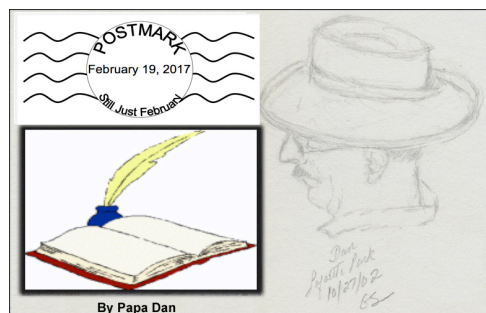


Beautiful Words — A Challenge

By Dan Sapone



**"To a first approximation,
words mean what they say"**

**...
AND how they sound."**

Recently, a 'by-line' in the San Francisco Chronicle got my attention. What caught my eye was not the title, but the author's name — Nick Hoppe. Frankly, I had not heard of "Nick" Hoppe, but his last name, "Hoppe," is a name that had been important to me for half a century.

Art Hoppe, who turns out to be Nick's dad, was a columnist at the Chronicle from 1960 until his death in 2000. The column was called "Our Man Hoppe" and later "The Innocent Bystander," at its peak syndicated by over 100 newspapers nationwide. His satirical column covered local and national politics and included essays, feature columns, and one-act scenes with an ongoing cast of characters like Private Oliver Drab, Joe Sikspak, Homer T. Pettibone, and others.

Art Hoppe was my hero. I read his five-day-a-week column starting in the 7th grade and, when I determined that I wanted to be a writer, he was my inspiration. Much of what I have done on convivio-online.net is inspired by him. One in particular is a one-act play I posted on *ConVivio* in 2011 in which I recreated two characters he featured often over the years — Gabriel and The Landlord — my version is called "[Some Explaining To Do](#)" ([click here if you'd like to read it](#)).

→ But I digress ... all of that explains what attracted me to **Nick** Hoppe's column earlier this month called, "Words That Just Feel Good On the Tongue." His goals were to identify ten words that, according to him, were the ten most beautiful words in the English language and explain why they were beautiful **TO HIM**. I thought that was an intriguing idea. When I read his column (and his list), I decided that many of his choices were NOT among those I would choose (e.g., his #1 choice was "knucklehead"). BUT, I quickly realized **that** was his point: that I should identify words that I thought were beautiful and defend what made them important **TO ME**.

So, I Made a List

I tried to create a list and a brief defense of each word's presence on my list. I decided a word earned the right to be included with a combination of the sound of the word and its meaning — the composite of how that word makes me feel. It was sorta fun, but as with most lists of "favorites," the challenge is to decide what must be excluded. Turns out, I just plain failed to limit my list to ten, as Nick Hoppe had done (so, sue me). Below is the result:

- A. My list of the top-ten most beautiful words in American English (according to me)
- B. My list of the second-ten most beautiful words in American English
- C. A list of beautiful words I've stumbled across in other languages that **SHOULD** be in American English, but we don't seem to have an equivalent word.

Observation: few one-syllable words made the list. Following the Italian pattern, d'yathink words with multiple pronounced vowels sound more melodious, and generate stronger feelings?

AND, since you will inevitably disagree with some of my choices, (I can hear you now: "How could you possibly include THAT word?"), **I challenge you** to make our own list(s) and defend your choices. If you send me a list (or even just suggest a word or two), I will publish them here, if you like (with or without your name, as you choose).

