

David Crystal: How Dare You Talk to Me Like That!

## Language on the air— has it degenerated?

The Director General, BBC, Broadcasting House, London.

Dear Sir, I shall be obliged if you will instruct whoever is in charge to stop the announcer whose name, I think, is Peter Barker, from saying: 'Good morning if I haven't already greeted you'. I find this habit presumptuous and very irritating and probably I'm not the only listener who objects to being forcibly ingratiated upon.

I was shocked to hear during the 8 am broadcast Brian Redhead refer to one of the major roads on which there was traffic congestion as being 'bumped up'. I ask you!

Please get rid of that dreadful woman who announces daytime programmes. Her awful voice and pronunciations . . . is she the only applicant for the job?

Can nothing be done about the deterioration in the quality of English broadcast by the Corporation? The latest vandalism occurred in tonight's *Kaleidoscope*: 'It has to be said, even by I'. Gaffes like this make us wince. Does no one ever check a script?

I implore you, would you please save my sanity by requesting some of your commentators and announcers to please practise saying 'the' in the proper manner and not 'thee' all the time.

During the announcement she had cause to use the word 'reconciliation', but to the amazement and disgust of my wife and myself she pronounced it 'reconciliation'. Pronunciation of everyday words should be beyond reproach.

Those were extracts from a few of the many letters received by the BBC over the last few months, complaining about English usage on the air. The BBC gets hundreds of letters a year about English usage—a few complimentary, the vast majority critical—and the theme that runs through nearly all of them is that the English language is going down the drain these days, and that the BBC is largely to blame, or at the very least should help to put things right. Well, is that true? What actually are the things that worry people most about English usage on the air. And should they or shouldn't they be worrying so much and making a fuss about them?

When this programme was first suggested I thought: these people who write in to the BBC to complain about the use of language—they may not be representative of the listening or viewing public, but the things they talk about must give us a pretty good idea of what counts as bad news, in terms of the English language, these days. So I spent some time going through all the letters about language received over the past six months or so—over 100 in all. The most promising way of

organising their diverse linguistic complaints seemed to me to be in the form of a sort of 'Top Twenty'.

First of all, our language can be divided into three main 'levels': the words we use or have at our disposal—*vocabulary*; the way we say them—*pronunciation*; and the way we put them together in phrases and sentences—*grammar*. A first count of the number of times these three levels were mentioned in the letters yielded a fairly predictable result. Vocabulary attracted the main interest, with pronunciation second and grammar third. Actually, I don't think this is very significant. After all, there are nearly a million words to complain about in English, whereas the total number of distinctive sounds can't be more than a few hundred—and the number of grammatical permutations possible in English isn't all that much more. A rather more useful measure is to look at the frequency with which particular types of word, pronunciation or grammatical construction attract comment, and it is these which made up my Top Twenty for the first half of 1981. So here it is:

One: The Number One spot is held by a grammatical construction—whether to use *I* or *me* in such phrases as *you and I* or *you and me*.

Two: a pronunciation problem—where to put the stress on certain words. Some people get very hot under the collar about the way people pronounce *controversy* and *research*.

Three: another grammatical one—whether words like *none* and *a number* should take a singular or a plural verb. (should it be: *none of them is coming* or *none of them are coming*?)

Four: a vocabulary problem—some people hate words and phrases of American origin.

Five: another pronunciation complaint—this time concerning foreign words. It seems to worry some people if words of foreign origin are pronounced differently—even if only slightly differently—from the original (for instance, the word *restaurant*). And a particular worry is often being expressed over proper names (How should the capital of Afghanistan, *Kabul*, be pronounced?)

Six: another grammatical problem—the BBC is frequently told not to split infinitives; in other words, not to say *to boldly go* but *to go boldly*.

Seven: more grammar. Some people get furious if they hear anyone say that something is *different* to something else or *different than*, and insist it should be *different from*.

Eight: yet more grammar: should it be

*I wish I was* or *I wish I were*?

Nine: pronunciation again—whether regionally distinctive pronunciations are acceptable. (The pronunciation of the word *poor* was, for some reason, mentioned several times.)

Ten: a vocabulary question—some people are infuriated by the use of clichés, such as *when all's said and done* or *by and large* or *at the end of the day*.

Eleven: a pronunciation problem—some broadcasters are accused of not making the sounds of certain words conform to the spelling, as when the letter *c* is left out of *antarctic* or *February* is pronounced as *Feb'ry*.

Twelve: vocabulary this time—people wish a clear distinction to be made between meanings of readily confusable words, such as *uninterested* and *disinterested*, *rich* and *affluent*.

Thirteen: a grammatical complaint—whether to end a sentence with a preposition . . . or not to.

Fourteen: another grammatical one—whether to say *who* or *whom* in sentences such as *Who were you talking to?* or *Whom were you talking to?*

Fifteen: vocabulary—how colloquial should speech be allowed to be—can *quid* be permitted for *pound* on the BBC?

Sixteen: vocabulary—are euphemisms tolerable? Should we refer to unions as *going on strike*, *taking industrial action*, or *performing industrial sabotage*?

Seventeen: a pronunciation problem—whether we should put in an *r* in certain words when followed by a vowel: is it *drawing* or *drawring*? *awe-inspiring* or *awe-rinspiring*?

