

THE REASON WHY

ET is a forum for the discussion of 'good', 'bad', 'correct', 'incorrect', 'standard', 'non-standard', 'substandard' and other kinds of usage. DAVID CRYSTAL invites readers to consider the usage games that people play and to send in their views about such matters.

'The reason why I dislike the modern use of *hopefully* . . .' began Mr W.'s letter to a radio programme about current usage. The following week, Mr W. was himself savaged by Mr P., who ignored the point being made about *hopefully*, condemning instead Mr W.'s use of *the reason why* as 'tautologous'.

A few months ago, Alan Protheroe of the BBC wrote a piece on usage in *The Listener*: a week later, he was attacked by a reader, not so much for his ideas, as for the style in which he wrote them – and this reader was in turn attacked by another reader for his errors.

The desire to attack ideas about usage by attacking the language in which they are phrased is certainly widespread. I have several times been beaten up in this way. 'How can we take seriously,' wrote one radio listener, 'anyone who talks about English usage, who pronounces *one* as "wun" – a point which will not be immediately apparent to *ET* readers, of course, but which is certainly an accurate observation about my Welsh-Liverpudlian background. I tried to make a joke about it in a later programme. 'I'm doing my best to improve my accent,' I said – and laughed while I said it, to make sure people saw it as a joke. But it backfired anyway. I received several letters praising me for my heroic stand. I received several others condemning me for being a traitor to my class.

This, as psychiatrists with a German accent would say, is a regular and interesting pattern of behaviour. In fact, it was neatly identified by Ian Lee in a letter to *The Listener* some time ago:

'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 skimmers, and so on. 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 from 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.
- Other categories can be added as necessary.'

Some of the reasons for this widespread and deep-rooted antagonism, and the insecurity which it feeds, I can understand. The correspondent referred to in my *ET* preview article, who was 'whacked' in proportion to the number of times he split his infinitives, illustrates very well the powerful way in which our early education can condition us. But can all the hardened attitudes, and the insecurity, be explained by early schooling? Was an antipathy to intrusive *r* taught in this way, for example? Or the concern to retain older stress patterns, such as '*dispute*' for the more recent (industrially acting) pronunciation of '*dispute*'? It is possible that *ET* readers might remember being drilled in these matters; but I haven't encountered this kind of subject matter being formally taught in school.

Perhaps one factor here is that the language changes involved have been going on for a long time: the stress shift case, for instance, has been with us since the later 16th century, when '*outlaw*' and '*rebel*' (used as nouns) were stressed in this way. Usage change of this kind seems to take

place largely unconsciously. In which case, when and how does people's attention become drawn to it? If these matters are not introduced in school, then where do they come from? Does an attitude of purism, once taught, become so deep-rooted that it searches out all kinds of linguistic difference and change, and subjects them to criticism? Or are we all endowed with some innate predisposition to purism in the first place, which we have to consciously control – a kind of linguistic original sin?

If you want to play Ian Lee's game, there are several places in the present article where you can score some points. But if you do play, I want to know *why* you play. If it were simply a matter of 'standards' – preserving clarity and intelligibility, avoiding ambiguity, striving for precision (in contexts where precision is desirable), and so on – I would rest content. But most of the criticisms which people make of each other's usage seem to have nothing to do with these notions. Is my split infinitive of a few lines ago any less (or more) intelligible, or ambiguous, than the alternatives? I chose to use it because I liked the rhythm which resulted; the alternatives seemed jerky and non-fluent. You may have a different sense of rhythmical values – but is this anything to do with standards?

It will be evident from these questions, and from the ones I raised in *ET1*, that I am trying to start a discussion about why so many people feel so insecure about their language, and what if anything can be done about it. What – or who – has made them so insecure? And, as a corollary, why are so many people so linguistically aggressive? *ET* would seem to be an excellent forum for such a discussion, so in the next number this column will be devoted to readers' views. I have my own theory about the matter, but more on that (if I survive) in *ET3*.