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## **British and American Cultural Stories in Hungary**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents a complex study highlighting English and American cultural stories and makes an attempt at determining to what extent these cultural stories are known among students of English and Translation Studies in Hungary. The first stage of the research was a process of finding out about previous research and then selecting British and American cultural items that might be relevant for Hungarian students. These are presented as a list in the introduction. Nine instances have been singled out for further analysis in this paper, in the second section of which the background of the cultural stories is described in detail. The third section offers information about a survey conducted among a group of students of English and Translation Studies, underlining the need for intercultural education in both courses. The first empirical results of a pilot survey were presented during a HUSSE conference in Veszprém (14<sup>th</sup> Biennial HUSSE Conference, University of Pannonia, Veszprém, 31 January – 2 February 2019), the title of the forthcoming paper is “*I can drink with any tinker in his own language*” – *Target Language Culture in EFL at Different Levels of Teaching*. More information including students’ personal insights can be found on the beliefs and perceptions of students of English about language and culture in a previous paper (Szele 2019).

### **Keywords**

British and American culture, stories, intercultural competence, mediation

### **Introduction**

This section describes the definitions of “culture” and “cultural competence” the research was based on, and discusses the cultural items involved together with the methodology of the research.

The selection of cultural items to be used was based on the following definition of culture: it is *the context within which the language is lived and spoken by its native speakers*. This, as Kramsch says, would include “the native speakers’ ways of behaving, eating, talking,

dwelling, their customs, their beliefs and values” (Kramersch 2016: 13). Neuner’s definition is similar:

Culture in its widest sense can be understood as a specific way of thinking, acting and feeling about one’s own actions and the actions of others. This includes conscious or underlying explanations of the world and one’s own and other people’s place within it. It also encompasses beliefs, faiths, ideologies and world views, which we call upon to assert reality, truths, values and ideas of good and bad. (Neuner 2012: 21)

Corbett asks the intriguing question whether native-speaker competence – and the underlying cultural competence – is still important. He argues that being a competent speaker involves the use of what he calls international communicative competence, and that competent language users will naturally become ambassadors of both their mother culture and their target culture. They will understand language and behaviour, and will be able to explain it to others, they will understand and appreciate both similarities and differences between their own and cultures of the communities/countries where the target language is spoken (Corbett 2003: 3). Byram and Risager take this further by saying that cultural competence should enable the learner to become “a mediator between cultures”, which is essential from a communicative point of view since “it is the mediation which allows for effective communication” (1999: 58). Similar ideas are stressed in descriptions and recommendations of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2018).

A need for intercultural competence arises naturally in the case of translation, which draws on students’ intercultural competence. Olk (2009) agrees that if translation is regarded as an act of communication in which a text produced for readers in one particular context is rendered for readers in another, students need to take on the role of intercultural mediators and identify culture-specificity in the source text. When it comes to the final translation, students “have to try and explain one culture in terms of the other when seeking a communicatively satisfactory mediating position for cultural divergences”. Witte (qtd. in Olalla-Soler 2019) defines translator cultural competence as a translator’s ability to compare cultural phenomena of a foreign culture with one’s own culture and to then translate them into the target culture in a manner appropriate to the translation brief while maintaining communicative interaction.

The idea of the complex research to be presented here was conceived when the author of this paper, a teacher of English language, culture, and translation studies, after many years of teaching, began to realise that cultural awareness and information was much more important in language study and, especially, translation and mediation, than what most coursebooks and university materials suggest. Students themselves also tend to be unaware of the importance of cultural skills: they are not sufficiently familiar with cultural items belonging to the cultural context of the texts they work with to deal with them appropriately in tasks requiring mediation.

In the first stages of the research, it had to be found how cultural knowledge and competence can be measured. In the pilot research mentioned above, 70 percent of the respondents had said “a quality speaker must know TL culture and customs” and 80 percent had said “I know and understand the differences between Hungarian and TL culture and behaviour” – slightly fewer (about 70%) respondents had also said that they could also explain these differences to others. These figures and personal interviews with students conducted by the author of the present paper indicate that most students overestimate their knowledge of British and American culture, and most are inclined to say they know a phenomenon just because they heard about it or saw it somewhere. As no similar research to start out from was found, expert advice was solicited, and on the basis of this, a simple method of to-the-point questions and answers was chosen. The best way to find out about students’ real knowledge of culture was to ask about cultural phenomena one by one – also ask students to explain them – and thoroughly analyse their answers.

