

rationale for pedantic brush

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 21 Mar 2002

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William Ansley — 21 Mar 2002, 19:20

Incidentally, the first definition for "Brush" at merriam webster online is "Brushwood". I am here going to imply that we use a test to see which of the following relationships hold: leaf: brushwood: tree or leaf: scrubbing brush: tree
Can't brushwood be rough and brown if it's dead?
I shouldn't beat that to death. I'll leave it alone. I'm just saying that simple words often have more than one definition ... and in this case the context just seems to insinuate foliage of somekind. If you still want to argue about the word, then I will copy all of the dictionary definitions over.
We are both saying the same thing about new life to decayed things, I'm just saying the new sun is granting a different kind of life rather than a resurrection. I guess there is no sense discussing it further - we are "kind of" saying the same thing.

When I wrote my original reply to this message, it became quite long and I decided to send it just to Marc Aramini. But I also want to address this matter here as well. This is a summary of what I said:

When Gene Wolfe uses the phrase "a rough brown brush" he is not using the word brush to mean underbrush. This can be established purely on the grounds of correct English usage.

First, I think we all agree that Wolfe is a master of correct English usage and seldom if ever makes usage mistakes.

Second, brush, when used to mean underbrush is a mass noun like water, sand or salt. Mass nouns, as a general rule, do not take the indefinite article ("a" or "an") or plural form. Just as you cannot say "a water leaked out of the hole in the bucket" or "dump out some sands to lighten the load" or "there are too many salts in this stew" (unless you are talking chemically), you cannot say "he moved through the dense growth, chopping down a brush with every stroke of his machete."

However, the word brush as in "scrubbing brush" (or hairbrush or a fox's tail [This one's for you, Roy]) is a count noun like cat or chair. Count nouns do take the indefinite article and plural form. Many homographs (different words with identical written forms) occurs as mass and count noun "twins." All of my mass noun examples have count noun homographs (the waters of the Nile, the sands of time, Epsom salts).

So, when Wolfe writes "a rough brown brush," whether he means a scrubbing brush, a toothbrush, or a hairbrush, he definitely doesn't mean underbrush.

William (the pedantic brush) Ansley