The cataclysm in Japan, though, has brought other divisions to the fore, with some folks clamoring for potassium iodide tablets and dismantling the entire nuclear energy industry, while others are lamenting the media obsession with all things nuclear and mocking those with nuclear concerns, routinely invoking the thousands of deaths caused by the coal industry every year. I do not mean to say that I think that the nu-klee-ar/new-kewl-ar division involves the same subsets of people as the dismantlers/mockers division; in fact, both “divisions” are probably better thought of as full spectra with distinct time-dependent and context-dependent distributions. Regrettably, neither do I have any profound knowledge to contribute to the nature of these discussions. These are hard issues in my mind—the folly of ignoring the dangers that a nuclear disaster means for the community surrounding a fission plant is not easy to compare to that of ignoring the real costs of the fossil-fuel lifestyle. Rather, I simply want to call for an end to the smirkiness, the smarter-than-thou condescension that I see often in discussions of these matters. Rather, I simply want to call for an end to the smirkiness, the smarter-than-thou condescension that I see often in discussions of these matters.

The word ‘nuclear’ is back in the news, and the conversation usually goes well beyond issues of pronunciation these days. Even the phrase “nuclear family,” perhaps once evoking only an idyllic Ozzie and Harriett image and having now evolved a broader interpretation, now occasionally takes on a meaning akin to “humanity in the nuclear age”— or is that just my perception? I have been thinking for some time now about the nu-klee-ar/new-kewl-ar divide, and similar societal schisms. Perhaps I am hypersensitive to dialect differences (being from the South and having been told at least once that my twang cost me a job), but it seems to me that there’s more to this separation than mere elocution. My own biases are probably apparent, as I will confess that I see the nu-klee-ar crowd as generally more hip, but sometimes arrogant or condescending, while the new-kewl-ar group comes across as more salt-of-the-earth but sometimes uninformed or oblivious (…and never mind what it says about me that I freely use constructions like “hip” and “salt-of-the-earth”).