## **Materials and Methods**

The stages of the research were as follows:

1) Setting the scope and the objectives. It was decided that a questionnaire on specific cultural items would be the best tool to address students. The research had the following objectives:

- uncover deficiencies in students’ intercultural competence;
- raise awareness of issues in intercultural communication;
- enhance students’ competence.

2) Identifying relevant cultural items. The relevant items were selected from the prestigious *Angol–magyar kulturális szótár* [English-Hungarian Cultural Dictionary] (Bart 1998) and *Amerikai–magyar kulturális szótár* [American-Hungarian Cultural Dictionary]

(Bart 2000) and were several times cross-checked and completed from other resources. The selection was based on two considerations: which items might be useful for students, and which are truly representative of British/American culture.

3) Selecting cultural items to be included in the research. The cultural items selected from the sources mentioned above included 122 items from British, and 89 items from American culture (these are fully listed in the Appendix). The final questionnaire included 35 British and 30 American cultural items. This narrower selection was representative in a way: the selected items included cultural items in the fields of 1) dining; 2) society, politics; 3) education; 4) particular expressions typical of the country; 5) geography. Experts and natives were asked to comment on the final list, and add new items, if necessary.

The list of items selected for the research questionnaire:

**British:** afters; agony column; babes in the wood; bag lady; baker's dozen; bangers and mash; barrister; bedside manner; Bond Street; cafeteria; Chippendale; dandelion clock; diploma; East End / West End; finishing school; free house / tied house; Further Education College; high street bank; Kent; Kermit; lollipop man / lady; Marmite; Mills & Boon; mincemeat; nineteenth hole; Number Eleven; pillar box; Poets' Corner; poppy; sportsman; stiff upper lip; third party insurance; Tom, Dick, and Harry; Whitehall; yard.

**American:** ACT; affirmative action; American Bar Association; Big Three; Black Maria; brown bag; club; Danish; Dear John letter; Deep Throat; egg roll; fence mending; first floor / ground floor; first-class mail; flapjack; gumbo; homecoming; Inc (Am) = Ltd (Br); logrolling; MVP; national bank; PAC; plum; pork; rider; small town; soda; Tinseltown; Trail of Tears; wedding band.

4) Setting the research questionnaires. This was mainly a technical issue carried out in Google Forms. Two questionnaires were created, one covering British, the other American cultural items. Students were free to answer either or both. The formula for the questions was: What is "X"? The two possible answers were "I know", or "I don't know", and if a respondent marked "I know", he/she was required to explain the term briefly in a free text box. This was done to eliminate phoney "yes" answers. The questions were formulated to give no hints and included a lot of ambiguities and generalisations so as to see whether respondents see the associations linked to the individual terms. One example could be "plum" or "pork" in the American questionnaire, which both have very specific associations in the USA, namely "plum jobs" and "pork barrel projects". In the end, 377 students were sent the questionnaire link (132 Translation Studies, 245 English BA).

5) Administering the questionnaire and analysing the results. The administration took place in late 2019 and the answers were collected, checked, and stored for later use. There were 21 answers for the British and 18 for the American questionnaire. The respondents were given feedback on their work and were sent a list of further interesting cultural items as a little reward.

In the present paper, four British and five American terms that are considered common and typical are explained and discussed. To check that these terms are indeed used and known in the target countries, extensive searches were carried out on the websites of high-circulation daily papers from both the UK (*The Guardian* and *The Times*) and the USA (*The New York Times* and *New York Post*).

### **Cultural stories from the UK**

The four items selected for further analysis in the UK questionnaire were the following: *baker's dozen*; *bangers and mash*; *nineteenth hole*; *poppy*. This section presents the meaning and story of each, together with empirical data about the findings of the questionnaire.

