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- “Undertaker sued for losing legs.” This headline appeared in a newspaper story. Whose legs? The undertaker’s or the unfortunate customer’s? The story went on to explain that indeed it was a customer’s lower limbs. I use this cautionary tale not to exhort morticians to be a little more careful but as a lead into an opportunity to have a bit of fun with one of our official languages. (Those heard muttering, “Not again,” are under no statutory obligation to read further.)
- My need to have a go at English once more was stimulated by a sentence in a recently submitted manuscript. The authors were trying to explain why consultation was sought in a case of precocious puberty. I discovered that: “The parents took the seven year old to a gynaecologist with enlarged breasts.” Anyone trying to use the written word can come up with such a misplaced modifier. When I was being taught to write, the teachers would use fictitious advertisements to make this point as in:
 - “Wanted—car for man with automatic clutch.
 - “Table for woman with spindly legs.
 - “Bathtub for man with copper bottom.”
 Modern headline writers are also experts as in:
 - “Pro-animal group tied to bomb.”
 - “Two sisters reunited after eighteen years in check-out counter.”
 - “Killer sentenced to die for second time in ten years.”
- All of these were written by English speakers. The *Globe and Mail* (Sept 26, 1997) commented on the difficulty in translating Chinese into English. In Hong Kong, films were required by law to have English subtitles. Here are a few examples.
 - “What you need is a canned woman.”
 - “You bastard, try this melon!”
 - “There’s no way you can trust her. Her missile is gigantic.”
 - “You with your thick face have hurt my instep.”

- “Thick” (see above), certainly where I come from, can be used to connote a physical dimension or a certain lack of cerebral prowess. I offer for your edification some more flowery ways to describe “thick” being applied in its latter sense (Weekend Sun, Sept 13, 1997).

“Has two brains: one is lost and the other is out looking for it.”

“A photographic memory with the lens cap on.”

“It takes him an hour and a half to watch ‘60 Minutes’.”

“So dense that light waves bend round her.”

- The authors of those less than complimentary epithets could be accused of being sarcastic. You might be interested to know (or alternatively you might not) that sarcoma, sarcophagus and sarcasm share the same Greek origin. “Sarx” is the flesh, hence sarc (flesh), oma (swelling). Sarcoma—a fleshy tumour. (As an aside, “Hamartoma” means “a badly thrown javelin,” but you really didn’t want to know that.) To continue, sarcophagus, a tomb, is literally a flesh eater. “Sarkasmos” means “to tear the flesh.” Forgive me if I feel a little like indulging myself in a tad of “sarkasmos” when I repeat exactly as printed, the headline of a professional newsletter which recently came to my attention. And, no, it did not contain any misplaced modifiers. It said quite simply, “From the Chair’s desk.” Given the thing had been written it would have been more accurate to have said, “From the pen of the desk of the Chair.” Perhaps I shouldn’t be sarcastic. Perhaps, with respect to “From the C’s D,” to slip into Latin, “Res ipsi loquitur.” (The thing speaks for itself.)