

Things we Say

By Joanna Bawa

In praise of neologisms

What word best captures an obstacle? A problem, difficulty, inconvenience, setback; a mess, disaster, catastrophe?

There are many such words, each with its subtle nuance, but there is one word which most exquisitely captures every aspect of something you'd rather hadn't happened.

That word is clartage.

Not sure you've heard of it? You haven't. It doesn't exist, it isn't a real word. It's a neologism, and when a neologism does a better job than an existing word, it becomes that glorious thing, a functional neologism.

Clartage is my favourite functional neologism ever. I first heard it when my student son called to say he was running late because 'the traffic is clarted'. Later, as his flaky friends changed their plans at the last minute, he sighed and muttered, what a clartage. I'm proper clarted, he exclaimed, when a string broke on his badminton racquet five minutes before a game; I apparently, was also clarted when I nicked my finger preparing dinner, although the real concern was that I might clart the entire meal by dripping blood on it (I didn't).

A friend, enduring a succession of minor mishaps, was declared 'a bit clarted'. Another, struggling with a serious health issue, is 'totes clarted'. Two people persistently misunderstanding each other's point of view are 'such a clartage'; the wrong postcode on a parcel delivery will 'clart' your plans; delays to flights or expired passports will leave you 'a bit clarted' at the airport. The dreadful and complex events going on in Israel and Ukraine can be summarised as 'a massive clartage'. And if you just want to vent, yelling 'claaart!' will do the trick. It neatly sidesteps more earthy anglo-saxon terms, offends no-one, and effectively externalises the frustration.

The reason I love clartage is because the first time I heard it, I knew exactly what it meant. I didn't even need to ask, it was such a perfect word to convey the speaker's meaning. Making it, I believe, onomatopoeic. Not only that, the sound and rhythm of it captures other words which try less successfully to describe a bad situation. Clobbered, shafted, knackered, wrecked, all have a similar ring to clartage, and are words which do a good job of expressing a problem, but each has its definition and limitations. Clartage, with no real definition or history, moulds beautifully into every situation, a chameleon of crisis.

Another reason I love clartage is the way it emerged organically, invented by a generation who needed a way to express the endless difficulties which confront them. Most clartages are small and annoying (a dropped egg, a forgotten deadline); others are comprehensive and irreversible (failing a year at university, getting fired from a job, being dumped), but they are all clartages. Without breaking any rules or diluting meaning and clarity, clartage has emerged and taken its place in the language of unintended happenings. It is language evolving right in front of us, dynamic and instinctive, a reminder of how powerful words can be and how, in certain circumstances, we are all equipped to create meaningful novelty.

With frightening ease, clartage slipped into my lexicon and has become my go-to thing I say in the face of adversity. It's spread like a plague through the family, and though our challenges are many and varied, every single one is captured perfectly by 'clartage'. The next time you need to express irritation, see a disaster coming, find yourself sat at another set of traffic lights, or receive a frightening diagnosis, simply mutter, what a clartage, and I promise you, not only will you feel better, but everyone will know exactly what you mean.