

January 10, 2010
The Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I recently observed something about cats: They don't name their kittens.

As far as I can tell, in fact, cats don't give names to much of anything. I have listened closely to the cat dialect spoken in our house, and I'm not sure I've ever detected a single noun. The thing is curious. Verbs yes---especially emotive predicates---but no nouns.

Thus, as far as I can discern, cats have no special word for "table." Now it is possible I am wrong on this point, but if there is special cat term for "table," it sounds a lot like the cat word for "equatorial circumference." The chances for confusion here---which are many---are perhaps what have discouraged cats from becoming restaurant waiters. I mean, you know, if the cat words for "table" and "equatorial circumference" sound very much the same, can we wonder why so many kittens, whose mothers encouraged them to go into the restaurant business, ended up as explorers? You may have noticed this: Lots of cats are explorers, and this would explain it.

Anyway, it is difficult to pick out nouns in cat language. And without nouns, there are no pronouns. Cats are notoriously weak on pronouns. I mean, if "table" sounds a lot like "equatorial circumference," you can imagine the subtlety required for he, she, and it.

Our non-nominal cats are, in this respect, quite the opposite of many people I know, who employ nouns almost exclusively, with virtually no verbs.

I don't know when cats stopped using nouns, but the loss of verbs among people can be traced to about sixty years ago. Before that, when I was a real little kid, we had lots of verbs.

(At one time life on the earth must have been truly exciting: human beings still using verbs, and cats meowing away with nouns.)

Anyway, to come back to the subject: about sixty years ago my father (ever a close observer of the scene) commented one day that people had recently reduced the use of verbs to about three.

This was true. For example, if a person back then wanted to narrate something the teacher expressed to Fred, the sentence would come out as, "The teachers goes, 'Fred . . .'" Or, we might be told, "The traffic cop goes, 'Stop!'" In those days "goes" could cover the function of almost any verb. Once in a great while we might catch wind of some other verb, but generally "goes" managed it all.

This is not the case anymore. Even the verb "goes" seems to be gone. I am not sure when "goes" went, but it did. Human language now is down to zero verbs. All

predication, transitive or intransitive, active or passive, has faded from human discourse. Verbs are no longer in use, and only a handful of us still remember them.

I trace this development to a fellow I once knew down in Oklahoma. I think he is the person chiefly responsible for the disappearance of verbs. At least he is the first man I ever met who could speak for hours with never the slightest recourse to a verb.

I don't mean he neglected verbs in common conversation, but in actual sermons and lectures. He told endless and detailed stories, stringing nouns together galore, garnished with---at most---a discreet adjective or the delicate whisper of a preposition. He was also fond of pronouns---he was---which he employed with deft precision.

His listeners never had the slightest idea what the fellow was talking about, but evidently it did not bother anybody. He espoused certain causes popular at the time---liturgical reform and ecumenical theology, if memory serves---and I remember him as quite a success on the lecture circuit. For my part, I confess sitting spellbound, just listening to him go on and on, admiring how he pulled it off.

Nowadays, however, even this achievement is pretty common. The verb has been almost universally replaced by the expression, "was like." This basic communication covers it all.

My phone has a function called "texting," about which I fear the worst. I have never ventured into this "texting," and I rejoice it is found only in electronic form. I would hate to think of archeologists, in some distant future, trying to make sense of it. Linear Script B was tough enough.

These days, anyway, I split my time between human beings and cats. I listen to people to make sure I get enough nouns, and then go to cats to guarantee I don't get too many.

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