There are several theories as to why a **baker's dozen** became 13, but the most widely accepted one has to do with avoiding a beating. In medieval England there were laws that related the price of bread to the price of the wheat used to make it. Bakers who were found to be "cheating" their customers by overpricing undersized loaves were subject to strict punishment, including fines or flogging. Even with careful planning it is difficult to ensure that all of your baked goods come out the same size; there may be fluctuations in rising and baking and air content, and many of these bakers did not even have scales to weigh their dough. For fear of accidentally coming up short, they would throw in a bit extra to ensure that they would not end up with a surprise flogging later. In fact, sometimes a baker's dozen was 14, just to be *extra* safe (Eldridge). The term is frequent in both *The Guardian* and *The Times*, the first having 1850 results, the second 602. The term is mostly used to mean an indefinite number and is well worth knowing for students of English.

**Bangers and mash**, a common British dish consisting of sausages ("bangers") and mashed potatoes ("mash"). It is traditionally served with onion gravy. Bangers and mash are a staple of the country's overall cuisine and is a popular pub dish. The term "bangers" supposedly originated during World War I, when meat shortages resulted in sausages being made with a number of fillers containing water, which caused them to explode when cooked. The sausages may be pork, beef, or lamb, but one of the most traditional meat sticks is Cumberland sausage, a coiled pork sausage from north-western England (Siciliano-Rosen).

This cultural item is very well-known and current: in *The Guardian* 1730 results were received for the search term, and a lot of interesting articles e.g. “How to eat: bangers and mash” or “I don’t understand the clean-eating thing. I’ve just had bangers and mash”. *The Times* had 830 results, including a lot of recipes. It can be concluded that bangers and mash are so common that they should be known by students of English or Translation Studies.

**The nineteenth hole** is the bar at or near a golf course where people go to have drinks and talk after they have finished playing (Cambridge Dictionary). The point is that most golf courses have 18 holes, so “the nineteenth” is a humorous way of lengthening the course to include the place where the game is discussed. *The Guardian* has 286 results for the search term, some of which include “talk at the nineteenth hole”; “the kind of stuff heard at the nineteenth hole from people who drink too much”; “playing a lot of golf and forming alcohol-soused liaisons at the nineteenth hole”. *The Times* has 300 results including “a good golfer comes to the 19<sup>th</sup> hole thinking only of the few bad shots he hit”.

**Poppy.** The most recognizable symbol of Remembrance Sunday is the red poppy, which became associated with World War I memorials since it was the red poppy that was one of the first flowers to bloom on former battlefields of Belgium and northern France. (The phenomenon was depicted in the popular 1915 poem “In Flanders Fields,” by Canadian soldier John McCrae.) In 1921 the newly formed British Legion (now the Royal British Legion), a charitable organization for veterans, began selling red paper poppies for Armistice Day, and its annual Poppy Appeal has been enormously successful since. In addition to poppies intended to be worn on clothing, wreaths made of poppies are frequently displayed at memorial sites (Cunningham). A search in *The Guardian* site yields 22100 results, including the following: “Wearing a poppy was a pledge of peace. Now it serves to sanitise war”; “When the poppy was first adopted as the symbol of remembrance it was shortly after the end of the first world war, when almost every family in the land still felt the raw grief of the time. The poppy represented mourning and regret and served as a pledge that war must never happen again.” Furthermore: “No 10 ridiculed after [digitally] adding poppy to David Cameron’s Facebook picture”. (NB. “No 10” is also a cultural item meaning Downing Street 10, the residence of the Prime Minister of the UK.) *The Times* has 7890 results, some of which are also related to current issues, like “Let’s reclaim the poppy purely as the symbol of national remembrance”.

### **The results of the student questionnaires**

The results of the student questionnaires, although they cannot by no means be called

representative, give a good idea about the cultural knowledge of the respondents. The student responses were compared to the results of the term searches on high-circulation daily papers from the UK (*The Guardian* and *The Times*). On the basis of the term searches completed, the most frequently quoted word was “poppy”, the second “bangers and mash”, the third “baker’s dozen”, and the fourth “nineteenth hole”. This is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Search results (UK)

Term	Search results (TG+TT)
“poppy”	22100+7890
“bangers and mash”	1730+830
“baker’s dozen”	1850+602
“nineteenth hole”	286+300

From this data it can be assumed that Hungarian respondents produce similar results. This assumption is partly right: “baker’s dozen” and “bangers and mash” were the most well-known terms, 50 percent of the respondents knew the terms and were able to explain them in some way. The “nineteenth hole” was familiar to five, whereas “poppy” to six respondents. The results are shown in Table 2. “Know minus wrong” means the number of students who said “yes, I know” but then gave the wrong answer.

