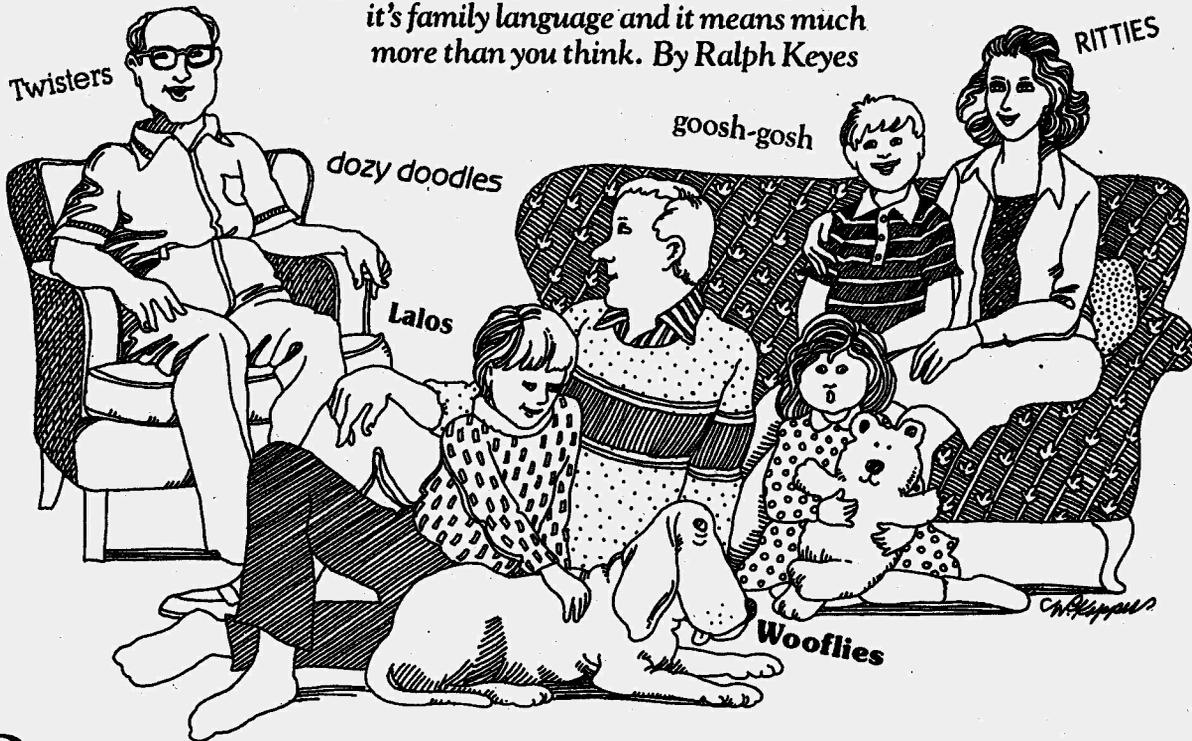


Family Spoken Here

Last week my family discussed bumpity bumps while eating a delicious bowl of goomyak. Confused? You should be, because it's family language and it means much more than you think. By Ralph Keyes



Does your family have a name for those small, raised, reflectingsquares of metal that mark highway lanes and shake up your car when you drive over them? They could just be called "reflectors" or "lane markers," but our family prefers to call them "bumpity bumps."

How about the solid parts of soup (like cut-up vegetables, rice, noodles, etc.)? There is no word for them in the dictionary, so out of necessity, my mother coined "goomyak." ("Does everyone have enough goomyak?" she would always ask.)

Each family develops its own private language over the years, composed of words that mean nothing to outsiders. Such words are often coined because none exist to describe something you need to talk about, such as those paper-covered wires used to tie plastic bags. Various people I spoke to call them: "baggie ties," "ties," "twist ties," "twisty things," and

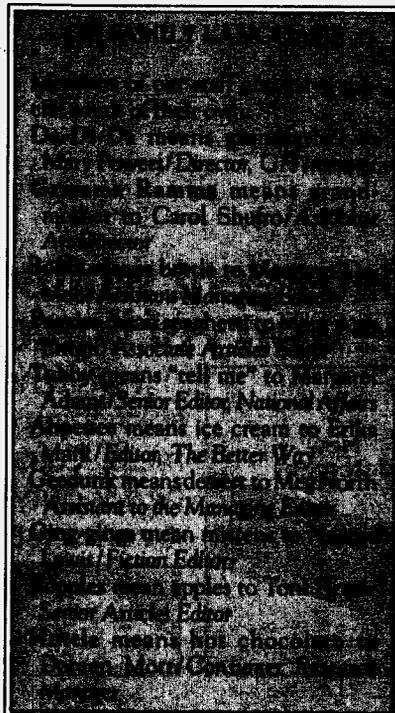
"twisties." Our family calls them "twisters."

