Casual Lex: An informal assemblage of why we say what we say

Garrison makes a few assumptions in Casual Lex (2005). Among them are that readers are looking for an accessible portal to the mystery of language origin, that other sources may have proved to be frustrating, and that he might win over the linguistically-disheartened—and enchant those already enveloped in etymological euphoria—with his matter-of-fact presentation of the material. His children expose his joy for language in the two-page foreword to the text, stating, “Dad… relished the craft of writing, massaging the words into his own special style of literary expression” (vi). But they also say he also found the established academic sources less than accessible for the people likely to use the words and phrases about which little history is widely known (or remembered) (v). The most important assumptions, however,—those that Garrison holds about the reader—become evident only through reading and feeling this book like the participants in the constant construction and negotiation of language that we are.

Casual Lex was published posthumously—Garrison died in the summer of 2000. His daughter and sons explain in the foreword that Casual Lex is an abridged, revised version of three books their father previously published: Why You Say It (1955), Why You Say It (1992, 2nd ed.), and What’s in a Word? (2000).

The text moves alphabetically through a list of entries he has compiled over years of writing. A prolific Civil War author—publishing over 55 books in his lifetime (Juneau 2002)—Garrison extends his expertise to reach an audience he relates to in his zest for language and disdain for traditional sources in discerning its origin.
Garrison does not cite any references directly within entries in his book, but includes a six-page bibliography in the final pages. His references go broad and deep, ranging from *The Dictionary of American History* (1940) and *Concise Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (1924) to *Word People* (1970) and *WorldWideWords.org* (1996-present). In the foreword, his children mention that he used numerous scholarly works, most notably the 22,000-page *Oxford English Dictionary*, which includes detailed accounts of the way speech has developed. He found such references cumbersome and out of touch with how people really speak in everyday life.

He provided an alternative approach to the history of words, explaining their fascinating origins through amusing, breezy entries. (v)

Readily available references within the text would have better served readers with a penchant for academic evidence; although because the book was published in the popular vein of current literature, the bibliography seems sufficient for those whose deeper curiosity drives them to resources beyond the book’s cover.

Language poses a slight barrier only when considering the potential audience for *Casual Lex*. The sometimes-stilted “one” appears frequently—Garrison holds readers at arms’ length in saying “silver spoon in one’s mouth” (p.198) when a more direct second person or less formal third person reference would have been appropriate. While for an academic audience the use of “one” is more suitable, use in this context keeps readers at an uncomfortable distance. Despite Garrison’s earnest attempt to reach the masses, he is still in a position of power in this sense through his voice, as the author explaining away common language. Still, it’s not unusual for authors to take on directive roles in their work because, after all, they are asserting authority on a topic merely by writing on it. He does counterbalance this authority, somewhat, by couching his
definitions within historical contexts to which most readers may relate. Garrison’s humorous approach to many of the words and phrases also helps to ease the tone of the writing. It becomes clear in reading Casual Lex that Garrison’s assumptions about and power over his readers have a parental feel: he is the father giving lessons on the language we hear and use every day.

To further explore Garrison’s personal involvement in Casual Lex, I will examine two terms from the book: capricious and rummage. I will give Garrison’s definition and a definition from another source to illustrate how Garrison’s assumptions about readers and his role as author influence how his entries were written and affect readers.

“Capricious” (adj) comes from caprice (n), which is an impulsive change of mind. Both terms are traced back to French and Italian—“caprice” and “cappricio,” respectively.

In Casual Lex Garrison defines capricious as follows:
When you are forced regularly to spend time with a capricious person, you tend to find your companion quite annoying. Anyone who frequently indulges in impulsive changes of mind is hard to deal with. Italians of past generations wouldn’t have challenged that verdict. Matter of fact, they coined the descriptive term as a result of watching goats in action.

