LIGHT REFRACTIONS

Health Nut

S.J. TRESS is a retired English teacher who lives in Brooklyn. She has written me several times during the past few years, always signing herself S.J. Tress—never a Mrs., Miss, Ms., or any indication of what S.J. stands for. She has assured me, though, that she is, indeed, a *she*. I feel just a bit uncomfortable not using one of the conventional titles, but I'll refer to her simply as S.J. Tress.

I heard from her several times last fall. First, she objected to my shooting down *port out, starboard home* as the derivation of *posh*. She had made many Atlantic crossings, she said, and several sea captains had assured her that *posh* really came from *port out, starboard home*. I think that just indicates that sea captains are as easily suckered into folk etymology as anyone. I have to accept the findings of Tom Burnam, who did extensive research on the subject for his *Dictionary of Misinformation*.

Next, S.J. Tress delivered an epistolary rap to my knuckles in response to a column on *Endangered Words*, in which I had said that *healthy* seems to be elbowing *healthful* into obsolescence. *Healthful*, I said, means "conducive to health; wholesome or salutary"; I added that *healthy* can also mean "conducive to health, etc." in addition to "in good health." *Healthy* has two edges and is replacing good old *healthful*, which I hear less and less frequently. "I think this is a shame," I said, and then I suppose I got too cute and threw in a few lines in which I deliberately confused *healthy* and *healthful* in order to make my point, which was that *healthy* should mean "in good health" and *healthful* should mean "conducive to good health."

S.J. Tress, in admonishing me, said "I must state that your explanation of the difference between 'healthy' and 'healthful' was vague and incorrect. Some of my former students phoned me about that, and I agreed."

Since I think that retired teachers whose former students still phone them about things like that deserve great respect and attention, I wrote to ask in what sense I was incorrect. (I accept "vague" without question. As I said, I probably got too cute.)

She answered that *healthy* "applies to living things—persons, animals, insects, plants, trees, etc. Example—if you follow sensible dietary habits, you will be healthy. If you care for your dog, he will be a healthy animal. If you care for your plants, they will be healthy, etc." *Healthful*, she went on, "applies to that which makes us healthy. Example—Milk is healthful for babies. Most people take vitamins because they believe them to be healthful."

What S.J. Tress says and what I say are very similar, but they differ in one important particular. She says the two words *do* mean what I say they *should* mean. The sad truth is that *healthy* has so often been used to mean "healthful" that any dictionary worth its flyleaf just has to list "healthful" as one of *healthy*'s meanings. At the same time, any such dictionary should somehow note that *healthful* has a greater claim on "conducive to good health" than does *healthy*.

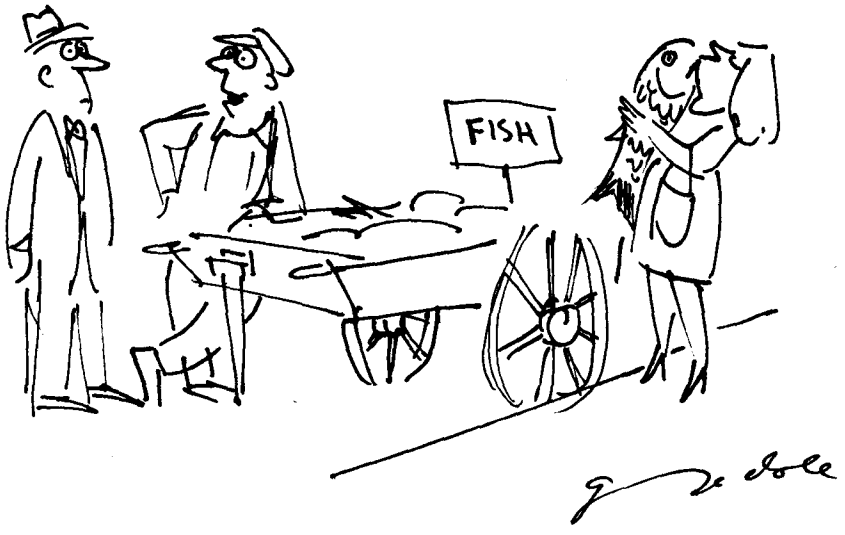
The point of my lament is that, considering the way language changes, if the present trend continues, *healthful* might some day appear in dictionaries with *Obs.* after it; it will have been retired to obsolescence; *healthy* will have taken over the whole field; and we'll have lost another useful word.

S.J. Tress and I are on the same side, but, whereas I assume a rather wishy-washy posture—viewing the trend with alarm while, at the same time, mumbling, "That's the way the cookie crumbles"—she, I think, maintains that the know-nothings who use *healthy* for *healthful* are wrong and that the dictionaries that justify them are wrong. S.J. Tress reminds me in that respect of my father, who, when he found something he disagreed with in a book—dictionary, encyclopedia, or whatever—would underline the offending phrase and write *bunk!* in the margin. If my father were alive today, he'd still deny that *contact* can be a verb: "You don't *contact* someone, for God's sake. You make contact with him!"

One of the impressions I get from the letters of S.J. Tress is that she is a linguistic positivist of the old school, like my father and all my favorite teachers of yore.

They laid down absolutes that we ignored at our peril. I'm grateful. It doesn't matter that, years later, I learned to say, "Not necessarily" to some of those absolutes. They were good for me in my formative years. I still thank Miss Welden, Miss Penney, Mrs. Haig, and the others who pounded absolutes through my thick skull, and who taught me in no uncertain terms the difference between *healthy* and *healthful*. And I'm sure many of S.J. Tress's former students are still grateful to her. Some of them even contact—whoops—keep in contact with her.

