

A language must change, to keep pace with society

1963

A recent article by Donald Hughes about the use and abuse of our language aroused considerable interest. Here a linguist, DAVID CRYSTAL, of the Department of English at University College, London, discusses the question from a different viewpoint, and offers some answers.

methods of asking the question instead of one, a good case could be made out for saying the language has been enriched, based on arguments of rhythm, nuance, and so on.

There couldn't possibly be a case for making one construction more "harsh-sounding" than the other. Wherein does the harshness lie? In the "d"?

In the same way, the N.E.D. shows "suspect" used as a synonym for "think" since 1549, and the list of quotations is long: Sir Thomas Browne, Macaulay, Carlyle and Scott are all there.

As for the "distressing transatlantic habit" of turning a noun into a verb, although a perfectly good one exists already. This process has been going on in English since the earliest Anglo-Saxon, as any book on the development of the language will testify.

Why is the substitute "I would have thought" or "think" labelled genteel and cowardly? I would have thought "polite" or "careful" much better. (And if I substituted "think" in that last sentence, I would be called pompous).

Why are people on television (or in front of any microphone, come to that) supposed to talk more naturally? I would have thought a self-conscious situation inspires in untrained people a self-conscious language.

I certainly would not expect colloquial diction, especially in discussions where precision (not affectation, note) is the aim.

It is also difficult to reconcile the generalisation that television lets "loose on the young a formidable organ of opposition to the best efforts of teachers of English" with such programmes as A.T.V.'s "Headway," and all the documentaries which, being in normal, "ordinary" English, are never noticed.

There is slang in the serials, sure, but remember, people were criticising "vulgar speche" before television was ever a twinkle in Baird's eye.

A lot of this criticism would have been unnecessary if the fact of language change had been borne in mind.

Language does change, and it is just as impossible to "preserve the tongue

all right for the specialist, though it may be condemned as "jargon" by the layman.

One regional dialect or accent is no better than another — one might be more common or useful (so-called "B.B.C. English," for instance), but this is quite a different thing.

And there is therefore no justification whatsoever in condemning the usage of others because it does not fit in with some preconceived notion of what English should be like, or how it should sound.

It is egocentric in the extreme to condemn types of language as "irresponsible," "abominable," mere prejudice to talk about linguistic monstrosities and "cowardly" usage.

There's nothing wrong with "utilise" or "commence." They can be most effective at times for rhythmical reasons, or to avoid monotony. (And what's the "obvious, natural" word for "anticipate"?)

Condemn excessive usage, verbiage, by all means; but Mr Hughes gives us no instances of the kind of excesses which deserve to be shouted at (the businessese of "soliciting your kind indulgence in the interim" and the like).

He castigates "in fact" (which isn't as common as all that) but omits "indeed" and a host of others.

Such words are not meaningless: they may be signalers of emphasis, and are an essential part of the rhetoric of debate. Without them, discussions or speeches would sound very thin indeed.

So the first thing Mr Hughes mistakes is the purpose of the academic advocates of English Usage: they do not say "everything goes," still less "everything is good," merely "everything has a valid use in its own context."

They have studied the

quirks and tendencies of the language, often in minute detail (as in the twelve year projected Survey of English Usage at London University, and others at Edinburgh and Leeds); and they have noted that people want to use a kind of language which suits the context they live or work in.

One of the dialects of English, they see, due to historical accident, has received more than the normal amount of attention, and has greater prestige and influence than other dialects; this "standard" language has become most people's objective as a result.

They need to be familiar with it if they want to get on. Which is why it is taught so widely. Not because it is better for communication; but because it is useful. Society has decreed it.

* * *

No-one has yet discovered a language which is not in a state of flux. And the changes in form and meaning which occur, and the innovations and obsolescences, are just not valid objects of criticism.