Table 2. Summary of the questionnaire results (UK)

Term	Know minus wrong	Don’t know	Other information
baker’s dozen	11–1	10	one student’s explanation: “a dozen – and an extra just to be sure (so 13)”
bangers and mash	11–1	10	mashed potato known by 12 students
poppy	12–6	8	eight students said “flower” or “food”; six knew the correct answer in some form
nineteenth hole	8–3	12	Some students said: “pub or bar” near golf course. Three guesses were wrong: “they use it in golf”; “a golf course with nineteen holes to play”; “golf?”

It is clear, that very few students are familiar with the terms discussed, at least in a way that they can explain them clearly to others, although each term is basic in British culture. “Baker’s dozen” and “bangers and mash” are still only known by 10 students each. In the case of “poppy”, the explanations “flower” or “food” are not acceptable as they are only dictionary meanings, the point is also knowing the connotations of the term. Many students guessed that

“nineteenth hole” was in some way related to golf, but their guesses were not acceptable as they missed the point (i.e. it is a pub). In summary, it can be stated that students, who should act as ambassadors and mediators, need more education in this respect.

### **Cultural stories from the USA**

The five items selected for further analysis in the USA questionnaire were the following: *fence mending*; *homecoming*; *plum*; *pork*; *Trail of Tears*. This section presents the meaning and story of each, together with empirical data about the findings of the questionnaire.

**Fence mending** originally means the restoring of a deteriorated political relationship. The term was first used in 1879 by John Sherman. Today, he is remembered for a speech in which he declared, “I have come home to look after my fences” (Political Dictionary). However, the newspaper reports of the speech interpreted it as a political statement that meant Sherman was really home to campaign among his constituents. A search on *The New York Times* site yields 1185 results, *New York Post* brings up 340 results, and it seems the meaning has now become more general, meaning “make up with” (e.g. “they have mended fences”).

**Homecoming** is the return of a group of people usually on a special occasion to a place formerly frequented or regarded as home, especially an annual celebration for alumni at a high school, college, or university – the word is often used before another noun (e.g. homecoming dance, homecoming game). A search on *The New York Times* site yields 14389 results, and there are 2208 results on the *New York Post* website. Most mentions involve students and athletes returning to former schools and teams.

**Plum** means someone or something unusually desirable, especially a well-paying job (e.g. “Victory to trigger rush for plum jobs”). There is also a book, called *United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions*, which is more commonly referred to as the “Plum Book”. A new edition is published every four years, just after each presidential election, and lists over 7,000 federal civil service leadership and support positions in the legislative and executive branches of the federal government that may be subject to non-competitive appointment nationwide, commonly called “political appointments”. The Plum Book covers positions such as agency heads and their immediate subordinates, policy executives and advisors, and aides who report to these officials. The Plum Book originated in 1952 during the Eisenhower administration to identify presidentially appointed positions within the federal government. For twenty years, the Democratic Party had controlled the federal government. When President Eisenhower took office, the Republican Party requested



a list of government positions that the new president could fill. The next edition of the Plum Book appeared in 1960 and has since been published every four years, just after a presidential election. The 2020 edition was published on December 1, 2020 (Wikipedia 1). The term “plum job” gives 4059 results in *The New York Times*, and 414 in *New York Post*.

**Pork barrel** means wasteful government expenditures that lawmakers secure for their local districts in an attempt to gain favour with voters. The term first came into use as a political term just after the Civil War. The literal use of “pork barrel” dates as far back as the early 1700s. Before refrigeration, pork was salted and preserved in large wooden barrels. The term is derived from the practice of plantations distributing rations of salt pork to slaves from large wooden barrels as a reward or for special occasions and requiring them to compete among themselves to get their share of the handout. The usage of “pork barrel” to describe any kind of public spending is thought to date to 1863 in the story *The Children of the Public*, written by Edward Everett Hale. It was not until about 10 years later that the phrase and the related concept of pork barrel politics came to mean spending by a politician done primarily for the benefit of a group of people in exchange for their support (The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the modern sense of the term from 1873). The term was further popularized by a 1919 article by Chester Collins Maxey in the *National Municipal Review*, which reported on certain legislative acts known to members of Congress as “pork barrel bills” (Wikipedia 2). Today, pork barrel spending has come to be used in a derogatory sense to mean spending on public works projects of dubious value in exchange for political support, often at the expense of the interests of the broader public (Investopedia). Especially derogatory is the metaphorical association of today’s voters with old time slaves. The term “pork barrel” gives 6910 results in *The New York Times*, and 410 in *New York Post*. Many instances are the single term “pork”, and its negative, “non-pork”.

