

184th, Kansas City, MO, September, 1982; "History of Polyolefins," 189th, Miami Beach, FL, April, 1985; "History of Polymer Composites," 192nd, Anaheim, CA, September, 1986; "History of Organic Coatings," 198th, Miami Beach, FL, September, 1989; and "Manmade Fibers," 201st, Atlanta, GA, April, 1991.

George B. Kauffman, California State University, Fresno

FUTURE MEETINGS

Denver ... 28 March - 2 April 1993

* *General Papers.* Contact M. D. Saltzman, Department of Chemistry, Providence College, Providence, RI 02918, (401) 865-2298.

* *Coordination Chemistry Centennial.* Contact George B. Kauffman, Department of Chemistry, California State University, Fresno, CA 93740, (209) 294-2581.

Chicago ... 22-27 August 1993

Four copies of abstract by 15 April 1993.

* *General Papers.* Contact M. D. Saltzman (see address above).

* *C. K. Ingold, 1893-1970. Master and Mandarin of Physical Organic Chemistry.* Contact M. D. Saltzman (see address above) or Derek Davenport, Department of Chemistry, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907, (317) 494-5465.

San Diego ... 13-18 March 1994

Four copies of abstract by 1 December 1993.

* *General Papers.* Contact M. D. Saltzman (see address above).

Washington DC ... 21-25 August 1994

Four copies of abstract by 1 May 1994.

* *General Papers.* Contact M. D. Saltzman (see address above).

Anaheim ... 2-7 April 1995

Four copies of abstract by 1 December 1994.

* *General Papers.* Contact M. D. Saltzman (see address above).

* *Archaeological Chemistry.* Contact M. V. Orna, Depart-

ment of Chemistry, College of New Rochelle, New Rochelle, NY, 10805, (914) 654-5302.

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PARTING SHOTS

Gibber, Jabber, or Just Geber?

William B. Jensen, University of Cincinnati

As an avid reader of the older chemical literature, it has long been my custom to keep a file of interesting and/or curious quotes, especially if they relate in some manner to the teaching of chemistry. Until recently my favorite was Tobern Bergman's (1735-1784) contention, which appeared in his 1779 essay "Of the Origin of Chemistry", that the history of chemistry could be divided into three distinct historical periods: "the mythologic, the obscure, and the certain" (1). Believing in a pseudo-Haeckelian version of education in which the mental develop-

ment of the individual student is a sort of weak recapitulation of the historical development of the subject being taught, I have often amused myself with the observation that the majority of my Freshmen manage to survive a full year of 20th-century introductory college chemistry without every leaving the mythologic stage. Some, I will admit, may even have reached the obscure stage, but few, if any, have passed beyond to the age of certainty (I'm certain).

More recently, however, I have stumbled on a serious contender for Bergman's position of favor, found, not in the chemical literature, but in the writings of the famous 18th-century lexicographer, critic and poet, Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). For in his great *Dictionary of the English Language* we read, under the entry for the word "gibberish" (2):

Gibberish - [Derived by Skinner from *gaber*, Fr. to cheat; by others conjectured to be formed by corruption from *jabber*. But as it was anciently written giberish, it is probably derived from chymical cant, and originally implied the jargon of *Geber* and his tribe] Cant; the private language of rogues and gypsies; words without meaning.

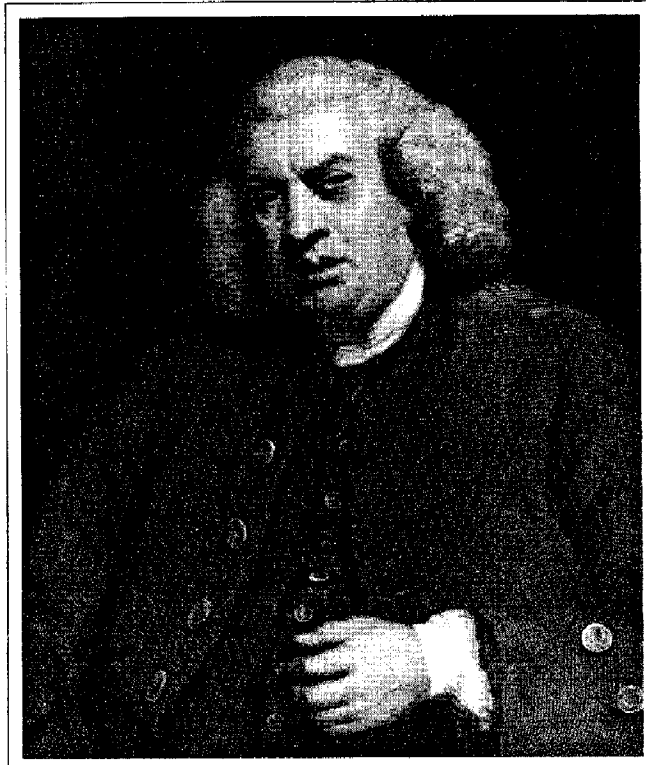
Chemical cant! The private language of rogues and gypsies!! Words without meaning !!! The nightmare vision of 300 Freshmen nodding their heads in gleeful agreement was overwhelming. The ponderous authority of Dr. Johnson had put the linguistic seal of approval on something they had suspected all along.

I immediately consulted other dictionaries in an attempt to confirm or disaffirm this dreadful revelation, but both the *Oxford Unabridged* and *Webster's Unabridged* were silent on the matter. However, Edwin Radford's small volume, *Unusual Words and How They Came About*, fully endorsed Dr. Johnson's assertion (3):

... Despite the contrary opinions of other etymologists the writer holds that this word for unintelligible conversation is derived from Geber, the Arabian alchemist of the eleventh century, who wrote in mystical jargon in order to avoid the death penalty for sorcery, which he might have incurred from the Ecclesiastical authorities of his day had he written, plainly, such heretical opinions. It seems a farfetched theory to our mind to connect it with *gibber*, a variant of *jabber*. *Gibber* did not come into use for many years after *gibberish*.

