

Language, life, the universe

ET is a forum for the discussion of 'good', 'bad', 'correct', 'incorrect', 'standard', 'non-standard', 'substandard' and other kinds of usage. In this issue, DAVID CRYSTAL considers readers' views on verbal aggression.

Why are so many people insecure about their language? Why are they so linguistically aggressive? These were the questions I left you with at the end of *ET2*.

Several people sent me a list of pet hates, of course – and it's always interesting to see these, because one day they'll provide valuable evidence of changing attitudes to the language. If a change in, say, tenses, is taking place in English at the moment, you can be sure that a lot of sharp-eared people will spot it straight away; many will condemn it; and much publicity will be generated, in the form of letters to the press, or radio feedback shows. If these letters can be kept, they'll make a valuable archive one day. It's impossible to see the extent of change in a language when you're part of it. But fifty years later, the change will probably stand out, as clear as a bell.

I've kept mine – ever since I started puzzling over attitudes to English usage (to my recollection, something over 20 years ago, when I unexpectedly had a piece published in the *Liverpool Echo* in a debate headed, believe it or not, 'Let us preserve the tongue which Shakespeare spoke!'). My impression is that the letters do reflect some interesting changes over time – though I've never made a detailed analysis. When a new usage comes in, they tend to begin: 'I am appalled to hear a new usage creeping in . . .'. After it's been around a while, they start rather differently: 'Is it too late to stop the endless flow of . . .'. Next, they become more sweeping: 'It seems that the rule of . . . has been abandoned'. And finally they become despairing: 'Am I the only one who regrets the passing of . . .'. Then the letters on this point – or perhaps their authors – die away.

But my question was not: *what* don't you like about English usage, but why don't you like what you don't like. Where do your dislikes come from? This is a very difficult question, it seems to me, and I'm not surprised to find that few people tried to get to grips with it. When they did, their letters got very long – so you must stand by now for some lengthy quotations.

Many British people, to begin with, blame the Americans. For example, Claire Hawthorn of Norwich sends me a long list of points, and comments:

I am not by nature aggressive, but I do love the English language. I have a Geordie accent, so you will appreciate that

I am not a peppery Colonel who objects to dialects and regional accents. . . . I know we have a living language which must change and grow. I was impressed by the chart published in *ET1* showing me the numbers of people who speak English as a first language and where. I know, therefore, that we in England are a tiny minority. It seems to me, however, that the growth and development of the language is being orchestrated from the USA, largely through television programmes, and I fear that this is just another step in our becoming the 51st state.

Well, fear of America may be a good reason for a great deal of British concern about usage, but it can't stand up as a general explanation. Many Americans are just as worried about usage as the British are. If you read Larry Urdang's article in *ET3*, you'll know that.

No, we have to dig deeper, if we want to find out what's going on. And several readers weren't scared to do this. Brian Thompson of Halesowen drew a thoughtful analogy with a different field:

I think the emotions aroused by language are similar to those inspired by music. People gravitate towards the type of music which enriches their feelings in some way, and it is not perhaps that they feel insecure when other forms of music intrude, more a sense of discomfort or irritation at having to hear something which is not to their taste. Happily, music is usually enjoyed in situations where the listener has chosen to be present. But language penetrates all facets of life, and the individual cannot escape by simply turning off his radio, or choosing not to go to a Barry Manilow concert.

To be forced to listen to the imbalanced and lazy ramblings some people in public life release upon us is not unlike having to listen to jazz when, although you have nothing against it, you would simply prefer Mozart. There is no confusion over what the jazz is probably quite competently expressing, it is merely that you would prefer the same emotions portrayed by Mozart. I am suggesting that this preference operates on a very minute personal level, and the reason some people do not care about usage and others do is analogous to the incidence of tone-deafness at one extreme and perfect pitch at the other. Some people simply have an 'ear' for language, and that 'ear' can be as broad or as narrow in taste as its

musical counterpart. The important difference is that tolerance of disparate musical tastes has developed easily because the element of choice has provided many escape routes, but you cannot get away from the more discordant examples of sloppy English so readily. So people get offended, and try to persuade others that Chopin is better than Shakin' Stevens. Most are in fact easily persuaded; they just cannot be bothered to contribute the extra amount of thought.

