

FORUM: A PUBLICATION OF THE ALSA

Number 3 • Spring 2009

Second Printing, Corrected

The Latest Illiteracy

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With Preface by Christopher Ricks*

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PREFACE

Christopher Ricks

On 9 April 2009, there appeared an advertisement for *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*: “Contributors from academia, journalism and the world of music pour over 40 years of Dylan’s career, music and cultural influence”. Neither Cambridge University Press nor the *New York Review of Books* could bring itself to pore over the words.

The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics understands that it has an obligation to direct some of its force, time, and imagination to the bad examples that are set, as against the good example that the Association itself tries to set, for instance in its journal, *Literary Imagination*, and at its annual conferences. It was in this spirit that *Forum* No. 1 (Winter 2004) turned its sustained attention to *Writing Without Reading: The Decline of Literature in the Composition Classroom*. John C. Briggs, a pertinacious and perceptive member of the Association, generously devoted himself, his energies, and his substantiated research to a sustained demonstration of what was going wrong. It was again in such a spirit that *Forum* No. 2 (Spring 2005), *Reading at Risk*, was conducted by Mark Bauerlein, who edited with verve and scruple what was not only an issue of *Forum* but a forum itself, with contributions by fourteen strong and independent thinkers.

Forum No. 3, *The Latest Illiteracy*, now brings together, in the same hope that the situation is not hopeless, many instances of, as well as some reflections on, how different – largely, how much worse – things are these days, both in print and in speech. The underlying questions are the enduring ones. Really worse, not just different? What is the evidence, or more taxingly, what even counts as evidence? Is it merely that all of us, especially some of us, are getting older, and that the invocation of a golden age is becoming more of a lure? Is it not the case that in the Paston Letters, as long ago as the 15th century, the complaint was being voiced that servants be not so diligent as they were wont to be? *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*? One thing that never changes is that each of us gets something wrong sometimes. I still blush (faintly) after 46 years for having neglected to notice that Milton’s phrase “ribs of Gold” had become – there on the culpable page that I let pass – “ribs of God”.

In 1974, Kingsley Amis was obliged to deplore age-old error. “Illiteracies over the meaning of words, such as good old ‘disinterested’ for ‘uninterested’, have attracted quite a lot of attention recently, though without, of course, any perceptible reduction in their incidence; those who don’t notice what they say or write don’t notice what they read either”. A dozen years later, Amis recommended *The Oxford Guide to English Usage*:

This book is founded on a principle taken for granted by most writers and readers since time immemorial: that there is a right way of using words and constructing sentences, and plenty of wrong ways. Until very recently this was denied by linguists and lexicographers, who would have returned a hearty No to the question asked in the title of a scholarly paper of 1964, “Can Native Speakers of a Language Make Mistakes?” Or was it so hearty? In the course of giving their followers leave to spatter their talk and prose with any old illiteracy or howler that took their fancy, such people were always noticeably careful to make no “mistakes” themselves, like a parson grimly preserving his own chastity while recommending adultery to his parishioners.

(*The Amis Collection*, 1990)

This *Forum* likewise resists such excuses and acquiescences. It is the work of two highly articulate writers who wish to help others to be no less articulate – and, since individuality is to be respected and fostered, help them to be variously and personally articulate. This, as being able to do right by oneself as well by others because doing right by the great inheritance that is language, that is a language.

Thirty years ago, in the first of two collections on *The State of the Language* that Leonard Michaels and I edited, I tried to sum up what, for me, a language is, down to what a word is. The meaning of a word is not a matter of fact (which is why an argument about it can't be conclusively settled by recourse to the dictionary), and is not a matter of opinion (which is why an argument about it mustn't be unsettled by a refusal to have recourse to the dictionary). The meaning of a word is a human agreement, created within society yet incapable of having meaning except to and through individuals. We may find evidence for such agreements, but we can't find proof of them. A language is a body of agreements. Some lapse; others change; new ones form. “Our language”, said the creative and critical genius who was American and then English – T.S. Eliot – “Our language, or any civilized language, is like the phoenix: it springs anew from its own ashes”.

Neither of the present contributors, the one English, and the other American, is a university teacher, which was one reason why the Association, which is committed to allying the world of the university with the worlds of the arts, of the professions, and of the common reader, recently authorized me to invite these two particular friends of mine to put their experienced minds to illiteracy, new and old, and then to give the rest of us the pleasure of witnessing these two minds, their findings, and their provocative speculations. Each of them is necessarily and rightly in two minds about some aspects of what is at issue.

Jim McCue has worked as a journalist – on literary topics as well as on that humane social convention, the obituary – for *The Times* (London), which is not to be called *The London Times* for that is a solecism; his writing appears in *The Times Literary Supplement* as well as in our Association's journal *Literary Imagination*, and he publishes fine books (uncollected Ben Jonson and William Empson, unpublished letters by Pope and by Henry James) under his own imprint, The Foundling Press; he is the author of *Edmund Burke and Our Present Discontents*, and he is co-editing the complete poems of T.S. Eliot in a critical edition.

Bryan A. Garner is the founder and the foundation of LawProse, which succeeds in

educating lawyers so that they actually enjoy writing more clearly and more justly; he is the editor of *Black's Law Dictionary* and of many indispensable books, including standard works that are of exemplary usefulness, such as *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style* and *Garner's Modern American Usage*. His latest volume, of more than 800 page-turning pages, is *Garner on Language and Writing* (2009), which has an enthusiastically judicious foreword by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Christopher Ricks
Immediate Past President
Association of Literary Scholars and Critics
May 2009

ILLITERACY AND OTHER ILLS

Jim McCue

Working freelance over the past few years, I have been involved with newspapers, universities, the books department of an auction house, publishers, an antiquarian bookdealer and the British Library. In all of them there is unease about the consequences of what I have come to think of as The Illiteracy – the evaporation of the reading culture on which they all depend. As another index of this, the number of books in local libraries fell by 2.6% in 2006¹ and has continued to fall by two million a year.²

The evidence that Britain and America are slipping into illiteracy is clear across the board, from school children to professionals, from journalism to scholarly publishing and government. Many people are now so used to it as to have given up worrying and started shrugging. So perhaps it is ridiculous of some of us still to be concerned when we see mistakes in magazines, or on road signs, or in legal documents. Yet it does feel as though mistakes are more numerous and more egregious now, and comparison of modern books with those of thirty or fifty years ago supports this impression. Most mistakes are individually trivial, but there is evidence that cumulatively they are causing social erosion. For if the belief that there are right and wrong ways to speak begins to fail, so does the belief in right and wrong ways to behave, and political problems and even physical dangers follow.

TOP TO BOTTOM

Six million British people of working age have literacy skills below those expected of an 11-year-old by our not especially demanding government. The Public Accounts Committee accepts that “45% of pupils leaving school are not considered to be adequate for a modern society”.³

This is probably as bleak a picture as it would have been a century ago. The difference is in the standard of literacy among those who *are* considered adequate, and on whom we depend for good laws, sound finances, reliable information, justice, scientific progress, discrimination in the arts and the education of future generations. For those at the highest levels now make elementary mistakes. The scholarly editor of a volume of *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* writes “Four pivotal concepts or overarching thematics underlie . . .”⁴ and no one at Oxford University Press objects to such a muddle (or notices that the possessive should not be “Hopkin’s”). Despite being the world’s leading academic press and producer of dictionaries, Oxford publishes a biography of the philosopher H.L.A. Hart which discusses “mysogyny”, and another book which claims that the Argentinian leader who invaded the Falkland Islands was “General Altieri”. On this showing, the Delegates should come down from their loftiness and question the education or procedures of their

own staff. Meanwhile at Cambridge, the University Librarian begins the catalogue of an exhibition with the statement that “The influence of the intellect of John Milton . . . cannot be underestimated”.⁵ Literacy is no longer second nature among traditional guardians of the language. When the Professor of the History of the Church at Oxford wrote “the painting’s fragility would put it at risk if it was moved”, none of the proofreaders at the *Times Literary Supplement* (27 October 2006) insisted on the subjunctive. In the *Review of English Studies*, of all places, a piece by the head of the English Department at a reputable university began, without irony, “John Kerrigan’s monumental new study fills a much-needed gap”.⁶

It is painfully evident that parts of the professoriate are illiterate.⁷ The introduction to Richard B. Doubleday’s recent book on Jan Tschichold, for instance, begins with this non-sentence: “Between 1947 and 1949 Penguin Books hired Jan Tschichold to standardize Composition Rules and redesign the entire series of paperback and hardback books that could be applied to mass production”. His publishers (Oak Knoll and Lund Humphries) allow writing of this standard to continue throughout, not even correcting the spellings “juxtapose”, “fluerons”, “intrical” and “essentric” – all in a book about the making of good books.

The Illiteracy has now spread throughout society. The evidence is all around us. At first it seems comical: the sign in York that offers “Tak Away”, or the one in London inviting us to “Watch Live Football Hear”. The greengrocer’s apostrophe has been a laughing stock for years, but there’s a new slippage in “Potato’s and carrot,s”. Newspapers routinely write “not much different to” when they mean “not very different from”, and make extraordinary mistakes such as the headline about a man who “road around the world”.⁸ At corporate level, global brands are guilty of violence against the language (McDonalds: “Millions of food and Sony prizes to be won”), and like a barrow-boy who has made it in the City, illiteracy has broken through old barriers of privilege so that an international hotel in Piccadilly displays an expensive poster inviting you to “Endulge yourself”.

