

Like it or not: Fumbling for words

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

Some decades ago the replacement of and synonym for *ummhhh* and *aaahhh* was “you know,” a phrase introduced by “Valley Girls” and voiced by speakers not because you *did* know, but because the speakers did not, and were fumbling for words. While *aaahhh* and “you know” both survive, the most prominent contribution from the Valley to the cultural plains is “like.” It’s become, like, an all-purpose, like, word. It is both a filler word and a substitute for “said,” as in, “My mother is like, ‘You’re showing too much midriff.’” Listen to radio, call-in shows and even a pulpit now and then and you will be “liked” almost to death.

The usual remedy for vocabulary impoverishment and voids in the part of the brain whence speech issues is to go to the thesaurus. I hit “like” on my computer thesaurus and turned up “similar, alike, comparable, uniform, analogous, undifferentiated, intercomparable, consonant and same,” none of which is a true equivalent. Anyone who has taught can imagine students who, their vocabularies impoverished, will consult the thesaurus and use *intercomparable*. I’d like to hear contemporary Valley people start saying, “Intercomparable, my mother is intercomparable, ‘You’re showing too much midriff.’”

I bring all this up because reports from the field suggest that too many preachers and speakers of the Word display an impoverished vocabulary and thus fail to stimulate imaginations or rouse hearers to holy action. Some years ago I shared a platform on church reform with the late great blind sage, theologian Joseph Sittler. Asked to put in one phrase what he would do to begin reform of the church, he immediately said, “Watch your language.” He counseled that we read, read, read to help enrich ours. Sittler knew how busy today’s communicators are, but was undeterred from counseling that they read. He was not an aesthete or elitist or snob, and he relished effective choices of words by parishioners who read enough that they did not have to draw on *ummhhh* or *aaahhh* or *you know* or *like*—or formal consultations with the thesaurus.

John Whale reviews Werner Hullen's *A History of Roget's Thesaurus* in the *Times Literary Supplement* (February 13). The reviewer scorns those who overdo thesaurus talk, citing Shakespeare as the poet who made fun of synonym-merchants. Thus in *Love's Labour's Lost*, schoolmaster Holofernes describes an apple as "the pomewater who now hangeth like a jewel in the ear of caelo, the sky, the welkin, the heaven, and anon falleth like a crab on the face of terra, the soil, the land, the earth." Whale warns against trying to fill the void in vocabulary by pseudo-enrichment: "Even when a fresh word seems the right recourse, a thesaurus may not be the place to look for it."

The point of this sermon is in a paragraph of Whale's that bears reproducing: "The safest storehouse for writers to fetch words from is their own head. In it are the words and phrases, read and heard, that have struck or pleased them. Among these will be the colloquialisms, the neologisms, the new metaphors hatched out of current events, that are unlikely to be in any existing list. Only the treasury of the mind can supply just those turns of phrase with which writers express their own thoughts and not somebody else's."

As with writers, so with us speakers, preachers, teachers. We do well to enrich the storehouse in our own heads, the treasury of our own minds, by reading, reading, reading—and then heeding Sittler's counsel, "Watch your language."