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Author(s): Frederic G. Cassidy

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# AMONG THE OLD WORDS

FREDERIC G. CASSIDY

*University of Wisconsin*

SOMEWHERE IN THE DIM PAST of the early nineteenth century (as I suspect but cannot prove), our grandparents or their parents, in pursuit of the pleasures of elegance, clothed their speech, as also their corporosities, in the fashion of the times. Proper speech being an appurtenance of good manners, they composed, and taught their children, certain formulas of polite expression fitting to such social situations as they were liable to encounter.<sup>1</sup> They knew well that informality is notoriously untrustworthy, that the spur of the moment can urge a speaker to disastrous infelicities. Better far to be prepared, to have an appropriate formula fall trippingly off the tongue. Imagine, for example, the dinner guest who, having partaken of everything in sight, is being plied by his hostess to stuff himself further. Smiling assuredly, he replies, "No, thank you. I have had a genteel sufficiency—any more would be superfluity." The occasion is met, the temptation resisted, and the formula has attested the propriety of the guest's upbringing.

A preamble to what tale?

The tale began when, as editor of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, I was asked by an elderly lady in West Virginia to explain the word *cironcified* (as she spelled it). Neither it, nor anything like it, is in the dictionaries. I began inquiring around me, got a few replies, then printed a query about it in a widely read publication.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly the mail began to pour in. To date I have received forty-six letters and several postcards giving the writers' versions, no two exactly alike, of the formula of polite refusal as used by their family or acquaintance, usually by an elderly person, but remembered appreciatively by some younger ones. Most of these formulas have at their center some version of my elderly lady's etymologically mysterious word.

The formulas typically fall into two parts (like the elegant one quoted above), one part refusing more food, the other explaining the refusal. A common pattern is "My sufficiency is fully surancified; any more would be obnoxious to my fastidious taste." Obviously, the original, serious formula has become inflated; it is on the way to jocular, even satiric, exaggeration. Our attitude toward "verbal elegance" has changed: one does not say that sort of thing nowadays unless in humorous mockery. *Surancified*, at the center of the new formula, is clearly intended to be impressive and a bit mysterious. Our evidence suggests that the original formula was elaborated until it became too hard to learn and produced

embarrassing breakdowns and finally that it became fashionable—as a sort of game—to invent new, amusing elaborations.

Variants have been sent me from nineteen states and three provinces of Canada, and similar formulas are claimed for Britain, Norway, and Sweden. One writer traces the family formula back to great grandparents at about 1840, in upstate New York. Formally the variants fall into distinct groups. In the absence of established spellings, the letter-writers made their own, ad hoc, more or less phonetic. Omitting insignificant differences (such as *c* and *s* for [s] and the vowels used for [ə]), we find the following:

suffancified, suffencified, suffoncified, suffuncified, suffaucified, suffonified, seffancified, serfancified  
suffanciful, serfanciful, so fanciful  
surancified, surencified, surrossified  
surquancified, surquencified  
ferancified

The most regular feature, *-ified*, is clear enough: the speaker's *sufficiency* (by far the most frequent word) has been achieved. The suffix *-iful* has similar force; the *sufficiency* has been *full-filled*. The prefix, with all the spellings for [ə], perhaps goes back to *sur-* (as in *surfeit*?) and suggests complete satisfaction, possibly even excess ("I'm as full as I can go!"). The last six forms listed would seem to have strayed from the prevailing pattern, having lost touch with *fancy*, the evident core ("I've had all I could fancy!"). There may also be the adjectival suggestion that the food was *fancy*: the guest has been full-filled with fancy foods. The word itself is a kind of layer cake, a fanciful concoction. The last word, *ferancified*, has lost touch completely: the layer cake is squashed.

A few other variants in the formula may be worth notice. Sufficiency may be *ample*, *elegant*, *full*, or *genteel*. The guest may be *completely*, *fully*, *greatly*, or *prodigiously suffancified* or *suffenciful*. One writer claims the condition for his "dialidical" regions; another says, "I have eaten to my *sanctification*," which carries him a bit above mere *satisfaction*.

The first part of the formula is more regular than the second part, where perhaps overtaxed memory broke down. An original "any more would be *superfluity* (or *superfluous*)" underlies most of the variants, but some strange collapses or mutations resulted:

superfluity: supernuity (Illinois), superflousy (New York), super-inflopecy (Wisconsin), superty-flipperty-flopperty (Montana), flippancy-floppancy (Massachusetts), flippis-floppis (Colorado), flippus-floppus (Kansas), flip-flop (Massachusetts, Wisconsin)

Or, "I am full to—"

superabundance (New York), redundancy (Florida, Illinois), the elegance of my taste (Michigan), (I am full) clear up to my quiddy-quaddy (Illinois), (I) nearly bust my quiddy-quaddy (New York)

Or, "Any more would be—"

obnoxious to my (fastidious, malicious) taste (Pennsylvania, Illinois)

Finally, throwing every pretence of elegance to the winds, "I've stuffed my gut to capacity" (Illinois).

The humorous development of the formula by means of parody carried over to a little "story" reported independently in slightly different forms by three writers. A real incident probably underlies it, but narrative art enhanced it somewhere along the line and folk transmission did the rest, introducing the theme of the naive "country cousin." It seems there was a little girl from the country visiting her cousin in the city. They were invited to dine with neighbors, but the country girl was reluctant, being uncertain of city manners. "Don't worry," says the city cousin, "Just watch me and do as I do." All goes well till the meal is over and the hostess offers more. "No thank you," says the city girl, "I have had sufficiency suffanciful. Any more would be superfluity." The hostess offers more to the country girl. "No thank you," says she, "My shimmy-shirt and pants-are-ful." Delicacy draws a curtain over the sequel.

#### NOTES

1. Such formulas contain some of the old words of my title. For more years than I can remember, I. Willis Russell, in addition to performing his duties as Secretary of the American Dialect Society, produced, with the help of a committee, a feature for *American Speech* entitled "Among the New Words" (and for a time wrote a similar feature for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), thanks to which his friends and other logophiles were kept up to date—or updated. This was a labor of love, for which we remain ever in his debt.

2. *Verbatim* 6, no. 2.