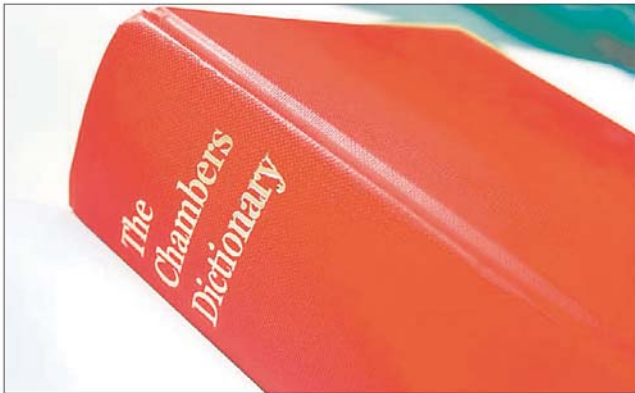


The real meaning of words – ass a rumm'un

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Words are dangerous things. Sometimes you have to choose them carefully.

They can change their meaning through time, and so mean different things to people of different ages.

To my mother “cute” means ‘too clever by half’, but for young people it means ‘good looking’. In the old Norfolk dialect, “gays” meant ‘pictures, illustrations in magazines and books’, but that’s not what it means nowadays.

Words also vary in their meaning from place to place. When Americans say “homely” they mean ‘not very good looking’, which isn’t what it means to us. In Norfolk “linen” means ‘washing, laundry’ – many people still have linen lines and linen pegs – but in other places it just refers to textiles made from flax.

And many words have several different meanings, so “funny” means ‘peculiar’ but also ‘amusing’. For all these reasons misunderstandings can occur if we’re not careful.

I recently got an appointment letter from the hospital which had, at the top, a small logo (a word that most of us had never heard of 30 years ago), together with a slogan (originally a Scottish Gaelic word, rather older than that). This read “Our vision: to provide every patient with the care we want for those we love the most”. Well, ‘ass a rumm’un! Who would have

thought our NNUH would have wanted to give everybody the best possible medical treatment!

Like most people, I have every reason to be extremely grateful to the NHS. But you can’t help wondering how much the NNUH paid someone to come up with this sentimental drivel and have it printed on all their stationery and plastered all over their website.

I wonder too if whoever it was who took the money should have thought a bit more carefully about the word “vision”. Whatever this word meant to them, I’m not sure the rest of us will share the same understanding.

Obviously they didn’t mean ‘the faculty of sight’ or ‘hallucination’. Probably it was something more along the lines of ‘the act of anticipating that which will or may come to be’. But it actually seems to be business-speak. On a leading “Human Resources” website, I find that for HR-types “vision” has a rather special significance. It means ‘the skill of visualizing and thinking beyond the obvious’. Well, as I say, if there’s something which isn’t obvious about providing top-level medical care in a hospital, ‘ass a rumm’un.

■ **What do you think? Email: EDPlotters@archant.co.uk**