

The Latest Pitch

By Bob Ruark

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I got news for you, sweetie. A certain argot is current in the cafes among the New York-Miami-Hollywood set, and it couldn't be more divine. This spoken shorthand, consisting of a set flock of phrases and a limited number of cliches, already has crossed the big waters, to such extent that I was recently greeted in Australia as "sweetie" and "baby" by people who used to call you "cobber" and "mate."

This sweetie, darling, dear, baby and honey routine—anything that isn't a routine today is an operation—has nothing to do with endearment. For awhile, in the huckster set, it was even fashionable for men of unquestioned masculinity to call each other "honey," generally along sarcastic lines. Women who hate each other, strangers speaking to telephone operators, and all Broadway-Hollywood characters address everybody from busboys to Bernie Baruch in the above saccharines, possibly because they cannot remember names.

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Very few adjectives are in work today. Anything that is not dreamy is sensational or divine. It is a dreamy dress or a sensational speech or it couldn't have been dreamier or it couldn't have been more divine or less divine, and this applies as easily to the weather as to a fistfight in a ginmill. The "couldn't-have-been-more-or-less" operation, is a hangover from the war. We seem to have borrowed it from the British, who couldn't be less flexible in their speech.

Amusement, amazement and disbelief today are expressed simply. The person merely throws up his hands and says "Oh, no." I pulled a house count on a gal the other night and she said "Oh, no!" in anguished tones 18 times in half-an-hour. For relief she said: "This is the complete end," in a mild shriek, and "That's all, sweetie." Or darling or dear or baby.

People start few sentences today without the preamble of "Tell you what I'm gonna do," which is the old carnival pitchman's phrase, or "I've got news for you," or a cute little gambit such as "Whatever became of So-and-So?" If the topic, say, is the State Department, some-

body chirps: "Whatever became of Sumner Welles?" and the house falls dead.

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You notice I said "falls dead." This means everybody is amused. It is not to be confused with the more elderly use of death, which was a state people asked you to drop into a couple of years back. A command to drop dead or get lost now stamps you as unhep—or, as the latter saying goes, "not with it." To be unwith it is to be a little corny baby. Or sweetie. Or darling or dear.

I have noticed that the people who talk a lot are "always on," and if they are being knifed behind their backs, they are "never off." They are generally regarded as being loaded with no talent, and you can say that again, honey.

Loaded is another all-purpose word. A drunk is loaded. A rich man is loaded. A guy full of information is loaded. In describing, with some admiration, the actions of a drunk, the verb comes first. "Was she loaded last night!" the phrase goes, and no question is implied. To be loaded, but with actually no talent, means that a person couldn't be less divine.

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I fall dead, but dead, for this new shorthand in speech, since it demands no thought. I mean I think it's sensational, or, if talking to people so intimate I do not call them sweetie, I think it couldn't be more sensash. I have not said "natch" for three whole years, nor "wha' happen?" and I simply adore the idea of using "contact" as a verb. It couldn't be dreamier, except it makes my skin crawl.

It's sheer heaven to be able to refer "South Pacific," the musical, merely as "S. P." and know that you'll be understood, and I think that "Hollywooded" as a synonym for pregnancy couldn't be dreamier. But I got news for you. I'm running out of space so I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna go off and brood over the English language.

Whatever became of Noah Webster? He couldn't have been more divine, sweetie. Even if he is obsolete.