

The Problem of purism

Prompted by a variety of letters from readers about deterioration and falling language standards, TOM McARTHUR discusses purism and the standard language, past and present.

'When books refer to Standard English, they mean English that is considered correct by most educated people for writing and speaking, in nearly all situations.' This classically straightforward description appears in Godfrey Howard's *A Guide to Good English in the 1980s*, published last year. Howard, however, immediately adds: 'The problem is there is no final authority on where slang and colloquial language end and Standard English begins.'

Ay, there's the usage rub. Like many other commentators on the language, Howard concludes that there are risks in laying down the law, because 'even good dictionaries take different views' on the standardness of certain words and usages. He opts for a 'standard English' without the capital S, so as to avoid suggesting 'an absolute fixed standard that everyone agrees with'. Or, from the purist point of view, that everyone should seek for and conform to when found.

The only difficulty here is that people will divide even on whether the 's' should be a capital or not, advocates of the 'permissive' lower case locked in verbal combat with defenders of the majuscule.

There appears to be no limit when it comes to defending the honour of the language, whether that language is perceived as a standard core or the whole kit and caboodle of English. The conflict dates back at least to Reformation times, when purists vigorously deplored the flow of flowery Latinisms into the vernacular tongue. Latin and English, they argued, should be kept apart: further mongrelizing the already mongrel native tongue would, they asserted, spoil the purity of the breed, and was a sure sign of decadence. People were at that time already arguing about the use of 'infer' for 'imply', while innovative lexicographers were coining Anglo-Latinisms wholesale. Their method was simple: Take a Latin-English dictionary, apply a few simple conversion rules, and *onerous* becomes 'onerous' and *catalogus* 'catalogue'. Words like 'alacrity' and 'ruminant' entered the language in just this way, words that nobody would blink at now. Others, like *nexible* ('able to hold or knit together') and *bubulcitate* ('to cry like a cowherd') were on offer as well, but the options weren't taken up, so some kind of filtering process appears to have been at work. The words, presumably, did have to be functional.

The editorial mail-bag of *English Today*

contains its fair share of present-day protest. Much of it is aimed at 'the media', while now and again a warning shot is fired across *ET*'s bows as well. W A R Hamilton, a pensioner from Bristol, states his position with admirable clarity:

'I shall not renew my subscription to *English Today*. Not being either a Phonetician nor an "acronym-watcher", I cannot understand articles like those in the October issue by Robert Ilson and John Haycraft . . . As for effusions like that of Miss Cheshire in the first issue, they are more suited for a journal of psychology, and in general your writers seem more concerned with chronicling changes and neologisms rather than with defending the purity of our native tongue. How does one combat errors such as PRONOUNCIATION which one hears almost daily on radio and television, except through journals such as yours: but what are you doing about it?'

Jack Conrad, a Fellow of the Institute



'Did you particularly want that infinitive split?'

of Linguists, writes from London with a comparable anxiety about corruption. 'I am very concerned at the way the English language has been rapidly deteriorating during the past few years, even when spoken and written by people who should know better, including authors and journalists. I have exchanged correspondence with the BBC and newspaper editors about the growing use of slipshod English but still it goes on. For example, such expressions as 'between you and I', 'never ever', 'hopefully' and dozens more are

now in common use and the process of deterioration has become a landslide.'

'People who use ugly English,' adds Heather O'Dare of Bath, 'including for example the singular "they", do not inspire respect and pleasure. When I read or listen, I admire those who can use the language correctly and beautifully. Our language is a precious heritage. One cannot respect professional communicators who cannot use the tools of their trade expertly. If I opened a novel and read, "the average person has *their* own ideas," I should close the book in disgust. As a matter of great interest to me, is there a book entirely without faulty English?'

I do not know of any that would measure up, because there is quite simply no way of assessing the candidates for such a literary role. Shakespeare's 'most unkindest cut of all' would disqualify him on grammatical grounds, and his 'make the multitudinous seas incarnadine' would do badly in a Plain English test. Every single one of us has a private yardstick – however cleverly or crudely worked out – relating to the grammar and the aesthetics of the standard language. As I read the angrier letters that arrive in the post, I wonder who or what the variously distressed correspondents *could* accept as a final arbiter of such things as usage, spelling and punctuation.

