

Does being nice aggravate you? Well it upsets some

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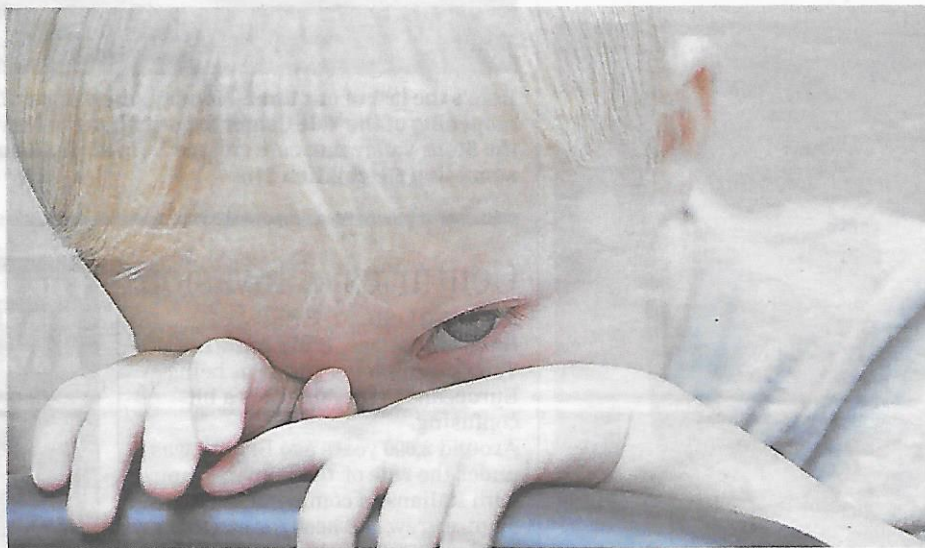
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There are some pedants who reckon that it's wrong to use the word aggravate to mean 'irritate' or 'annoy' – as in “stop doing that, it's very aggravating!”. This is probably the most common usage of the word in modern English. But the pedants say that it's incorrect because aggravate comes originally from Latin *aggravare*, which meant 'to make heavier', derived from the adjective *gravis* 'heavy'.

Aggravate was originally borrowed into English with the meaning of 'to make more serious' – our first record is from 1530 – and we do still use it like that: “that will only aggravate the situation”. But it very quickly gained the additional meaning of 'annoy', first recorded in 1598.

The pedants' fallacious belief that the original meaning of a word is its “true” meaning is known as the etymological fallacy: some of these pedants fallaciously maintain that it is wrong to talk about “three alternatives” because alternative comes from the Latin word *alter*, which meant 'second'.

When I was at school we had a teacher who greatly disliked the way we used the word nice. He used to reprimand us, intoning “nice means precise”. It is true of course that we can talk about “a nice



■ When you're trying to be nice it doesn't help to remember the original use of the word.

distinction”. But that is not how most English-speaking people use it.

In fact, the history of the word nice provides a very good illustration of how wrong the etymological fallacy is. Nice originally comes from two ancient Indo-European roots: *skei* meaning 'cut', which came down into Latin as the verb *scire* 'to know', probably via a meaning like 'be able to distinguish one thing from another'; and *ne* meaning 'not'. The combination of the two forms produced the Latin verb *ne-scire*, which meant 'to be ignorant of'. This led to the development of the adjective *nescius* 'ignorant', which appeared in Old French as the word

nice, which meant 'silly'.

Nice was then borrowed from French into medieval English, with the meaning 'foolish, shy'. Over the centuries it gradually changed its meaning, first from 'shy' to 'modest', and then 'delicate' (with the 'precise' meaning coming from this). Then, when applied to people, the 'delicate' meaning gradually became 'considerate', followed by 'pleasant', and finally 'agreeable'.

In 6,000 years, the meaning of nice has changed enormously. Surely no one in their right mind would want to argue that the “real” meaning of nice is, or ought to be, 'not cutting'?