—Thomas H. Middleton



"There's someone who really loves fish!"

Blocking the Road to Riches

THE DOMINANT firms in a $100 billion industry meet regularly to discuss prices. After a brief hearing of consumer comments, company officials decide for themselves on a common price. The rates are then published and, short of providing the service for themselves, customers have no choice but to meet the asking price.

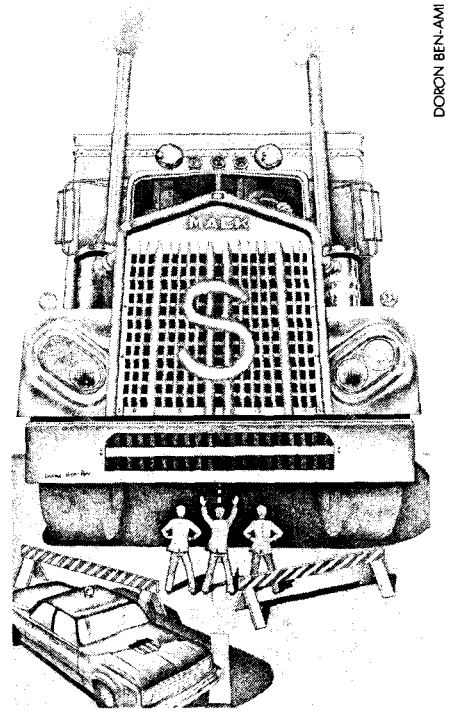
The slightest hint of such price-fixing activities would bring Justice Department lawyers running—unless, that is, the industry happens to be trucking. The nation's motor carriers, who set their prices in rate bureaus, constitute a legally protected cartel. Competition is further throttled by the chariness of the Interstate Commerce Commission in handing out operating licenses, especially the most lucrative ones. In this ideal climate, trucking concerns pull down a whopping average profit; consumers, meanwhile, are estimated to pay as much as $2 billion a year more than they would were the industry deregulated.

And deregulated it soon will be, if the Carter administration and such legislators as Senator Kennedy have their way. President Carter has tabbed trucking deregulation as a top priority for the 96th Congress. Alfred Kahn, his chief inflation fighter, has not only declared his support for change, but has already led the successful fight to strip the airlines industry of its traditional protection. Senator Kennedy has already laid the ground for reform by conducting extensive hearings in the fall of 1978.

Despite the broad consensus for deregulation, and the surprisingly easy success with the airlines industry, reform advocates are girding for a rough battle. Every president since Truman has advocated reform, but none has proved equal to the task. The large carriers that make up the American Trucking Associations, the industry's formidable trade organization, are considerably more united in their opposition to legislative change than were the airlines.

And, with members located in congressional districts throughout the country, the ATA can bring substantial grass-roots power to bear on members of Congress. So, too, can the drivers' union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, whose two million members include 600,000 truckers, many of whom fear that deregulation would depress wages and cut into employment.

PROPONENTS OF trucking reform feel that the regulatory machinery has long since outlived its usefulness. The Motor Carrier Act of 1935, which empowered the ICC to suspend rates it found unjustified and to limit the number of trucking firms licensed to offer service, was passed as a means of protecting the fledgling two- and three-truck companies that, at the time, were ever on the edge of bankruptcy. But as firms prospered during and after World War II, the act rapidly became obsolete. Today its standards serve mainly to insulate carriers from competition—and to produce a windfall for many of them. Of the country's 15,000 regulated carriers, some 350 take in over $10 million in revenues a year. Sixty-seven trucking companies are listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Rates of return on equity (profit as a fraction of outstanding stock) average close to 20 percent—far higher than the ratios that prevail in most other industries.



DORON BEN-AMI

A key prop in this protectionist scheme is the ICC's requirement that all regulated carriers obtain operating certificates for each service they provide. Only some 1,000 carriers hold the coveted "general commodity, regular route" certificates, which authorize the bearer to haul all but certain excepted goods over major intercity routes. These licenses are so lucrative that the eight largest trucking firms, all of which have this advantage, enjoy a rate of return on equity twice that of the average Fortune 500 company. The ICC will grant such a license to a carrier only if the applicant can demonstrate that its service will not damage the operations of any other carrier. But since every application produces hundreds of witnesses eager to testify that the proposed service would cause them undue hardship, new licenses have become as scarce as they are valuable. Few firms even bother to apply to the ICC for authorization; instead, they buy operating certificates from existing carriers, usually at exorbitant prices. In 1976, for instance, one bankrupt company sold its operating rights alone for $20.6 million.

The effect of such entry restrictions on competition would not be so serious if truckers did not also enjoy the other classic element of cartelization—price fixing, or, as it is more politely called, collective rate making. In the past, truckers have defended rate bureaus by pointing out that all carriers have the right to file independent tariffs; but they neglect to add that bureau members usually respond to proposals for lower rates by filing formal protests with the ICC, setting off a time-consuming, costly hearing that effectively discourages most carriers from bucking the bureaus. The ATA itself has tacitly recognized the need to reform rate-bureau procedures by preparing a bill for submission to Congress that would set zones within which carriers could move their rates up or down without ICC say-so. However, reform advocates, notably the Justice Department, say they would not be satisfied with anything less than repeal of the Reed-Bulwinkle Act, the law that has bestowed antitrust immunity on bureau activities since 1948.

Many shippers, increasingly dissatisfied with the industry's oligopolistic practices, have set up their own private trucking fleets—an undeniably expen-