Fingerprint Words

Not too long ago, I was forced to come to grips with something terrible about myself. I use the word *iteration* a lot. More than any human being should. If I had to ballpark it, I'd set the over/under on daily utterances at five.

I'm not proud of this. I'd prefer to be a guy who can refer to a *version* or *edition* or plain old *instance* of something, and who doesn't go around saying *iteration* over and over again. Alas, that is not me. And I found out about my *iteration* malady in the most jarring way possible. I had just started a new job. One day, a few weeks in, I heard three different colleagues with whom I interact often use the word *iteration* independent of one another. When the third of these, a woman I knew prior to taking the job, said it, I stopped her mid-sentence. "Wait, did you just say *iteration*? Why is everyone saying that word here?" Her response hit me like an unabridged thesaurus to the dome. "You should be psyched," she shot back. "That's one of *your* words."

After a fit of denial, and some back-and-forth, I went home after work and asked my wife if there were any weird, fingerprint-type words I used often.

"You mean like *iteration*?" she said, without the slightest pause. Then the floodgates opened. "You also say *tangential* all the time. Oh, *antiquated*, too! And you're always talking about *the extent to which* someone did this or that."

She kept going. Turns out I have an affinity for *anachronism* and maintain a close connection with *cognizant*.

By the time I returned to work the next day, I had begrudgingly accepted that I overuse a bunch of goofy words, and that everyone around me knew it. But I also noticed a change in how I spoke to my colleagues at the office. I was just as apt as ever to pepper a sentence with *antiquated*, or to throw in an *extent to which* here and there, but I actively and consciously stopped using *iteration*. That was *my* word, even though I hadn't realized it until the day before. Now everyone was saying it. I didn't want to appear a mere imitator when I used this noun that now seemed to belong to me.

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But I also won't become one of those people who go around stealing the fingerprint words of others. How lazy! How unoriginal! How lame! How long after writing those last few sentences was it before I could think of a time I engaged in the exact sort of behavior that so infuriated me when it happened at the office? About four seconds.

I did it a few months ago. One of my closest friends uses the word *tremendous* often in emails. I'll send him a link to some especially outstanding baseball catch or a stupid screaming goat video, and he'll reply, succinctly, "That is tremendous." Or he'll email me an article prefaced with, "This is a tremendous story." It works for him. It really does. And, without knowing it, I've snatched that word from him like nobody's business.

I didn't realize this until July, when a different friend responded to one of my own emails by giving me props for my unusual word choice. "Also, great use of *tremendous*," she wrote near the end of her correspondence. This prompted a review of my sentbox folder, which confirmed that the word is now pervasive in my outgoing emails. "What an old-school term," she added. "Let's bring that back!"

Matthew J.X. Malady, "Fingerprint Words", 11 September 2014. Available from http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_good_word/2014/09/fingerprint_words_verbal_tics_that_define_us_and_how_they_spread_to_others.html.