**Trail of Tears** is the forced relocation during the 1830s of Eastern Woodlands Indians of the Southeast region of the United States (including Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole, among other nations) to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. Estimates based on tribal and military records suggest that approximately 100,000 indigenous people were forced from their homes during that period, which is sometimes known as the removal era, and that some 15,000 died during the journey west. The term “Trail of Tears” invokes the collective suffering those people experienced, although it is most commonly used in reference to the removal experiences of the Southeast Indians generally and the Cherokee nation specifically. The physical trail consisted of several overland routes and one main water route and, by passage of the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act in

2009, stretched some 5,045 miles (about 8,120 km) across portions of nine states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee). In 1987 the U.S. Congress designated the Trail of Tears as a National Historic Trail in memory of those who had suffered and died during removal (Pauls). The term gives 443 results in *The New York Times*, 74 in *New York Post*. Most mentions are political, as the issue of Native rights still divides the country, but in some cases the term is used as a metaphor for “sufferings”.

The number of search results for the five terms is summarised in Table 3. For “pork” and “plum” the search was narrowed down to “pork barrel” and “plum job” as the original terms yielded too many irrelevant results. The student responses will again be compared to the results of the term searches on high-circulation daily papers from the USA (*The New York Times* and *New York Post*).

Table 3. Search results (US)

Term	Search results (NYT+NYP)
“homecoming”	14389+2208
“pork barrel”	6910+410
“plum job”	4059+414
“fence mending”	1185+340
“Trail of Tears”	443+74

The results show that each term is well-known and is frequently used in the American press. Students’ responses suggest firstly that very little is known about American culture, even less than about UK culture, secondly that apart from “homecoming”, the other terms rank differently. A summary of student responses is shown in Table 4. “Know minus wrong” means the number of students who said “yes, I know” but then gave the wrong answer.

Table 2. Summary of the questionnaire results (US)

Term	Know minus wrong	Don’t know	Other information
homecoming	14–5	4	nine students knew it is a “high school event”
Trail of Tears	6–0	12	<i>see below</i>
fence mending	7–2	11	five students knew “make peace” or “fix an issue”
plum	5–5	13	all five guesses wrong: “fruit” or “chubby / curvy person”

pork	8-8	10	all eight guesses wrong: 7 times “pig”, 1 time “dirty speech”
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If “homecoming” is little known, “fence mending” is almost unknown; and being unknown is the very case for “plum” and “pork”, even though they are very frequent terms in American life. None of the collocations or connotations of these were familiar to the respondents. An amazing fact is that six respondents knew quite a lot about “Trail of Tears”, their answers are copied here for the sake of interest: *1) relocations of native Americans; 2) the name of the route alongside the river Mississippi where the old tribes were forced to leave their territories; 3) when native Americans were forced Westward in the US towards the Midwest by the European settlers; 4) forced relocation that happened to Native Americans; 5) forced removal of the Cherokee Indian tribe; 6) the horrible journey of the Native Americans being driven away from home to the appointed reserve.* Each statement is generally true and also contains some detail.

In summary, it can be pointed out that students, who, again, should act as ambassadors and mediators, need much more education about American culture.

## Conclusion

The research described in this paper was designed to find out about the cultural knowledge of students of English and Translation Studies in Hungary concerning British and American culture. The whole process took a long time, since the right method had to be found after a pilot survey and the research material had to be selected carefully. The set of cultural items used for this research was further narrowed to fit the requirements of this paper, so altogether nine items were selected for further analysis, each of which has an underlying story. Being aware of this story would fix the meaning of the term itself in students’ brains. The conclusions of the research and some further implications are discussed in this section.

