

# □ PERSPECTIVES

*This is the first in a series of four columns on language/Ed.*

By Jason Zweig

Last year an Ivy League student began telling me a story: "This," she said, "is so incredible you won't believe it." She was right, or course; I didn't believe it. The story itself was credible enough, but that first sentence was indeed unbelievable.

The fact that the student was from Brown and not Columbia is hardly reassuring. That preposterous sentence still came from the mouth and mind of someone who certainly should have known better. Something is wrong with the English language when educated people abuse it so thoughtlessly.

Examples are everywhere; some of them are amazing. How can anyone use a word like "coequal" and retain faith in his sanity? I imagine a definition like this: "A, which is equal to itself, is equal to B, which is equal to itself and A. And vice versa." Perhaps in a world where only the very loudest shouts can be heard, no one can continue to believe in the vital force of words. People are afraid to let words speak for themselves; a new kind of grammar says everything twice, as if the innate meaning of a word is no longer enough. "Unique," which once meant "the only one," has become "very unique," or the only, only one. "Excellent" has become

## Talking Heads

*Remain in  
redundancy?*

Perspectives is a new  
*Sundial* column of  
opinions and ideas.

Anyone interested in  
expressing views on  
any subject is  
encouraged to submit  
their efforts.

"so excellent"; it once meant "extremely good"—now it must mean "so" extremely good. And so it's a short climb to "so incredible you won't believe it," which of course means unbelievably unbelievable.

I am writing a column on words not from a position of superiority—since I have made worse errors than my friend from Brown—but because I think about words a great deal, even when I may be abusing them. Thinking about something means taking it seriously; and thinking about language is the first step on the long road toward coherence and creative expression.

My goal in writing this column will be to force you to *think* about language. I believe that using words thoughtlessly is dangerous; first, because stupid words and phrases impoverish the language and constrict our lives; second, because passive acceptance of words is politically dangerous as well. The Big Lie will be most readily believed by those who never question the meaning, virtue and usage of words.

Our lives are governed as much by words as by governments, and yet most people pay even less attention to language than they do to politics. I think that's unfortunate, since we have more control over words than we do over Washington. If this column succeeds, it will simply make you more conscious of that control. ■

## TOUCHÉ

The Columbia Fencing Team opens its season against Rutgers this Saturday, December 6th at 1:00 p.m. Stop by and watch one of Columbia's most successful teams begin their year on a winning note.

Levien Gymnasium

## LARGEST Second-Hand Bookstore

on the Upper West Side  
WITH OVER



100,000 BOOKS and 35,000 RECORDS  
\$1.50 Sale—Records: Rock, Classical, Jazz

Fantastic Sale—Art and Architecture:  
Just Received Books

Bring in your books or records for credit or cash!!

Just acquired over 19,000 records. Many out-of-print  
show tunes, classical, early rock & jazz

**NRS Books** 118 & AMST. AVE. 666-3030