It is unlikely that ten years ago a prominent charity would have run an advertising campaign under the slogan “The fact is if we don’t do something about poverty who will?” – because so many people (including the copywriters) would have realised that the question “Who will?” cannot be described as a fact. They would have known at once that something was wrong. A hand cream company would not have started one of its poster adverts with the words “Who would of thought...?” A major bank would not have written to its customers to tell them that their mortgage payments were “due to change because of the following reason”. Yet today the worlds of business, regulation and government no longer have the authority that literacy bestows. How authoritative is the sign that reads “No Unortherised Parking”, and how resourceful would you expect to find Lewisham Council’s “Naborhood Resource Centre”? The very name of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre shows how muddled it is.

The extent of the breakdown can best be judged from the internet. On a website such as MySpace, thousands of young people present themselves to the world. It is common for them to misspell words they must use all the time. “Live in Mancenser” and “studyin pyshcology but wanta be a lawer” are typical. “i have a wheat and dair interance and this means i cant eat ne thing lol” is probably worse than average (she means “wheat and dairy intolerance”).

Doubtless these pages are laboriously designed to be informal, and most teenagers' thoughts have always been banal, yet overall the inarticulacy of the writing is pitiable.

"I like 2 rite songs (b4 u ask there crap) friends are the most important things to me above a thing my friends are like my family, ill do anything for them". Inaccurate spelling is almost certainly adopted deliberately in many cases to disguise an inability to spell. But that inability also means that our children cannot read literature. If you cannot spell, you can't read accurately. In "Law Like Love", W. H. Auden wrote

If we, dear, know we know no more
 Than they about the Law,
 If I no more than you
 Know what we should and should not do

where "no" in the third line is crucially not the expected word "know". A reader who does not distinguish the two spellings can neither follow Auden's sense nor enjoy his riddling. The same is true of the reduction of "to" and "too" to "2". But more depressing than "rite" or "b4 u ask" in this MySpace exhibit is the spelling "there" for "they are", for it shows that the writing is governed entirely by sounds and not at all by an awareness of parts of speech, or even of what a word is. Sentences run on and over and into one another, making the structure of the message hard to discern. There is no indication of when a thought is complete. Again, "the most important things to me above a thing my friends" defies parsing. Perhaps "above a" should have been "above all" or "above any"? More probably, "a thing" is a rendering of the demotic sound for "I think". Actually, with such a feeble grasp of language – the basic tool of thinking – it is doubtful whether this girl can think rationally at all.

With this as the standard of self-expression across a swathe of the youthful population, it is not surprising that many university teachers say that only exceptional – or foreign – candidates have any training in writing, and that most have a very poor grasp of spelling or grammar. When a blog by Jim Knight, the Schools Minister (educated at Cambridge), was found to be "littered with spelling mistakes", the report in *The Times* of 5 Feb 2009 attracted several comments from foreigners about the poor standards of English they encountered in Britain. And when the Royal Literary Fund sent dozens of its Fellows into universities to foster better writing, they were shocked by what they found. Yet the Fellows themselves were not immune; the first page of their multi-authored report said that not enough attention was being paid by those "with the real power to affect change".

WHAT ARE WE TEACHING?

If teachers and academics have as little training in language as this, how is our literary culture to be passed on, and by whom? The National Audit Office reported in 2005 that 26 million people in the UK have literacy and numeracy skills below those expected of school-leavers with reasonable GCSE grades. That is to say, almost half the population is not properly literate.

From America comes news that "five out of six pupils" leave school without mastering joined-up writing. "The American study involved analysis of the essays of 1.5 million 16-

and 17-year-olds who were sitting their SATs, the equivalent of the first year of A-levels in the UK, in 2005. Officials found that only 15 per cent of the pupils wrote in joined-up writing.⁹ The National Handwriting Association reports a similar picture in Britain, commenting that some teachers feel that handwriting is an unnecessary skill in the keyboard age – just as times-tables were supposedly made obsolete by calculators. Presumably spelling and grammar-checking programs make those kinds of knowledge redundant too.

Governments try to persuade us that literacy and education for the many are improving all the time. Education was made compulsory up to the age of 10 in 1880 and up to 14 in 1918. This is assumed to have improved the situation immeasurably since the beginning of the 20th century, and a few diehards continue to insist that comprehensive schooling, introduced from 1965, has been a further step forward. Yet in 1808-09 Coleridge estimated in his notebook that three out of four boys were taught to read, adding “it is scarce possible that [a boy] might not procure the Bible, & many religious Books, which at all events would give him the best & most natural Language . . . probably, Milton, Gray, Thomson, &c how much more than Pindar ever read!”¹⁰ And how much more of worth than most people ever read today. Two hundred years later, for all our technical advances, it is questionable whether we are as literate as the generation Coleridge described. The old sense of a shared culture of classic books is largely gone. Schools say that they teach Shakespeare, but in some this amounts to showing the film and talking about the characters, with no attention paid to the language itself.¹¹ The British appear to have so little belief in their own culture that one of the greatest rewards of literacy – the greatest literature – is beginning to slip away, as knowledge of Latin and Greek classics has largely been allowed to. There is at least a danger that in a generation or two Shakespeare’s words will be comprehensible to as few people as Chaucer’s are now. Perhaps the author said to be “for all time” may be for only another fifty years or so.

Multiculturalism tends not only to impoverish the language in this way, but to limit the ability of schools to teach. Half-a-dozen different mother tongues are spoken in many London classrooms by children whose acquaintance with English is often very slight; in half of London’s primary schools, English is not the first language of a majority of the children. Teachers, therefore, must attend to each child individually each time they explain something. Teaching assistants have been invented to try to mitigate this difficulty – though without it actually being acknowledged – and they presumably do help individuals. Yet overall, progress is painfully slow and frustrating – not least for the children who *do* speak English fluently. The development of a great many children is retarded as a result, and an acquaintance with the heritage of former centuries and the achievement of true literacy are suffering.

Thirty years ago, it would have been rare in most parts of the country for anyone to leave school without a basic accomplishment in reading and writing (as far back as the 1930s my mother had no trouble with the “three Rs” when she left school at 14, and she has not written an ungrammatical sentence in the 70 years since). This means that most of our millions of illiterates are products of the past three decades (during which, officially, exam grades have improved every year). In 1974 about 2 million adults were deemed insufficiently literate to cope with everyday life: some 6 per cent of the population. By 1999 the proportion of new school-leavers in this category was 16 per cent.¹²

The Royal Literary Fund confirms that doctoral students and young dons are themselves not always literate, and the same is true of the younger generation of schoolteachers. For many were taught under a regime that neglected – or even despised – grammar, and, whatever the national curriculum may prescribe, they cannot pass on knowledge that they do not possess. One can only sympathize – with both parties – when pupils complain about the ignorance and mistakes of those supposed to be teaching them. Daily conversation demonstrates that, at different levels, practically the entire population is aware that there have been grievous losses, and most people regret it. More encouragingly, increasing numbers of the best educated young appear to feel a personal responsibility to improve school standards, as can be seen from the growth of Teach First (modelled on Teach for America).

LANGUAGE, LOGIC AND THE FACTS OF THE WORLD

Many people, of course, affect (or as the Royal Literary Fund might say, effect) not to care about linguistic niceties. Not long ago I asked three undergraduates reading English at Oxford whether they tried to avoid split infinitives in their writing. No, they said, and then one of them sheepishly admitted that he didn't know what a split infinitive was. Not surprising, I suppose, if they have never been taught. Another said that she didn't want to know either, because how you write is just a matter of how you feel: there are no rules. Many of her less privileged contemporaries would indignantly agree, and believe that this applies to spelling, too.¹³ If "realli" looks clever, why not write it that way? T.S. Eliot explained why not: "a word is something more than the noise it makes: that is to say, it represents its own history, the story of the way in which one meaning has altered, expanded, split up into related meanings, as a consequence of the work it has been called upon to do by successive generations; and therefore it should not disown its origins or disguise its ancestry" (Address Delivered at Washington University, 1953, later published as "American Literature and the American Language", in *To Criticize the Critic*).

Some influential writers about linguistics say that all this just shows that language changes, has always changed and will always change, and that nothing can or should be done to impede its changes. Nothing is "correct" except in a particular context, and then it is only a matter of expectation, like wearing black tie at a banquet.

But this is not so. For dress codes – although they indicate that one has made a respectful effort – have no intrinsic meaning, whereas grammatical codes (though not every individual rule) correspond to the facts of the world and the relationships between things. Knowing the difference between a noun and a verb means having a way to think, and being able to distinguish an abstract noun or a transitive verb enables those thoughts to be refined. Grammar is a complex rational system which has evolved to order our thoughts and help us to explain ourselves to others, and it is not optional. Without it, we could not process ideas, know what they mean or test their validity.

