

# Chemistry and the English Language

A popular joke describes the danger of dihydrogen monoxide. It's claimed that this colorless, odorless, and tasteless substance results in thousands of deaths every year. Assorted other perils are cited, and finally the reader is warned to stay away from it as far as possible.

The joke is that dihydrogen monoxide (H<sub>2</sub>O) is a made-up chemical name for water.

With their long, exotic-sounding names, chemicals often frighten us. Yet, all of us (like everything else in the universe) are made up of thousands of chemicals. No wonder, when we meet a person, the first thing we look for is chemistry.

A number of words derived from chemical names have colored the English language, as we shall see this week.

**bromide** (BRO-myd) noun [From bromine, from Greek bromos (stench).]

1. A tired or meaningless remark.
2. A tiresome or boring person.

In earlier times, potassium bromide used to be taken as a sedative. So any statement that was intended to be soothing ("Don't worry, everything will be OK.") acquired the name bromide. Eventually any commonplace or tired remark and anyone uttering such remarks came to be known as a bromide.

The term was popularized in the title of Gelett Burgess's 1906 book "Are You a Bromide?"

**acidulous** (a-SIJ-uh-luhs) adjective

Somewhat sour in taste or in manner.

[From Latin acidulus (slightly sour), diminutive of acidus (sour), from acere (to be sour). Ultimately from the Indo-European root ak- (sharp) that's also the source of acrid, vinegar, acid, acute, edge, hammer, heaven, eager, oxygen, and mediocre.]

"Like Munroe, she permitted herself no grand, expressive gestures, but then this is a wry, acidulous work."

Justin Davidson; The Virtuosos of the Philharmonic; Newsday (New York); Feb 5, 1996.

**caustic** (KAW-stik) adjective

1. Capable of burning or corroding.
2. Highly critical; sarcastic.

[From Latin causticus, from Greek kaustikos, from kaustos (combustible), from kaiein, (to burn).]

Caustic soda (Sodium hydroxide) is a highly corrosive substance used in the manufacture of soap, paper, and textiles.

"Some were outright sarcastic, others clearly caustic."

Vijay Mruthyunjaya; ICC's Hairobics Baffle; Gulf Daily News (Bahrain); Aug 28, 2006.

**miscible** (MIS-uh-buhl) adjective

Capable of being mixed together.

[From Latin miscere (to mix), ultimately from the Indo-European root meik- (to mix) that's also the source of mix, miscellaneous, meddle, medley, promiscuous, melee, and mustang.]

"'With old homes, some of the lead actually becomes dissolved in the hot water,' said Rahming. 'So it is advisable that hot water not be used from the sink for cooking or drinking. Even the cold side should be run for at least two minutes during the day so that any miscible lead can be washed out of the system before ingestion.'"

John H. Manor; Get the Lead Out!; Michigan Chronicle; Feb 7, 1996.

**vitriolic** (vi-tree-OL-ik) adjective

Extremely caustic; bitterly scathing.

[From Latin vitrum (glass).]

Sulfuric acid, a highly corrosive substance, was formerly known as oil of vitriol or simply vitriol. It was named vitriol owing to the glassy appearance of its salts.

"Unlike many other districts in Ventura County, Simi Valley has suffered a steady diet of noisy board meetings, vitriolic letters to the editor and name-calling directed at board members."

Mack Reed; Simi Schools in Throes of Tumult, Hope; The Los Angeles Times;

Jun 2, 1996.