

The Words of the Week - 5/29/20

Some of the words that defined the week ending May 29, 2020

Welcome to The Words of the Week, in which we look over some of the good, the bad, and the semantically imprecise words that tickled your curiosity this past week. Please note that *bad* is used here in a vague fashion; we do not really think of any words as bad (although sometimes they are a bit unruly).



'Human capital stock'

Human capital stock was on the minds of many people last week, after a member of the Trump administration used the three words in an order that some found **infelicitous**.

infelicitous (adj.): not felicitous: such as a: not appropriate or well-timed b: AWKWARD, UNFORTUNATE

Kevin Hassett, a top economic adviser to President Donald Trump, sparked indignation after saying that the nation's "human capital stock" is ready to return to work, with critics calling the term "dehumanizing."

— Aimee Picchi, [CBS News](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kevin-hassett-human-capital-stock/) (cbsnews.com), 26 May 2020

We have an entry for [capital stock](#) (although not of the *human* variety), with three possible meanings: "the outstanding shares of a joint-stock company considered as an aggregate," "the total **par** value or the stated value of no-par issues of authorized stock," and "the proprietorship element in a corporation usually divided into shares and represented by transferable certificates." This is not, however, one of those cases in which one may simply take the shorter phrase (*capital stock*), and by looking at the modifier (*human*), figure out the meaning. *Human capital stock* tends to not be entered in dictionaries, on the grounds that it is mainly found in the jargon of economists, but it does have a specific and

distinct meaning. A nice explanation of this meaning may be found in one of the early uses of the term, from 1965:

par (n.): 1a: the established value of the monetary unit of one country expressed in terms of the monetary unit of another country using the same metal as the standard of value

The human capital stock of a nation consists of the capability of all its citizenry to meet its social, political, cultural and economic needs.

— Kenneth Lee Neff, *Educational Planning in a National Development Context: Indonesia —A Case Study* (PhD. Diss., The American University), 1965

citizenry (n.): a whole body of citizens

'Scofflaw'

A birder unjustifiably had the police called on him in New York City, an incident which caused a number of words (such as *racism* and *privilege*) to spike in lookups. Also looked up was [scofflaw](#), after the birder in question used the word in a newspaper interview.

"I don't think there's an African American person in America who hasn't experienced something like this at some point," Christian Cooper, a 57-year-old science editor, told *The Washington Post* in an interview. "I don't shy away from confronting the scofflaw when I see it. Otherwise, the park would be unusable - not just to us birders but to anybody who enjoys the beauty."

—Teo Armus, [The Washington Post](#), 27 May 2020

We define *scofflaw* as “a contemptuous law violator,” although the word came into English with a more precise meaning; it was formed in 1924 as an entry in a contest organized by a man named Delcevere King. The point of the contest was to come up with a word for a lawless drinker, or one who ignored Prohibition. The word soon took on a more extended meaning (Prohibition ended in 1933), and may now describe many types of lawbreakers, although it is perhaps most often applied to one who fails to pay parking tickets.

'Noncitizen'

[Noncitizen](#) surged in lookups as well, following reports that the New York City council had voted to henceforth use this, rather than the words [alien](#) and *illegal immigrant*, in future laws and documents.

@NYCSpeakerCoJo

BREAKING: New York City just became the first major U.S. city to prohibit the use of the dehumanizing and offensive term "alien" in local laws, rules, and documents. From now on, the term will be "noncitizen."

Our definition of *noncitizen* is “a person who is not a citizen,” and we additionally note that the word is often used before another noun (as in “*noncitizen student*”). There are a number of people who use the word *illegal* as a noun, and so we provide a definition for that (“a person who enters

or lives in a country without the documentation required for legal entry or residence”). There are also a number of people who find this use offensive, and so we provide a usage label for that (“sometimes disparaging + offensive”).

so (conj.): 1a: with the result that 1b: in order that. 3A: for that reason: THEREFORE

'Cavalier'

Joe Biden usually makes the word [malarkey](#) spike in lookups, but every once in a while he'll send people running to the dictionary to look for something else; last week it was [cavalier](#).

malarkey(n.): insincere or foolish talk: BUNKUM

Joe Biden says he “should not have been so cavalier” after he told a prominent black radio host that African Americans who back President Donald Trump “ain't black.”

— Bill Barrow and Kat Stafford, [Associated Press](#) (apnews.com), 23 May 2020

Cavalier is defined as “marked by or given to offhand and often disdainful dismissal of important matters.” The word may also mean other things, such as “[debonair](#)” and “of or relating to the English Cavalier poets of the mid-17th century,” but we're pretty sure Biden meant the ‘disdainful’ sense.

debonair (adj.): 1a: SUAVE, URBANE. 1b: LIGHTHEARTED, NONCHALANT

Our Antedating of the Week: 'fact-check'

For our antedating of the week we are turning to [fact-check](#) (“to verify the factual accuracy of”). The word had a moment in the sun this past week after Twitter decided it would begin fact-checking President Trump's tweets.

Twitter Finally Fact-Checked Trump. It's a Bit of a Mess

— (headline) [Wired](#) (wired.com), 27 May 2020

Fact-check is surprisingly modern; our earliest known use had previously come in 1977.

Research Assistant. Loop encyclopedia needs science oriented person to fact-check manuscripts on scientific & engineering subjects & to procure information to assist in manuscript preparation.

— *Chicago Tribune*, 7 Feb. 1965