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In re Words: Don't Flaunt Your Flouting

By Juliette Gillespie

When I sat down to write this piece, I fully intended to go on a tirade about confusing the words *flout* and *flaunt*.

To *flout* is to intentionally disobey a rule or law, not follow a custom, avoid behavior that is usual or expected; to disregard something or treat it with disdain. A common phrase is to "flout convention." "Many motorcyclists flout the law by not wearing helmets."

Whereas to *flaunt* means to show or make obvious something you are proud of in order to get admiration; to display ostentatiously or impudently. “If you’ve got it, flaunt it!” “The newly rich often enjoy flaunting their wealth.”

So, if you want to show off that you’re a tough guy or gal, a rebel who wants the world to know that they don’t need no stinkin’ rules, you might flaunt your flouting. Conversely, if you don’t want to get caught, then keep your flouting on the down low.

But, it seems, for this tirade, I am too late. Language is complex and fluid. It evolves. The evolution is often sparked by errors that become so common they are no longer errors. (According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “comptroller” began as a misspelling of “controller” back in the 16th century.)

The habit of mistakenly using the word *flaunt* instead of *flout* grew quite common in the mid-20th century. It became so frequent that Merriam-Webster has added “to treat contemptuously” (i.e., to flout) as one of the definitions of the word *flaunt*, even though that’s not what it used to mean at all.

So the following passage, which I was going to use as an example of what not to do, is no longer incorrect:

The panel affirms, finding, inter alia, that after *flaunting court orders* for discovery ... and not appearing at the default hearing, plaintiff has not demonstrated that he is entitled to relief ..., and that his *flagrant disregard of the judicial process* amounts to inexcusable neglect.

“Flagrant disregard of the judicial process”—that sure sounds like flouting the rules to me. But I guess now it can also be called flaunting.

And “flaunting court orders” makes me think of a less-than-humble attorney taking a freshly printed and signed order from the court and dangling it enticingly in front of opposing (losing) counsel’s face. “Look what I got!” Now *that’s* flaunting. (It’s also flouting the Rules of Professional Conduct.)

I suppose the following example is perfectly fine as well: “Despite that order, the respondent continues to use dilatory tactics Will the respondent be allowed to *flaunt the court*, without a penalty?”

Flaunt the court? To me, that’s what an enthusiastic tour guide might do. “Look at our fabulous court! The elegant Corinthian columns, the clean lines of the classical architecture; isn’t it amazing?”

But language is a living creature, ever changing. I get it. Personally, I will continue to use flout and flaunt in the old-fashioned way, but I understand that this may be a losing battle. I shall accept that and move on ... to musical instruments. (Didn’t see that coming, did you?)

All this talk of flouting made me wonder why a person who plays the flute is called a flautist (not a floutist) and not a flutist.

But, there again, I discovered I was wrong. They are not always called flautists.

Traditionally there have been several names for those who play this instrument, including “fluter” (not bad, kind of fun to say) and “flutomater” (yes!). But nowadays the main contenders for the title are *flutist* and *flautist*.

Flutist is the far more common term chosen by us practical, no-nonsense Americans. But, according to Webster's, flautist is the preferred term in British English. It's derived from the Italian *flautista*. Che bellezza!

My personal preference for using the term flautist could be due to my secret inferiority complex about being American. The Brits (and the Italians) just sound so much better than we do. Plus I enjoy flaunting my exotic vocabulary.

Then there's Sir James Galway, possibly the most famous current master of the flute—certainly the only one I can name. He flouts both the terms *flutist* and *flautist*. He prefers to be called a flute player, and has been quoted as saying, "I am a flute player not a flautist. I don't have a flaut and I've never flauted."

But, being Irish, he's not British, is he? Although, he's from Belfast, Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom. But one would assume that his ancestors hailed (see [last month's column](#)) from County Galway, which is in regular Ireland. But I'm wading into dangerous territory here. Sir James lives in Switzerland now, so we'll call him neutral, and he can call himself whatever he wants.

In any case, I have gotten sidetracked from my digression. The takeaways are: 1) language evolves; 2) flout is turning into flaunt; and 3) flautist and flutist are both OK. ■

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