When not only a word but the object it describes is unique to a family, even more invention is

needed. Years ago Richard and Hannah Northway of Yellow Springs, Ohio, concocted a sandwich spread from peanut butter, honey, and butter. This quickly led to a communications breakdown when Hannah wanted to ask "Would anyone like a peanut-butter-honey-butter sandwich?" or when one of her six children wanted to ask for some to be passed, please. The problem was finally solved by calling the concoction "goosh-gosh." No one can remember who first came up with this term, but "goosh-gosh" has been the Northways' own word for their sandwich spread for as long as they can recall.

In at least one case a family's word, the Wiffle ball, became the accepted American name for an object. In 1953, when David Mullany was 12, he kept talking about how he could "whiff," or strike out his Fairfield, Conn., playmates with the plastic golf ball they used to play stickball. The Mullanys soon began calling this

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their son's "whiffle" ball. When David Mullany, Sr., developed a baseball-sized version of this plastic ball, he simply dropped the "h" and capitalized the "W" to create its brand name. ("Zippers" were named in a similar fashion when a B.F. Goodrich executive kept exclaiming "Zip her up! Zip her up!" as he played with the contraption before it was introduced in 1923.)

In some cases new words are created for things that probably do have a name, but no one knows what it is. Or the official name twists the tongue or is just plain boring. It's far more fun to call a truck that carries cars a "cars on top truck" (as one family does) than to call that vehicle whatever it's supposed to be called.

E.B. White when speaking of his late wife, Katharine, before he died, said she felt that the term "tooth twine" was a great improvement over plain old "dental floss." He noted that the first time he heard her use this term, "I knew that a girl who called dental floss 'tooth twine' was the girl for me."

And, closer to home, years after my wife, Muriel, and I had dubbed them "stretchems," we discovered that those elastic fastening cords with hooks

at both ends already had a name: "bungee cords." But we like our word better, so to us, they will always be stretchems.

It's a rare family that doesn't have its own synonyms for everyday objects with perfectly good names already. When Alan and Judith Appelbaum of New York start discussing "woofflies" and "dozy doodles" with their two children, I need an interpreter to know that they're referring to snack foods and over-the-counter sleep aids. (Judy Appelbaum isn't sure where they picked up these terms, but thinks they may have been fanciful brand names on an old television program that the family adopted.)

Then there are "lalos." To the Fitzsimmons family of Swarthmore, Pa., its meaning is perfectly clear. "Lalo" is fruit that has gone by this name ever since Devin Fitzsimmons, now six, craved bananas as an infant but couldn't pronounce the word. So his siblings, Justin and Elizabeth, tried teaching their baby brother to ask for "yellows." The closest Devin could come was "lalos." And that's what bananas have been to all the Fitzsimmonses ever since.

Among the nine Coulsons of La Jolla, Calif., raisins are called "ritties" because that's what their son David called

them when he was an infant. The Coulsons also know that when a family member refers to an item of underwear as a "bookcase," it's really a bra that's being discussed. An embarrassed Coulson youngster once warned her mother when they went shopping for her first brassiere to call this item a "bookcase." If anyone asked where they were going, the mother was to reply, "out to buy a 'bookcase.'"

In a somewhat similar vein the Collins family of Newtown, Pa., came up with the exclamation "Geronimo!" to let their two boys know if their flies were open—without anyone outside the family being any the wiser.

Aside from the sheer fun of it, a lot of the reason we invent and continue to use such terms is to have secret code words known only to club members. A unique family language has more to do with community than communicating. Terms known only to insiders encourage a sense of belonging, and sayings based on shared experience remind family members of their history.

To Raymond and Rosalind Vogel of Cape Girardeau, Mo., making the best of a bad situation is known as "getting your curtains up." This harks back to the time two decades ago when the Vogels hired a part-time minister to paint their rambling old house. The man turned out to be much better at preaching than painting. As the five Vogels surveyed his damage, their painter suggested cheerfully, "It'll look better once you get your curtains up." And forever after, the words "getting your curtains up" became the Vogels' euphemism for blind optimism.

Since 1974 the Coulson family of La Jolla has used the phrase "two before breakfast" to needle boasters. The phrase came into use when their fourth child, Tom, examining a slim volume that happened to be a family favorite, observed that such a thin book couldn't be hard to write. "I could write two of these before breakfast," he said, and this became the Coulson's favorite way of gently cutting down anyone who's talking big.

In addition to fathering seven children, Bill Coulson is a counseling psychologist. He has noticed that good groups of all kinds invent their own language. "Every healthy family has a touch of it," says Coulson. "I think it's a way to say 'I love you' without putting it into words."

In Ohio, Richard and Hannah Northway recently acquired two step-grandchildren. They weren't sure of the best way to make them feel a real part of the family. But a short time later when one of the boys asked for some "goosh-gosh"—well, as Paula Northway put it, "You can tell he's one of us." ★