

The best of both worlds

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
Friday, 24 February 2023 03:10



Our family bought a minivan last year. With child number three on the way, we needed more room for car seats and Cheerio dust. While some people hesitate to get on board with the idea of buying a minivan, I was all about it.

My wife and I looked into hybrid minivans to save money on gasoline. Unfortunately, the hybrid van life was too rich for our blood, so we opted for a traditional gas-guzzler. Our kids named the new-to-us gray minivan “Delfín,” Spanish for “dolphin.”

Hybrid electric vehicles operate through the combination of an internal combustion engine and one or more electric motors, utilizing energy stored in batteries. Hybrid words (also called hybridisms) combine prefixes and suffixes from multiple languages to create new words.

The most common type of English hybrid words combines Latin and Greek prefixes and suffixes. Since we’ve been talking about vehicles, we’ll start with the word “petroleum,” which combines the Greek word “petra” (rock) with the Latin word “oleum” (oil). In the same way, the word automobile fuses the Greek “auto” (self-) with the Latin “mobilis” (movable).

Here are a few of my favorite Greek and Latin hybrid words. The word liposuction fuses the Greek “lipos” (fat) with the Latin “suctio” (sucking). Dysfunction combines the Greek “dys-” (bad) with the Latin “funtio” (performance). Of course, this invention came much later than the Greek and Latin languages, but the word television marries the Greek “tele-” (far off) and the Latin “visio/visere” (to see).

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Nearly every example of English hybrid words combines Greek and Latin, and — interestingly — the Greek prefix or word usually comes first.

It's worth noting that some historical linguists dislike hybrid words, calling them "Frankenwords." Boston Globe columnist Jan Freeman writes that "usage gurus who could flaunt their Greek and Latin did, and those who couldn't copied them." Other linguists describe hybrid words as "barbaric."

We coin new words (or neologisms) every day; it just makes sense that we use our combined knowledge to merge terms and ideas to create new ones. It's unavoidable, as well as human nature, to continue to innovate our language, whether you like it or not. After all, we don't live in a monoculture.

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