The Oxford Companion to the English Language makes the point well when it describes grammar as "a term for the syntactic and morphological system which every unimpaired person acquires from infancy when learning a language . . . All speakers of a language like English 'know' this grammar in the sense that they use it to produce more or less viable

utterances". But that was written in 1992, well before Paula explained on a dating website "i'm looking for someone who is lovely like to go out, meeting a new people, have a dinner in a town". Is that a viable utterance, or are Paula and the millions like her impaired by their lack of education? If this is how millions now write – and it is – can the permissive modern grammarians be sure that it is just a change, rather than a deterioration to the point at which language doesn't make sense? Imagine trying to reply to Paula.

More subtle violations may be even more insidious. Grammatical nuances are often vitally important, yet they are being cast impatiently aside as though they were hair-splitting archaisms of no possible current use. Who cares about the difference between "may" and "might" nowadays, a senior (Oxford-educated) television journalist asked me?

Actually, Alex, I care a lot about the difference between "your son may have survived if . . ." and "your son might have survived if . . .", or between "the President might have launched an invasion" and "the President may have launched an invasion". But these are far from the only grammatical signals or sequences of tenses which are now ignored by even the most prominent writers of English. The distinguished *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman wrote in November 2006, "When I wrote all that I could, I got out my iPod", meaning "When I had written . . ." Perhaps the pluperfect too is doomed. With it will go another sophisticated distinction that helps us to understand what is meant. It is like taking successive colours out of a painter's palette.

More strikingly still, the Republican powerbroker Tom DeLay was quoted as warning "Two years of [Nancy] Pelosi gives a good idea of what four years of Hillary [Clinton] will be like". Perhaps the spin-doctors had decided that the conditional mood was too delicate for people to grasp, so DeLay said "will be like" when he meant "would be like", but it is remarkable that he should speak as though the very thing he wanted to prevent were already inevitable. Compare Tony Blair: "I would strongly dispute the fact that we are a less equal society", which oddly conceded as fact what it claimed to reject (interview, 18 Feb 2007). His intonation gave no suggestion of sceptical inverted commas around the words "the fact".

CEASING TO AGREE

The grammatical elements in our language are ceasing to agree. Even the simplest rule, the distinction between singular and plural, is increasingly broken. Some people have always said "you was" and "he were", but until recently one would have expected a government minister who said "There is changes in legislation coming forward" to correct herself, and a professional broadcaster would not have said "The President, in consultation with two advisers, were . . ." These days in informal English – which is often used in formal contexts too – it is usual to ask "Is there any drinks in there?"

Historically, one reason for this tiny, mighty change may be the attempt to avoid giving offence to feminists, who in the 1960s and '70s complained vociferously about the "sexism" inherent in English. "Each diner should pay for himself" became unacceptable, and people meekly began to say "each diner should pay for themselves", where the singular subject turns into a plural in mid-sentence. Some people tried out the alternative "themselves",

where the plural turns into a singular in the middle of the *word*, but on the whole “each should pay for themselves” began to be accepted, and broadcasters and the rest learnt to ignore the signals of singular and plural. So now when one of the most eloquent academics in the world, Niall Ferguson, writes “the Bolshevik leadership was forced hastily to remove themselves to Moscow”, nobody from his great team of researchers, assistants and editors hears it grinding.

The desperate wish to avoid “he” and “his” resulted in common usage of forms such as “no one can be easy in their minds”, and now that this is accepted, it has become common even where no evasive action is necessary. The newspaper sentence “These first-time buyers are taking on massive debts to buy their own home”, referred not – as one might reasonably have supposed – to a couple buying a home together, but to a whole class of house-buyers buying thousands of homes. There was no reason not to write “homes”, but apparently in the media-language of today the singular sounds more inclusive, reinforcing the impression that the thousands of separate transactions all amount to the same thing.

Commoner still in modern speech and writing is the splicing of idioms, as in “he didn’t so much rise to power but leap to it”; or “we preferred fish and chips rather than Chinese”; or “the choice is between red or black”. Like listening for the second rhyme in a couplet, the ear strains for the fulfilment of the idiom (“didn’t so much *x as y*”; “preferred *x to y*”; “between *x and y*”), only to be confounded when instead it hears half of some other expression. “She declared the ‘no sex’ campaign as ridiculous” writes the journalist, hovering between “She declared the campaign ridiculous” and “She condemned it *as* ridiculous”. After his education at Oxford and starry career at Radio 4 and *The Times*, the Conservative MP Michael Gove still fails to follow the arc of his thought to its close: “The EU has a system of allocating jobs that is more about giving jobs to the boys and not about spending taxpayers’ money efficiently”. Good though it is to hear that he opposes jobs for the boys, “more” needs its “than”. Perhaps it’s the one that slipped erroneously into the *Times* headline “Twice as many Poles living in Britain than officials think”.

Hearing the flow of broadcast conversation or news nowadays is often like listening to a music CD that keeps skipping:

“It’s because of the availability of those guns that makes them more likely to use them”.

“We have chosen projects that are mature enough so they can be developed this year”.

“It’s more of a tribute to the film as much as it’s an original play”.

Agony. Tom Stoppard once used the analogy of a cricket bat: “What we’re trying to do is write cricket bats, so that when you throw up an idea and give it a little knock, it might . . . *travel*” – but if you use language like a short plank, “the ball will travel about ten feet and you will drop the bat and dance about shouting ‘Ouch!’ with your hands stuck into your armpits”. If you don’t want to suffer this way, it is easiest to resolve not to listen to or read anything produced since 2000. Scarcely anything is *safe*.

The ease of editing on computers makes grammatical dislocations much more common, as we make one change but fail to make another that it entails. “My CV is attached, and

as you will see that I have experience of managing teams”. Either “as” or “that”, but not both. But the writer – if he read it back at all – saw what he wanted to read, rather than what he had actually written. We all do it, and because we know how such slips are made, we all make allowance for them all the time. So the literate are training themselves *not* to demand grammatical coherence, and are failing to instil it, so that the next generation has much less chance of reaping its intellectual benefits. “Owing to today’s wet weather, please take care on the station”. No. It doesn’t work like that. If that sentence were a building, it would fall over. “Owing to rain, extra care is needed” is a *statement*, and quite different in construction from the *request* “In view of today’s rain, please take care on the station”.

A further intriguing development is the abandonment of the main verb, as in Jonathan Miller’s reporting for what is now clearly Britain’s most sophisticated news service, Channel 4 News. His report from Palestine on 2 February 2007 began:

Incessant automatic gunfire, punctuated with bigger bangs. Residents huddling in their homes. Gaza City empty, a city of ghosts, the fragile truce between Hamas and Fatah dead, as the men with the guns slug it out. A Hamas militant branding Fatah agents of the Zionists and the interfering devil Bush. No respite in the dawn, the one-and-a-half million people of the Gaza ghetto condemned to the ever-intensifying violence of an internecine feud that’s fast becoming the Palestinian civil war. Our faith in Allah is all we have left, he repeats again and again. Another small boy caught in the crossfire. Seventy Palestinians killed in this fratricide in just a couple of months, twenty in twenty-four hours, 200 wounded. Fatah gunmen attacking the Islamic University today, a Hamas stronghold.

These emotive remarks were intended as audio captions to the video. Only one of the nine is a sentence. The effect of listening to a stream of such utterances is one of continuous slight discomfort, as the mind waits for a main verb and is repeatedly disappointed. Again and again, the hearer must restructure his expectation, as yet another statement turns out to be not a proposition but an exclamation. However, the world cannot be explained by a series of evocative snapshots. For us to understand the news, or science, or each other, we need propositions and a narrative or argument; even newspapers aimed at the most simple-minded use main verbs.

COPING WITHOUT GRAMMAR

As we cease to expect words to fit properly together, we are gradually losing the sense that, because they have specific tasks in the communication of information or ideas, they ought to. Both in individuals and in the aggregate, that part of our minds configured to expect grammatical sense is atrophying – being insufficiently nurtured, and being overwhelmed by the number of exceptions. So will society function if words don’t work together? The expression “functionally illiterate” suggests not, since it recognizes that grammatical illiteracy impairs many other functions.

Increasingly, “computer literacy” is touted as a substitute, with the suggestion that young people who can scarcely read may be entirely at home in cyberspace. Even if one thought

that virtual life could be acceptable as an *alternative* to real life, the fallacy of this would be clear, since the illiterate are excluded from the verbal content of the internet in their own language as surely as I am excluded from the Chinese pages there. The proportion of the content that is verbal may or may not diminish in the future, but even if it does, the question remains, is it possible to reason in clicks and pictures? How well can an image convey the concept of “not” or “unless”, let alone subjunctives or probabilities? It is difficult to imagine how the chain of a complex argument can be followed (or challenged) by people unable to read; and if they cannot reason, they will inevitably be thrown back upon impulse and unchecked feeling.

