

21 Days to a Bigger Vocabulary - Day 21

Tuesday, 26 February 2008

Here it is! The end of our 21 Days of words you've probably never heard and are less likely to ever use. I'm ending the series with one of my favorites I've been saving for you.

shibboleth

pronunciation: shib-uh-lith

definition: A pattern of behavior, speech or activity that sets apart a group of people. Also, a common belief or saying with little current meaning or truth.

I love this word mostly because of the somewhat comical story behind it. This is a passage taken from the Bible, Judges 12:4-6 (NIV):

Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, "You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh." The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No," they said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.'" He said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

Today, a shibboleth is akin to a stereotype. Think about groups of people: Christians, Muslims, Jews, homeschoolers, plumbers, Arkansans, gays, lawyers, etc. What are some shibboleths you hold?