

ENGLISH AT WORK IN THE WORLD

Three Papers

I. FACT AND FICTION IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

by

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Reading, delivered to the Society on Monday 22nd February 1982,
with Professor Randolph Quirk, CBE, FBA, Vice-Chancellor,
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THE CHAIRMAN: We begin to-day a series of three weekly lectures on the theme of 'English at Work in the World', a general title that serves as a timely reminder of the extent to which English is a *working language* around the world. English is not of course the first (and almost certainly won't be the last) language aspiring to a major international rôle. Latin was the language not only of classical and silver age literature but the language of science, learning and diplomacy for a millennium, the language of the western Church for a millennium and a half. Arabic has also a millennium of international use, is still the international language of the Maghreb and Middle Eastern world as well as the language of Islam, the only religion vying with Christianity in its world spread. Spanish is a major international language and has been since the time of Columbus. French likewise – note the title of a book written two hundred years ago by Antoine Rivarol: *Discours sur l'Universalité de la langue française*.

But, increasingly over this past two hundred years, the star of English has been rising (and is still rising), so that at the present time one can say that no language in history has been made to work so hard, so widely, in so many parts of the world, for so many different peoples, for so wide a range of communicative purposes.

In a recent research project of the East-West Center, Hawaii, in which I participated, we measured English against Chinese, Arabic, German, French, Portuguese and Spanish in respect of five parameters readily susceptible of objective measurement. In the countries of the world, to what extent were these seven languages used as the medium of daily newspapers, higher education, domestic broadcasting, external broadcasting, official pronouncements (named as (an) official language in the national constitution)?

Of the seven languages compared, English beats the others in all five of these respects in the majority of countries.

So it is fitting that the present series of lectures should include one by Peter Strevens (8th March) on *world English*, one by John Haycraft on the world *teaching* of English (1st March), but beginning to-day with David Crystal on *misconceptions* about English. There is one misconception that we in England are particularly apt to entertain. English is a world language – not just the language of its etymon 'England'. Folk in Cornwall would object strongly if the last word in the assessment of their *China* clay had to come from an authority in Peking. Our doctors wouldn't be happy if Helmut Schmidt reserved the sole rights in the diagnosis of *German* measles. But the English still too

often seem to insist that only they have the right to pronounce on good English (however they actually pronounce it). In particular, we are inclined to forget that there are four times as many native speakers of English in the USA as there are in these islands. This is an issue we'll undoubtedly come back to when Peter Stevens addresses us, but it is typical of the deep-seated 'fictions' about English that David Crystal will be discussing, reflecting the deplorable narrowness of perspective in which tradition – writing-bound, literature-bound, class-bound, London-bound, even recently BBC-bound – has decoyed us into viewing this least narrow of languages.

I have known all three of our lecturers for many years but I am particularly pleased that it is for Professor Crystal's that I am specifically the chairman, because he has been in turn my student, my colleague, and my collaborator in more than one publication. He was a first-class student who got a first-class degree despite the double burden of a serious illness and my teaching: an energetic, ebullient and voracious scholar, as severe in his evaluation of his own work as

he is scrupulously generous in his evaluation of other people's. A man of great personal courage in many directions, he has spearheaded the popularization of linguistics in a profession where popularization earns little credit. He has been prolific in his writing (twenty books, astonishingly, in less than twenty years) and being prolific in the groves of academe can be the kiss of death.

He has been, perhaps above all, courageous in extending an applied linguistic hand of help to the speech therapy profession. But one thing is common to all his work: a concentration upon the highways and by-ways of the English language. Where other professors of linguistics are specialists in Chinese or Greek or Arabic, Crystal remains a specialist in English. Rather on the principle that what is good for General Motors is good for the USA, Crystal holds that what is good for English is good for linguistics.

But already I have flagrantly abused my chairmanship privilege and far too long interposed myself between him and you. It is now my pleasure to invite him to deliver his lecture.