Eighteen: a grammatical one—when to use *shall* and when to use *will*.

Nineteen: pronunciation—should words be allowed to run into one another? Is it *last year* or *las'year*?

Twenty: a grammatical problem—leaving out important bits of sentences. Some people argue that a phrase like *Over to John Smith* in a news bulletin is not a sentence and that we should say *I'm now passing you over to John Smith*.

I am just as much concerned over falling standards as anyone. I want to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding as much as possible, and I think the BBC has got a major responsibility towards language in use. But, with only a couple of exceptions, I do not think that the issues raised in my Top Twenty help in achieving these aims. The *real* linguistic problems of our day are not going to be solved by the fury unleashed against split infinitives or prepositional placing. On the contrary, there is a danger that the real problems will be missed, because of the inordinate focus of attention on these old shibboleths of linguistic usage. The question of what counts as a *real* linguistic problem is an interesting one, and I shall present a view about this in a moment. But, first, let me say something about an assumption that is common to many letters—that standards are deteriorating *now*, and that the evidence is my Top Twenty, which is assumed to contain a set of *new* or *recent* phenomena. Here's a letter from a listener in Pembrokeshire:

In recent years I am saddened by so much bad grammar, especially on television. The climax came last evening, just as I was about to sit down to listen to the 5.40 BBC news. *Children's Hour* was just finishing and it appears that there was a child of five years old on the programme. The final words of the presenter were 'I wish I was five years old'. Is it any wonder that children's grammar is so deplorable today! It leaves one aghast!

That was a point about grammar, but the same attitude can be found with reference to pronunciation and vocabulary. First, pronunciation:

It appears that only common, badly spoken people are now employed by the BBC.

That is a general comment from a man in Shropshire. But what kind of things do people have in mind? This letter comes from Plymouth:

Twice in the comments about food at 12.30 pm today on Radio 4 there was a reference to 'restauranters'. How can anyone concerned with food make such a mistake? I have even heard Frank Muir say it!

Next, a lady in Sussex:

What is this strange new species called businessm'n? What has happened to businessmAn and businessmEn?

And a complaint about vocabulary—from a man in Sevenoaks:

Away back in 1953 in a broadcast interview with Sir Edmund Hillary on his return from his ascent of Mount Everest, he used the completely ungrammatical phrase *never ever*, and its use has been growing ever since. It means absolutely nothing, being a self-denial by each word of the other.

Well, is it really a question of 'in recent years', 'a new species', 'since 1953', 'nowadays', and so on? It is not. In all these cases—in fact in the whole Top Twenty—the problem has been around for much longer than people think. Guess what this is:

Look, to take one familiar example, at the process of deterioration which our Queen's English has undergone at the hands of the Americans. Look at those phrases which so amuse us in their speech and books; at their reckless exaggeration, and contempt for congruity . . .

That is no letter to the BBC (though it might have been). It is a quotation from a book called *The Queen's English*, by Henry Alford, Dean of Canterbury, written in the early 1860s—a book, incidentally, which sold 10,000 copies in five years. Alford systematically commented on a wide range of linguistic problems of his day—matters of pronunciation, spelling, grammar, usage, and so on—and almost every point raised by my Top Twenty is anticipated somewhere in his pages. For example, he comments on the change in pronunciation which takes place when compound words are formed (as in the *businessman* example). He spends some time discussing the *ever-never* distinction (long before Sir Edmund Hillary was even born). He spends

several pages on 'you and I'. He evidently received a letter, while he was writing his book. He says:

A correspondent asks me to notice a usage now becoming prevalent among persons who ought to know better; viz., that of 'you and I' after prepositions governing the accusative.

Now becoming prevalent—in 1863.

But we don't have to stop even with Henry Alford to trace the history of our Top Twenty. Most of the grammatical examples can be found in the 18th-century grammars, and in discussions of language propriety that date back to the early 17th century. The same with pronunciation. Take, for example, that view just now that the vowel in *businessman*, and such other words, should be given its full value. Other words cited in the BBC correspondence include *liberals* (*liberals* or *lib'rals*), *medicine* (*medicine* or *med'cine*).

The correspondence shows that, whichever pronunciation is disfavoured by the writer, the BBC is to blame for it. The 'businessman' writer wanted the vowels kept strong, and blames the BBC for not doing so. This writer, from Harlow, wants the vowels kept weak, and blames the BBC for not doing so:

The BBC has lately developed a distressing habit of giving words extra syllables—particularly the letters *e* and *i* in the middle of words—which are not normally pronounced as syllables. The longest standing case is probably *vegetable* which is—discordantly to me—sometimes given four syllables instead of being pronounced, as is usual, *vegetable*, the *e* being silent.

There it is again: 'The BBC has lately developed . . .' But in fact the *med'cine-medicine* dispute, to give just one example, was being discussed by Henry Alford over 100 years ago; and the value to attach to unstressed syllables in the middle of words like this has been an issue to worry poets since the time of Chaucer at least. It is an issue of which any producer of a Shakespearean play is well aware.

