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'One-Pulse Words' Might Be Better

PERIODICALLY, somebody comes up with a suggestion for improving our language as a means of communication. Progress comes slowly.

Phonetic spelling, required teaching of Latin and Greek, and mandatory reading of classic literature are among the means that have been advocated as roads to language perfection.

Slang, colloquialism, profanity, federalesque, business or professional jargon and new inventions might have more effect. Certainly, they seem to catch on for widespread usage more rapidly.

The latest language fad to surface uses "one-pulse words," meaning words of only one syllable. The game is to compose sentences and limit entire conversations to words of "one pulse."

Many of our most beautiful and most meaningful words have only one syllable. Then, too, some of our most fearsome and ugliest expressions are "four letter words" of one syllable.

At the other extreme are pedantic

uses of polysyllable words by educators, writers, speakers, lawyers and bureaucrats. Federal officials often have been accused of disguising their activities with contorted language or superfluous verbiage.

Business people and restaurants also are among those who use language to obscure real meanings. Menus often list "ground beef" as "chopped sirloin steak," which it probably is not.

A business publication recently portrayed an employer saying "We're very people-oriented." The translation given was "We pay peanuts, but we give out turkeys at Christmas."

Learning the language used in business "isn't a huge thing, but it can be a hugely important thing," said the head of a center for career women.

The "one-pulse people" justify their limitation on syllables by observing that words don't have to be long to be good.

Besides using words of no more than "one pulse," they have other rules. They discourage use of words

like "don't" and suggest that names of more than one pulse should be changed to code words. Therefore, it seems appropriate that their fourth rule is "Don't be a pest."

That happened when the women's liberation movement was at its peak. The notion that language should be "de-sexed" was carried to ridiculous extremes. The Department of Health, Education and Welfare issued an edict banning "gender specific terminology."

We began hearing words like "chairperson," which someone said ought to have four legs, the use of Ms. to identify females somewhere between Miss and Mrs., with questionable connotations, and there was danger of being arrested by a "policeperson."

Maybe those "one-pulse" people have something. It might not be as easy for us to be misled with words of "one cylinder."

As one wit said, "It all boils down to two words: Send money, raise dues or increase taxes."

One-pulse words might be better.