The following lecture was then delivered

WAS there ever a language with such an impressive history of linguistic scholarship as English? Was there ever a language whose library catalogues contained such an extensive list of grammars, dictionaries, pronunciation manuals, guides to spelling and punctuation, and essays on usage and style? Faced with such magnificent products of intellect and industry as the 2,500 pages of *Webster's Dictionary*, or the multi-volumed *Oxford English Dictionary* (which, whether heaved down from a library shelf, or contemplated obliquely through a magnifying glass, never fails to inspire a sense of awe at the scale of the authors' achievement), the seven volumes of Otto Jespersen's *Modern English Grammar*, or the 1,100 pages of grammatical detail in Randolph Quirk (*et al.*)'s *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, one might be forgiven for thinking that the story of the English language had been told enough, that all the facts are known. And one would be quite wrong.

For two reasons. Firstly, there is a remarkable amount of uncharted linguistic territory – innumerable recesses in the structure of the language which have yet to be explored, vast tracts of language in use where the demand for pioneer linguists is as great now as it ever was. There is no risk of intellectual redundancy for those concerned with the professional surveying

of such territory (though, these days, they may have redundancy thrust upon them for other reasons!). To take some examples. Consider the lengthy list of regional varieties of English whose characteristics of sounds, grammar and vocabulary have never been tabulated – not only locally (where, for example, we encounter the emergence of new inner city dialects and unprecedented linguistic amalgams arising out of multi-cultural settings), but also internationally (where several major national dialects have received little or no systematic investigation – the 25 millions who speak English in the Philippine Islands, for example, where dialect studies have but recently begun). Consider the even longer list of social and professional varieties of English whose characteristics have yet to be fully specified – styles of the written and spoken language where the needs of communication in special settings have promoted widely different standards of use (as in journalism, radio, television, the law, the church, business management), and where patterns of use have changed, sometimes dramatically, in recent years. Several of these varieties have received a preliminary kind of study, but there is nothing exhaustive or definitive on most of them. And even the tiniest and most elementary of empirical observations about the use of language in these varieties can exercise a sur-

prise value. As an illustration, a researcher recently completed a small study of the vocabulary of football commentaries, as part of which he listed the verbs used in order of frequency. One might have expected the verb *kick* to be the highest in the statistical table. In fact, *kick* turned out to be one of the lowest frequency verbs. In football commentaries, it seems, balls are sent, shafted, blasted, rocketed, trickled, lifted, and even, in one case, penetrated into goals! They are not, very often, kicked.

These are some of the facts yet untold. But there is a second, less obvious reason for remaining dissatisfied with our present level of knowledge about the English language, and this is a story of new facts for old. Our knowledge of English is not a matter of simple addition, as my examples so far would suggest. It is not simply a matter of finding a fresh pool of human linguistic behaviour, and dredging it for facts, which then take their place in grammars and dictionaries. Far more often, English language scholarship is a re-appraisal of old facts, a re-evaluation of previous generations' views and findings about the language, a re-statement of claims about the language's structure and use, in the light of new thinking about the nature of language in general, and of new experimental and instrumental techniques for the study of linguistic detail. We are in the middle of one such re-appraisal now, as long-established facts of English come to be subjected to the scrutiny of scholars, who have at their disposal a wider range of hardware and software to aid them in their task than ever before. Better techniques of speech recording, acoustic analysis, computation, information retrieval; clearer ideas about the way a language's vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation are organized. The result has been to show that many of our long-established, so-called 'facts' of English turn out, upon analysis, to be fictions. This point has been appreciated for some time now in the context of academic linguistics and its main areas of application – such as foreign language teaching, or speech pathology and therapy. But it is not widely acknowledged outside of these fields.

Perhaps the most useful way to illustrate this shift in thinking is to take one topic, of a fundamental kind, from one of the main branches of the structure of English – the study of grammar – and show how there is a tradition of educated popular opinion which has provided us

with a set of 'facts' about the topic, which turn out upon investigation to be chimerical. This might, at first sight, seem to be a somewhat negative exercise in 'mythological linguistics'; but in fact it has all kinds of productive and constructive consequences, especially in applied language studies, where attempts to analyse and teach English have often failed due to their uncritical and total reliance on certain of these linguistic myths, and where the need for alternative models is pressing. These myths are pervasive: they can be encountered in the discussion of every variety of English. But it will be as well to illustrate them from the most widely-used of all English varieties – natural, spontaneous, informal conversation. This, at least, is the variety which we all have in common, the highest common factor of our linguistic experience.