When we consider examples of this kind, and trace their history, it is plain that—while the BBC might be a convenient whipping-boy for people's feelings about language—the issue goes far deeper. BBC English is not an entity that can be defined independently of society at large; it is a reflection of the speech of society. Whatever might have been thought about the linguistic role of the BBC in its early days, the fact of the matter is that its influence in moulding usage is probably minimal, if it exists at all. The trouble is, there is no evidence, either way. Would it be the case that a pattern of usage adopted by the BBC would be picked up and used by society at large in the long term—I stress, *long term*, as opposed to the occasional catchphrase or vogue word which might stem from it? I do not know. I don't know of any survey, or, indeed, whether it would be possible to devise a survey whose results would be very definite. My feeling is that the BBC's influence is much overestimated—especially by the correspondents who have motivated my Top Twenty. The effect on

children is often cited. Take this listener from St Asaph, referring to the pronunciation of *drawing* as *drore-ing*:

Children are rather inclined to pick up bad speech habits from such travesties of pronunciation by people on BBC programmes, whom they tend to regard as infallible.

But do they? One listener cites *no way*, as a case in point. But I have heard adults say *no way* more than children. True, the adults may have picked up the phrase from television series reflecting American police speech style—but all they are doing is favouring one speech pattern out of the thousands they hear on the same medium every day. No one can explain why *no way* caught on, or whether it will stay in general use. That is the trouble. It is never possible to predict—in matters of language—change. Who knows what next week's programmes will stimulate? And who would dare say: 'We must not have a programme on such-and-such a topic, in case its language proves attractive to the English speech community'?

In many ways, actually, it is the word 'worry' which is the point of this talk. The whole programme is about people's worries. *My worry* is not that there is nothing in language to worry about—there is plenty to worry about! It is rather that of all the things that people could have picked on to worry about, so many people have picked on the things that are *least* likely to help them resolve their fears. For instance, many people see language as a reflection of society, and this is quite right. They see language change, as society changes. But they then proceed to blame language for changing, when all that language is doing is keeping pace with society. If you disapprove of a certain direction in social change, then, naturally, the language which accompanies it will not be palatable, and will in time come to be a symbol of your dissatisfaction. But attacking the language will not change anything. This is why, for example, so much of the fury with Americanisms in the BBC correspondence is beside the point. Feelings about alleged Americanisms can run very deep—this letter comes from a man in Crewe:

I never cease to be amazed by the bastardisation of the English language—not at all what Lord Reith must have had in mind. Does the BBC have no guidelines for proper speech or the Queen's English? Do we *have* to suffer such Americanisms in Britain?

As a matter of fact, the label 'Americanism' is used less often as a correct description of some word or phrase which comes from the USA and more often as a term of abuse. That listener in Crewe, referring to the northern British 'hard a' of *fast*, *last*, and so on, says:

Do we have to suffer such Americanisms in Britain?

Another listener, from Craven Arms, says:

. . . I get so sick of American jargon, such as *chuck*, *shove*, *quid* and now *Martin*, etc., leaving out all the t's.

Even Cockney forms are included under the heading of Americanisms, it seems! And even the upper classes are not excluded. After this, the point of a London listener is refreshing:|

While one accepts that language is in a process of constant change and development, why should this necessarily mean replacing quite adequate and precise usage with anything that the Americans choose to employ? Use Americanisms, by all means, for new concepts emanating from that country and for which no words already exist. However, what point is there in changing for change's sake, particularly when this usually results in a degradation of style?

I suppose the short answer is to agree, that change for change's sake is perhaps pointless, but we human beings are creative and innovative—it's in our nature—and we often use language to express it. The problem, though, is to decide whether a change *has been* for change's sake—or whether some nuance of meaning, or index of our social status, has not accompanied it. People don't usually change for change's sake, and if an American usage does catch on, there is usually a reason. As I said, it may be a social reason which some people may disapprove of—but that is a different matter, and one which must be evaluated in social, not in linguistic terms.

So where does all that get us? After reading all these letters, I have come to three conclusions. My first is, there has

been a confusion of personal taste and public standards. Remember that listener at the start of the programme?

I shall be obliged if you will instruct whoever is in charge to stop the announcer whose name, I think, is Peter Barker from saying 'Good morning if I haven't already greeted you'.

Well, we are all entitled to our own opinions, about language as much as anything else. We all have our likes and dislikes. I do too. There are some things in that Top Twenty which I like, and some I hate. But I have no right to insist that the BBC, or anyone else, should share my linguistic predilections, any more than my taste in music or cinema. By all means let us write to the BBC, or to anyone else, informing them of these likes and dislikes—but let us not dress up our attitudes to language in a façade of reasoning about standards, responsibility, trends and suchlike.

My second conclusion is that, by wasting time on the personal and the trivial, we do run a severe risk of having our attention distracted from what the *real* problems of language use are. Many listeners refer to such notions as ambiguity, lack of clarity, the use of cliché to avoid a straight answer, the need to keep distinct words whose meanings are readily confused, and so on. There are some of these genuine problems in my Top Twenty. Remember Number Twelve?—keeping apart the meanings of *uninterested* and *disinterested*, and so on?

