

Imagine ... an editor

David Crystal

If only – I imagine a writer thinking – there were people around who would read my work carefully, objectively, and sympathetically; point out places where I've been ambiguous or unclear, and suggest useful alternatives; check any references and cross-references for accuracy and consistency; ensure that my style follows the stylistic norms of the publisher; point out that the person my heroine meets in Chapter 18 I had actually killed off in Chapter 3; and generally act as a language guardian angel while my book or article sails the uncharted and often choppy waters between my desk and the public domain. A kind of Literary Health Service hero – to adapt a recent metaphor – keeping me linguistically and creatively safe. There are such people. They are called editors.

Crime fighter or caring consultant?

For many, this encomium would come as a bit of a surprise. They think of editors in a negative and fearful way. I've lost track of the number of times I've heard them called 'language vigilantes' or 'the grammar police'. Or, I should say, us. For I've been an editor myself, on many occasions. I've edited book series, encyclopedias, anthologies, newsletters, journals, and a huge amount of poetry. I suppose editorial tasks have taken up about

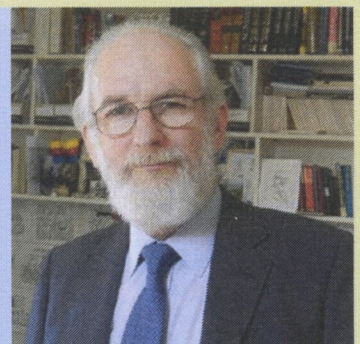
a third of my professional life. So I don't take it kindly when someone refers to me, or to any editor, using the language of crime protection, when the reality is so different. The language of the caring or advisory professions would be far more appropriate, for the aim of an editor is simply stated: to let nothing interfere with the goal of achieving total communicative rapport between writer and reader.

Expert help for complex choices

The simplicity of the aim hides the complexity of the practice, because the medium is language, which is the most complex of all the learned behaviours that have made us human. To see this, we need only consider the amalgam of words, spellings, punctuation marks, grammatical constructions, stylistic constraints, and graphic design that make up the totality of written English, and from which we make our selection when we begin to write. Well over a million words are at our disposal, and over three thousand variations in word order (syntax) and word structure (morphology) that give English sentences their grammar. All these words have to be spelled and all the sentences punctuated. And everything has to be stylistically honed to make the language fit for purpose. Popular or specialist? Tabloid or quality? Formal or informal? Conventional or creative?

About the author

David Crystal works from his home in Holyhead, North Wales, as a writer, editor, lecturer, and broadcaster. After earlier posts in London, Bangor, and Reading, he is now honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Bangor. He has written many books on linguistics and the English language, and was general editor of the Cambridge and Penguin families of encyclopedias. He received an OBE for services to the English language in 1995, and became a member of the British Academy in 2000. He lives online at davidcrystal.com. He is the CIEP's honorary president.



These are just the first choices that come to my mind. The list of constraining factors is as long as the social situations, subject matters, and readerships that a writer wants to encounter. Few can navigate their way through this linguistic cornucopia without help. And with a public readership waiting at the door, with high expectations, they need expert help.

The problem wouldn't be so great if everybody used the language in the same way. But that has never happened, at any time, in any language. Three great forces drive language: the need for intelligibility (which fosters what is called a 'standard'); the need for identity (which fosters variation, typically in the form of accents, dialects, and occupational varieties); and the need for enjoyment (which fosters language play, a huge domain that covers everything from Scrabble and crossword puzzles to the creative linguistic originality found in literature). Language reflects society, and because society is diverse, there is always variation, in the form of dialects, styles, inventiveness, and different preferences about usage. And because society never stands still there is always language change. The only languages that don't change are dead ones.

People typically underestimate the amount of linguistic diversity and change. Take spelling – supposedly the area of language where there is greatest agreement – and reflect on this illustration that I reprise from Chapter 28 of my book *Spell it Out*.¹ In 1986, English grammarian Sidney Greenbaum carried out a survey of words with alternative spellings in a general-purpose desk dictionary. He took letter A as a sample, and found an average of three variant forms per page, as illustrated by these examples:

abetter	abettor	acclimatise	acclimatize
abridgable	abridgeable	acouchi	acouchy
absinthe	absinth	adieux	adieux
abulia	aboulia	adrenalin	adrenaline
accessory	accessary	aegis	egis

There were cases of three variants (such as *aerie*, *aery*, *erie*) and even four (*anaesthetise*, *anaesthetize*, *anesthetise*, *anesthetize*). The variants amounted to 5.8 per cent of all the A words. I've carried out the same exercise on some of the other letters of the alphabet, and the percentage is similar. However, a desk dictionary includes only a small proportion of the words in English. The amount of variation in a scientific or technical dictionary is much greater, because of the frequency of words using a suffix such as *-in/-ine* or a prefix such as *paedo-/pedo-* or *archae-/arche-*. A similar sampling from specialised dictionaries shows a variation level of around 14 per cent.

And if proper names are included (*Tchaikovsky*, *Tschaikowsky ...*), we reach 20 per cent or more.