Aside from the fact that Radford's grasp of the history of chemistry - which places an 8th century Arabian alchemist in the 11th century and has him hiding from the wrath of the Catholic church - is itself an excellent example of gibberish, what exactly is the evidence for this chemical derivation?

In the first place the "Geber" in question is not the 8th century Islamic alchemist Abu Musa Jabir ibn Hayyan, whose actual historical existence is still a matter of dispute, but rather an anonymous 13th-century European author who wrote under



Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

the pseudonym of Geber (4). Usually referred to as the "pseudo-Geber" in the history of chemistry literature, his writing style is certainly in keeping with Johnson's description of gibberish as "chymical cant", though hardly a strong contender when it comes to alchemical literature in general. Thus, in a not untypical example, from his *Of the Investigation or Search for Perfection*, we are told that (5):

... because these Imperfect Bodies are not reducible to *Sanity* and *Perfection*, unless the contrary be operated in them; that is, the Manifest be made Occult, and the Occult be made Manifest: which operation, or Contrariation, is made by Preparation, therefore they must be prepared, Superfluities in them removed, and what is wanting supplied; and so the known Perfection inserted in them. But Perfect Bodies need not this preparation: yet they need such Preparation, as that, by which their Parts may be more Subtiliated, and they reduced from their *Corporality* to a fixed *Spirituality*.

It is not improbable that Johnson was directly familiar with the writings of the pseudo-Geber through Richard Russell's 1678 English translation of his collected works, as both Boswell and Mrs. Thrale testified that Johnson was quite interested in chemistry and took delight in performing simple chemical experiments. Indeed, Boswell informs us that it was Johnson's translation of a biography of the famous Dutch chemist Her-

mann Boerhaave (1668-1738) for the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1739 that first awoke in him "that love of chymistry which never forsook him" (6, 7). But beyond the observation that this hobby certainly sensitized Johnson to the possibility of chemical word origins in a manner not duplicated by the training or interests of most later etymologists, little more can be said, and one is left to follow one's personal preferences in the matter. As for me, I choose to believe Johnson.

But what of my 300 demonically grinning Freshmen? On thinking it over, I suspect that the word gibberish is a bit too esoteric for most of them to use on a regular basis and that I should be more concerned about the origins of such phrases as "that sucks" - undoubtedly derived from early Greek writings on hydrostatics and the theory of the siphon.

Notes and References

1. T. Bergman, "Of the Origin of Chemistry" in *Essays, Physical and Chemical*, Mudie and Fairbairn, Edinburgh, 1794, p. 4.
2. S. Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Vol. 1., Offor et. al., London, 1820.
3. E. Radford, *Unusual Words and How They Came About*, Philosophical Library, New York, NY, 1946.
4. In a debate that took place in the 1920s and 1930s, the British historian E. J. Holmyard maintained that Jabir was an actual 8th century alchemist and that the Latin works of Geber were an imperfect

translation of as yet undiscovered Arabic originals. The opposite position was taken by the German scholar J. Ruska, and Ruska's pupil, Paul Kraus, finally came to the conclusion that the entire Arabic Jabirian corpus was actually fabricated in the 9th century by members of an Isma'elite religious sect. I am unaware of whether this debate has ever been satisfactorily resolved.

5. E. J. Holmyard, ed., *The Works of Geber Englished by Richard Russell, 1678*, Dent, New York, NY, 1928, p. 5, a reproduction of the 1678 edition.

6. E. R. Atkinson, "Samuel Johnson's 'Life of Boerhaave'", *J. Chem. Educ.*, 1942, 19, 103-108.

7. D. J. Swaine, "Samuel Johnson's Interest in Scientific Affairs", *J. Chem. Educ.*, 1948, 25, 458-459.

NOTICE TO ALL SUBSCRIBERS AND AUTHORS

As you have undoubtedly noticed, it has been nearly six months since you received an issue of the *Bulletin*. The reason for the delay involves an extensive reorganization of our production and editorial procedures. The increasing size of the issues and the increasing number of library subscriptions have made it difficult, even with our already erratic schedule, for a single person to handle all aspects of the editing, layout, reviewing, printing and distribution. Consequently the Chemical Heritage Foundation has agreed to come in as a third sponsor of the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry*, along with the Oesper Collection in the History of Chemistry of the University of Cincinnati and the Division of the History of Chemistry of the American Chemical Society.

Beginning with this issue all production and distribution aspects of the *Bulletin* will be handled by the Chemical Heritage Foundation under the supervision of our Associate Editor, Dr. James J. Bohning. As indicated on the subscription form on the back cover, all new subscriptions and all claims for missing or damaged issues should be directed to Dr. Bohning at The Chemical Heritage Foundation, Suite 460B, 3401 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6228. All matters relating to manuscripts, book reviews and letters to the editor should continue to be sent to Dr. William B. Jensen, Editor, *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry*, Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0172.

In order to catch up on our publication schedule we hope to publish issues 12 through 16 during 1993. Because of its large size, the special Faraday issue (No. 11), mailed in July, will count not only as the last issue of the 1991 year but as the first issue of the 1992 year. This issue (No. 12) will count as the second issue for 1992 and issue 13 as the third. Issues 14, 15 and 16 will constitute the 1993 subscription and will hopefully be completed by early spring of 1994 - an event that will finally put us back on schedule. We appreciate your patience. *William B. Jensen, Editor*



An imaginary portrait of Geber