Whether to use *billion* in its British or American sense? These matters can cause real confusion of meaning, and they must be guarded against. More subtly, the slant given to words can generate attitudes which might relate to real issues in society—as when people equivocate over the use of the term *strike*, as opposed to *industrial action*, whether people in Northern Ireland are *killed* or *murdered*, or whether one should say *chairman* or *chairperson*. But these issues attract the fewest letters in my count.

My third and final conclusion is (to steal a medical metaphor), there has been a confusion of symptoms and cause. If you believe that society is changing for the worse, don't blame language for it—and, more to the point, don't distract yourself, and others, from the real issues. I was thinking about this talk in the week that the Pope was shot. I remember looking at letters which said such things as:

Listening to the eight o'clock news on the wireless this morning, I was appalled to hear that two infinitives had been split within three minutes of each other.

If one can be 'appalled' about split infinitives, what kind of language is there left, to refer to one's feelings when great men get shot?

Radio 4

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Language on the air

SIR: Discussing the question of the use of language on BBC programmes, Professor David Crystal says (THE LISTENER, 9 July), 'We are all entitled to our own opinions . . . I have no right to insist that the BBC, or anyone else, should share my linguistic predilections, any more than my taste in music or cinema . . . let us not dress up our attitudes to language in a façade of reasoning about standards . . .'

This is a ridiculous view, expressing an absurdly relativist position. Of course, no one has the right to insist that others, or even a public institution, should take over his standards. But there are standards, and must be, because language use is bound up with meaning, and so with problems of choice and action—with politics, social life, culture, values and consciousness. Those who make a special study of the use of language bear a responsibility to civilisation, by upholding standards. Why, otherwise, do we appoint professors of linguistics or English, who are expensive items at universities, unless we hope thereby to increase knowledge which will help us to maintain and develop a sense of human value and meaning? Anyone in the Humanities takes on such responsibilities, and there is a sense that culture is indivisible. Where meaning is confused, or standards decline, then attitudes to life suffer, and civilisation becomes threatened. It is of considerable importance to our society, whether or not the BBC, a public corporation with a significant role in our life, cares about the use of language.

Taste, as in an individual's preferences in the cinema or music, is personal: but it is not totally subjective. By the collocation of reports on experience, by the 'common pursuit of true judgment' we create values—by which *Les Enfants du Paradis* is a good film and a Soho blue film is not. We put Mozart into a promenade concert, because he illuminates the meaning of life as a trivial 'pop' number does not. So, while all of us have our private likes and dislikes in language use, we must also try as best we can to attend to clarity and meaning, and certainly, where our public teaching institutions are concerned, try to uphold standards. Whether it likes it or not, the BBC is a teaching institution, and one thing it most certainly teaches is how to use language. The linguist, of course, tries to be as 'objective' as possible, and seeks to study how people actually use language: but this objectivity must not be extended to imply that there are no standards, and that it is just as good to say 'different to' as to say 'different from', or to pronounce 'poor' as 'pore' as too many BBC broadcasters do.

There can be no doubt that in recent decades the BBC's attention to language use has declined. I am not objecting to the widening of the range of language use, to include regional accents and idioms—that is a gain. But what has also gained ground is slovenliness and this is often combined with a kind of matey air belonging to the very kind of relativism which Professor Crystal purveys; 'my sloppiness is just my style, don't object to it or I will call you elitist'. Language use on the BBC not only suffers from the minor faults listed in the article, but from mumbling (as when presenters put in asides ad lib); sometimes total incoherence (not least when certain sportsmen are interviewed); and

a kind of illiterate 'genteelity', as when people use 'I' when they should use 'me'. There are other aspects of a general decline of attention to meaning (it is the fault of the linguist often to fail to take into account this wider aspect of language use): there is, for instance, an inattention to tone, as when presenters glibly utter some silly joke, immediately after giving news of some appalling catastrophe or killing, or they present something they disagree with, with scorn. Interviews conducted by telephone which are virtually incomprehensible or inaudible are broadcast, while at the end of almost every interview with a sociologist I find myself saying, 'And said nothing . . .' These are editing matters, but they belong to the same phenomenon. Today the BBC thinks nothing of interviewing an individual, cutting the tape heavily, and putting a derisory comment at the beginning and end, an offence to discourse which makes me and some of my contacts disinclined to accept invitations to take part in programmes. Any protest, because of the relativistic kind of attitude, that 'anything goes', such as Professor Crystal puts forward, is greeted by the BBC with a new kind of smug and flip dismissal, conveying a contempt for anyone who objects to the lowering of standards and the misuse of language. In these respects today, one notes a radical and disturbing contrast between the concern for meaning and values of, say, good English teachers in schools, and the atmosphere of the BBC in recent decades, not least, I suspect, because some BBC programmes can only be seen as forms of miseducation—a point of view which a colleague is putting forward in a forthcoming article in *New Universities Quarterly* discussing *That's Life* on television. The loss of standards is a wider question than language use: but it is no argument, of course, to say that there are worse things than verbal faults. Attention to detail in meaning is as important as concern for the wider issues of human life.

