

## On Epistemic Compaction

I believe that the modern tendency to debase or distort the meaning of words has had a deleterious effect on social solidarity and mass sanity. In this essay I will only focus on this phenomenon as it occurs in English-speaking societies (i.e., North American and British Commonwealth countries).

One form of this degradation is achieved through **compaction** or shrinkage –not to be confused with reductionism. I use the term “compaction” to compare the process to the crushing of discarded cars into compact metal cubes. (Car enthusiasts might wonder how many precious hood ornaments and plush velvet-covered bison leather seats have been destroyed this way.)

Now, as English is inherently a supremely economical and practical language, as well as today’s Lingua Franca, there is always a tendency to compact new lexicon into short words (preferably monosyllables) or into acronyms. This practice, very common in the U.S.A., and coupled with the democratization of social mores, tends to “dumb-down” or reduce the value of previously important concepts to instant pabulum. In our day-to-day interactions we have become used to shorten commonly-used phrases to acronyms –many borrowed from texting– such as FYI and BTW. Even a reverent preface to our prayers has become the expletive OMG, tagged to banal remarks in the mouths of teens.

A good example of this tendency is the use of the acronyms POTUS instead of President of the United States, and SCOTUS instead of Supreme Court of the United States. Thus, what was originally a way of treating the highest offices of American government with due honor and deference, becomes equated with commercial brand names like AJAX or SPAM. This is a radical departure from traditional political practice wherein men in the highest offices were always baptized with the grandest and most impressive titles, such as Pontifex Maximus in ancient Rome, or Romanorum Imperator, title granted to the ruler of kings of the Holy Roman Empire. In Great Britain, when they created the office of the first Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole (1721-1742), they derived the title from the Latin “primus inter pares” meaning ‘first among equals.’ Today in Commonwealth countries only the letters P.M. before the individual’s name suffices. Dare I blame political compaction for the monstrous anomaly of someone like Donald Trump being elected to one of the most powerful offices in the planet?

Whereas in naming terrible plagues in Medieval times they chose impressive phrases like the Black Death, today’s pandemic –COVID-19– sounds more like a brand of deodorant than something one should worry about. Perhaps this is one reason why a sizeable portion of the population refuse to be vaccinated. However, this compaction has been mitigated somewhat by the names of some of the virus’ variants, such as *Omicron* –which sounds like a scary ogre.

Doctors and psychiatrist have used the term **PTSD** as shorthand for post-traumatic stress disorder ever since the 1980’s, when it was added by the American Psychiatric Association to its diagnostic manual of mental disorders. But PTSD was known to

previous generations as “Shell Shock,” “Trench Fever” and “Combat Fatigue” –none of which come close to fully expressing the horror felt by young soldiers immersed in the hellish maelstrom of modern war since 1914: massed artillery fire, arial bombardment, minefields, storms of lethal gas, etc. During World War II, PTSD was known as “Combat Stress,” defined at the time as “psychological disintegration suffered during the stresses of battle.” Stephen E. Ambrose noted in his *Band of Brothers* (1992) that... “The experiences of men in combat produce emotions stronger than civilians can know, emotions of terror, panic, anger, sorrow, bewilderment, helplessness, uselessness, and each of these feelings drained energy and mental stability.”

Today, doctors and psychiatrist use the term PTSD to describe other forms of trauma beyond those suffered by soldiers --including domestic violence, child abuse, rape, traffic collisions, and even the trauma of witnessing any of the above. I leave to the reader to decide if this compaction is justified.

Here are some other American acronyms used in law-enforcement or in military jargon that obscure their epistemic importance through compaction:

- **BAFT**, or Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives –An American law-enforcement agency of the Department of Justice created to protect citizens from violent criminals, criminal organizations, the illegal use and trafficking of firearms, the illegal use and storage of explosives, acts of arson and bombings, acts of terrorism, and the illegal diversion of alcohol and tobacco products;
- **GITMO**, or Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp –a United States military prison located within Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba, used for housing foreign political prisoners;
- **MAD**, or Mutually-assured destruction (i.e., the strategy of building-up nuclear warheaded ICBM arsenals by enemy superpowers to the point where neither would dare attack first for fear of being themselves annihilated);
- **MOAB**, or Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb (also “Mother of all Bombs”).

In closing, I would argue that the present constitutional crisis in the USA, as well as the Babel-like social and cultural confusion affecting all anglophone societies today, can be perhaps compacted into an apt World War II-era acronym: **SNAFU**... “Situation Normal: All Fucked Up.”