Most of the "new" usages objected to, are not as recent as Mr Hughes likes to think. The growth of concatenated prepositions after verbs, for instance, was parodied by Morris Bishop some time ago — "Come up from out of in under there" — but has been typical of English for centuries. "To face out with, out of, down with," for example, are all recorded in the Middle Ages.

Recourse to the N.E.D. would also have shown that though "image of" may be more popular these days (and what's wrong with popularity?), its meaning is certainly not new. As "symbol, emblem, representation" it has been recorded since 1566, and as "embodiment" or "natural representative, type of an

Every now and then, the "Radio Times" columns erupt into the national press with tirades and complaints about the use and abuse of English. But it's unfortunate that when the subject is promoted onto the features-page (as in Donald Hughes' recent article) the naive tone and parochial conservatism of the letter-columns come as well.

And what happens when sound linguistic principle and practice are ignored by well-intentioned critics? Intolerance, misguided attacks, and usually a large proportion of factual error.

The scapegoat once again turns out to be the academic, typecast as an evil ogre living in a University castle and spending all his time importing verbal abominations to syphon into children's brains.

But, in the name of Roget, why! They are as little to blame for the present development of the English language as they are for the present influx of television westerns.

A language is what all its users make it; it is a social, not just an academic phenomenon.

But why talk about blame at all? Why, in fact, should one form of the language be treated as any better or any worse than another, in this absolute way? This sort of misdirected dogmatism has been going for some time, of course, ever since Latin was looked upon as the ideal language for all.

The plain fact is, there is no external standard of correctness for self-expression, no innate ideal in English which all must attain if they hope to avoid linguistic damnation.

English, above all else, is alive, changing, versatile, flexible.

It is composed of numerous overlapping registers and styles of speech and writing, each of which has a specific end, a purpose which is delimited by the deliberate use of a set of defining verbal forms. One kind of language suits one kind of context, and usually very few others.

No-one expects, let alone hopes for, legal jargon in Church, or Old Testament prose in a pub.

The only valid test of a piece of language, then, is whether it succeeds in the job the user intended for it. Specialised language is

representative, type, of an attitude or orientation" since 1374 — and used like this by Shakespeare, Chaucer and Shelley.

As for the use of "do you have" for "have you," why is this so abominable? The verb is merely conforming to a process of periphrasis in verbal expressions, using "do" or "did" which has been going on since late Anglo - Saxon times, and which has affected all verbs except "be" and a few anomalous examples ("might," "should.").

Some regional dialects have had "do you have" for ages. It certainly doesn't offend my sensibility to hear it.

And as I now have two

to "preserve the tongue that Shakespeare spoke" as it is to stop cultural change.

If language stood still, culture would stagnate. All new ideas would be literally "inexpressible," and we would soon use up our resources. Dull indeed.

But what is there anyway about Elizabethan English that makes it more worth preserving than, say, English of 1963? Just because Shakespeare wrote in it?

If our age has not produced a Shakespeare, it is by no means the fault of the language (or the academic): could I suggest (with tongue in cheek, I assure you) that something's wrong with our teaching method?

a class on his individual shoulders.
Exam paper v. fair usually

Eternal vigilance will keep English intact

Documentary Newsreels etc. BBC = normal standard.

By Donald Hughes
Headmaster of Rydal School

We hear a good deal nowadays about the rebellion of the young, but when you think of what they have to put up with you can only stand amazed at their moderation. I am thinking particularly of the sufferings that are inflicted on them in the name of English Usage.

Academic people in Universities have suddenly decided that the sort of English that their pupils set before them is unsatisfactory. This is, of course, perfectly true, but it is no more true than it has been for at least fifteen years.

The decline of the Classics, and the fact that more people now go to the University from uneducated homes, are certainly the two major causes, though there are others as I shall show.

But the academics, it seems, are not really concerned with causes; they content themselves with grumbling at the schools in a testy sort of way and announcing savage tests in English Usage which will have to be passed by everyone who wants to proceed to higher education—though what is to be done to let in the occasional mathematical genius who is incoherent to the verge of illiteracy no one seems to have inquired.