A. My Top Ten Most Beautiful Words in American English, and why they are beautiful (listed here alphabetically)

1. Becoming — this word (the title of Michelle Obama's wonderful book) sets aside the notion that we must end up somewhere "final" in this life. It suggests that we can always be more.
2. Grace — I admire this word with its three meanings: for many, a spiritual condition ("a state of grace") received as an unearned divine gift; it is also a description of the physical elegance of artistic movement (as in a graceful dancer); but also, as a verb, to confer dignity or honor to a place or event. (*"I do not understand the mystery of grace only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."* — Anne Lamott)
3. Love — the starting point and sustenance of everything good; either with a specific target or a broad, generalized intent toward all of life. It comes to us free and is re-distributed free.
4. Kindness — the quality of being friendly, generous, considerate, without expecting a reward.
5. Serendipity — occurrence of happy or beneficial events apparently by chance (*"Hitting the center of a target you didn't know you were aiming at."* — Bujold)
6. Simplicity — uncomplicated, easy to understand effortlessly, uncluttered.
"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." — Einstein
"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity." — H.D Thoreau (essential ingredient of a good life)
7. Storytelling → → One of my favorite words.
"Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it." — Hannah Arendt
"Stories are the common currency of humanity" — Tahir Shah (Arabian Nights)
"The human species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories." — Mary Bateson
"Reality can be beaten with enough imagination." — Mark Twain
8. Welcome — an invitation bestowed on another person that says: "You belong here. Come in."
9. Wonderful — inspiring delight, worthy of admiration, stimulating imagination (i.e., wonder)
10. Yosemite (Yohhe'meti) — name of the tribe that occupied what is now the Yosemite Valley, named by the surrounding, more peaceful Miwok tribes (literal translation: "Those who kill"). That tribe called themselves the Ahwahnechee and named "their" valley "Ahwahnee." Miwok translation for "Ahwahnee" meant simply "people. Archaeological evidence of the Ahwahnechee and the name date back about 800 years. Early recorded contact with European settlers was about 1850 during the Gold Rush. The name "Yosemite" stuck after being named that by 18th-century European settlers. → → My love of this word does not stem from its troubled linguistic history but from our own experience with this beautiful, inspiring valley over our lifetime **AND** the inspiring sound of the word.

B. My Second Ten Most Beautiful Words in American English

11. Eloquence — fluent or persuasive speaking or writing. → And I enjoy the sound of this word.
"You must speak straight so that your words may go as sunlight straight into our hearts." — Cochine
"Eloquence is painted thought." — Blaise Pascal
12. Ephemeral — lasting for a short time, fleeting. *"She liked the way the word sounded in her head. 'I am ephemeral.' It made her feel like something passing and precious."* — Pamela Todd
13. Exhilaration — synonyms: elation, euphoria, joy, ecstasy, exultation, rhapsody.
"Exhilaration is that feeling you get just after a great idea hits you and just before you realize what's wrong with it." — Rex Harrison. *"We can take some gratification at having come so far in just a few thousand years as language users but it should be a deeper exhilaration to recognize that we have such a distance to go."* — Lewis Thomas



14. Felicity — joy, delight, cheerfulness, ability to express one's thoughts effectively.
"To strive with difficulties and to conquer them is the highest human felicity." Samuel Johnson
"There is more felicity on the far side of baldness than young men can possible imagine." — LP Smith
15. Forbearance — patient self-control, restraint, tolerance.
"Common man's patience will bring him more happiness than common man's power." Amit Kalantri
"Leadership was not an act of bravery but rather forbearance and the strength to move forward with humility in the belief of what is right." Sortoosh Shahrivar
16. Mellifluous — voice or words sweet or musical, pleasant to hear. *"In my dreams, I heard your mellifluous voice. It slowly woke me up from a deep sleep so that I could enjoy the magnificence of life."* — Debasish Mridha
17. Propinquity — proximity → I just like the sound of it better than mere "proximity."
"Keep characters in propinquity long enough and a story will always develop a plot." — Keith Miller
18. Quintessential — classic, representing the most perfect example of a quality.
*"A quintessential experience is to hike up the John Muir Trail **behind** the Mist Trail to the top of Vernal Falls and trudge through the snow to the rock from which you can look down at Vernal and up at Nevada Falls — and, if you are not eaten by bears in the dark on the way down, to have a glass of Rombauer Chardonnay in the Ahwahnee dining room with a plate of scallops."* — PapDan
19. Resplendent — attractive and impressive through being richly colorful or sumptuous.
20. Succulent — OK so I just like the Hemingway quote → *"As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans."* — Ernest Hemingway

C. Ten Words with no English Equivalents, that the English Language Needs

→ Some emphasis here on the sound of these words, as well as their meaning. ←

1. Flaneur (French) — a person at leisure, deliberately aimless, wandering streets, soaking in a city, a neighborhood, or, heck, a forest.
2. Magari (Italian) — "If only"; use this for beautiful experiences that you wish for, longingly.
3. Metanoia (Greek) — the journey of changing one's mind, heart, self, or way of life.
4. Mudita (Sanskrit) taking delight in the happiness of others.
5. Namaste (Sanskrit) — traditional Hindi greeting or gesture of respect, ("I bow to the divine in you") by holding the palms together before the face or chest and bowing. The gesture is called a "Namaskar"; the word used is "Namaste." →→ Greta contributed this one to the list.
6. Passeggiata (Italian) — a slow, late afternoon or evening stroll, (perhaps associated with gelato). This is a close relative of the French word "Flaneurie," which is what a Flaneur does.
7. Rocambolesco (Italian) — a person who is daring, adventurous, and incredible — or an experience that can be described with one of those adjectives.
8. Sprezzatura (Italian) — to do something flawlessly, effortlessly, splendidly.
9. Tickety-boo (British) — Something satisfactory and in good order (but not extraordinary); sometimes shortened to "twee." Some believe it derives from Hindi "thīk hai, bābū," meaning "it's alright, sir" — and is therefore a linguistic theft.
10. Tsundoku (Japanese) the act of buying books, keeping them, and not reading them

