A primer on nice-sounding words, names

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
Friday, 30 December 2022 06:33

There's a subreddit page I like to visit called r/eyebleach. It essentially gives your eyes a break from scrolling through cynical and often disturbing Reddit entries by showing photos of kittens, baby otters, and puppies doing funny puppy things. The page has 9.4 million subscribers.

Our eyes and brains all need a respite from bad news, polarized politics and 2 am doomscrolling. But, what about our ears?

There's a term I love for synonyms that sound more pleasant than similar words: euphonyms. A euphonious word is a word that is pleasing to the ear. C.S. Lewis posited that the most pleasant-sounding term was "cellar door." Others have their preferences, but I like cellar door.

On the other hand, many people have unofficial lists of their least-favorite words. My friend Jeff has an official list in a Word document. The term for avoiding icky terms is called "word aversion." By employing word aversion, we can avoid words like "moist," "slurp," "bulbous," "pus," "phlegm," "mucus," and the like.

But today we're not focusing on "moist" and its legions of blech; we're going to take a "meh" word and make it marvelous by using euphonyms.

Euphonyms allow neutral or negative-sounding words to seem more pleasant. We take "moist," and it becomes "dewy." "Supple" (one of the words on my "ick" list) becomes "limber." We can

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replace "orifice" with "aperture."

Pleasant-sounding synonyms can really save a sentence.

You may be reading this and wonder, 'Could a euphonym have a different definition?' Yes! We can consider an alternate application for this pleasing prose.

As you probably know, "-nym" is a suffix meaning "name" in Greek, the prefix "eu-" means "good," and "phone" means "voice." Put this Greek alphabet soup in order, and we get "good voice name" or "pleasant-sounding name." In our previous definition of euphonym, we used the suffix "-nym" to mean "word."

Based on this secondary definition, people have submitted their favorite names, whether in fiction or real life. The top Google search result of euphonym gives us the name of the twentieth-century American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. She seems like someone who'd be pleasant to meet for tea out on a veranda somewhere on Montauk.

Personally, I'm fond of the sound of former Major League Baseball pitcher "Goose" Gossage, although I suppose euphony is in the ear of the beholder.

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