A distressing habit

If we are really being serious about what is happening to the language (and I hope that we are: it is at least as important to defend the English tongue as it is to preserve the English countryside) then we ought to do something a little less facile than blaming the teachers. We ought, for example, to recognise that in the last ten years society has let

loose on the young a formidable organ of opposition to the best efforts of teachers of English. I refer, of course, to television.

It is not only that so much television time is given up to Americans, though that is an important factor. Let me make it plain that I am not anti-American. I admire that great nation for more things than I can find space to list. I accept the fact that it is now Top Nation and I welcome its leadership in many spheres. But I do not welcome its leadership in the sphere of English language. I am not concerned with the more obvious vulgarities. I know, of course, that crooners and the like are not considered experts in language in their own country; I am not complaining here of things like the inability of writers of lyrics to distinguish between "like" and "as" (Dew yew love me, honey, like I love yew?).

Do you have to have it?

It is the little, nameless, unremembered Americanisms of the god-like elite of the B.B.C. that a rose my indignation (make me mad); of announcers and of the oracles of Monitor and Panorama. I give these examples out of a host that could be given, and I invite readers to make their own collection.

First there is the abominable "do you have?" for "have you?" How can anyone who is at all sensitive to language tolerate, let alone perpetuate this monstrosity? Think of Hamlet saying to his mother, "Ha, do you have eyes?"

I believe that I never heard this expression except on American lips, till the advent of television, but now we can observe obviously well-educated people talking like this to millions of people every day.

And television is more influential than the radio; we copy far more readily the things that we both see and hear prominent people saying. Everyone talks about "images" now ("the image of socialism," &c.). This cliché was created by political propaganda on television at the time of the last General Election.

Then there is the redundant preposition. No one faces difficulties now (that is, "currently"). They have to be faced up to. And if we face up to them we shall win out, unless we meet up with disaster.

My other example is the distressing transatlantic habit of turning a noun into a verb, although a perfectly good verb exists already. Has not the great Dimpleby himself been seen saying "That film was loaned to us..."? Yes, he has, more than once. (Friends, Romans and Countrymen, loan me your ears.)

But it is not only professional television personalities who are selling the pass. I want to carry the war into the enemy's camp and place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the academics. There are three verbal habits to which I wish to direct particularly the attention of readers and I invite them to look out for these in the next week.

It is the mark of the educated man to-day that he is unable to speak three consecutive sentences in public without saying "in fact" at least once and possibly twice. It has become a meaningless verbal tick. I once heard a headmaster say "What, in fact, are the facts?"

Secondly, no one seems to think anything now; everyone "suspects," whatever the context. "I suspect that he is going to do very well in the examination." No one would have said that ten years ago. Worse than that, as a substitute for "I think" is the genteel form of disagreement, "I would have

thought," without which no wireless or television discussion could be sustained for more than a few minutes.

A plea for vigilance

It is a cowardly way of saying what you think: It is shorthand for "if you hadn't said what you have just said — and of course you must be right — I would have thought (why 'would' and not 'should') something quite different — and really I still think it."

The simple truth is that the language which is spoken to a television camera is something different from that which is written. You would expect it to be more colloquial, but it is really (in fact!) more self-conscious. You can see people rejecting the obvious, natural words and reacting for "anticipate" and "utilise" and "commere."

All this is a plea, not for pedantic, old-fashioned English, still less that we should abandon the language to the people who talk on wireless and television.

But let us at least become more aware of the irresponsible influences which beat upon the young, in this sphere as in very many others, and let those academic persons who are too willing to find the literary moe in the essays of their pupils be more sensitive to the beam of cliché and argon in their own public appearances.

The price of preserving the tongue that Shakespeare spoke is eternal vigilance; or, as I should prefer to say, "Watch it."

cated: regional dialect?

why of columns

50% polite why? dundance.

this was? no external purpose