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Watch your pension nomenclature

by Frank P. di Paolo

The English language can be very cruel when it comes to describing the act of a person attaining age 65, terminating his or her employment, and starting to receive a life annuity from a former employer. Consider this announcement in a recent issue of a house organ of a large manufacturing company:

At the end of last November, having attained age 65, John Smith retired from the company after 35 years of service and became a pensioner the following month. All John's friends and colleagues gave him a surprise party during which they wished him lots of luck.

Poor John. He needs lots of luck. The two key words in the announcement are "retired" and "pensioner." "Retired" is the past participle of "to retire," the cruelest verb in the English language, and "pensioner" is the cruelest noun.

"To retire" describes the act of taking something or someone out of circulation. If you have an old, defaced \$100 bill and take it to the bank, the teller will give you a brand new bill and will retire the old one by sending it back to the mint, which will eventually destroy it. Surely, someone who reaches age 65 and decides to terminate his or her employment deserves better treatment.

The etymology of "pensioner" is

downright ominous. It comes from the Latin "pensionarius," which referred to a Roman army veteran who, because of old age or disability, could no longer perform military duties and was relegated to a hostel where he was assigned a 6 by 4 foot cubicle with a bag full of straw for a bed and was given a loaf of bread and a bowl of soup a day. Surely, today someone who has worked 35 years for the same employer is likely to receive a pension that is worth much more. However, the symbolism associated with the etymology of the word "pensioner" would indicate that this is all to which he or she is entitled.

Let's put the cruelty of the English language in juxtaposition with the kindness of the Spanish language. In Spanish, the individual who attains age 65 and is retired is said to have been "jubilado" (which means "was made happy") by his employer. While the English language describes the event as something that causes mental anguish and physical discomfort, the Spanish language describes it as something that causes joy and happiness.

Had the announcement of John Smith's retirement been made in Spanish, it would have read:

Al fin del mes de Noviembre ultimo, habiendo cumplido 65 años de edad, la Compañía jubiló a Juan Smith después de 35 años de servicio. Como consecuencia, el empleado jubilado principió a recibir beneficios de jubilación el mes siguiente. Todos los amigos y colegas de Juan lo sorprendieron con un agasajo durante el cual le desearon muy buena suerte.

This literally translates as:

At the end of last November, having attained age 65, the company jubilated John Smith after 35 years

of service. As a result, the jubilated employee started receiving jubilation benefits the following month. All John's friends and colleagues gave him a surprise party during which they wished him lots of luck.

Well, John Smith could very well have been me. A few months ago I also attained age 65 and retired from my former employer after 35 years of service. My former employer is one of the best insurance companies in North America and, because of my long service, my pension benefits are quite respectable. Therefore, the day I attained age 65, my former employer did not retire me. I was jubilated; that is, I was made very happy. I wish the pension nomenclature could be revised to instill some kindness in it.

Can you imagine how elegiac the life of a "jubilation actuary" would be after the pension nomenclature is revised? Consider the following domestic vignette:

The jubilation actuary arrives home at 9:30 p.m. after a long day at the office. His wife says, "Did you have a hard day at work, dear?" He says, "Yes, dear. I worked very hard all day long. I am tired, but I feel very happy and warm all over. I valued a very large jubilation plan today. Because the plan generated a substantial surplus during the last fiscal year, I suggested to my client that the surplus be used to improve the jubilation benefits so the employees would be even happier at their normal jubilation date. Do you know what? My client accepted the suggestion jubilantly." His wife says, "Oh, how wonderful, dear. Now, I also feel very happy and warm all over, which is good, because our dinner is icy cold."

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