A remarkable fact, in its own right, is that this universal variety of English has not, until very recently, received much study at all. Indeed, until recently, most English language writers would not have considered conversation to be worth studying. Alongside the stylistic grandeur of written English at its best, everyday speech, it was felt, reflected badly, lacking care and precision, displaying mistakes and incoherence. We had to use it, but that was nothing to be proud about; and we should all be striving to introduce into our conversations the level of care which we see around us in the works of our best authors. There is no exaggeration here. A few years ago, the *Liverpool Echo* ran a half-page article by a well-known head-teacher entitled 'Let us preserve the tongue which Shakespeare spoke', and such clarion-calls are commonplace. The legacy of this attitude, implicit in our school language textbooks and examinations until recently, has been a universal inferiority complex about spoken language, especially when tinged with regional character. Is 'inferiority complex' too strong? It is perhaps too weak a characterization, when one reads the half page of reports in an issue of the *Daily Express* a few years ago, devoted to people's sensitivity about their accents. The lead story read: 'Blacksmith X died a victim of dialect snobbery. He killed himself at 70 because he was ashamed of his Yorkshire accent when he went to live in the south, it was said at the inquest.' Probably each one of us has squirmed, at some stage in their youth, when, having asked of our school-teacher whether we *can* do something, we were told 'You can, but

you may not!'. This tradition, whereby spoken language is judged in terms of the standard of achievement of the written language, and found wanting, is the main reason why conversational English has been at once neglected and misunderstood.

But there is a second reason. Even if there had been a desire to establish conversational English as a serious object of study, there would have been problems over how to set about the task. The desire certainly exists, these days, but so do these problems. Above all, there is the problem of how to obtain genuine, well-recorded examples of the phenomenon, so that the facts can be accurately transcribed and analysed. So often, the requirement of genuineness, and that of good recording quality, conflict. It would not be difficult to approach a pair of conversationalists, and place a microphone in the vicinity of their mouths, but the result would hardly be the 'natural, spontaneous, informal speech' of everyday life, though the quality of the recording would doubtless be excellent. Conversely, one might consider hiding a microphone in a room where conversationalists were engaged in discourse: here, the data would be genuine enough, as the participants would be unaware they were being recorded, but there is of course a major objection – namely, the likelihood of obtaining a high-quality recording of the phonetic detail involved. (The procedure also gives rise to other problems, as ex-President Nixon, among others, must surely still recall!) With excellent equipment, understanding friends and not a little ingenuity, it is possible to get round these problems. A few years ago, a colleague and I were anxious to obtain data reflecting the language used in informal conversation between close friends and within the family – data which, as far as we knew, had not previously been gathered. After several abortive attempts, in which our samples proved unsatisfactory in terms of naturalness and quality, we hit on a technique which proved to be extremely successful. A room in one of our houses would be set up ready for a recording. In the middle of the room stood a tape recorder, with several microphones leading from it. The conversationalists (usually two or three at a time, all close friends or family) were invited round for an evening's drinks, but were told in advance that we also wanted to use the occasion as an opportunity to record some data on English accents.

When they arrived, they were led to their places in the sitting-room, and the microphones were placed with great ceremony before them, recording levels checked, and so on. They sat there nervously while all this was done, and then we proceeded with the task: each person had to count from 1 to 20, in their best accent. When this was done, they were thanked, the tape recorder was ostentatiously switched off (but the microphones left in their places), the drinks came out, and everyone relaxed. The real conversation of the evening started – and, of course, all the time was being recorded by a second tape recorder to which the microphones were really connected and which was turning away merrily in the kitchen! The conversation was excellent, as natural as one intuitively knows it to be. The recording-quality was excellent, as no one thereafter bothered about the microphones, which remained near the speakers. The only slight embarrassment came at the end of the evening when, to avoid subsequent charges of Watergate morality, we informed the participants of what had happened, allowed them to listen to the recordings if they wished, and agreed to erase any sections they felt unhappy about. The exercise cost us nothing by way of lost data – though it cost us dear by way of later rounds of double whiskies!

