

Crewless in Space

BY KEVIN SELF

Political correctness has taken exception to the word *man* in the realm of technical writing. Given the popularity of this “foe,” it remains to be seen whether the development will curtail the word’s use. At issue is the adjective *unmanned*, which lost out to a less customary term in the lead story of the September issue of *The Institute*, IEEE members’ monthly newspaper.

That article described the successful first test flight of the Helios solar-powered “uninhabited aerial vehicle” by engineers at the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. While technically correct, the use of the adjective *uninhabited*, instead of the more common *unmanned* or *robotic*, to describe a pilotless vehicle was a bit unusual. Presumably *unmanned* carries a masculine connotation, making the term appear sexist.

Magazines and newspapers also have tried inventing nonsexist descriptions of robotic missions. Earlier this year, for instance, the Reuters news agency article, “Spacecraft Aims to Snap Big Bang ‘Baby Picture,’” about NASA’s MAP (Microwave Anisotropy Probe) craft faced a similar wording difficulty. In the piece, the agency reported: “The unstaffed probe will swing past the Moon on its way to an orbit around a point 1 million miles from Earth in the direction away from the Sun.”

With this kind of change in the air, be on the lookout for other aerospace vehicle-suitable synonyms such as *unpopulated*, *unpeopled*, and *untenanted*.

Overlooking the Obvious

Ever wonder about the parentage of a newly coined word? Reuben Thomas of Cambridge, England, made a quick connection between *prossification* [May, p. 112], defined as the result of procedural ossification (fossilization), and a character’s name in a 1979 science fiction book, Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.

At the beginning of the book, a particularly unimaginative bureaucrat is sent to inform the protagonist, Arthur Dent, that his house is to be demolished forthwith. The name of the bureaucrat? Mr. Prosser, of course.

Jumping In About Jacks

E-mails concerning an article on the etymology of the word *jack* [also in May] for the receptacle for a plug continue to trickle

in. *The IEEE Standard Dictionary of Electrical and Electronics Terms*, Sixth Edition, defines the item as “a connecting device within a circuit to which one or more wires may be attached and which is arranged so that a plug may be attached.”

By far the most common report from readers was that the name was derived from the fact that the plug is jacketed. Gary Belshaw of Hong Kong described it as “a coaxial plug with a tip and sleeve, the sleeve being the earthing jacket over the central core (which usually carries the signal). Shorten the name, and instead of jacketed plug, we get jack plug.”

As for how long the term *jack* has been used in electrical engineering, Jim Calvert of Denver, Colo., wrote: “I am pretty sure I have seen the term in use by the 1870s or earlier. These original jacks were not round, but were flat and long, with upper and lower springy parts. Plugs consisting of two flat metal strips separated by insulation were inserted into the flat jacks and held by a catch operated by the springiness of the jack.”

Calvert believes that the name arose because the jacks resembled bootjacks with the flat strips slightly raised to catch the boot heel. “When jacks became cylindrical [as most are now], the resemblance was totally lost, though....”

Responding to our speculation that the word seems to be short for jack-plug, Jonathan Scott of Santa Rosa, Calif., wrote: “I suggest that the jack-prefix implies ‘quick’; a jack-plug is thus one that makes a quick connection....The term was shortened to *jack*, disconnecting it from the etymology.” ●

Worth Repeating

“Scientists are men who dream about doing things. Engineers do them. If you want to be an engineer but find you have ten thumbs, become a scientist.”

—JAMES ALBERT MICHENER (1907–1997) from his novel *Space* (Fawcett Books, 1988). A U.S. writer and essayist, Michener won a Pulitzer Prize in 1948. In *Space*, he chronicles the history of the U.S. space program.

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