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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: Smart things

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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — Smart Things

Column Editor: **Michael P. Pelikan** (Penn State) <mpp10@psu.edu>

When did the use of the term “Smart” as a prefix arise? 1997 saw the first use of the term “smartphone,” says **Merriam Webster’s** online dictionary, and I’ve no reason to doubt it. “Smart” itself, if I can dig through all the ads on the page (Good Grief! There are TWO video ads running, TWO Top Ten lists, plus an electronics retailer banner (no surprise there, given it’s me, although Your Results May Vary — and we won’t ask you to publish them...)) (Hmmm...I guess printed, bound dictionary sales must be slow) Help! I’m creating a punctuation nightmare!)) — Anyway...

“Smart” itself, gets three definitions and a number of additional components for a Full Definition.

- 1: very good at learning or thinking about things,
- 2: showing intelligence or good judgment,
- 3: behaving or talking in a rude or impolite way, showing lack of respect for someone.

And in the Full Definition we find added:

- 1: making one smart — causing a sharp stinging,
- 2: marked by often sharp forceful activity or vigorous strength <a smart pull on the starter cord>
- 3: Brisk, Spirited <a smart pace>,

- 4: mentally alert,
- 5a: Witty, Clever,
- 5b: Pert, Saucy,
- 6a: Neat, Trim,

6b: Stylish or elegant in dress or appearance,

6c: (1) appealing to sophisticated tastes.
(2) characteristic of or patronized by fashionable society,

7a: being a guided missile <a laser-guided smart bomb>

7b: operating by automation <a smart machine tool>,

7c: intelligent.

Well. A pretty loaded word, and some marketing genius earned a big bonus by attaching all those importations to any old thing you stick “Smart” in front of.

So — we all know what’s implied when we refer to a “Smart” anything, a phone, of course, or even, as **Merriam Webster** pointed out, a machine tool or a laser-guided bomb.

As this is written, we have prominent in the news a smart (Fuller def. 1,2,3, maybe 6a, maybe 7a, certainly 7b) convergence of stories — several prominent retailers caught in the latest identity spill — in the case of one, both IDs and pass-



words, more comprehensive (and less surprising) revelations about surveillance of network traffic by alphabet agencies, technical and policy difficulties in getting government-operated computer systems to play nicely in information exchanges with privately-held systems, not to mention Websites, and the close of the Computer Electronics Show for 2014, amidst which there have been a number of pronouncements that this year will be, specifically if not gracefully, “The Year of the Internet of Things.”

Great. What else do we know? There’s a *USA Today* story recently in which **Amazon** asserts that it “...knows its customers so well it can start shipping even before orders are placed, and **Google** has plunked down 3.2 billion dollars (that’s a ‘b’) to acquire **Nest**, a company that makes home automation products.”

Oh — and there’s also a story about a smart refrigerator having been used, along with more than 100,000 appliances and devices, to send out spam emails — the first notable use of “Smart” appliances to launch a cyber attack.

There’s so much here to launch a column from I hardly know where to begin (as should be clear by now). I can only lay out a few smart (Fuller def. 5a, 6a, maybe 6b(1)) observations.

continued on page 10



Take a closer look at....

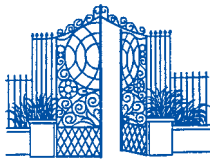
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First of all — **Amazon** — our e-readers (which for some reason no one calls SmartBooks — maybe it's taken) have been snitching on us since Day One. **Amazon** has been informing its recommendations by very, very specific statistics derived not just from our browsing and purchasing of reading material from their Website, but also from our actual usage of that material on “our (**Amazon's**) devices. Pretty Smart (Fuller def. 7c, 7b, 7a, 2, 1, possibly Primary def. 3). Our books are reading us. This will never stop. We'll never go back to the way it was before. And we have very little power over how well they hold on to their vaunted ideals and security measures.

I am honestly and entirely uncertain whether to be more apprehensive about deep information relating to comprehensive browsing and purchasing activity, along with electronic identities, passwords, credit cards, etc., being in the hands of Private Industry, or Government, or Both. Do we get a choice here? Can't pick, neither, can we? Nope, not anymore. As my kid sister the Classics Professor says, “That horse has sailed...”