Afterthoughts

Nick Hoppe's recent column (with his top-ten list) can be found here:

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/entertainment/article/Words-that-just-feel-good-on-the-tongue-13607480.php?cmpid=gsa-sfgate-result>

If you're interested in knowing more about my earliest writing hero, Art Hoppe, his obituary in the Chronicle from February 3, 2000, paints a good picture. It can be found here:

<https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Chronicle-Columnist-Art-Hoppe-Dies-Eloquent-3240505.php>



Words that just feel good on the tongue

By Nick Hoppe

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/entertainment/article/Words-that-just-feel-good-on-the-tongue-13607480.php?cmpid=gsa-sfgate-result>

I've been thinking about the English language lately, mainly because it's the only language I know. I've decided it needs a boost, so I've come up with a list of the 10 Most Beautiful Words.

This was not an easy task, considering there are more than 470,000 entries in the Merriam-Webster Unabridged English Dictionary. But in a recent column I came up with my Top 10 Driving Irritations, and I whittled that down from a list much longer than a measly 470,000.

We might not know it, but everyone has their favorite words. Whether we're talking or writing, there's a conscious or subconscious satisfaction in using certain words. When it comes out of the mouth, or when it's typed onto a page, it just feels good.

I started thinking about favorite words when I was fresh out of college and working as a copy boy in the sports department of The Chronicle. I only lasted a year before moving on to a different career, but it left an impression.

Bruce Jenkins, who is widely regarded as one of the best sportswriters in the business, was just getting started in his career, only a few years out of college himself. While I was running copy, he was writing about sports, and I watched and tried to learn.

I'm sure he doesn't remember this, but he had a favorite word that he used time and time again, and I could see that he embraced it as his own. So in deference to Bruce and his illustrious career with The Chronicle, I'll start my Top 10 Beautiful Words with the one that let me know that writers have favorites.

10: Vintage. I don't see Bruce using this word as much these days. Like many relationships, maybe it got stale. But it's still a beautiful word, and I'm proud to have it in my Top 10.

9: Certainly. It doesn't have panache, it doesn't have any vim or vigor. But to me, it's just plain comforting. I probably use it more often than I should, but I don't care. It always makes me nod in agreement.

8: Neanderthal. This word always makes me smile. Cro-Magnons, Homo sapiens — they simply don't have the same joyful ring. There's something lovable about this word.

7: Caress. It doesn't get more soothing than this word. What's surprising is I don't know anyone named Caress. I'm sure that will change once the Top 10 Beautiful Words hits the internet.

6: Northern. This was a tough one, because I could have just as easily chosen southern. Both have smooth edges. But western and eastern didn't come close to making the cut, which shows the painstaking thought that went into composing this list.

5: Relinquish. Put a "q" in a word and it's got a good chance to make the list. It's a letter that is underrepresented and underappreciated. I chose relinquish because ... well, I actually have no idea. I just liked the sound.

4: Evergreen. I was sitting outside the other day and looking at a tree that had lost all its leaves for the winter. I naturally thought of the word "deciduous." Then I thought of its counterpart, "evergreen," and it dawned on me what a beautiful word it was. That's why it made the list.

3: Eloquent. There's that beautiful "q" again. If a word can be suitably named, this is the one. Eloquent is an eloquent word. There's no other way to describe it.

2: California. There are other states that were in contention, like Colorado or Wisconsin, but they're not quite in California's league. Maybe it's because I went to Cal, or maybe it's because I was born and raised here, but I love the word California. Even Arnold Schwarzenegger's pronunciation couldn't screw it up.

1: Knucklehead. Some may be surprised to see this as the No. 1 choice of The 10 Most Beautiful Words. Not me. I love this word and use it as often as possible, quite often to describe myself. It rolls off the tongue, and generally offends no one. It's just plain fun, and what's wrong with that?

So there it is, the definitive 10 Most Beautiful Words in the English language. Hard to believe, but it is possible that a few readers might disagree with some of the selections, and that's their prerogative. Let them devise their own list. With 469,990 other choices, I'm sure they'll come up with something. The English language will be grateful.

Nick Hoppe's column appears Tuesdays in Datebook. Email: NickHoppe61@gmail.com

