

Ice-speak: Words I learned from the Ice Storm of 1998

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I learned a few new French words during the ice storm. The most surprising was *génératrice*.

I'm sure in the past I would have said *générateur*. What surprised me was that it was feminine. *Génératrice* sounds so dainty – even ladylike. Like *institutrice*, *directrice*, *séductrice*. Not like something that belches fumes and roars louder than a Motorhead cover band. Something that uses diesel fuel and is sometimes employed in the pumping of water over – well – dikes. Then again, these days the generator has become the sustainer of life, like a mother, in this the mother of all storms. (Sorry!)

Speaking of floods, during the Saguenay Crisis I learned that the water *englout*-ied whole homes, farms and roads. How could such a googly sounding word be so mean? If you said it without telling me what it meant, I'd never have pictured something *aval*-ing *gloutonnement* whole communities (swallowing gluttonously).

The Oka Crisis taught me *autochtone*. They kept saying it over and over again on French TV. "O-tuk-tun," was the way I heard it. Sounded more like a native language than a group of Native speakers. Like "Inuit." But these were Mohawk. Before then the only French synonyms I was familiar with were *indien* and *amerindien*.

Back to the current Crisis. Another surprising term I learned during the ice storm was, well, *tempête de verglas*. In particular, *verglas*. In *franglais* that comes out sort of as "glass-glass." The word also looks a bit like a certain late fashion designer – both hot topics over the past year, metaphorically speaking.

They said that during the middle of the storm there was an *accalmie*. (Lull? What lull?) The rotating, flashing light on top of a service vehicle is a *gyrophare*. The guys from the States who came up to prune trees are *élagueurs*; some of them are using *tronçonneuses* (chainsaws – again a feminine word for a butch power tool – and again we have that lesbian-stereotype theme).

The creeps who are pillaging homes not containing *grelotte*-ing (shivering) people are *pilleurs*. (I recognize that one!) *Aiguillage* is not the needle-like freezing rain; rather, the switching of the power load, and *délestage* its "shedding" (new terms for most people in either language). And I've known for

some time the broad meaning of *alimentation* – ever since a friend received a particular letter from Hydro-Québec: “They’re threatening to cut off my alimentation,” he wailed, pronouncing the word *à l’anglaise*, and giggling just a little because before we’d only associated it with “food.”

But the most appealing new word under the circumstances was *Mexico*, French for Mexico City. While Mr. Bouchard stayed here for the suite of the storm, I wonder who got his suite in the Mexico City Hilton?