This, in the language of John Le Carré, was 'pure gold', 'grade-one material', 'nothing coach-built' – though, unlike George Smiley, we have yet to analyse this material as thoroughly as he analysed Ricki Tarr's. But it quickly showed up the limitations of traditional descriptions of English, and brought home to me, more than ever before, the nature of the linguistic fictions with which we operate. In the field of grammatical construction, we can see this contrast most clearly. The *sentence* is perhaps the most established and cherished fact of grammatical life, and its central rôle in linguistic theory, school grammar and personal intuition is undeniable. We write in sentences, and we are supposed to speak in sentences – and while occasionally we may lose our way in our expression, and leave an utterance unfinished, for the most part people would be happy to accept the proposition that educated speakers speak in sentences most of the time. For such a well-recognized concept, then, one might expect that problems of definition and identification would be minimal? Far from it. It is not quite such a problem in the written

language, where guidelines about units which begin with a capital letter and end with such marks as a full-stop, question-mark or exclamation mark, handle the majority of cases (though by no means all, as any glance at a poster, poem or legal proclamation would show). But the problem is at the centre of our understanding of the organization of speech – and especially conversational speech. Here, there are no capital letters, and no full-stops. How then do we proceed? A widespread view is that sentences are signalled in speech by a combination of *prosodic* features – features such as intonation, rhythm and (especially) pause. All that one has to do, on this view, to signal the fact that a sentence has come to an end is to make sure that the pitch of the voice falls to a low level and that a substantial pause follows before the next piece of utterance begins. Unfortunately, such guidance handles only a minority of cases. In connected speech, we often allow the pitch of the voice to fall, and introduce a pause (which in the present example I will mark with dots) only to find that after the pause the same utterance continues . . . and may continue to continue, as the speaker makes progress in what he wanted to say. In informal conversation, it is not abnormal for such sequences to continue for a matter of a minute or more, as the following example illustrates. It is part of a story told by one of the participants in one of our tape evenings (and may I avoid the wrath of female members of the Society by assuring them that our lady conversationalists that evening were quick to redress the smear which the story imputed to them):*

A |yes I REMEMBER| there was a |TERRIBLE| |STORY| – |HORRIFYING| story| that was |told by a COLLEAGUE OF MINE| when |I used to TEACH| |YEARS AGO| – |who erm · |this 'chap 'lived in erm – a semi deta · de'tached HOUSE| and |next DOOR| – there was · a |MAN| who'd |just 'bought a 'new CAR| – and |he was TELLING me| that |one MORNING| he was |looking 'through the WINDOW| – and |this · MAN| al|lowed his WIFE to drive the 'car| |very UNWISELY| and |she was 'having a 'first GO in it| – (|M|) · and – |he BACKED it| |OUT OF the GARAGE| – |so that it was standing 'on the DRIVEWAY| · and he'd |closed the 'garage DOORS| – (|YEAH|) · and – |she 'came out of the HOUSE| – to · |take this CAR out| and |go SHOPPING for the 'first 'time| – |so she |CAME out| |very GINGERLY| – and |opened the DOOR| · and |sat in the CAR| – and – er · be|gan to BACK| · |very very GENTLY| – |taking · GREAT CARE you 'see| that she |didn't do ANYTHING to this · to this

'new 'car| – and – – |as she BACKED| – there was an |un|pleasant · CRUNCHING 'sound| (*laughs*) and she |SLAPPED ON the BRAKES| and |looked a'round FRANTICALLY| – and |REALIZED| that she |hadn't 'opened the · GATES| · that · |let on to the 'main ROAD you 'see| (|OH|) · and she'd |just BACKED into 'these| |very GENTLY| and (|M|) sort of |touched the BUMPER| and |bent the GATES 'slightly| (|M|) – and |this put her 'into a 'bit of a FLAP| · (|M|) so – be|fore she could do 'anything ABOUT THIS| she |had to 'pull FORWARD| (|M|) · in |order to er to OPEN the GATES| – |so she – took the 'car out of REVERSE| · |put it 'into · 'first GEAR| (|YEAH|) and |pulled 'forward very GENTLY| (|YEAH|) – but – UN|FORTUNATELY| · she · |mis|judged the distance to the garage DOORS| · so that |as she 'pulled FORWARD| · she |RAN into the 'garage DOORS| · |THUMP| (*laughs*) and |smashed 'in the front BUMPER of the CAR| · and (|OH|) |bent the 'garage DOORS| (|YEAH|) – so she |STOPPED in time · you |SEE| – and by |THIS STAGE| she was |getting 'into a bit of a FLUTTER| · (*laughs*) so · she got |out of the CAR| (*laughs*) |shaking 'like a LEAF| – |went · BEHIND the CAR| and |opened the 'gates · that let on to the 'main ROAD| (YEAH) and |then she · was determined 'not to be DEFEATED| 'by this 'state of AFFAIRS| which was |pretty TERRIFYING| |GOT into the CAR| – and – – |started the ENGINE| · |looked 'through the 'back WINDOW| |very 'very CAREFULLY| · and · backed OUT| with the |utmost DELIBERATION| · |into the 'main ROAD| · and |managed it absolutely PERFECTLY| – but the |only 'trouble WAS| · that · she'd |left the DRIVING 'side 'door| |OPEN| · and had for|gotten to CLOSE it| · so that |as she 'backed OUT| |through the GATES| |into the 'main ROAD| she |tore 'off the DOOR| (*laughs*) – AP|PARENTLY| at |WHICH STAGE| she |just COLLAPSED| and |went into a state of HYSTERIA|