Who is going to take the time and trouble to research this complexity, establish the factors that account for the variation, draw up guidelines for writers, and check that choices have been implemented consistently throughout their writing? Or, if there is apparent inconsistency (as in much creative writing), check that the variation is deliberate and not inadvertent? And who is going to do the same thing for all the usage choices in the other areas of language, especially in grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation? The researchers are called linguists – in the sense of 'scholars of linguistics' (not in the sense of 'polyglots') – and the implementers are called editors. Some, of course, are both. But to be successful as either, one needs several attributes that cumulatively define the character of their professionalism. As this paper is for the CIEP, I'll focus on the editorial side.

Professionals in communication

What sort of person makes a good editor? At the very least, someone who has:

- a systematic mind to keep tabs on myriad points of detail
- a good memory, to ensure that recommendations are consistently applied
- an awareness of personal linguistic preferences, to avoid their unconscious application to the writing of others
- a well-informed and up-to-date appreciation of language structure and use, and the sources that provide reliable and helpful information about variation and change
- a sensitive, empathic, and tolerant appreciation of social changes affecting language (such as in relation to political correctness)
- experience of a wide range of literary and non-literary genres of writing

and, perhaps the most important attribute of all

- a good dose of humility and courage, in the face of the scale of the enterprise.

The two groups of language professionals have complementary aims: linguists aim to understand the nature of the communicative chain that binds writer and reader; editors aim to help writers achieve the greatest possible communicative rapport with their readers. And the corollary of that is a simple principle:

any linguistic feature that could interfere with that rapport needs to be identified and – after appropriate discussion – avoided. A simplistic, uninformed, dated, or naive view of language will not allow this to happen. And when someone takes on an editorial role without the appropriate professionalism, things can quickly go wrong. That is when we hear of cases of arbitrary or blanket correction, of confrontation between writer and editor, proofreader, or publisher, and the emergence of such expressions as ‘linguistic police’. Some confrontations have become famous – Mark Twain, for example, writing in 1889: ‘Yesterday Mr. Hall wrote that the printer’s proof-reader was improving my punctuation for me, & I telegraphed orders to have him shot without giving him time to pray ...’

The professionalism counts for everything. Authors have a message that they want to convey, and they’ve done this as well as they can. But they themselves can’t judge their likelihood of success. They know their own text too intimately. They know what it means – or at least, what they intended it to mean. But they aren’t in any position to evaluate what it actually conveys. Only a reader can do that – which of course is why authors often get a friend or colleague to read their work before submitting it. But good friends and colleagues are not usually good critics. After all, they want to stay friends! And even if they do notice – and dare to point out – infelicities of expression, few have the skills needed to define the basis of their discomfort and to suggest alternatives.

Personal taste and pedantry

More often than not, a reaction is governed by personal taste or by vaguely remembered rules about ‘good English’ once taught in school. No harm in that, if the interaction remains friendly and informal. We all have stylistic likes and dislikes, and are the product of our education, and our feelings can be discussed in the same way that they would be in any other domain, such as when looking at a work of art. Danger comes only when these attitudes grow into a mindset that disallows a consideration of alternatives, and where writers are told to follow a single linguistic path that corresponds to the critic’s personal preferences, even when the language presents other usage, just as respected, that supports an alternative choice. Such people are often called *pedants* – a name that has had a negative connotation since the 16th century. And if those pedants become Persons of Power – a senior manager, a head of department, a minister of education, even ... – then those who are made to follow their rulings sense the arbitrariness and unreality, and feel frustration that

they’re unable to do anything about it. That’s when they begin to use such phrases as ‘grammar police’.

We saw this kind of arbitrariness in the UK in 2015, when civil servants were told by the Lord Chancellor (in the person of Mr Gove) never to begin a sentence with *however*, even though this usage is well attested in English literature, and has been in the language for centuries. We see it again in the rules imposed on British primary school children in preparing for their SATS tests, when their teachers were told to mark wrong a serial (or ‘Oxford’) comma before *and* in such sequences as *tall, dark, and handsome* – ignoring the fact that this usage is followed by many writers and publishing houses. A good editor has more sense. Judith Butcher, as always, provides sensible advice in her *Copy-Editing* (6.12):² choose either, but be consistent – allowing of course for cases where it may be necessary to depart from the norm to avoid ambiguity. Readers from other countries will have no difficulty finding parallel instances.

The human editor

Despite rumours to the contrary, editors (and linguists) are human, and can make mistakes like everyone else. That observation might sound banal, but I have heard writers complain that their work seemed to have been edited by a machine; and indeed, when we see the naively pedantic correcting that takes place, with red underlining, in so many word-processing systems, the notion of an editorial automaton is uncomfortably close to all of us. Nothing yet beats an empathic human. But of course with being human come as many personalities as in any other sector of society, presenting different attitudes to language and different levels of linguistic tolerance. Yes, there are editors around the English-speaking world who are proud to be pedants and who think of themselves as linguistic guardians. But they are a decreasing minority. The ones I know, as president of the CIEP, recognise and aspire to the highest imaginable standards of editorial practice, and in their professionalism show the world how editing should be done. Language police, never! Language partners, always!

Notes

- 1 David Crystal (2012). *Spell it Out*. London: Profile Books.
- 2 Judith Butcher, Caroline Drake and Maureen Leach (2014). *Butcher’s Copy-Editing: The Cambridge handbook for editors, copy-editors and proofreaders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.