

Purist won't give up on Latin plurals (pluri?)

I don't know how to tell the governor's office this, but referendums C and D are terrible. They're referenda.

I know, most dictionaries allow either plural, and some authorities even recommend "referendums." But it wasn't always so. Plurals such as "referendums" used to be considered a sign of laziness and a lack of education. Only when they fall into common use do dictionary editors throw in the towel.

Coloradans should fight back while there is still time. The forces of light are winning, but not by much. Googling "referendums" will get you about 1.6 million hits, while "referenda" is hanging on with more than 2 million. Variations on "initiative and referenda" show that the good guys still have the upper hand.

But the adoption of the phrase "Referendums C and D" by virtually every office of Colorado state government was a tremendous victory for the forces of darkness. "Referendums C and D" has more than 23,000 Google hits, "Referenda C and D" barely half that. At least the president of the University of Colorado in Boulder still knows how to pluralize. Keep up the good fight, Hank.

Words like "referendum" have interesting plurals because they were originally borrowed from Latin. (Strictly speaking, "referendum" was originally a gerund and doesn't have a Latin plural. Don't stop me, I'm on a roll here). English's greatest strength is its ability to absorb words from other languages. We are more than happy to let foreign words into our country, as long as they can pull their own weight. None of this French obsession with protecting linguistic purity for America, thank you very much.

Believe it or not, the French government banned the word "e-mail" from official correspondence because it's too English. Give me a break. Should we fire a warning shot across the ocean by banning "a la carte"? "Savoir-faire"? "Apres-ski"? It makes me want to RSVP to the French government that they are full of faux *fin-de-siecle* *noblesse oblige*.

But when we allow foreign words into English, they're supposed to obey our laws. That's why we have high school auditoriums, not auditoria. Sports teams play in stadia, not stadia.

Which is too bad, because I like the



OPINION
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sound of "stadia," even though I've only heard it used once by anyone else. He was a well-known musical comedian, poking fun at snooty Ivy Leaguers. I guess he had a point. It'd sound goofy for a sportscaster to say "The World Wrestling Federation will hit several new college stadia this year."

Speaking of college stadia, who are you most likely to find there? Alumni. Not alumnuses, or alumnas or aluminum. If you're talking about a group of college graduates, either all male or mixed gender,

they're alumni. If you've got a group of female grads, they're alumnae. A male grad is an alumnus. A female is an alumna. Any school that brags about its alumnuses isn't worth attending. Especially if the diplomas are in Latin.

Why do we let some foreign words such as "alumni" stick to the ways of the Old Country? Because they're associated with important things like colleges and education. It's no accident that doctors and lawyers use Latin terms. Language matters. That's why members of learned professions use words different from ordinary speech. They are a constant reminder of the ancient history of their craft and the noble ideals to which they aspire.

If we're committed to the noble ideal of democracy, we should do the same with "referenda." After all, the Romans gave us the idea of a republic 2,000 years ago, building on an even older legacy of democracy from the Greeks. When we vote on C and D in a few weeks, could we please use a term that reminds us of how important voting is?

Maybe I still haven't convinced you that important ideas deserve a better fate than having an "s" stuck on their rear. But I've got one last weapon in my arsenal, a nuclear bomb. Bow before the awesome power of "datum." The plural is "data," part of the vocabulary of the Internet Age with more than 2 billion Google hits. "Datums" isn't even worth checking. Really, don't even try. Trust me.

All right, if you must know, "datums" has 2 million hits. The number is increasing even as we speak.

Maybe C and D are just ballot measures.

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