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Amazing no more

Give the word a rest so it can regain its true magnificence.

By Michael Krikorian | October 11, 2010

It's sad when you see magnificence decline into mediocrity or worse.

Muhammad Ali, unable to speak. Mickey Mantle limping back to the dugout, head down, after striking out. Brando looking like a beached Pacific walrus, mumbling away. Liz Taylor avoiding the spotlight. Renoir with hands so arthritic he could barely hold a brush. The word "amazing."

For too long now, I have been painfully aware of the failing meaning, diluted power and loss of essence of "amazing."

I have known for a few years that "amazing" was stumbling and that it was only a matter of time before irrelevancy set in, but still it hurts. Probably what irks me the most is how people don't even realize the word needs to be put on the injured reserved list or out to pasture.

Folks, I'm here to tell you officially, it's time. "Amazing" — the most misused, bastardized, overworked superlative in the American language — is no longer valid. Oh, people might still use it ad nauseam, but the significance is gone. And when a word loses its original intent, it's time for retirement.

The final, inevitable blow came last week when a friend described a doughnut to me as amazing. I am big-time into food, but doughnuts are not amazing. They can be tasty; they can be delicious. Nothing wrong with that. But a doughnut cannot stop you in your tracks in wonderment, in, in, in amazement.

"Amazing" and I go back about 47 years. We first became close in 1963 when, as a hard-core 9-year-old Marvel Comics buyer, I became fascinated with Spider-Man. If you don't know, he was known, on the cover, as "The Amazing Spider-Man."

I mean, this teenager, Peter Parker, after a spider bit him, could shoot webbing out of his wrist and cling to tall buildings and even go swinging like Tarzan from skyscraper to skyscraper! Cat could do all kinds of stuff: fight evil supervillains; rescue damsels in distress; throw a rock 'em sock 'em punch. He was, well, amazing.

But, about three years ago, I began noticing that "amazing" had become the go-to superlative. More and more, I started hearing it in inappropriate situations. It was sad because my old friend was starting to annoy me. "Amazing" turned cheap, a shell of its former self.

It started to mean good — not that there is anything wrong with good. I like good. But suddenly every thing was amazing. How was that movie? It was amazing. How was the concert? Amazing. How's the dust on top of your refrigerator? You guessed it.

Last week at a restaurant in south Hollywood that I frequent, a couple — thinking it was my first time there — used the word seven times in roughly 90 seconds to praise the food and service. If they kept up that torrid pace, allowing for eight hours of sleep, they would have said the word 1,634,200 times in 12 months. What lives of wonderment they must lead.

Two nights ago, at a Hollywood and Vine restaurant, the waiter described the Brussels sprouts as "amazing."

If everything is amazing then nothing is amazing.

"Amazing" is not the first superlative to lose its power. "Great" went long ago. But then, Alexander set the standard so high, it's demise wasn't shocking. For those of you who don't know, the word fizzled out in 1997 after announcer Al Michaels declared a four-yard run by Barry Sanders as great. I enjoyed watching Barry as much as anybody, but to me, you just about have to conquer Persia or at least the ancient port city of Tyre to be called great.

"Awesome" overdosed several years back. Everything was awesome. Remember that? The word went on life support and people backed off. It might never be the "awesome" we once knew, but it's making an ever-so-slight comeback

There's a tiny chance "amazing" can regain its former vitality. Unfortunately, it's highly unlikely, given the American love of superlatives and hyperbole. We'd all have to leave the poor thing alone. Realize what it really is. Maybe start abusing other words. "Tremendous" is still a tremendous word and not overworked. "Magnificent" is still magnificent.

"Amazing" should be deployed only for the truly special, um, spectacular. Like describing Yosemite in spring from Tunnel View. Like when Koufax pitched that perfect game against the Cubs. Like the aurora borealis. Like childbirth, (formally super-amazing). Like the 113-degree temperature last week downtown. Not like a crumb doughnut at Bob's, as much as I like crumb doughnuts on a Farmers Market morning.

I hope "amazing" gets the solitude it needs to recover. Do your part. The next time you hear it, stop the madness immediately. Explain that a once amazing word has hit the showers.

Michael Krikorian covered street gangs and the LAPD for The Times. He recently completed his first crime novel, "Southside," and a children's book, "The Sunflower Who Loved the Moon."