No other domestic animal quite matches the goat in its tendency to switch suddenly from frolicking to butting heads. Many a goatherd noticed that animals seemingly intent upon grazing could be mating in the blink of an eye.

Called the caper by Romans, the animal’s behavior led humans to label outlandish conduct as cutting capers. Italians who knew the goat as the capriccio adapted its name to describe a person subject to erratic whims and sudden willful behavior. (p.39)
Garrison’s definition combines numerous aspects of the word’s history to comprise his colorful story. His references to the Roman “caper” leads us to believe that “capricious” has a longer history than what it can claim; however, the word was brought into use in English in 1667. Etmyonline.com and Wordinfo.info both insinuate that the Italian word for goat do not have anything to do with “capricious”:

While the Italian word *capra*, “goat,” is not directly related to *capriccio*, the similarity of the words and the skittish, flighty behavior of goats apparently gradually pushed *capriccio* away from “fright” and towards “whim.” By the time “caprice” entered English in 1667, it meant simply “whim, erratic,” or “notion.” (Wordinfo.info)

It’s difficult to tell if Garrison made connections that aren’t valid merely to create a compelling story that would reach his audience. Could he be inventing a story to keep readers interested? He said that he found traditional sources inaccessible, but a conflict like this might be confusing for readers instead of helpful and memorable. “Capriccio” means whim, not goat, in Italian.

“Capriccio” is also a term used in musical composition to indicate a free or irregular style, often including improvisation (dictionary.com). The Italian goat connection seems to be a forgery. While this is not devastating information, and the connection is still believable for its humor, drawing readers in with false information is not admirable. Further and deeper research could prove Garrison’s connection to be valid; nonetheless, the book’s pervasive element of going beyond traditional sources could have derailed reality.

“Rummage” (n) is usually comprised of odds and ends, for example at a rummage sale we find a variety of unwanted goods for sale. As a verb, “rummage” is a kind of hasty search. Garrison’s description in *Casual Lex* bridges the gap between the noun and the verb:
Few operations require more skill than that of loading a large ship. There is a vast amount of space, and every part of it must be packed tightly. Otherwise, the motion of the vessel might cause the cargo to break loose and shift, at least causing damage, at the worst sinking the ship.

Early French shippers adopted a special term for the loading operation. Their word was *arrumage*, related to the ancestor of “arrange,” and it was used to indicate the packing of lumber, casks, and other heavy articles in the hold of a vessel. No matter how carefully the job was done, however, experience proved that some of the cargo was sure to get damaged.

Warehouses frequently put such goods to one side until enough accumulated for a special sale. These goods came to be called *rummage*. By the fifteenth century the word was being applied to any collection of goods of low quality. The *rummage* sale has come to be associated with clothing and other items householders sell to earn a little money.

Oddly enough, I can find no French “arrumage.” Referenced in Etymonline.com, “arrumage” is said to be Modern French—“an arrangement of cargo” coming from the verb “arrumer.” While the French connection remains hazy at best, the deeper truth that Garrison fails to mention is the connection to the Old English word for “room”: “rum.” Etymonline.com mentions this, and so does Dictionary.com—the Old English makes a stronger tie to the word in question because we might consider a rummage sale to be part of the process in “making room” or see rummage as something to arrange in a room (It’s possible there is a different connection to French here with the use of “arrange.”) Despite ignoring the true English heritage of an English word, Garrison’s
story makes sense, has sources backing it up, and is interesting enough to remember: mission accomplished.

I recommend this book for readers who are casually interested in etymology and linguistics in everyday life, perhaps as a springboard for students who might be engaged by the book’s atypical approach to defining common speech. Readers looking for more reliable, substantive etymological breakdowns might do well to disregard this book and reach for the OED instead.
References

http://www.woxikon.com/ita/capra.php

http://www.wordinfo.info/words/index/info/view_unit/371

http://www.wordreference.com/iten/capriccio


http://www.wordreference.com/enit/goat


http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=rummage