The anger often has a shape as well as a target. Bertram Lippman, a retired professor of English living in New York, identifies both when he writes: 'William Safire in the *New York Times* appears to take the view that in pronunciation, and ultimately in usage, when enough of us are wrong, we're right.'

Here, William Safire, whom many people regard as a final arbiter of usage, represents the media, while the general evil is statistical – the *mobile vulgus* at work contaminating the language. Professor Lippman adds: 'I find this dictum not only offensive but linguistically noxious. There is an assumption that correctness is an unattainable goal.' He also makes the point that some permissivists who tolerate individual neologisms and abuses will become as puristic as the next man if neologism is piled on neologism and abuse upon abuse. To illustrate his point he offers an intriguing 'synthetic paragraph' of his pet dislikes:

'Let me give you some advice for free, it is not too important, but anyhow . . . If you're buying a home, even if it's not finished yet, is when you have to be real

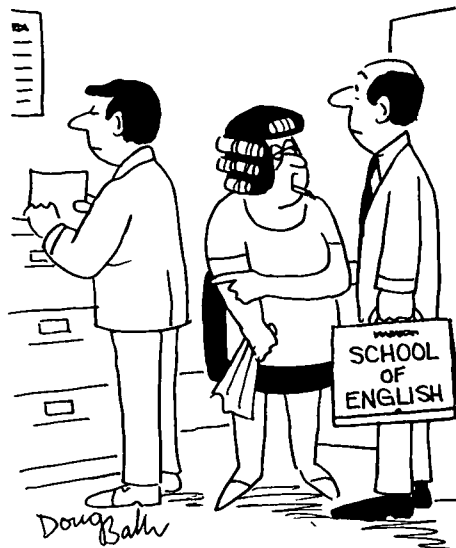
careful to get the true facts, they may turn out to be fortuitous for you and whoever you are buying it with. For one thing, you may be able to work the sales agent for something extra, say a chaise longue or maybe a casket for somebody's internment. I wish you get there before it gets real late, so you don't miss nothing. Those agents seldom or ever miss out on a chance to put one over on you. I could care less what you do, but why not get the best deal for your money? It just makes me livid with rage to think you might lay down tonight with a bad conscience.'

There seem to be three problems with a passage like this, excellent as it might be as a collage of complaint. Firstly, it is socially discriminatory, marked by judgements about education, class background, sloppy thinking, dialect differences, and in certain circumstances race and religion as well (although these may not be specifically built into *this* collage). They could, however, appear in somebody else's chamber of horrors. Secondly, it falls foul of Howard's problem: how, when, where and why do you draw your line between the approved and the disapproved, the standard and the 'other'? Thirdly, what do you do when a skilled writer deliberately blends the standard and the rest, for artistic and communicative purposes? Lippman's collage serves Lippman's purpose. What about all sorts of other collages serving all sorts of other purposes – and still in the end being 'standard' enough to grasp?

Some people do, however, appear to want legislation, in the French style. Others want the language professionals to clean up their act, so that they can then serve as exemplars for the rest of us – and particularly for the mob, when it opens its collective mouth or picks up its collective pen. It is hard, however, to legislate for something so/as vast and protean as present-day English. It is altogether too large for crusades. It currently defies the efforts of the most dedicated and sophisticated scholars – as witness Robert Burchfield's observations in *ET5* about the new grammar produced by Randolph Quirk and his colleagues. Most people consider the Quirk grammar dauntingly large; Burchfield sees it as 'deliciously small', and not at all sufficient for the task of describing the grammar of English.

There is, however, no doubting the sincere anguish of people who have over long and productive lives cared greatly about the state of the language. As Jack Conrad says, in closing his letter: 'What can be done? I have long been of the opinion that the decline of our language is part and parcel of our permissive and decaying society. Some years ago, in despair, I thought of forming an Association for the Defence of English, but I am afraid that my age – I am 73 – and my physical and mental vigour are against me. Anyway, I hope that you and your new journal will help to repair some of the damage. All power to your elbow.'

