

Grade 8 Informational

Flapjacks or Pancakes? Understanding Our Language

“Nice sneakers!” Chances are you won’t hear that if you live in our nation’s Midwest. In Nebraska, athletic shoes are often referred to as tennis shoes, which is rather odd considering that the majority of the wearers are not on the tennis court. The words we use are part of our vernacular, language associated with a geographic region. That is why at breakfast this morning you may have eaten a pancake, a flapjack, a griddle cake, or maybe even a silver dollar. All of those are perfectly appropriate terms for your short-stack smothered in syrup. While synonyms such as soda, cola, or pop are easily deciphered, some colorful phrases create more confusion.

Idioms are phrases we use in everyday language which are not meant to be taken literally. When someone asks if the cat’s got your tongue, it has nothing to do with a feline. Instead it refers to someone who isn’t speaking up. Whereas your teacher may understand her directions to proceed to the gym “as the crow flies,” you may be left standing with a confused look on your face. Imagine the confusion for an English language learner. Not only must one learn the dictionary definitions, but one must also become familiar with the many idioms used on a daily basis, and that’s no “piece of cake.”

Linguists who study the language have an interesting job. One of those is to add and subtract words from our language based on usage. Couch potato can now be found in many dictionaries, but you’ll have a hard time locating vinyl record. Dictionaries are basically descriptive, not prescriptive. That means the goal is to observe how words are being used and define them based on current usage. If dictionaries were prescriptive, definitions wouldn’t evolve. Linguists would prescribe how the word should be used and we would follow suit, but that’s not how it works. Technology is a perfect example of the prescriptive process. Technology has spawned hundreds of new terms like spam, blog, podcast, and instant messaging. As words are created to fill a need in a society, lexicographers work to accurately define them. It’s a continuous cycle.

But the change doesn’t end with new words. Old words often take on new meanings. A generation ago people “zipped” their lips or their jacket; but, today it is common practice to “zip” a document before sending it electronically. The language also morphs with the addition of slang terms that quickly become part of conversation. Many of these terms will eventually become dictionary entries. Remember the first time you discovered that “ain’t” was actually in the dictionary? Unfortunately, most of us failed to notice the notation immediately following its entry that described it as slang or colloquial. Just because it is in the dictionary doesn’t mean it is considered standard or formal English used by schools and businesses.

Like a fully developed character in a great novel, our language is dynamic and not static. Don't be surprised if twenty years down the road a young person looks at you in a state of confusion when you tell them to just "chill" for a while.

Grade 8 Narrative

Sky's the Limit

Jordan lay flat on his back, clutching his skateboard to his chest, the board's wheels facing upward and spinning wildly. He thought to himself: Nothing hurts. I landed safely on the grass, and I'm OK. His heart raced with the adrenaline of exhilaration, instinctively revving, unable to detect the difference between survival mode and celebration. For one seemingly endless moment, Jordan's existence consisted of a deep, tranquil silence underscored by the rhythm of his heightened heartbeats. He gazed up at the sky overhead, absorbed by the great stillness of the clouds and the thought that how strange that such a sky would be called *altocumulus mackerel*.

Then his sister's voice reached up and snatched him from the clouds and the sky and the memories of the past, yanking him unceremoniously back to the present.

"You really think you're something, don't you?" were the words, but Julianna's tone conveyed an almost parental pride.

A multitude of faces stared down at him; he heard not only Julianna's voice, but a chorus of voices, all speaking at once, unintelligibly, words blending together and cresting like the roar of the waves crashing on the shore:

"He's in shock."

"Concussion."

"Oh, right, when did you become a doctor?"

"At least he didn't break anything."

"How would you know?"

"He's a doctor, remember? He diagnosed the concussion."

"Look, he's trying to get up."

As Jordan tentatively hoisted himself to a sitting position, the voices gradually stilled, the faces anxiously watching, the anxiety apparent and yet so strange to Jordan until he understood the silence stemmed from worry: they assumed he was hurt. "I'm fine," he said, but his words did nothing to reassure them; having seen the landing, they had made up their minds.

"Maybe you shouldn't get up," said a girl in a black T-shirt.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” asked the guy who thought he was a doctor. Undeterred by Jordan’s indifference, he continued. “Hey, that was some fall.”

“It wasn’t a fall,” corrected Julianna, who had observed him more closely than anyone. “He was in control the whole time.”

“Maybe he broke something,” offered someone else, one of those who was clearly and understandably enjoying the drama of the spectacle.

Jordan’s respiration and heart rate had returned to normal, or as close as could be expected under the circumstances. Standing up casually cost him both effort and concentration—the temptation was to stay there, in that place of *altocumulus mackerel* sky, soaring, exhilarated, and more alive than he had ever been. The endless hours of slowly rolling, painstakingly rehearsing on the ground what he longed to achieve in the air, stepping backward into a rotation, wheels clacking awkwardly on the pavement, had finally lifted him up to the sky. He managed to appear just the same as always, with no indication that anything unusual had happened, as he picked up his board. Jordan glanced back at the ramp, trying to recapture the moment, but the moment vanished, evanescent as the clouds now drifting away.

“He’s fine,” said Julianna dismissively.

“That was incredible,” he heard someone else say. “At least two complete rotations!”

“More like a McTwist,” said the girl in the black T-shirt.

“That was some landing,” said the guy, who, like many who watch too many television doctors, somehow had gained the illusion that he had medical credentials. “Lucky you ended up on the grass.”

Staring at the ramp, Jordan assembled fleeting snatches of memory as brief scenes appeared and then disappeared like pictures in an accelerated slideshow: checking his helmet straps, adjusting his kneepads, testing wheel bearings before rolling up to the vertical ramp, then assessing its curve and steepness, preparing as he had millions of times before for yet another attempt at a Caballeria—a backward 360-degree turn, a maneuver he’d been practicing for ages, ever since Julianna taught him how to do it.

At that moment, those countless repetitions of movements merged and coalesced; immediately before releasing himself to gravity, Jordan visualized the exuberant arc of a dolphin, the heartbreakingly graceful swoop of the hawk, and then he, too, was soaring, effortlessly spinning in what seemed to be slow motion. Then the downward spiral as he caught the board under his feet mid-air and landed, sure-footed and solid, only to collapse in sheer amazement and disbelief in the grass.

“That wasn’t luck; that was intentional,” countered Jordan absentmindedly.

“Good one,” said the girl in the black T-shirt, and Jordan nodded in acknowledgment, seemingly nonchalant, but grinning inwardly.

“What’s next?” asked Julianna, as they navigated their way through the crowd.

Jordan shrugged. “Sky’s the limit.”