Ah! Just this moment I've run into a story in which **Google** hastens to assure us that changes to **Nest/Google's** privacy agreement will be “opt-in.” Such assurances seem more exemplary of the “necessary next press release” than of ultimate assurance.

What is it about **Google's** acquisition of **Nest** that has attracted so much attention, besides the price? Well. **Google** has been, primarily, a software company. The Nexus tablets have

been manufactured for **Google**, all those smartphones running **Android** — those are all built by someone other than **Google** as well. The line of demarcation between software and hardware is fuzzy at the best of times, especially when we realize that both hardware and software fall under the moniker “technology,” but to the extent we can know such things, we can largely identify **Google** as a company that makes its money writing software that runs on hardware, well, writing software that runs on hardware that people run, thereby creating data, which **Google** harvests and sells. It's a crop, and it's always in season.

Amazon has been primarily a retailer, selling “things” over the World Wide Web, at least before it began selling hardware that permits it to deliver more of what it sells. We buy a Kindle. **Amazon** gets a new Retail Location. We buy the Kindle, then we pay for Prime, and get free British Television and Two-Day shipping. According to **CNBC**, American customers spend an average of \$968 annually on **Amazon**, while **Amazon Prime** members spend an average \$1,340 annually. **Amazon** also gets fuller, richer data upon which to personalize its automated (smart) recommendations. My wife watches British Television. I watch films in which things blow up. Both metadata streams are associated with the same Prime account, although I'm fairly sure **Amazon** can tell her Kindle is watching *Downton Abbey* whilst mine is watching *Mission Impossible*.

So that's another thing — it's anonymous and driven by automatons. **Amazon** doesn't “care” what we watch. They merely automate connections between our activities, their offerings, and those additional offerings they offer us: “People who watched (read, listened to, bought)

this also like this...” If enough customers started searching for *AstroBoy* or *Clutch Cargo* episodes (Heaven help us) then **Amazon** would probably enter into a negotiation to acquire and stream that content (maybe they already do — I have not done and will not do the search).

As for **Google**, is anyone even potentially disquieted by the thought that our thermostats, our smoke detectors, our lawn sprinklers, our garage door openers, and on and on, may all be connected, phoning home (to **Google** that is, not *our* home), keeping **Google's** appetite for data not merely whetted, but certainly not satiated? Who will their customers for that device-born data be? Home insurers? Energy suppliers? Medical insurers (Internet connected bathroom scale, anyone?)? And who will that medical insurer be, anyway? No, not going there today — but just imagine, fiber-optic-speed data collection meets Department of Motor Vehicles efficiency! Perhaps things balance out after all.

In the meantime, as everything around us gets “smarter,” just how smart are we?

Washington Post, January 16, 2014.
“Smartphones get more sophisticated, but their owners do not.”

Standard-Examiner, January 17, 2014,
“Feeling flummoxed by your cell phone? Join the crowd.”

Chicago Daily Herald, January 18, 2014,
“Owners can't keep up with sophisticated smartphones.”

Ars Technica, January 20, 2014, “Internet users ditch ‘password’ as password, upgrade to ‘123456.’”

The sub headline on that last, “Contest for most commonly used terrible password has a new champion.”

Please. Do a quick search on the *Ars Technica* Website for the 1/20/2014 story cited above. Check out the top 25 passwords cited by **SplashData, Inc.**, (the publisher of a password management solution) as the most common in use. The new top rankings, according to the *Ars Technica* article, were influenced by a hack on, let's just say, a maker of software for opening and reading printed and animated content on computers and the Web — a hack that revealed 130 million passwords that were protected by reversible encryption.

Perhaps we are ready to rely upon a smart refrigerator to monitor itself and send out an alert if its internal temperature rises to such a degree as to imperil our Brie and Chablis.

Perhaps we do need a car that refuses to start if our house keys are sitting on the kitchen table — and a smart door that will admit us to pick the blame things up.

Perhaps we even need helpful, completely impersonal recommendations to aid us in the selection of reading material.

I'm not so sure.

But sadly, I'm afraid we have, indeed, already arrived at our limit when it comes to inventing passwords. Password automation that helps me increase the likelihood that each and every password I employ is used in only one setting, and ensures that all those passwords are truly strong, and that helps me create, manage, and use those passwords out here in the jungle — that's a kind of “smart” I can live with. 🐼