It's a really interesting analogy – but I'm not totally convinced by it. I think there's more to language attitudes than differences of personal taste. And I think there are some basic differences between language and music which weaken any analogy. 'Rules' of grammar are not much like 'rules' of composition or musical analysis – though several people (notably, Leonard Bernstein) have tried to find parallels. There is a much clearer divide between what is acceptable in language and what is not. The sequence of sounds $s+p+r$ is acceptable in English at the beginning of a word (e.g. *spring*), but not at the end – and $s+r+p$ isn't acceptable at all. You don't get this kind of arbitrariness with sequences of notes. And what are the musical equivalents of such grammatical rules as 'Add an *-s* to form the third person singular of the present tense' (e.g. *run* → *runs*) – not forgetting the exceptions which a grammar must allow for as well (e.g. *has, is, does, says*)?

Several readers go in for a mixture of linguistic and social explanations – which is where my own feelings about the matter lie – at least, so far (see below). The linguistic explanation is at best a partial one, referring to such factors as the need to avoid ambiguity, maintain intelligibility, and so forth. Anna Dunlop of Edinburgh, for example, introduces this line of reasoning:

Such things as split infinitives are more matters of taste or conditioning (I am a Pavlovian dog on this myself), but they do not generally obscure meaning . . . whereas writing sentences that are not grammatically analysable into clauses can lead to ambiguity or even unequivocally wrong meaning.

But this still leaves open the question of why people get upset about split infinitives. By contrast, Sybil Sarel of Stromness adopts a social psychological argument:

If some of us are honest, we might admit that we (as you say, the older generation) *resent* that those who 'misuse' English are 'getting away with it', and despite their shortcomings, are financially much more prosperous, and are more adulated (pop stars, TV personalities, and the like) than we who, in our younger days, were *never* allowed to write so ungrammatically or so unattractively, and would have been ostracised, not adulated, if we'd done so.

'Ostracised' is a significant word – that is, by the social class to which you might aspire to belong. If you want to appear 'educated', in the eyes of society, then you had better follow the rules that educated people lay down, otherwise you will be considered 'uneducated'. These rules may be to do with what you say or write (such as the obligatory reference to obscure authors), or when you say or write it, but far more important is *how* you say or write it. Following the rules of spelling is a crucial first step – with punctuation lagging some way behind. Since the 18th century, these have been real rules, which we break at our peril. Following the usage rules of the grammatical handbooks – largely the invention of influential grammarians, but psychologically none the less real – is a crucial second step. Breaking those can be just as serious for your public image as an educated person.

My final extract comes from Janet Binkley of Newark (Delaware), who takes up the social argument, but proceeds to a deeper psychological explanation.

Why do people display such emotion when it comes to questions of usage? The answer can be given at two levels, I think. The most obvious level is, as you suggested in your column, that people have a vested interest in following the rules. The most obvious vested interest is that of social status. This can include professional status – I've worked for years with editors, and I notice each new generation of young editors taking their knowledge of the rules as a mark of superiority over the authors they deal with.

But I think we can look at a deeper level – we need to see where the vested interest came from. After all, our real social status is a very complex thing, involving a great deal more than making a few 'slips' in usage, and being impervious to our own slips. I suggest that the deeper cause is the attempt to reduce psychic dissonance – the theory of the American psychologist, L. Festinger, in the early 1960s. Basically, Dissonance Theory says that anyone who is forced to do something unpleasant will either rebel (and take the consequences) or will rearrange their value systems to make the unpleasant thing into one that is considered valuable. The more

unpleasant it was, the stronger will the individual later defend it as valuable.

One example of Dissonance Theory in action came in America at the time of the Vietnam War. The young men who sacrificed most in Vietnam later were those who proclaimed most loudly that that war was needed. Those who suffered but saw the war as pointless were subject to considerable psychic dissonance, and were prone to later psychic breakdown. Those who resolved their dissonance by deciding that the war was valuable did not break down.