B *laughs* |OH 'God| · I |thought you were going to 'say she was going to hit the MILKMAN or something|

A |no NO|

B |HM| – t |oh BLIMEY|

Now this piece of monologue was listened to avidly by others present, and reacted to appropriately; there was a great deal of laughter and counter-comment. As a piece of language, it was evidently a success to those present (who are really the only ones qualified to judge). But now, look at it from an analytical point of view: where shall the sentence boundaries be drawn? At one

* In the transcription, | marks the boundary of an intonation unit, | the first prominent syllable in an intonation unit, ' indicates a stressed syllable within an intonation unit, · a brief pause, – , – – pauses of increasing length, () enclose speech produced by B while A was talking.

extreme, it might be argued that the whole thing is one enormous sentence, the phrases and clauses being joined by a wide range of connecting words (or *conjunctions*)—20 *and*, 6 *that*, 4 *so*, 3 *so that*, 3 *you see*, 2 *but*, and one each for *who*, *as*, *to* and *which*. But the idea of sentences several pages of transcript long does not appeal to most people. Alternatively, one might argue that each bit linked by *and* (etc.) is itself a sentence; but this solution does not work well (it would mean, for example, saying that such stretches as *and opened the door, and sat in the car* were sentences). And it is difficult to see how any intermediate-position solution can be imposed on this utterance with consistency. On the other hand, it is plain to see how the language 'works'—the balanced use of these connecting words and phrases, counter-pointed by a clever use of intonation, rhythm and pause. These are the features that give the speech its dynamism and coherence, and they are worthy of study in their own right. The concept of *sentence* does not seem so useful, with such material. With such material, it is not obviously a 'fact' that 'we speak in sentences'.

The next research step, of course, would be to establish what kinds of linguistic unit best explain the way in which such speakers work, and this is one of the goals of that branch of linguistic science known as *psycholinguistics*. The 'fact' of the matter may be that we speak in clauses, or in clause pairs, or in rhythm units, and these possibilities can be investigated experimentally. For the English language scholar, though, there is a great deal of purely linguistic interest in what has been said—more fictions, which a more detailed analysis of this material can bring to light. As an illustration, let us take such phrases as *you see*, which were used in the extract, along with the many other interpolations used in this way in conversation—*you know*, *I mean*, *mind you*, *as a matter of fact*, *to be honest*, etc. The general view is that these phrases (especially those like *you know*) are undesirable features of language, irritating non-fluencies which attempt to cover over unclear thinking and lack of confidence. There are no rules governing their use; they are like mannerisms, uncontrolled and, in some, uncontrollable. Such is the fiction. In fact, they turn out to be subtle, rule-governed features of language, which have an important job to do in fostering the fluency of informal conversation. Of course, they can be over-used

(as can any feature of language), and over-use promotes irritability. They are especially prone to criticism when they are over-used in formal linguistic contexts, where listeners expect high standards of construction and fluency. One cannot justify a radio interviewee's response to a straight question, which might proceed: 'Well—you know—the thing is, you see—I feel—or rather, you know . . .'. But when we are talking about informal conversation, we are not talking about such careful contexts of language use. In informal conversational settings, the same standards of precision and planning do not apply. When people are at their linguistic ease, when no-one is listening critically to how things are being put, when there is no alien audience, and no producer standing over their speech with a stop-watch, different rules govern their behaviour. There is no difference here between language and other forms of behaviour: the clothes we wear at home are unlikely to be those we wear in public; and it is the same with our linguistic habits. Are we speaking comfortably? Then how is it done?