David Holbrook  
Cambridge

SIR: Professor David Crystal's article on the complaints about BBC English (THE LISTENER, 9 July) reveals some of the plaintiffs as almost as guilty as the defendants. For instance, there is the myth of the 'split infinitive'. This was exploded decades ago by grammarians. (1) Even if 'to' must be regarded as part of the infinitive (which is debatable), there is no grammatical reason why it should not be 'split' (though there may be euphonous reasons in some cases). (2) As a distinguished grammarian put it 50 years ago, 'the infinitive has been split by very nearly all the most famous writers in English literature'. (3) There are cases where *not* to 'split' would actually pervert the speaker's or writer's meaning!

At the same time, there are BBC pronunciations which are fairly recent and which irritate me as a former teacher of English to foreign students. One of them is 'the' pronounced 'thee' before a consonant. It never used to be thus spoken; there is an obvious anatomical reason why the e in the 'the' before a consonant should be pronounced as in 'her'. I suspect that some of the new users have been exposed to elocution lessons.

Again, in Greek and Latin the e in 'ego' is short and was thus pronounced by educated people till fairly recently. Perhaps 'eego' sounds grander. Or is it just ignorance of

elementary etymology, as when speakers use a long o in 'homosexual'?

Basil Druit  
Christchurch, Dorset

SIR: May I congratulate Professor David Crystal on his excellent article on language (THE LISTENER, 9 July). Unlike so many specialists he has not developed blinkers and still takes a broad and balanced view. The primary purpose of language is to convey our thoughts to others and the *important* errors are those that lead to misunderstanding.

Anyone who is appalled by the use of a split infinitive is either guilty of gross exaggeration or has no idea at all of the true values in life.

Maurice Nimmo  
Haverfordwest, Dyfed

## Language on the air

SIR: In his interesting article 'How Dare You Talk to Me Like That!' (THE LISTENER, 9 July), Professor David Crystal says: 'Let us not dress up our attitude to language in a façade of reasoning about standards, responsibility, trends and suchlike.'

Why ever not? Surely those of us who know more about language matters than the average person have a right, if not a duty, to impart our knowledge concerning trends and to propose standards of efficient speech and writing. Or has the notion of 'standards' become taboo in this field as in others?

While many, though not all, of his 'Top Twenty' points show ignorance, prejudice or muddle-headedness on the part of the complainants, that is surely all the more reason for analysing them on a basis of 'reasoning' as well as subjective taste.

P. S. Falla  
Bromley  
Kent

SIR: Professor David Crystal (THE LISTENER, 9 July) gives us positive evidence of the decline of our language and of the standards of those who teach it.

He writes: '... the number of grammatical permutations possible in English isn't all that much more'. The adverbial use of 'that' is a vulgarism. 'That' may be used legitimately as a pronoun, adjective, conjunction, relative pronoun and, in certain circumstances, a relative adverb. It is a busy word and has all the work it can manage. It should not be used as a simple adverb. This usage damages the language.

Professor Crystal should read Fowler, Gowers, Partridge and Fraser. This would greatly improve his grammar, syntax and style.

A. Sefton  
Windsor  
Berks

30 JULY 1981

## Language on the air

SIR: Professor David Crystal (THE LISTENER, 9 July) describes receiving a letter complaining of a split infinitive heard on the BBC, the letter being written during the week of the Pope's attempted assassination, and comments, 'If one can be "appalled" about split infinitives, what kind of language is there left to refer to one's feelings when great men get shot?'

It is true that inflation of money has been accompanied by an equal inflation of language: witness the use of 'obscene' by politicians to describe their opponents' policies, and the more endearing progression whereby female passengers on public transport, once addressed as 'Miss' or 'Ma'am', have become first 'dear' then 'love' and now 'darling'. However, though split infinitives don't actually appal me, is it not to be welcomed that people hold the very strongest feelings about the English language and express those feelings in a suitable way?

Soon after reading Professor Crystal's article, I came upon the following passage in Morley's *Life of Gladstone* under the heading 'Table Talk': 'In the evening Mr G. remarked on our debt to Macaulay for guarding the purity of the English tongue. I recalled a favourite passage from Milton, that next to the man who gives wise and intrepid counsels of government he places the man who cares for the purity of his mother tongue. Mr G. liked this. Said he only knew Bright once slip into an error in this respect when he used "transpire" for "happen".'

Probably Professor Crystal would dismiss the idea of purity of language as being static.

13 August 1981

He rightly points out that it must change, that some Americanisms to which objection is made owe their popularity to what he describes as 'social reasons', which I interpret as trendiness. All right, but need change be for the worse? There are plenty of short, expressive American expressions, mostly slang, like 'corny' and 'grotty' and 'high', but why do we have to go for the dreaded sociologese and the sub-academic jargon which adds syllables to our words and destroys the syntax of English, partly because it is quite often a translation from German?

It is clear after reading Professor Crystal that he holds some controversial opinions. Briefly summed up, he believes that subjective judgments about language ought not to concern the BBC; that only questions of clarity and meaning deserve its attention; and that in any case the degeneration of our speech, if it exists, springs from the degeneration of society, so that to reform the one you must first reform the other.

While agreeing wholeheartedly with his remarks about obscure language and the way in which it is used to produce deliberate ambiguity, is it really necessary, in order to discourage such abuses as a strike being described as 'being in an industrial action situation', or OAPs being coyly called 'senior citizens', to embark on the reform of society (what General de Gaulle might dismiss as 'un vaste sujet')?