So is this new dispensation “viable”? Well, does this feel like a society with its priorities right? In the past human beings have often scorned the ways of others, but our unusual predicament was diagnosed by Doris Lessing: “We do not like the way we live”. Our society feels unjust, lawless, and economically and environmentally unsustainable. It feels decadent and sentimental yet incapable of treating people with dignity and common sense; it feels dangerous, divided, increasingly full of delinquents, and politically squalid. We have very little confidence that we understand how we got here, or that we can use our knowledge to solve our problems, and we are less and less convinced that questions of public importance are discussed and adjudicated on rational grounds. Bad faith, bad practices, bad arguments, bad grammar and bad language prevail. None of these can be confronted without the old disciplines of reading and writing.

Illiteracy means failing to understand not only a sentence or an idea, but what the world itself is like and what people in the past have thought, how they have reasoned, and what they have tried to convey. It involves disregarding or simply discarding “the best that is known and thought” and reducing everything to immediate concerns. It means living without the lessons and perspectives of the past,¹⁴ and narrowing imaginations to the mere present (and to what is recorded in pictures). It means failing to understand how different things have been, how diverse civilizations have been and how variously people have thought. On Radio 4 in December 2006, Philip Larkin’s poem “Homage to a Government” was read as a slap in the face for Bush and Blair:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home
For lack of money, and it is all right.
Places they guarded, or kept orderly,
Must guard themselves, and keep themselves orderly.
We want the money for ourselves at home
Instead of working. And this is all right.

It’s hard to say who wanted it to happen,
But now it’s been decided nobody minds.

Despite the poem’s clear irony, the presenter was unable to see that Larkin *deplored* the withdrawal. Support for British military activities overseas was to her unimaginable, and she could read the poem – and the past – only as though it had been scripted by the present-day BBC. For all of Larkin’s eloquence, it was impossible for him to disagree with her.

It’s hard to say who wanted our use and understanding of language to be so enfeebled,

but it's not true that nobody minds. Irritation, contempt and despair are frequently but disjointedly expressed, and *Private Eye* and others make comical hay with the ignorance that is all around. There is certainly fun to be had from the verbal pile-ups of a politician such as Iain Duncan-Smith, with his claim "we have made improvements, and we'll go on furthermore" and his reflection that "You can't be a leader without getting your nose dirty". There is also a serious point, though, about such failures to see how things fit together and to appreciate that the world works organically. If you change one thing, you will have to change others, because things do not exist in unrelated units. Before you consider a single element, you must ask, "What kind of construction is this, and what else would be affected by a change?" This is not just a matter of making your participles agree. A quarter of Britain's power plants are scheduled to close over the next ten years, yet the proposed new network will not fill the gap until 2030. An advanced society cannot work without a sense of consistency and of how one thing entails another.

CONSTITUENTS OF THOUGHT

It is no coincidence that an age that is neglecting grammar is also neglecting constitutional structures. For the grammatical habit of mind is akin to the logical and constitutional. Just as grammar is the abstract superstructure of language, and logic is the superstructure of argument, so a constitution is the superstructure of law. Grammar governs how a sentence may legitimately be constructed, logic governs how deductions may legitimately be made, and the constitution governs the laws that legitimately govern us. You can change the subject, or the verb, or the object, or all three, but you can't, in English, do away with the whole structure, because that is how the language is constituted. In the same way, it ought to be understood that a government can ask the Civil Service to do all kinds of things, but not to take political sides, because the working of our society depends upon its impartiality.

Grammarians speak of a verb or preposition *governing* other parts of a sentence, requiring them to use a certain case or mood, because grammar is a form of regulation. In the words of *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, it is "part of a Janus-faced psychological and neurological process: each person learns and uses a private system which blends into a social consensus". It is a habit of mind that tells you that if you have *this*, you must necessarily have *that* in order for things to run smoothly. Anyone trained to think this way should realise that it does not make intellectual sense to abolish the hereditary peerage and not provide any replacement. It is constitutionally illiterate, just as it was for Gordon Brown, when Chancellor of the Exchequer, to make a bid for popularity by challenging the admissions tutor of an Oxford college over an individual candidate for admission, or for another minister to "fast-track" an asylum application in which he had a personal interest. These are truly ominous failures to understand the constitutional grammar which has been evolved over centuries in Britain to keep power orderly. They are failures to understand the limits, the inflections and the punctuation of power. To many of us they are almost unthinkable – in a way that makes armed robbery seem harmless fun – but apparently we are a declining minority in a country where most people are insufficiently educated to notice that, as the BBC put it, "they send out a precedent".

In January 2007, newspapers reported two more frightening instances of failing to understand proper relations and distinctions that ought to be second nature. First, an actor who had been playing in a film about child abuse was asked what he thought about vigilante groups, and replied that if they were “just killing nonces, it’s OK”. No distinction occurred to him between a criminal being tried, found guilty and punished by a court on behalf of society, and private revenge based on rumour. A few days later, the Mayor of London decided to comment on a ballerina who had admitted being a member of the British National Party. Although the BNP is a legal organization, it is one he disapproved of, so he declared that the woman should be sacked. Since he appeared to be speaking officially, the ballet company might reasonably wonder whether this was some kind of threat, to, for instance, its funding.

This impulse – not so much to break the law, as to take it into one’s own hands – is a terrible failure of education. Increasingly, it threatens our way of life, because people who are unable to distinguish between their personal feelings and how the law should operate are liable to take out their feelings on anyone who disagrees with them.

Teachers who instruct their charges in grammar are *explaining* something, not imposing it. They are explaining, factually, how the instrument of language expresses and communicates in rational ways. They are no more narrowing its scope or constraining its possibilities than a maths teacher who explains the workings of fractions. Similarly, some of our fundamental political and legal conventions are triumphs of *understanding*, keys to living in advanced societies. So much is predicated upon these things, upon the constitutional habit of mind, upon rationality and its distinctions, and ultimately on the ability to read and write, that it is hard to imagine quite how barbarous life without them would be – until you look at societies where they have not developed.

One of the interpreters of Confucius put into his mouth the wisdom that “If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success”. This is certainly true of the euphemisms and evasions of political language, which so obviously do not match the facts: you cannot solve a problem if you do not first describe it accurately. The dictum applies also to the modern abandonment of grammatical sequence. If we cannot distinguish with certainty between one and many, between fact and hypothesis, or between a phrase and a sentence, we don’t have the basic data and equipment to reason. Like a Treasury which can’t distinguish millions from billions, or current from future revenues, such a cast of mind doesn’t enable us to follow cause and effect, or investigate the various possible relations between them. People are left guessing what to do, dependent upon whim, unaware that experience and science have provided at least some answers. The neglect of literacy amounts to denying ourselves several vital human faculties. It is a retrograde evolutionary step, which helps to explain the current global flight from the Enlightenment into superstition. Grammar is, in Donald Davie’s revelatory phrase, “a social and public institution”,¹⁵ and like many of society’s other institutions, it is in poor repair, too little respected and not sufficiently understood by those who have custody of it.

One of the functions of grammatical sequence is to distinguish one meaning from another. To say “All aces are cards” is different from saying “All cards are aces”, and the distinction used not to be kept secret from Cabinet ministers. Yet in January 2007 the

Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter Hain, made a mistake of precisely this kind when he asserted that in the Province “one in five Catholics is now a serving police officer”. (He meant that one in five police officers now is a Catholic.) It was a slip, no doubt, but one that raises the question how much government or business can be carried on in this slipshod manner. For if everyone must collude to pretend that people actually did say what they ought to have said, who will ever be responsible for anything? “I misspoke” is one of the more sinister of recent euphemisms, and should be regarded as an act of misspeaking. It really does matter that we should be able to distinguish “Right is might” from “Might is right”. Clarity of purpose is possible only through clarity of expression. Individuals, and especially those in authority, need to be able to say what they mean, and stand by it, if life is not to be intolerably capricious.

When John Reid as Home Secretary declared that with regard to terrorist suspects, “to follow the law to the letter” is to “fail in our primary duty”,¹⁶ he was implicitly granting himself a frightening waiver, apparently without even understanding its significance. Nor is this a unique aberration. When it turned out that a banker’s severance contract granted him a pension he could not possibly have deserved, Harriet Harman, QC, the Leader of the House of Commons, argued that “it might be enforceable in a court of law, this contract, but it’s not enforceable in the court of public opinion”,¹⁷ thereby implying that our legal and constitutional arrangements, painstakingly worked out over centuries, are all now subject to unpredictable challenge. This preparedness to cast aside the mechanisms of civil society is the profoundest illiteracy of all, and yet it is calculated to appeal to a population so ill-educated that many have only brute emotions to guide them.

Politicians and judges are obviously not the only ones who need to be able to communicate meaning exactly. In different ways, The Illiteracy is going to affect all kinds of jobs, from working out the tension in a suspension bridge to running a hospital department. Not teaching children to read is self-inflicted, slow-motion sabotage of society. Planes will crash because of failures of expression or understanding, and patients will die because nurses cannot follow the instructions on medicine labels. (I write this ten days after being seconds away from being given a drip intended for the man in the bed next to me.) Viruses such as foot-and-mouth disease will escape from laboratories, costing the country hundreds of millions of pounds, because we have a workforce that is incompetent and doesn’t understand what it is doing.