The answer is bound up with the fluent use of these apparently non-fluent features. Forms like *you know* do several jobs: they give the speaker a breathing space, while he works out what to say next, or considers whether what he *has* said is clear enough; they give the listener a breathing space too, as he processes the information he has just received, and decides whether to acknowledge it. Some of these jobs can be illustrated by taking a sentence, and seeing what happens when *you know* is inserted into it. The first thing to notice is the *you know* cannot be inserted randomly: it is far more likely to appear in certain positions in speech than in others. You will not find it between the last two words of this sentence, for example: *I'm flying to New York*. Nor will you find it between the second and third words in the following sentence (or, for that matter, between the third and fourth): *Between you and me, John is an idiot*. When it is used, the phrase can radically alter the meaning of what is said: *John and his friend arrived late* vs. *John and his, you know, friend arrived late*. Or again: *I've just been speaking to Mrs. Jones—you know!* What has to be appreciated is the way the meaning of this phrase alters as it moves from one part of a sentence to another; its intonation and rhythm change too, which is a further factor in getting to grips with the complexity of these

utterances. At the beginning of a sentence, it usually has a rapid rhythm and a high rising pitch, and adds a softening stylistic force to the utterance: compare *It's time we went home*, which could sound quite abrupt, and *You know, it's time we went home*, which would not. In the middle of the sentence, the phrase has a low rising intonation, and expresses several implications – often, acting as a marker of re-thinking on the part of the speaker. *I've just been down to the shop – you know, the shop on the corner*: here, the phrase acts as a sign of semantic clarification, a signal to the listener that it is what follows, not what precedes, which is the crucial bit of meaning. Then at the end of the sentence, there is the meaning signalled by the low rising tone already illustrated in the *Mrs. Jones* example – a marker of shared or intimate meaning – and a further meaning signalled by the use of the phrase with a high rising tone, where it acts as a kind of comprehension check. *He's just bought one of those new panda-bikes, you know?* And lastly, as a further illustration of the existence of rules governing the use of this phrase, let it be noted that all the examples so far have involved the use of statement constructions. One is far less likely to hear *you know* used to introduce a question, command or exclamation, for example. Are these possible: *You know, is it six o'clock?*, *You know, shut the door!*, or (having banged one's thumb with a hammer), *You know, damn!*

In all of this discussion, I am not, of course, being prescriptive: I am not recommending that people *should* or *should not* use these forms. I am simply observing what people do with their language, when they are at leisure, and attempting to describe what I see. In so far as I am making a case, in this talk, it is to point out the frequency and importance of this kind of language: it is an English which most of us use most of the time, which surrounds our children in their earliest language-learning years, and which reasserts its pre-eminence when people become redundant or retire. It is a dynamic, flexible and varied English, capable of incorporating the extremes of emotion, and an enormous range of humorous and dramatic effect. It is an insult to us all to condemn it as loose, unshaped, and incoherent, as many popular commentators on grammar have done. It is a massive fiction to write a book called *An English Grammar* which makes no reference to such language at all. And the fiction is universal. A Sunday paper once carried an

advertisement for English lessons which read: 'English course of 30 lessons, to teach *speaking* – so there's not much grammar'. I am not sure how one weighs grammatical structure, but there is little difference in quantity between the grammar of writing and that of speech. There are, of course, many differences of a qualitative kind, as my examples should have shown.