These expressions become current partly because they are tolerated; some are used in the belief that they are correct: for instance, the extraordinary new pronunciation 'businessm'n' only started after Bernard Levin had complained of 'the' and 'a' being pronounced 'thee' and 'ay' (imagine Ralph Hodgson's poem pronounced as 'Time you old gypsym'n, why don't you stay?'). In Wales, I learn from Radio 4, poets are the acknowledged guardians of the language. Perhaps a poet as well as a professor ought to open the postbag on English usage.

In conclusion, one must record high marks for good English to the BBC's own presenters, as opposed to some of its contributors, the team who present *Today* being outstanding, while Sir Robin Day's rephrasing of his audiences' questions on *Question Time* is an English lesson in itself.

Laura Grimond  
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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Language on the air

SIR: I believe I detect in your columns the growth of a new indoor sport. The game opens with an incisive and well-meaning letter or article on the subject of language. People then write in and score points by skinning the original writer with his own knife. Then more people write in and skin the skinners, and so on. It happened to a reverend gentleman a few weeks ago and is happening again with David Crystal. It is an exciting and noisy game, glasshouses crashing down and petards being hoist all over the place.

The rules are obviously as complicated as your crosswords, but I think I've spotted some of the main points-earning categories: (a) getting your piece published; (b) spotting others committing the sin they are condemning (double points if you can catch out a professional writer, treble for a professor of linguistics); (c) displaying knowledge of Fowler; (d) taking a considered view different to Fowler's; (e) displaying knowledge of Latin and Greek, though this can cause penalty points if you are led to believe that English pronunciation follows the classical—Basil Druitt (Letters, 6 August) is close to the line here. Other categories can be added as necessary. Anyway, my turn.

First, David Holbrook (Letters, 6 August) should know that Fowler decries dislike of 'different to' as a superstition, and most of us would, I think, agree with that. And whether you say 'poor' or 'pore' depends on where in England you come from. I should have thought that the BBC's growing willingness to employ non-Oxbridge accents manifests an *increasing* attention to language use. David Holbrook says he regards the more common use of regional accents as a gain. But this must inevitably introduce a variety of pronunciations, especially of extended vowels. So what?

Secondly, I claim treble points for noticing that David Crystal berated for exaggeration those who were 'appalled' by linguistic abuses, yet half a column earlier was telling us that he 'hates' some of his Top Twenty. It takes a professor of linguistics to make these fine distinctions in figurative usage, I suppose.

Thirdly, I claim points for the following in the glasshouses category. Within the same paragraph David Holbrook complains that confusion of meaning causes attitudes to life to suffer and then writes the sentence: 'It is of considerable importance to our society, whether or not the BBC . . . cares about the use of language.' Since he believes in attention to detail I'm sure Mr Holbrook will forgive me for pointing out that the comma after 'society' in that sentence tends to make the 'It' at the start refer to 'meaning' or perhaps 'civilisation' in the previous sentence whereas the sense otherwise seems to demand that 'It' refer to the noun-phrase 'whether or not the BBC, etc'. If the latter was intended, there should have been no comma. Is this not the sort of confusion we are supposed to be avoiding?

There are many other oddities of style or meaning in Mr Holbrook's letter but it would be too tedious to pick them all out since the overall thrust of complaint is itself so misdirected. I am sure Professor Crystal can look after himself, but as a disinterested observer I should like to say that I did not understand from his article that he had no regard for

standards. On the contrary, what he said was that we should reserve our indignation for genuine cases of falling standards (i.e., where meaning is being confused or impaired) and not waste our energies pretending that our personal predilections have the status of standards. David Holbrook's choice of 'different to/from' as an example of good and bad standards could hardly have been more felicitous if he were trying to prove that he does not know what he is talking about.

Not wishing to be a spoilsport for those who wish to play the game after me I have left a few howlers or semi-howlers in this letter!

Ian Lee  
London W12

SIR: How well David Holbrook's letter on the use of language on the air (6 August) illustrates the sort of problem radio presenters find themselves faced with.

I work on a small independent station, which anyone who shares Mr Holbrook's attitude would presumably switch off after a very short time indeed. Yet, like all the independent radio stations, we have a large and loyal audience who understand perfectly what we are saying.

Mr Holbrook, like many other people, is simply not aware of his bias towards language as an intellectual exercise. Indeed, his letter is biased in other ways, despite his claim to what might be described (no doubt to his horror) as 'relative objectivity'. He says, 'Mozart . . . illuminates the meaning of life as a trivial pop song does not.' I doubt whether many of our listeners would agree.

You can't please all of the people all of the time, and the world is not full of academics like Mr Holbrook, so it's not surprising that usages which are not to be found in Fowler are used on the air. They reflect more nearly the way most people use English.

Michael Lloyd  
Edinburgh

SIR: David Holbrook tells us (Letters, 6 August) that 'there are standards, and must be'. Of course there must be, but who is to create them: professors of English or writers and broadcasters?

Here are some views quoted in my book *Getting Through!*:

'The circle of English has a well-defined centre but no discernible circumference.'

(Sir James Murray)

'The syntax may go to hell but what I am aiming for is a true conversational tone of one man talking to another.'