The correlation between illiteracy and other social problems is well known. Four-fifths of people who end up in prison have difficulty writing. High levels of illiteracy, failure in school, unemployment, poverty, obesity, teenage pregnancy, single parenthood, depression, drug use, psychosis, criminality and emergency hospital admissions are all horribly linked, and almost all of them have risen in Britain in recent decades. Each is a symptom of social inadequacy, and they tend to cause or reinforce one another, so that in families and then in neighbourhoods a terrible cycle begins. But illiteracy is not the direct result of any of the others, and whereas the others are likely to need repeated mitigation, a case of illiteracy can be cured once and for all. It is not a coincidence that from the 14th century onwards, the schools for those of whom something better is expected have been called grammar schools.

Today, however, a cult – sometimes ironic, but largely reverent – has grown up around a woman who thought that Rio de Janeiro was a person, that Saddam Hussein was a boxer, and that a ferret was a bird. Jade Goody said it herself: “I am intelligent, but I let myself down because I can’t speak properly or spell”. Millions of people in Britain empathized with her, because they too are unable to read the instructions for a decent life. Unfortunately, our masters cannot read the manual that we inherited for a free society either. From top to bottom, society has fractured, and instead of the old rules, principles and manners, we are kept in place by ever greater surveillance and ever more dictates as to what we must and must not do, eat, drink, wear, spend, say, think.

When I originally submitted this essay, it ended with a couple of anecdotes. But my enormously educated Bostonian editors resisted, saying they were beside the point. You decide.

My new spectacle lens was ready and I had only to go to the optician to have it fitted. But the fellow at the front desk could not find it and wasted ten minutes hunting before admitting defeat and going to his manager. “It’s in alphabetical order in the drawer”, he was told, and I saw from his sheepish look that this didn’t help him. Finally the optician himself came out and found it straight away. The poor assistant simply didn’t know about alphabetical order.

I was reminded of the graduate student, trying to do research, who asked a friend of mine who works in the British Library how to find the right book among the results returned by a catalogue search. “They are alphabetical”, my friend explained. “Huh?” “Arranged A-B-C- . . .”

“Heh, that’s a good idea”.

NOTES

- 1 More4 News report, March 16, 2007 (website headline: “Redifining the library”. Honestly).
- 2 *The Sunday Telegraph*, February 15, 2009.
- 3 *Skills for Life: Progress in Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy* (January 2009). The Department of Education reported that 42% of 16-year-olds leaving school failed to achieve level 2 in functional English, and 47% failed to achieve level 2 in functional maths (*The Sunday Times*, July 23, 2006).
- 4 Lesley Higgins, ed., *Oxford Essays and Notes*, vol. 4 (2006), 29. This £85 book’s first typographical error occurs in the first paragraph of the dust-jacket blurb.
- 5 Peter Fox, *Living at this Hour* (2008).
- 6 Andrew Hadfield, *Review of English Studies* (November 2008).
- 7 Delicious to hear Claire Fox, scourge of the dumbers-down, protesting “I do not want less people to go to university”, and being quietly corrected: “Fewer” (*Start the Week*, Radio 4, January 29, 2007).
- 8 *The Sunday Times*, April 15, 2007.
- 9 *The Sunday Telegraph*, October 22, 2006.
- 10 Entry 3415.
A hundred years later, as Hugh Kenner pointed out, there was a substantial demand in Britain for a bilingual Dante, with the Temple Classics *Paradiso* of 1899 going through eight printings by 1912 and a further five by 1923 (*The Pound Era*, 77).
- 11 The examination board Edexcel (to use its philistine title) reported in August 2006: “Coursework moderators noted that it seems to be the practice in a number of schools and colleges to teach to the task, so that candidates appear to be following some kind of template, with the same quotations, the same critical snippets, and the same ideas and interpretations. Sometimes essays follow the same pattern, paragraph by paragraph . . . A number of responses did not make use of capital letters for proper nouns or titles, such as Hamlet”. Reporting this, *The Sunday Telegraph* added: “The examiners’ report found that sixth-formers still struggled with basic grammar and spelling. They had problems getting right the name of the author whose work they were discussing, despite having the book in front of them”.
- 12 *The Sunday Times*, May 20, 2007.

- ¹³ On the other hand, the huge success of Lynne Truss's book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (2003) demonstrates how many people acknowledge that there *are* rules and want guidance about them, because they know they were let down in school.
- ¹⁴ Some state schools, perhaps as many as a third, do not offer pupils the chance to continue studying History after the age of 14 (*The Sunday Telegraph*, February 11, 2007).
- ¹⁵ *PN Review* 5, no. 1 (1977), 18.
- ¹⁶ "Reid says human rights laws soft on terrorists", *The Sunday Telegraph*, May 13, 2007.
- ¹⁷ *The Times*, March 2, 2009.

THE ONGOING STRUGGLES OF GARLIC-HANGERS

Bryan A. Garner

“Research from the New Literacy examines literacy practices, and literacy events, and many researchers have used it’s [sic] perspective to look at what people do with literacy.” [Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell¹]

A Solecistic Summary

The truce that I once proposed² between descriptivists and prescriptivists having been only conditionally excepted by a single linguist,³ the embattlements must continue.

Linguistic history bares out the fact that since English has spreaded throughout the world, people who hue to traditional idioms can avoid the maelstorm of indivious solecisms that await for the unwary. Although the language is continually evolving, and insipient changes become wispreadly disbursed and then take route so that words become distant from their entomologies, the mileau in which these changes occur remains fairly constant. Whether all change can be quelched is a mute point – a serious misnomer. The language is a self-regulating system of disambiguation, without any self-proclaimed body of persons in high dungeon, at our beckon call, exerting a right to meet out punishment to a would-be literati who has a heyday abusing it – punishment that might amount not just to a mild annoyance but to caricature assassination.

For all intensive purposes, some linguistic shifts may past mustard, even those that don’t harp back to Middle English or Early Modern English. People with an overweening interest in oversighting English sometimes, as a kind of guttural reaction, take all this for granite. There will never be paralyzation of a living language, nor even hiati in its evolution. And it may give piece of mind to know that linguistic change isn’t something to be measured in decades, much less per anum. Improperious words and phrases that may once have been considered abdominable, slightly course, or otherwise beyond the pail may, over time, become fully acceptable and no longer peak anyone’s interest. But even if there are many a person whom misuse particular words and are allowed to do so with impugnity – and all tolled, English contains a heterogenous mother load of almost infinite potential errors – their credulity is likely to be strained in the minds of listeners and readers. The more populace the language community, the greater the wrecklessness with which some speakers and writers can reek havoc on the language itself. These phenomenon become their mode of operandi; for them, perhaps we might say they could not of known better, even if they had ought to. But in the end, close analyzation should demonstrate that correct English usage should be brandishment enough – it’s own reward.



This fictitious summary of the essay you are reading contains no fewer than 63 more or less prevalent misusages (some of them quite popular) that represent potential shifts in English usage – that is, each of them can be readily documented in modern print sources. (For a key to this gallimaufry of bad usage, see the end of the essay.) When solecisms arise today, they can spread as never before – like linguistic infections. There are thousands of outbreaks throughout the English-speaking world at any one time.

The viral nature of linguistic change has assumed new dimensions with the advent of mass communications. Consider three examples. (1) On 31 August 1997, immediately after Princess Diana died in a car crash while being chased by tabloid photographers, reporters throughout the world that evening proclaimed that she'd been hounded by "paparazzis." Millions of viewers at once were exposed to the new double-plural. (2) In 1995, Mazda introduced America to its new luxury sedan, the *Millenia*, having trademarked the car name by changing the standard spelling of a word by dropping an *-n-*. During the ad campaigns that followed, millions of people were exposed to the single *-n-* spelling and to the idea of having a single *Millenia*. In 2000, Mazda offered a special luxury sedan: the "Mazda Millenia Millennium Edition" – doubtless prompting in consumers everywhere even further linguistic befuddlement. (3) The new popularity of e-banking has made it commonplace for many of us to pay bills online. One bank now sends hundreds of thousands of e-mail acknowledgments every day, each beginning with an individualized salutation: "Dear Bryan A. Garner; A payment has been made . . ." When an exasperated bank customer wrote to protest the repeatedly misused semicolon after the many salutations he receives daily, a bank representative coolly responded: "The semicolons are embedded in our computer systems, and there's no easy way to change the code. Besides, several of us here at the bank think the semicolons are correct." The customer's punctuational credentials matter not. When it comes to language, people with meager knowledge like to think of themselves as experts.

Given such mass-communication "linguistic events" or "speech acts" – and my three examples could be multiplied a thousandfold – people not surprisingly come to view *paparazzis*, *Millenia*, and semicolons after salutations as normal. And their own usage soon reflects that view.

On the whole, teachers of English can do only so much to improve the situation – can do little but help inculcate a lively interest in words, grammar, punctuation, and the like. Even that much has seemed impossible to many. Certainly it's a great challenge to make those subjects lively and engaging. Yet the best teachers do.

