How do you predict what things will be like in the future? Basically, you consider the present, and then factor in your estimate of the rate of change. I recall automobile shows of 25 years ago which included a “concept car” which was labeled “what you’ll be driving 25 years from now.” But 25 years later the new cars looked more like those of 25 years ago than the predicted super-modern car. The problem here was the manufacturers’ reluctance to change things too radically.

Estimates of future world population miss the mark if they assume the degree of change remains the same. We must allow for such factors as smaller families and better health.

Back in 1957, some bees from Africa being studied in Brazil managed to escape. They were quickly dubbed “killer bees” because a large group of them would attack those who annoyed them, and it was estimated that over a thousand people had been killed by their persistent repeated stings. The distance the bees would travel each year was known, so accurate predictions could be made of their spread. Pretty much as expected, they reached the United States border...
in 1990 and continued on. But another factor slowed their northward migration: they don’t like cold weather. Also, some “killer bees” adopted native queen bees, which made the resulting worker bees much less aggressive.

One lesson we might learn from all this is that things often turn out to be not as bad as we had expected, because other then-unknown factors may modify the change we had feared.

The Unwanted Number “Four”

In the Chinese and Japanese languages, the words for “four” and for “death” are pronounced almost the same. A 25-year analysis of U.S. death statistics showed that people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry suffered 13 per cent more than expected deaths on the fourth of the month, and that figure went to 27 per cent for the large Asian populations in California. A similar effect did not occur for whites on the 13th of the month, perhaps because the number 13 is not directly related to death, although some consider it unlucky. Doctors suspect some sort of psychological stress causes the “four” effect. They pointed out that many hospitals in China and Japan don’t list a fourth floor or any room with a 4 in its number.

A Causes B Causes C Causes D, Etc.

Here is a nice example of a multiple causation string: DDT was used widely as a pesticide in the 1950s, before it was found to be so extremely toxic and not just to mosquitoes spreading malaria. The World Health Organization sent large quantities of DDT to Borneo, and it quickly wiped out the mosquitoes. But the billions of roaches there stored the DDT in their bodies. The small lizards who fed on roaches were not killed but the DDT slowed them down, so it was easier for cats to catch the lizards, a favorite food. Caterpillars moved in to feed on the roofing materials of homes; the lizards that had been consuming caterpillars had been eaten by the cats. Then cats began dying of DDT poisoning, so rats moved in because there were no cats to stop them, raising the danger of plague. So the WHO brought in more cats and parachuted them in to control the rats.

From Richard Fagerlund, who writes a syndicated column “The Bug Man.”
A Language without Verbs

You know about E-Prime, the English language without any “to be” verbs. Now here’s a language that has no verbs at all.

The notion comes from a French intellectual, Michel Dansel, who is publicizing his new book The Train to Nowhere. The publisher says the book is “brilliant, baroque, and original.” It describes a train journey: “In that carriage, between the grumpy woman oozing vulgarity and the similarly asinine creature with her, the progenitor and her eczematom brat, the purple-faced fatso, the half-bald guy like a vegetarian may-bug, the verbose matinee idol and the crazy witch, no room for me.”

So what’s the point? The writer termed it “a challenge to old, tired ideas about language.” One critic sneered it was “a jungle of similes and essences, desperate for the oxygen of a verb.” The author’s elementary school teacher remembered him as weak in spelling and grammar, and “bad at verb conjugation.”

Watch Out: The Word Is Not the Thing

Some examples from Consumer Reports magazine:

• America Wear shirts are made in Vietnam.

• Barnegat Bay sardines, with a label including a picture of the lighthouse at Barnegat Bay, New Jersey, come from Thailand.

• A portable stove from American Tool Exchange made by USA products, comes from China.

• The Europa Elite showerhead, made with “European styling,” is “made in USA.”