The first thing to see is that students clearly need guidance in terms of factual knowledge about culture, and their cultural awareness and mediation skills need to be developed. It is alarming to see that even among “professionals”, be they practising or future ones, almost nothing is known about British and American culture (the survey done might not be representative, but the implications are, nevertheless, clear). As a result, new teaching ideas and materials focussing on intercultural differences and ways of translating these into other languages have been developed and feedback from students has been requested. The experiences and results of the survey can be used later for educational purposes too, to refine

the focus of the classes and find the most motivating topics. As a spin-off, the same process of identifying and defining was used during some classes to identify and explain Hungarian items to foreigners to make students see how the process can be done in both directions.

The research and the cultural stories included can lead to more detailed research and open up new paths in teaching intercultural studies at Kodolányi University. A focussed analysis based on thematic categories (e.g. food, education, politics, history, language, etc.) would be very useful. Further papers can analyse the remaining results of the survey and try to draw more conclusions about students' cultural knowledge to be able to give them a better understanding of British and American culture.

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## Appendix

**British cultural items:** advocate; affidavit; afters; agony column; ale; angry young man; arcade; The Ash Grove; attendance centre; attorney; Attorney General; Auntie Beeb; Aunt Sally; babes in the wood; bag lady; baker's dozen; bangers and mash; bar billiards; barrister; bedside manner; Bench and Bar; Bond Street; breadline; the Burke; BYOB; Cadbury;

cafeteria; cereal; chancellor; Charing Cross; Chippendale; Civil List; club; consolidated fund; cornflakes / Kellog's; council; Country Life; Dacron; dandelion clock; devil; diploma; Ealing Studios; East End / West End; Eton; fair play; father of the house; finishing school; first past the post; poppy; Fleet street; footsie; Forth Bridge; free house / tied house; Further Education College; Great Ormond street; Gretna Green; high street bank; homicide; hopscotch; hunting vs. shooting; ICU; John Doe / Jane Doe; the Joneses; Kent; Kermit; Laurel and Hardy; Law Lords; lollipop man / lady; mace + woosack; Magistrates' Court; The Mall; Marmite; maternity pay / allowance; Mayday; Mills & Boon; mincemeat; Mr Nice Guy; muffin; mumbo jumbo; MYOB; Newgate; nineteenth hole; noname vs. label; notary public; Number Eleven; Number Ten; OAP; Official Birthday; Old Bailey; Oxo; parent-teacher association; pillar box; Poets' Corner; political; port; Premium Bond; public lending right; pudding club; rain check Regina vs. XY; Scotch; Secretary (of State); sportsman; Square Mile; stiff upper lip; Stork; terraced house; third party insurance; the Old Lady of Threadneedle street; timber frame; Tom, Dick, and Harry; Trivial Pursuit; U and non-U; UB40; Unilever; Vice Squad; West End; Whip; Whitehall; woosack; yard; youth court.

**American cultural items:** Academy Award; ACT; administration; affirmative action; agency; agent orange; Alcatraz – The Rock; American Bar Association; Arlington; Attorney General; Band-Aid; bank holiday; Beagle Boys; bee; big stick diplomacy; Big Three; Black Maria; Blair House; BLT; bourbon; Bronx; brown bag; Brownie point; caucus; club; cracker; Danish; Dear John letter; Deep Throat; deli; department; dinner; donkey / elephant; egg roll; Evil Empire; Fed; fence mending; filibuster; fireside chat; first floor / ground floor; first-class mail; 501; flapjack; food stamps; frank; fried bread; gerrymandering; Gibson girls; Gotham; Grand Old Party; greenbacks; gumbo; Harlem; homecoming; hot dog; hunky; impeachment; Inc (Am) = Ltd (Br); litigator; logrolling; MVP; Mothers' Day; Mrs Mop; national bank; nickel / dime; PAC; pemmican; Peoria; plum; Ponzi scheme; pork; redneck; rider; Saturday night special; shower; shrink; small town; soda; State of the Union address; subpoena; Surgeon General; Thanksgiving; Tinseltown; Trail of Tears; veep; Wall Street; WASP; wedding band; yard.