But academia has promoted some nefarious ideas that have undermined those efforts, and the ideas have made headway among the teaching ranks. That is, some teachers now validate the demotic idea Kingsley Amis majestically refutes in Christopher Ricks's preface that no native speaker of any language can ever make a mistake – that there *are* no mistakes (just "different" ways of approaching speech acts). Even if they do believe that mistakes are possible in a native speaker's use of language, they may think it would be discriminatory and politically unacceptable even to mention the errors. Some teachers think that their mission should be to focus on the appreciation of literature – that linguistic matters, especially those relating to usage, are beneath them. Or they may believe in the "new literacy," the idea

that perpetuating standard English is a hopeless, thankless task because linguistic change is inevitable. Some teachers don't want to interrupt the "natural" process of linguistic change. Just go with the flow: as long as their students are intelligible to others, they are "literate" and engaging in "appropriate speech acts."

It's true, of course, that children learn to write better if they spend lots of time writing, as opposed to diagramming sentences and going through rote drills. Teachers generally now accept that truth. Yet it's almost as if the education system starts but never even tries to finish teaching children how to write.

Approaching a finish would mean recognizing that intelligibility is only part of the goal – perhaps the first part, but only a part. Another part is *credibility*. If students are to profit from their educations, they need to acquire knowledge. For as the truism goes, knowledge is power. But power depends on having credibility with others.

Students don't need to have their own faddish or unthinking linguistic habits merely validated at school. They need to have their communication skills sharpened and elevated, lest they enter the adult speech-world handicapped by sounding ill-educated. This upgrading involves their acquiring, among other things, word-consciousness, which tends to retard linguistic change rooted in misunderstandings. This brings us back to usage, and to the viral outbreaks that sometimes become epidemics, even pandemics.

Descriptive linguists hardly resist change – of any sort. They certainly don't see degenerative change as a sign of disease. Rather, they largely embrace change. As Mark Halpern observes, "linguists' insatiable appetite for change in language is undoubtedly another phenomenon for which there is a mixture of reasons, but among them one is surely fundamental: without change, an important group of linguists would have little fresh material to study."⁴ So if descriptive linguists welcome dialectal varieties and resist the teaching of a standard language because a standard language makes their linguistic laboratory less *interesting*,⁵ they're like epidemiologists who get excited about the spread of new viruses.

But perhaps the disease metaphor isn't as apt as another biological metaphor – evolution. The forces of natural selection are every bit as much at work in living languages as they are in the rest of the natural world. Over time, words and phrases mutate both in form and in meaning, sometimes through useful innovation and sometimes through unconscious drift and pervasive error. Usually the mutations don't survive, but occasionally a change proves meritorious and ends up becoming a part of the standard language. That happens only if it's fit enough to survive – as a part of the natural selection that takes place in every language.

Sometimes the source of a mutation can be hard to pinpoint. Take, for example, the word *nimrod*. That word has always denoted a hunter. It is an eponym from Genesis: Nimrod, a descendant of Ham, was a mighty huntsman and king of Shinar. Most modern dictionaries even capitalize the English word, which they don't do to other eponyms, such as *mentor* (a guide or teacher, from the *Odyssey*) and *solon* (a legislator, after the ancient Athenian lawmaker, statesman, and poet).

But few people today capitalize *Nimrod*, and fewer still use it to mean "great hunter." The word is now pejorative, denoting a simpleton, a goofy person, a dummy.

Believe it or not, we can blame this change on Bugs Bunny, the cartoon character created

in the 1940s. He is so popular that *TV Guide* in 2002 named him the “greatest cartoon character of all time.” Bugs is best known for his catchphrase “What’s Up, Doc?” Bugs would chide one of his chief antagonists, the inept hunter Elmer Fudd, “What a moron! [pronounced like *maroon*] What a nimrod! [pronounced with a pause like two words, *nim rod*].” So for an entire generation raised on these cartoons, the word took on the sense of ineptitude – and therefore what was originally a good joke has gotten ruined.

Ask any American born after 1950 what *nimrod* means and you’re likely to hear the answer “idiot.” Ask anyone born before 1950 what it means – especially if the person is culturally literate – and you’re likely to hear “hunter.” The upshot is that the traditional sense is becoming scarcer with each passing year.

This little example illustrates the huge changes that words can and do undergo all the time. Sometimes the changes aren’t semantic – changes in meaning – but instead involve the word’s very form. Take, for example, *bridegroom* or *groom*. In Middle English (ca. 1200-1500), the original term was *goom* (= man). The extra *-r-* was added centuries ago by false association with someone who works in a stable to care for horses. America’s greatest lexicographer, Noah Webster, fought in vain in the early 19th century to make a man on his wedding day the *bridegoom* and all his attendants the *goomsmen*. But the English-speaking people would have none of it – they wanted their extra *-r-*, and they got it. The harmless mutation survived, and today we’re wedded to it.



It’s one thing to hear about past changes. We already know the outcomes and feel comfortable with them. But it’s quite another to consider current word-struggles. Most people feel justified in taking a position on the current standing of a word or phrase. After all, the language belongs to all of us, and we all have a say.

So let’s consider the major stages of verbal change. They were first suggested in a 1967 article by Louis G. Heller and James Macris in the journal *American Speech*. I’ve adapted their four stages into five. (Nonstandard forms below are preceded by an asterisk.)

Stage 1: A new form emerges as an innovation (or some dialectal usage persists) among a small minority of the language community, perhaps displacing a traditional usage. Examples include the misspellings **baited breath* for *bated breath*, **bellweather* for *bellwether*, the misbegotten **harp back* for *hark back*; the double negative **unrelentlessly* for the correct *relentlessly* or *unrelentingly*; and the dialectal **brung* for *brought*. People normally consider innovations at this stage outright mistakes. Most people who are aware of them hope they won’t spread.

Stage 2: The form spreads to a significant portion of the language community, but it remains unacceptable in standard usage. Terms at this stage include using *alumni* and *criteria* as if they were singulars (*alumnus*, *alumna*, or even *alum* being correct, and *criterion* being the singular form); misspelling and mispronouncing *sherbet* as if it were **sherbert* (with an extra *-r-*); misusing *infer* for *imply*; using *peruse* to mean “scan hastily” rather than “read carefully”; and using a nominative pronoun in compound objects such as **between you and I* rather than *between you and me*. Terms in stage 2 often get recorded in dictionaries

as variant forms, but this fact alone hardly recommends their use.

Stage 3: The form becomes commonplace even among many well-educated people, but it's still avoided in careful usage. Examples include **gladiolas* for *gladioluses* (or simply *glads*); **hone in* for *home in* (traditionally it's what homing pigeons do); **miniscule* for the correct spelling *minuscule*; and the supposed contraction **til* for the good old word *till* (as in *We'll be here till noon*).

Stage 4: The form becomes virtually universal but is opposed on cogent grounds by a few linguistic stalwarts (the traditionalists that David Foster Wallace dubbed "snoots": syntax nudniks of our time). Examples are pronouncing *flaccid* as /**fl**as-id/ instead of the traditional /**fl**ak-sid/ (like *access* [/**ak**-ses/] and *accident* [/**ak**-sə-dent/]); using *unbeknownst* for *unbeknown*; saying or writing *the reason is because* instead of *the reason is that*; and using *nimrod* in the Bugs Bunny sense.

Stage 5: The form is universally adopted except by a few eccentrics. It's a linguistic *fait accompli*: what was once merely *de facto* has become accepted as *de jure*. There's no going back here. Examples include *contact* as a verb (as in *I'll contact you next week*); the verb *finalize* (*Let's finalize our plans*); the adjective *interpretive* instead of the traditional *interpretative*; *pompom* in reference to cheerleaders' ornamental balls or tufts, instead of *pompon*; the adjective *self-deprecating* instead of the original *self-depreciating* (which the British still sometimes insist on); and saying *You can't have your cake and eat it too* (as opposed to the original and more logical sequence, from centuries ago: *You can't eat your cake and have it too*).

Many mutations never progress beyond stage 1. They stay in the shadows of the language, emerging now and again, mostly to the annoyance of educated people. Arguments frequently erupt about words and phrases in stages 2 and 3. But if a mutation makes its way to stage 4, its long-term progression to stage 5 is all but assured: it's just a question of the passing of time, whether decades or mere days.

As words go through their long lives, they swell and shrink, grow bright or dull, become loud or soft. To some degree they're always changing – most of them glacially, but some of them precipitately (or precipitously [stage 4]). Anyone who aspires to true proficiency with the language should cultivate the habit of assessing words.

I've tried to further that educational effort in my various writings, most notably in *Garner's Modern American Usage*, published by Oxford University Press. In its new third edition, I've developed a "Language-Change Index," as outlined above. Of the nearly 11,000 usage entries in the book, I have assigned rankings (stages 1 to 5) to more than 2,000 usages. The purpose is to measure how widely accepted various linguistic innovations have become. In their 1967 article, Heller and Macris rightly noted that "usage specialists can make a clear-cut demarcation of phases in the evolutionary process relevant to the inception and development of alternative forms."⁶

A reference to the key to my five-stage ranking system appears at the bottom of each right-hand page. Once again, briefly: stage 1 represents usages that are widely rejected; stage 2, usages that have spread but are rejected by better-educated speakers and writers; stage 3, usages that have spread even to well-educated speakers and writers but are rejected by the most careful ones; stage 4, usages that are almost universal, being rejected only by the most conservative linguistic stalwarts; and stage 5, usages that, perhaps once condemned,

are now universal even among the best-educated, most fastidious speakers and writers. That is, stage-5 usages are accepted by everyone except linguistic oddballs.

