



## Glitch demons

### Description

*Tutivillus* was the original glitch demon. He caused scribes to write the occasional wrong character in a manuscript. He would also collect a record of people's sins, or would record the idle gossip of churchgoers. The word *Tutivillus* (or *Titivillus*) appears in the online OED, with its variant spellings. It seemed to originate from Latin, meaning *something worthless*.

As the cause of errors in manuscript production, *Tutivillus* took the blame for careless scribes. This is explained nicely by Mark Drogin in a book about calligraphy. *Tutivillus*'s mischief continued into the era of print, notably in a persistent misprint in the OED entry for *Tutivillus!* (19)

### Tut tut

In his fascinating book on vocal sounds that are not words, but that convey meanings none-the-less, Steven Connor makes much of Tutivillus. More specifically he focusses on the *t* sounds in the word, and that a person makes when she or he forces air through the mouth while tapping the tip of the tongue against the front part of the roof of the mouth, just behind the teeth — if that needs explaining.

“Tut, tut, tut, I’ve heard from curbside pedestrians as I cross the road against the red ‘don’t walk’ sign in some countries, probably Germany. Strangely, that sound echoes in softer volume the *tick, tick, tick* of the pedestrian walk signal at those same pedestrian crossings.



*Titillation, tickle, trickle, tittle tattle*: these are just some of the words that exploit the ambiguous and lightly moist emptiness of the *t*.

## Nothing at all

Connor gives space to another important *t*-word, *it*, the tiny pronoun that precedes its *t* with an *i*. The dot on the *i* distinguishes it from an *l* to avoid confusion. The association between *t* and the dot of the *i* introduces the iota, jot, and tittle.

“till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished,” wrote the apostle Matthew (5:18). That’s the Revised Standard Version. *Iota* and *dot* were translated as *jot* and *tittle* in the King James (from Greek).

The single dot is the Arabic arithmetical symbol for zero (0) and reads as *ʿĪfr*, from which we derive the English word *cipher*. I summarised the dual meaning of that word in a post [I am not a statistic!](#)

A cipher is a code, as in cryptography. But the word is used that way as an abbreviated references to the zeros and ones of the binary coding system, or perhaps the first number in the sequence of positive integers. In other uses, a cipher is a non-entity, a person requiring no consideration, a zero, an anonymous entity.

(Such is the play potential of words that Jacques Derrida referred to as *intertextuality*, which I recounted in [Derrida for Architects](#), and in a blog post: [Derrida for stand-ups](#).)

## Empty mouth sounds

This brings me back to *Tutivillis*, a word derived from the Latin for something of no worth, or at least a thing so deprecated *it* perhaps as an insult. Connor explains a lot of *t*-words.

“Tittling is itself proliferative, since the tittler is a spreader of rumours and seeder of dissension. Ungoverned by the demands of truth or meaning, the empty language of tittle-tattle is the nothing that comes of nothing, the nothingness of language given over to the agitated idling that is the mere wagging of tongues” (159).

“I’ve not yet exhausted all words with prominent *t* sounds in them that point to trivialities, tripe, trifles or tantrums or that titter, tickle, titivate, or titillate. But *Twitter* comes to mind, and the endless tickle-words and devilish tutivillic mouth sounds of ASMR videos. See post: [The pleasures of the mouth](#).”

## Tidy town

Then there are the quiet *t*-sounds of the city (ticks and taps), and their materialities: traps, trips, cavities and glitches. That’s my speculation, but Connor brings out the significant of the Middle English word *tid*, for time. Tidy means *timely, seasonable, opportune; in season* (OED).

To titivate is to draw out time: *the core meaning of drawing out time in trifling or inessential adornment* (158). Some *t*-sounds therefore have something to do with a glut (surplus) of time and extent (space) *where things happen timeously, tidily, or tardily from time to time*.

## References

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### Category

1. Voice and text

### Tags

1. ASMR
2. cipher
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