(Alistair Cooke)

'Such a prescriptive view of English was based on a comparison with classical Latin, and it mistakenly assumed an unchanging quality in both grammatical rules and word meanings.'

(The Bullock Report on the Teaching of English in Schools)

'There are no experts—only users.'

(Lord Reith, on the demise of the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English)

'Grammar is a stranglehold on passion.'

(Bernice Rubens, winner of the 1969 Booker Prize)

There is freedom in the way we use English; there is also some order. The balance between the two is delicate and no one has the

right to lay it down for all time and for everyone. David Holbrook plays a part by putting the brakes on too hard: David Crystal contributes by allowing a good deal of free-wheeling.

So who do we listen to? (Neither my ear nor my eye *insists* on *whom*.) It is writers and not professors who have made the language what it is and over the centuries they have done well by it, although grammarians have nipped on most of them, from Shakespeare to Dr Johnson to Churchill to Agatha Christie.

All over the world, English is being stretched in new directions and this is life-giving. As the language moves on, we lose some refinements in meaning but we gain facility and colour. All is not for the best, but a lot of it is. The last words can be left to Isaac Bashevis Singer:

I think the only reason languages disappear is when they lose any creative power.

If that's the case, English is going to be around for a long time to come.

Godfrey Howard  
Addington, Bucks.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Language on the air

SIR: I am sorry that a holiday in a LISTENER-less land has made me miss the interesting correspondence about 'Language on the air', and I hope it is not too late to add a few comments.

Let me begin with the myth, ably expressed by David Holbrook, that I am not concerned with standards (Letters, 6 August). He picks on my phrase 'a façade of reasoning about standards', as does P. S. Falla (Letters, 30 July), and uses it to support his general case about the BBC miseducating everyone. He attributes to me an 'anything goes' position—a glib catchphrase often used as a critical label for language scholars engaged in descriptive commentary by those who have not taken the trouble to understand the premises on which they work. I would have expected something a mite more thoughtful from Mr Holbrook. But let the talk speak for itself. Holbrook writes: 'We must also try as best we can to attend to clarity and meaning.' Crystal writes: 'We do run a severe risk of having our attention distracted from what the real problems of language use are . . . ambiguity, lack of clarity . . .' Holbrook writes: 'This objectivity must not be extended to imply that there are no standards.' Crystal writes: 'My worry is not that there is nothing in language to worry about—there is plenty to worry about.' And so on. I'm sorry there wasn't time to give my views about the 'real problems' more expression: it was a production decision to focus the programme on the readers' letters as such, and I was left with only a few dozen seconds to indicate an alternative view. Had there been time, this view would have been seen to encompass such notions as 'mumbling', 'inappropriate tone', 'incomprehensibility', 'inaudibility', and 'total incoherence'. I would want to investigate the evidence for these 'snarl words' first, of course (A says B is mumbling; B says A needs his ears syringing), but if the evidence existed, I would then be quite happy to Criticise and Recommend, in my role as human linguist. Believe it or not, I don't like 'total incoherence' either. Bonus points to Ian Lee (Letters, 20 August) for spotting this.

One standard which I hold very dear is that of factual accuracy, both historical (when did a usage actually develop, and why) and modern (who actually uses it now, and why). I am all for reasoning being brought to bear on matters of language (*pace* P. S. Falla); it is unfounded or superficial reasoning which I am against. That is why I used the word 'façade'. Similarly, I welcome the expression of feelings about the language (*pace* Laura Grimond, Letters, 13 August), but not when these feelings fly in the face of facts. As an example, let me say again (it was already said in the talk) that the 'businessm'n' pronunciation has been around for ages—certainly long before Bernard Levin was born (to take Mrs Grimond's example). Or the pronunciation of 'the' as 'thee', which she refers to, and which also attracts the attention of Basil Druitt (Letters, 6 August). Their comments about this phenomenon again illustrate the need for my attitude. Whether we like this pronunciation or not, let us at least get the facts right, and in so doing we may stand a chance of getting to grips with the real issues underlying the criticisms. Basil Druitt refers to 'thee' as a 'BBC pronunciation'. It is not. It is used by everyone in emphatic

speech (try saying 'that's *the* car for me', without lengthening the vowel) and in hesitant speech ('that's thee—er—thee— . . .'). Just listen. Basil Druitt also says 'It never used to be thus spoken.' It did, as far back as records go.

I would wish to argue that it is not the pronunciation as such which is really upsetting people, but the use of the emphatic form of the article when the meaning does not (in the critics' view) require emphasis, or the use of the hesitant form of the article when the speaker should (again, in the critics' view) be more fluent. In so far as these criticisms are really about the meaning of language, the appropriateness of its subject-matter, or the ability of professional speakers, there are certainly real issues here. My anxiety is that people who inveigh about the pronunciation only may well miss the more fundamental issues. In this respect, my argument surely supports the general tenor of Mr Holbrook's final paragraph?