It is tempting and touching when the mantle of saviour descends, but it is, I suspect, risky for all concerned. The magazine that I am privileged to edit is called *English Today*, warts and all – not *Good English Today*, with the implication of better English tomorrow. It is equipped neither with easy solutions nor a big linguistic stick.



'I am but the cleaner. It is he, Mr. Gleason, to whom you should speak.'

At the same time, one cannot and would not want to abdicate entirely. It is possible to want – and to try to use – well-composed standard English at the same time as one looks dispassionately or humorously or critically or intently or casually or linguistically or sociologically or indeed puristically at all the goings-on in English today. There is plenty to do, and we hope people will write well while they are doing it. But contributors will make mistakes and eagle-eyed readers will spot those slips, or object to errors as they perceive them. This issue is replete with examples of this, as for instance where Bill Broughton rebukes Bill Beavis on p. 3 and Laurence Urdang has something to say about Robert Ilson and American English on p. 5. This is the kaleidoscope of the language and of people's reactions to other people's language and ideas. We can learn from it, all of us. Sybil Sarel puts it as follows, in an elegant blend of purism and optimistic tolerance:

'An English friend living in Calgary is appalled by the standard of English used by her son's teacher of English, the latest example she sent me being: "I don't got any problem". Her husband has spotted numerous spelling mistakes on classroom blackboards, exclusive of the British and American/Canadian differences mentioned in Robert Ilson's very interesting article in *ET4*. Parents' evenings at this Calgary school are consequently lively, to say the least!

'Considering that much of youngsters' reading, in Britain today, is of American

style and spelling, should our teachers – and those in America and Canada – not draw attention to the differences, and so avoid confusion over what is a spelling mistake and what isn't? I used to do this, and it made interesting talking points. I must confess that, depending on how many books I'd marked and how tired I was, I would sometimes comment acidly, in red, "Re-write, in ENGLISH!" May I be forgiven . . . My mind has since broadened by reading your excellent publication; alas, too late for me, but not for those still teaching, to enrich English lessons. Perhaps *ET* should be regulation issue to all schools using English? And in fairness to the Canadian teacher, it should be said that English teachers' mistakes are not unknown in Britain.'

Or anywhere else the language is used . . . It is a seductive thought, a mandatory copy of *ET* in every English-using school. We would love to see copies of the magazine in every institution in any way concerned with the language, but not by diktat. If a government, ministry or board chose to buy *ET* in bulk for all its schools, that would be fine – as long as the people in those schools had the fullest possible freedom to make up their own minds about what was in the magazine, or to abstain from looking at it at all.

At the end of the day or the article, however, the fear and fury are still there, and are hard to exorcize. They are part of the kaleidoscope too. Bertram Lippman quotes Bertrand Russell, from *Human Knowledge*, where he says; 'This brings me to a fundamental divergence between me and many philosophers . . . They are persuaded that common speech is good enough, not only for daily life, but also for philosophy. I, on the contrary, am persuaded that common speech is full of vagueness and inaccuracy, and that any attempt to be precise and accurate requires modification of common speech both as regards vocabulary and as regards syntax.'

Quoting Russell in a context of standard and non-standard language implies a strong desire for a specialized 'uncommon speech'. Such an element is certainly part of the evolution of Europe's standard languages, the scholarly strand that mingles with the courtly strand, with the translations of the Bible, with the invention of the printing press, with middle-class aspirations, with ideas of a 'classically pure' literary language, with canons of 'good taste', and with the over-riding needs of centralized governments. It is this uncommon speech that purists defend.

As Peter Strevens put it in his article in *ET2*, however, that special core is alive and well, and living in every English-using country in the world. It is a demanding medium to use, and can be used well or badly, but it is highly likely that more people are nowadays using it consistently well than have ever done in any generation in the past.