The rankings were arrived at by a variety of methods.

First, I had the benefit of many studies carried out and reported over the years. These were especially useful for the “canonical” usage problems – the ones that every serious usage guide treats. Most notable among these guides is Margaret M. Bryant’s *Current American Usage* (1957), based on more than 900 specific surveys conducted by English teachers in the 1950s. But other surveys were also useful, including those of (1) the *American Heritage Dictionary* usage panels over the years (reported in various forums since the early 1970s), (2) William and Mary Morris’s usage panel assembled for both editions of *Harper’s Dictionary of Contemporary English Usage* (1975 and 1985), and (3) the findings reported in *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (1989; concise ed. 2002). These surveys, of course, had to be weighted according to their dates and the predispositions of the survey participants (easily fathomable).

Second, I made extensive use of computer databases, including Google Books, Westlaw, Nexis, and the Oxford English Corpus. The findings here had to be weighted according to word frequencies of newer as compared to older usages.

Third, I have relied – unabashedly – on my own sense, based on a lifetime of serious linguistic study, of where a given usage falls on the spectrum of acceptability in standard English. Part of this sense I have developed through attentive observation and part through daily correspondence with English-language aficionados throughout the world. Fortunately, my daily usage e-mails, known as Garner’s Usage Tip of the Day,⁷ have brought me into contact with thousands of language-lovers who have written to me about their linguistic views over the past several years. Additionally, I frequently discuss linguistic matters with acknowledged experts such as Charles Harrington Elster, Mark Halpern, Richard Lederer, Wendalyn Nichols, Christopher Ricks, John Simon, Barbara Wallraff, and others. These discussions have proved particularly helpful in differentiating stage-4 usages from stage-5 usages.

Finally, I had the benefit of preliminary rankings by more than 100 members of my industrious panel of critical readers, assembled for the purpose of preparing the third edition of my book. They proved most helpful in conducting independent research into the prevalence of specific usages.

My thought was that these rankings of various usages would be much more helpful than what one finds in existing usage guides. On the one hand are traditionally stern naysaying handbooks that mostly just tell readers not to indulge in certain usages. On the other hand are permissive guides such as the *Merriam-Webster Concise Dictionary of English Usage*, in which the writers typically come out with milquetoast pronouncements. For example, the anonymous authors of that particular book won’t call *could of* a mistake. The entry reads in full: “This is a transcription of *could’ve*, the contracted form of *could have*. Sometimes it is used intentionally – for instance, by Ring Lardner in his fiction. Most of you will want *could have* or *could’ve*.” That’s the full measure of its guidance. Then sometimes there’s virtually no guidance at all: on the question whether the distinction between *infer* and *imply* is worth preserving, the *Merriam-Webster* authors give five reasons why it’s not. Bizarrely, along the

way they say “the words are not and never have been confused.”⁸

These sweeping statements, and hundreds of others like them in *Merriam-Webster*, simply don't comport with reality.⁹ And they blur important distinctions in the gradations of usage. So the Language-Change Index helps the user understand something about answering the questions, Who uses a particular expression? Everybody? Highly literate people? Only moderately literate people? Only those whose language is pretty slipshod? And what does the use of a given expression say about its user?

The Language-Change Index rejects, naturally enough, the bizarre dogma that I touched on above – a dogma that many linguists have accepted since the mid-20th century – that a native speaker of English cannot make a mistake.¹⁰ The belief is that anything a native speaker says is *ipso facto* linguistically correct. The dogma was first espoused by the linguist-lexicographer Allen Walker Read and soon came to be accepted within the ivory tower.¹¹ Increasingly, though, that view has fallen into disrepute for three reasons: (1) common experience refutes it (see the “solecistic summary” above);¹² (2) native speakers reject it, as witness the fact that they often admit errors in their speech and correct them;¹³ and (3) the dogma sweeps away any analytical insights into differences between educated and uneducated speech, or even the different strata within standard English – and the relative statuses of certain words.¹⁴ Besides, if a native speaker cannot make a mistake, then Mrs. Malaprop becomes unfunny in her verbal bumbles, as when she refers not to *an alligator* but to *an allegory on the banks of Nile*. (Mrs. Malaprop is so often corrected to *on the banks of the Nile* that those who give back what Sheridan gave are thought to be mistaking.)

There is, however, a school of linguists who persist in adhering to a version of the no-mistake-is-possible dogma. Even today, they are curiously reluctant to allow the notion that if one wants to sound educated, one must avoid certain syntactic constructions and word choices. Many of these linguists cavalierly dismiss any effort to advance prescriptive notions about effective language. Consider John McWhorter, a prolific linguist, in his book *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*: “All attention paid to [linguistic prescriptions] is like medievals hanging garlic in their doorways to ward off evil spirits. In an ideal world, the time English speakers devote to steeling themselves against, and complaining about, things like *Billy and me* [as subject], singular *they*, and *impact* as a verb would be better spent attending to genuine matters of graceful oral and written expression.”¹⁵ So: *My friend said they might come over by themself this afternoon. I need to know the time, because it will impact when Billy and me will go to the store.* How can such a statement be consistent with “graceful oral and written expression”?

What I have here called a solecism, McWhorter calls a “new way of putting things.” And he says: “the conception that new ways of putting things are mistakes is an illusion.”¹⁶ Much more tendentiously, Steven Pinker argues that linguistic prescriptions “survive by the same dynamic that perpetuates ritual genital mutilations,” and he refers to “the kind of terror that has driven the prescriptive grammar market in the United States during the past century.”

Many linguists, indeed, would argue the position to which McWhorter gives voice: “the notion that people are always ‘slipping up’ in using their native English is fiction.”¹⁷ Further still: “One must revel in disorder.” And the climax: “In our time, pedants are engaged in a

quest to keep English's pronouns in their cages instead of *me* being used as a subject after *and* and *they* being used in the singular. Whether that fashion will pass I cannot say, but we do know that it is nothing but one more fashion."

And what of the point that McWhorter and Pinker themselves, like all self-respecting linguists, use standard English? This has been a conundrum that linguists have lived with for years. I noted the issue in the second edition of *Garner's Modern American Usage*:

[Linguists] themselves write exclusively in standard English. If it's really a matter of complete indifference to them, why don't they occasionally *flout* (or should that be *flaunt*?) the rules of grammar and usage? Their writing could *militate* (or is it *mitigate*?) in favor of linguistic mutations if they would allow themselves to be *unconscious* (*unconscionable*?) in their *use* (*usage*?) of words, as they seemingly want everyone else to be. But they don't do this. They write by all the rules that they tell everyone else not to worry about. Despite their protestations, their own words show that correctness is valued in the real world.¹⁸

In a similar vein, a reviewer of David Crystal's *The Stories of English* complains about "a major contradiction in the whole work," noting that "while it celebrates diversity [of usage] in every possible way, it is written throughout in flawless Standard English . . . This is in a sense inevitable – the book wouldn't get printed otherwise – but one may also feel that the author is only theoretically sympathetic to nonstandards."¹⁹ And the redoubtable Mark Halpern puts the point even more emphatically: "It is typical of the descriptivists to pat the uneducated on their heads and assure them that some poor usage is just fine, even if they would never dream of employing such usages in their own work. On this basis they plume themselves on being 'democratic,' and charge their prescriptivist opponents with elitism."²⁰

As for McWhorter's own standard English, he has his lapses. For example, he is addicted to *as such* in the sense of "therefore."²¹ Two examples of this wretched new misuse:

- "You learned what subjects and objects are, you learned your Parts of Speech. As such, you don't like someone coming along and deeming your effort and vigilance worthless."²²
- "There are, believe it or not, languages where pronouns vary only for person but not number, such that *I* and *we* are the same word, *he*, *she*, and *they* are the same word, and as such, singular and plural *you* are the same word."²³

And then there are the seeming attempts at youthful hipness by using multiple (often quadruple) exclamation marks and question marks. This, in a book representing itself as a work of scholarship:

- "They do not specify for us that they are *in the process of eating the apples at this very instant!!!!*"²⁴
- "[M]any grammarians considered the following words and expressions extremely déclassé: *all the time* (quality folks were to say *always*), *born*

in (don't you know it's *born at*????), *lit* (What did I tell you, darling? it's *lighted*), *wash tub* (I don't know why people can't say *washing tub* as they should!).²⁵

These are only a few examples.

To the extent that linguists do use standard English, it's sometimes under protest. McWhorter purports to answer "the question we [linguists] often get as to why we do not use [nonstandard] constructions . . . in our own writing if we are so okay with them." The answer: "I was required to knuckle under." And he adds: "At best I can wangle an exception and get in a singular *they* or *their* once or twice a book. (I must note that the copy editor for this book, upon reading this section, actually allowed me to use singular *they* throughout the book. Here's to *them* in awed gratitude.)"²⁶ One wonders why copyediting might ever be necessary.

