

defining ideas

Lexical Afterlife of Carbon Copies, Brassieres, and Other Relics

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The other day, I ran into an old acquaintance, a high-powered business executive now long retired, and he told me that he did not feel he needed to reply to an e-mail I had sent him “because,” he said, “you carbon-copied it to me.” I was a bit puzzled, but I assured him I was indeed not expecting a reply from him. I thought he might be amused by it, “and so I had,” as I told him, “put his address in the cc line.”

And, at that moment, it dawned on both of us that we had said exactly the same thing.

The e-mail address line for sending someone a copy, “cc,” preserves the venerable abbreviation that once appeared at the bottom of typewritten letters, where it literally meant “carbon copy.” Actually, its literal meaning had grown dim about a decade before computers came along. The photocopier absolved typists of the need to insert a sheet of carbon-coated paper between two ordinary sheets so that what was typed on the top copy would be reproduced, somewhat smudgy and indistinct, on the undersheet. That was, literally, a copy in carbon.

Academic theses, exotic as it now seems, required three or four carbon copies, and the bottom one was the candidate’s copy because, according to the old academic witticism, it would be legible only to someone who already knew what it said. The photocopier, praise be, made the fifth copy as good as the first and, incidentally, eliminated carbon fingerprints on keyboards and clothing.

The abbreviation “cc” thus has taken on a life of its own, and it has outlasted carbon copies by three or four decades. In its contemporary meaning, it doesn’t even involve paper, let alone carbon, and it can also be used as a verb, as in “The secretary cc-ed [see-seed] the birth announcement to the whole department.”

Lots of our words have similar histories. The things they name become familiar and the names get shortened, by the same human impulse that leads us to call our best friends Ted and Becky instead of Theodore and Rebecca. Ordinary words, once shortened, lose their narrow association with the originals, and from there they can apply to whatever evolves from them. Vans are among the most common vehicles on our roads, but they bear scant resemblance to caravans, the original name.

In youth-oriented realms, the loss of literal meaning can lead to a generation gap. Everyone under 30 knows about discos and deejays, but their parents get blank looks if they talk about discotheques and disk jockeys, the full forms, now obsolete.

Knowing that changes like these are happening all the time hardly makes them less surprising when you run into them for the first time. One of my colleagues used the word “brassiere” in a classroom full of undergraduates and sensed a wall of befuddlement. Finally, someone explained helpfully, “It’s another word for ‘bra,’” which surprised my colleague, who thought it was the same word for it. The full form (so to speak), so French in its sound and its look, had a certain politesse in the days when it was a word women used among themselves and men never uttered. Nowadays, when bras are almost as conspicuous as socks, and sometimes like them partly-visible undergarments, it can drop the pretense. The brusque, Saxon-sounding monosyllable will do just fine.

It is an off-beat way of looking at history. Yesterday’s carbon copies, caravans, and brassieres are today’s cc, vans, and bras, and in the transition from one to the other lies a world of difference. &