Lastly, I regret that I can offer no solace to A. Sefton (Letters, 30 July), who invites me to read Fowler, Gower, Fraser and Partridge, in the hope that this will improve my grammar and syntax (*both*, note). Having already done this—and, indeed, having edited a book of Eric Partridge's writings myself—I'm afraid the influence of these good men will already have made itself apparent. A. Sefton is worried about my vulgar adverbial use of 'that'. It is a colloquial use these days, certainly, but it is really nothing to worry about. He thinks I am damaging the language, by using it. In fact, it is a usage which has existed in English for several hundred years, and was standard until relatively recently. The language, it seems, has been damaged for quite some time!

David Crystal  
Wokingham, Berks.

# What the BBC says leaves some people speechless

But as a new Radio 4 series proves it doesn't stop them from speaking out

If you occasionally feel the need to really, whole-heartedly and unequivocally split an infinitive, if you think the English textbooks call for a different style to your own, if there's no way that you're going to give a monkey's if a load of listeners are sick as a parrot when they hear your programmes — there is a Radio 4 series for you.

Speak Out is a 10-programme series looking at the use of English today and there is a strong emphasis on the BBC's involvement with the language.

Presenter David Crystal is trying to find out what makes people so angry, and why.

Angry they certainly are. When Speak Out ran a first series of three eight-minute programmes in June producer Alan Wilding was amazed at the number of letters he received.

"They even sent in poems," he said.

It seems that any mention of the BBC's use of English has people reaching for their pens from one end of the country to the other. As a result, this second series of Speak

by KEITH CLARKE

Out is using listeners' letters to determine the topics.

In the first programme, broadcast last week, the spotlight was on newsreaders. During World War Two Wilfred Pickles was asked to read the news and one listener has written in to suggest that "the rot set in" there and then.

But recordings of the news as read by Wilfred Pickles and by Alvar Lidell reveal that although the accents were different the use of grammar and vocabulary shows no obvious differences.

Richard Whitmore, representing modern-day newsreaders, was interviewed in the first programme.

David Crystal asked him to what extent he is aware of the "old voice" of the BBC when he reads the news.

"Not a lot," Richard said. "I suppose it's there subconsciously. What is at the back of my mind is that I've got one opportunity to get over to the listeners or the viewers the information that I have to give, and if I don't give it clearly, they've missed it."

The pressures to tidy up spoken English are the least of a newsreader's problems, he said.

## Pandemonium

"I don't think the listeners are really aware of the enormous pandemonium that sometimes goes on, particularly with the Television News.

"Often we go on the air with only half our scripts and the rest comes on during the programme, so one has little time to assess them and one has to do one's best."

In the second programme of Speak Out, broadcast on Monday, David Crystal suggested that while many listeners shudder when they hear the Radio 1 style of presentation, there are probably just as many shuddering over Radio 3.



ALVAR LIDELL, the "old voice" of the BBC . . . RICHARD WHITMORE, one of today's voices . . . SIMON BATES, thanking heavens for cliches.

"The BBC has to cater for this vast range of listeners and naturally enough it will follow the norms of the group of listeners to which it hopes to appeal," he said.

David Crystal asked disc jockey Simon Bates whether the technical restraints of programme making affect his use of language.

"Yes, inevitably you fall back on cliches. But I like cliches, they make me feel secure. I think, golly, thank heavens for a cliché! I don't have to concentrate for three or four seconds.

"If you're panicking technically and you're under a lot of pressure, the brain will switch off and the cliches will come out."

Simon Bates cites as an example the moment during King George VI's funeral when a hapless Brian Johnston said, "Here comes the main body of the procession."

"What had happened of course was that Johnston was concentrating on his producer speaking to him in his ear, and therefore the mouth was working without the brain.

"That's one of those ghastly moments which is funny after the event, but horrifying to the broadcaster at the time. But we are all guilty of it."

But bloomers at state occasions aside, Alan Wilding feels that most of the things that people complain about are not worth worrying about.

"Many of the people who write to the BBC are quite extreme," he said. "They tend to focus on things which are not really important."

One programme in the series will deal with what Alan calls male and female language.

## Feminist

"Language is also a feminist issue," he said. "Some women insist on being called Ms while some people refuse to use it."

Other guests in the weekly series include the BBC's Pronunciation Adviser, Graham Pointon, and that other well known custodian of the English language, Jimmy Young.

Orft the listeners will no doubt jolly well go to their pens — know what I mean?



# WODDIS ON...

## The Language of Love

I combed the golden treasury of song  
In search of language to express my love,  
But finding it looked odd or sounded wrong,  
I sought new ways to push the Muse (not 'shove').

None are so dull as those whose verse runs free,  
And by and large it should be done in rhyme.  
In all this world there's only you and me  
Who speak correctly at this point in time.

My love is riper far than summer fruit,  
And different to the dawn that starts the day.  
How do I love you? Let my heart compute.  
Will sorrow ever cross our path? No way.

These halting lines should tell you what I feel,  
If you can bear to read the bottom line.  
The love we share, my dearest, is for real,  
And kindles this simplistic heart of mine.

I shall (or will) revere you while I live,  
And all my life continue to adore.  
Let's swear, despite the split infinitive,  
To boldly love, as none have loved before.

ROGER WODDIS

(How Dare You Talk to Me Like That! *Saturday 3.40 Radio 4UK*;  
Love Story: A Chance to Sit Down, *Friday 8.25 BBC1*)