I'm suggesting that people cling to grammar rules for the same reasons. Having to learn rules that appear pointless (since they are contrary to the language surrounding us daily), the child resolves the dissonance by deciding the rules must be extremely valuable, and invests emotional energy in sustaining them from now on.

This is very much to the point, and I for one intend to read up on it. In the meantime, there's plenty to be done at a more 'surface' level, noting the way language is changing, trying to work out why one area changes more than another, and analysing the effects these changes have. This column won't be short of material – though whether this author will be writing it depends on how long he can stave off his evidently impending psychic breakdown.

Angry Words

Passion is never far away when usage and abuse are discussed. People who no doubt abhor physical violence and abominate war do not hesitate to use the most vigorous terms when talking about actual or perceived abuse of English, whether by wrong-headed individuals, misguided nations or virtually every user of the language save themselves. Some samples:

Other contemporary abbreviations, just as ugly, come to mind. 'Agro' for 'Aggression', and 'Demo' for 'Demonstration'. The English language is amongst the most beautiful and expressive in the whole of literature. Why truncate it in this hideous fashion? If the excuse is that it saves time, does it really take all that much longer to carry both words to their correct termination verbally and on paper? Both abbreviations look ugly in print and they sound even more uncouth. Then take 'Ya' for 'Yes'. It may be allowable in those parts of the United States where, by long custom, it has become an accepted idiom. But not, please, in England. [Doris M Hodges, 'There was this man, y'see . . .', *The Lady*, June 77]

I have made myself hoarse telling English people my name is not 'Yte'. I still yell at the radio 'WHining,' 'WHales,' 'WHeel' and so on when my

ear has been misled by the misuse of 'wining', 'Wales' and 'weal.' But what about the other dropped Hs? This morning on radio Scotland a South-eastern Englishman discussing DIY [Do-it-Yourself] spoke of 'A deesive' and 'A dear' when he obviously meant 'adhesive' and 'adhere'. Quite abhorrent (as opposed to 'A borrant') (Derrick White, letter to *The Scotsman*, 23 July 83)

The man from BBC Wales still looked unhappy. 'You just can't win in Wales,' he muttered. 'The other day I was introducing a programme from Llandaff Cathedral in Cardiff. The announcer called it 'Landaf', but I pronounced it 'Hlandaff.' It must have sounded awful – as if I was being pedagogical and correcting him. Anyway, the correct Welsh pronunciation is 'Hlandaav.' But if you pronounce names the Welsh way, one side says, 'Listen to those buggers being pedantic,' and if you use an anglicised form, the other side says, 'Why can't you pronounce things properly?' (Hugo Davenport, 'How to tell that Beanes means Baynz', *The Observer*, 18 Sept 83)

Grandma's heartthrob is standing up for a return to good grammar. Former matinee idol Rudy Vallee is mad as hell and he isn't going to take it anymore: 'I

would like the president to appoint me to the FCC (Federal Communications Commission),' said Vallee. 'I want to be TV's czar of scripts and grammar! . . . I get so angry when I hear "yeah" instead of "yes" and "don't" instead of "doesn't",' Vallee told *Over Easy* host Hugh Downs. 'We spend millions of dollars every year to teach our kids to speak properly. Then they turn on the television and all the work is undone. I want to stop that.' It is unlikely Vallee will be appointed to head the FCC, and that's too bad. A crackdown on language abuses is long overdue. (Mike Boone, 'Television's poor grammar is polluting the English language', *Montreal Gazette*, 29 Nov 80)

Ignorant cooks, with no palate and no interest in food, can spoil the best of raw materials, so that what might in more skilled and more sensitive hands have become a dish to be recalled with pleasure, ends up as nothing better than a repulsive, tasteless mess. So it is with words. No language has better ingredients than English; no language has ever been more monstrously ill-treated and deformed by vandals and incompetents. The most beautiful instrument is always the most vulnerable to abuse and damage. (Kenneth Hudson, *The Dictionary of Diseased English*, Macmillan, 1977)