Descriptive linguists have long looked askance at anyone who purports to recommend certain uses of language rather than others, or to condemn isolated changes in language. In an otherwise superb history of the English language, Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable express pity for standard-bearing prescriptivists:

Conservatives in matters of language, as in politics, are hardy perennials. We have seen many examples of the type . . . They flourished especially during the eighteenth century, but their descendants are fairly numerous in the nineteenth and scarcely less common today. They generally look upon change with suspicion and are inclined to view all changes in language as corruptions. In retrospect they seem often melancholy figures, fighting a losing fight, many times living to see the usages against which they fought so valiantly become universally accepted. . . . If we might venture a moral, it would be to point out the danger and futility of trying to prevent the natural development of language.²⁷

Their book, of course, is written in flawless standard English – and appears to have been fastidiously copyedited.



Outside the grove of academe, the garlic-hangers – the “conservatives in matters of language” – continue to hold sway. Not all of us are melancholy at all. I, for one, have come to delight in each new stage-1 usage, each new solecism that I'm able to document and write about. It can be thrilling to discover for the first time someone misusing *corollary* for *correlation*; or *as such* without an antecedent, as if it were equivalent to *therefore*;²⁸ or thousands of other bungles. It's entertainingly outré to be able to write a couple of paragraphs like the “summary” at the beginning of this essay (see the key below). It's sad, of course, to know that many teachers have given up the idea that they should teach good English.²⁹ But the proliferation of error can definitely be the source of a perverse joy. Let there be no doubt about that. Or about the fact that not everyone is incorrigible.



Key to the Solecistic Summary

The truce that I once proposed between descriptivists and prescriptivists having been only conditionally *excepted* [accepted] by a single linguist, the *embattlements* [battles] must continue.

Linguistic history *bears* [bears] out the fact that since English has *spreaded* [spread] throughout the world, people who *hew* [hew] to traditional idioms can avoid the *maelstrom* [maelstrom] of *indivious* [invidious] solecisms that *await for* [await] the unwary. Although the language is continually evolving, and *insipient* [incipient] changes become *widespreadly* [widely] *disbursed* [dispersed] and then take *route* [root] so that words become distant from their *entomologies* [etymologies], the *mileau* [milieu] in which these changes occur remains fairly constant. Whether all change can be *quelched* [squelched] is a *mute* [moot] point – a serious *misnomer* [misconception]. The language is a self-regulating system of disambiguation, without any self-proclaimed body of persons in *high dudgeon* [high dudgeon], at our *beckon call* [beck and call], *exerting* [asserting] a right to *meet* [mete] out punishment to a would-be *litterati* [litterateur] who has a *heyday* [field day] abusing it – punishment that might amount not just to a mild *annoyment* [annoyance] but to *caricature* [character] assassination.

For all intensive purposes [For all intents and purposes], some linguistic shifts may *past* [pass] *mustard* [muster], even those that don't *harp back* [hark back] to Middle English or Early Modern English. People with an *overweening* [overwhelming] interest in *oversighting* [overseeing] English sometimes, as a kind of *guttural* [gut] reaction, take all this for *granite* [granted]. There will never be *paralyzation* [paralysis] of a living language, nor even *hiati* [hiatuses] in its evolution. And it may give *piece* [peace] of mind to know that linguistic change isn't something to be measured *in decades* [decennially], much less *per anum* [per annum]. *Improprieties* [Improper] words and phrases that may once have been considered *abdominable* [abominable], slightly *course* [coarse], or otherwise beyond the *pail* [pale] may, over time, become fully acceptable and no longer *peak* [pique] anyone's interest. But even if there *are* [is] many a person *whom* [who] *misuse* [misuses] particular words and *are* [is] allowed to do so with *impugnity* [impunity] – and *all tolled* [all told], English contains a *heterogenous* [heterogeneous] *mother load* [mother lode] of *almost infinite* [countless] potential errors – their *credulity* [credibility] is likely to be strained in the minds of listeners and readers. The more *populace* [populous] the language community, the greater the *wrecklessness* [recklessness] with which some speakers and writers can *reek* [wreak] havoc on the language itself. These *phenomenon* [phenomena] become their *mode of operandi* [modus operandi]; for them, perhaps we might say they could not *of* [have] known better, even if they *had ought* [ought] to. But in the end, close *analyzation* [analysis] should demonstrate that correct English usage should be *brandishment* [blandishment] enough – *it's* [its] own reward.

NOTES

- ¹ Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell, *Literacy and Education: Understanding the New Literacy Studies in the Classroom* (2005), 11.
- ² "Making Peace in the Language Wars," in Bryan A. Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 2nd ed. (2003), xxxi-xlv.
- ³ See Peter Tiersma, "Language Wars Truce Accepted (with conditions)," *The Green Bag* 8, no. 3 (2005): 281-90.
- ⁴ Mark Halpern, *Language and Human Nature* (2008), 20.
- ⁵ See, e.g., Ang Yiying, "Linguists Speak Up for Singlish," *Straits Times* (Singapore), December 9, 2008, quoting sociolinguist Anthea Fraser Gupta, who opposes the Speak Good English Movement in Singapore on the grounds that Singlish, a dialect of Singaporean English, should be allowed to flourish, and not be displaced by standard English, because from a linguist's perspective, the dialect makes Singapore "the equivalent of a really well-equipped laboratory for a chemist."
- ⁶ Louis G. Heller and James Macris, "English Usage and Modern Linguistic Theory," *American Speech* 42, no. 2 (May 1967), 132.
- ⁷ Anyone can sign up at www.lawprose.org.
- ⁸ *Merriam-Webster's Concise Dictionary of English Usage* (2002), 421.
- ⁹ Warnings against misusing *infer* for *imply* are legion in English handbooks. If citations to actual misusages are needed, see Garner, 450, which also notes, "Don't be swayed by apologetic notes in some dictionaries that sanction the use of *infer* as a substitute for *imply*. Stylists agree that the important distinction between these words deserves to be maintained."
- ¹⁰ See William E. Rutherford, ed., *Language Universals and Second Language Acquisition*, 2nd ed. (1987), 164: "During the period of American structuralism a myth became well established that a native speaker cannot make a mistake."
- ¹¹ See, e.g., Bergen Evans, "Grammar for Today," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1960, 80: "Scholars . . . do not believe that any language can become 'corrupted' by the linguistic habits of those who speak it. They do not believe that anyone who is a native speaker of a standard language will get into any linguistic trouble unless he is misled by snobbishness or timidity or vanity."
- ¹² See Jefferson D. Bates, *Writing with Precision: How To Write So That You Cannot Possibly Be Misunderstood*, rev. ed. (1985), 5-6: "'A native speaker of a language cannot make a mistake.' That statement is one I've encountered many times; possibly you've heard

it too. No wonder we're confused. Either the statement is ridiculous, or there is no such thing as 'correct usage' anymore."

- 13 See Patricia Demers, *The Creating Word* (1986), 13: "Professor Read's maxim, that a native speaker cannot make a mistake, is refuted by the evidence of common practice. Native speakers do not believe him, for they frequently correct themselves and sometimes each other: they are conscious of having made a mistake."
- 14 Cf. "At what point is a solecism committed by a single person transformed into a change in language that it is futile to resist?" [Mark Halpern, 122] and "Clearly we have not to accept as right any usage that any native speaker happens to adopt, nor even that large numbers happen to adopt. We shall not find ourselves accepting *them as don't like it* as sound usage, but why not? I suppose the only good reply is that people who use the language in a way we think good do not say it. This may be middle-class or upper-class snobbery, but it is also the defence of those who care about the clear and agreeable use of language, who value the power of making distinctions [that] are necessary or helpful." [T.W.H. Holland, *The Nature of English* (1967), 136.]
- 15 John McWhorter, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold Story of English* (2008), 68-69.
- 16 McWhorter, 72.
Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (1994), 374.
Pinker, 375.
- 17 McWhorter, 70. Cf. Pinker, 371: "The pervasive belief that people do not know their own language is a nuisance."
Pinker, 77.
Pinker, 85.
- 18 Garner, xxxiv.
- 19 Tom Shippey, "We're Still at It," *Times Literary Supplement*, August 20, 2004, 11.
- 20 Halpern, 24.
- 21 See Garner, 68-69.
- 22 McWhorter, 68.
- 23 McWhorter, 81.
- 24 McWhorter, 72.
- 25 McWhorter, 74.
- 26 McWhorter, 66.
- 27 Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 5th ed. (2002), 336.
- 28 I was, as far as I know, the first critic to note this misuse: see Bryan A. Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, 1st ed. (1998), 59-60.

- ²⁹ Consider this telling admonition from decades ago: "With the triumph of the doctrine of usage, amplified into 'the native speaker can do no wrong,' what does an English teacher have to teach his pupils that the pupils don't already know? After all, 'anyone who is not deaf or idiotic has fully mastered his native language by the end of his fifth year.' Teachers of English who listen to the siren song of the structuralists should perhaps begin to show some concern over the continuance of their own jobs, if not over anything else." Mario Pei, "*Webster's Third* in the Classroom," in Jack C. Gray ed., *Words, Words, Words About Dictionaries* (1963) 110-111.