In adopting a descriptive position over the changing English language, in attempting to present all the variables fairly, without taking sides on whether change is for the good or the bad, whether standards are deteriorating since 'I' went to school, whether the Americans, or perhaps the BBC is to blame, one is taking a considerable risk. When one takes no sides, one offends everybody equally. People have a vested interest in their linguistic past, and a deep-rooted set of likes and dislikes about language. There are linguistic radicals and linguistic conservatives. (I even came across the initials SDP in a linguistics book once, but they stood for 'semantic differential principle!') Middle-of-the-road positions, accordingly, fail to be appreciated. The point was brought home to me again recently, in relation to a BBC talk on listeners' attitudes to language. I had been given the opportunity of examining the letters written to the BBC about language, and the programme was about the findings – which sounds, words and constructions attracted the most venom. My aim was, once again, descriptive and explanatory. The BBC correspondence was very divided: some writers would support the use of one construction, and others would reject it (constructions like *between you and I* or the split infinitive). The irony was that *both* sets of critics viewed the BBC's use of their hated construction as a major cause of the language's deterioration in recent years, and both blamed the BBC for failing to take a stand. In my talk, I tried to make the point that most of the disputed usages had been around a lot longer than the BBC, and that the BBC's use of speakers from all walks of life, in all kinds of contexts (news, entertainment, current affairs, education . . .), would naturally lead to all kinds of usage being heard over the air. I took the line that the BBC reflects, as much as shapes usage, and that disentangling these two possible directions of influence is not easy, nor has it ever been systematically attempted. I concluded with some general remarks about the different levels of seriousness pre-

sented by the range of usage problems cited: some letters referred to problems which raised serious questions of ambiguity, intelligibility or accuracy of meaning; whereas others spent just as much space on problems which did not seem to interfere with communication at all, though they nonetheless offended the writer's sensibility.

This talk stays in my memory for several reasons. One, interestingly, was the difficulty we encountered in reading aloud listeners' letters acceptably. Should a listener from Scotland, commenting on pronunciation, have his letter read in a Scots accent? If so, how broad an accent? But does it follow that the listener is Scots, just because he has an address in Perth? On the other hand, if the letter is read with a southern British accent, will the listener be satisfied? Some listeners do actually give guidance on the point, but where they do not, one has to choose a policy and use it consistently – which is what we did, but not without upsetting one listener, who subsequently complained that in our choice of regional accents we were poking fun at the writers, and not without upsetting another listener, who subsequently complained that in our failure to choose really genuine regional accents we were poking fun at the writers . . . ! But more importantly, the talk stays in my mind for the barrage of correspondence I subsequently received, which almost entirely focused on my descriptive stance. Most of my correspondents thought I should have spoken out as a man, and condemned the BBC; slightly less thought I should have spoken out like a man, and condemned the usage, if not the BBC; a few thought I should have spoken out like a man, and praised the BBC; and a tiny group said they actually liked the stance I had taken. One charmingly-written letter expressed gratitude for my view, saying that it had relieved the writer of a guilt feeling about her use of English which she had had since leaving school; she then went on to liken the programme to a confessional, with me dispensing absolution!

It is difficult, then, to take up a descriptive stance with reference to English – a stance in which one's aim is to establish the facts of usage, to explain why things are as they are, but not to

take sides. Such a position is often misunderstood, with critics asserting that its proponents have no standards, that 'anything goes' (witness the *Listener* correspondence following my talk). The reality of the situation is the reverse: I have my linguistic standards as much as anyone. I too get upset when I encounter ambiguity, incoherence and imprecision in contexts where clarity is crucial; but I equally get upset when I encounter unnecessary precision in contexts where a certain amount of looseness is desirable (if I pass an acquaintance in the street and say 'How are you!', I do not expect or want a catalogue of data concerning his pulse-rate, temperature and body-fluids). If I am engaged in an applied task, such as language teaching or speech therapy, again I have to use standards – I have to teach a particular form of the language as 'normal', for that user; but I am not such a fool as to think that the form I teach a pupil, or a patient, is the only form he is going to encounter as he matures in his awareness of English, and I will want to apprise him of the existence of other forms in the language around him. As mature language users, we all have to recognize the heterogeneity of the linguistic life around us. Taking other people's language seriously is an important step in the process of taking *them* seriously. But this cannot be done if one lives in a world of linguistic fiction, believing that informal conversation has no rules, or that there is something intrinsically sloppy about a regional accent, or that West Indian immigrants are hampered by their lack of grammar. This, in short, is the main reason why it is important to distinguish clearly between linguistic facts and fictions. Not simply because the process of investigating the English language is fascinating as an academic enterprise, but because it helps to promote the cause of linguistic tolerance. A few years ago, it was the myths of Christian theology which were undergoing scrutiny, and 'demythologization' has become part of theological vocabulary since that time. The English language too needs to be demythologized, in the popular mind, and new lamps brought in to supplement, and occasionally to replace the old. We will all see the better for it.