
This intelligent and sympathetic book

Ernest Gowers, *The Complete Plain Words*, revised by Sidney Greenbaum and Janet Whitcut, Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), 1986, pp. 288, £5.50

Review by David Crystal

In 1948, Sir Ernest Gowers, a distinguished civil servant, wrote *Plain words*. In 1951, he followed it up with *The ABC of plain words*. Both books were written at the invitation of the Treasury, as part of their policy of improving official

English. Then, in 1954, the two books were combined and revised to produce *The complete plain words*. It quickly became a standard work alongside Fowler and Partridge, much admired for its elegance, wit, and good sense. When I bought it, it cost me 8s. 6d.

There was a second edition, edited by Bruce Fraser in 1973, and now we have this third edition, issued as part of the HMSO's bicentenary celebration, and still a very reasonable price (£5.50). It was a wise decision. Usage does not stand still – nor do people's attitudes to it. Gowers and Fraser always introduced changes with each reprinting of the book. But in 30 years, something more radical is required.

Sidney Greenbaum is Quain Professor of English at University College London. Janet Whitcut, now a freelance writer, has been a research editor in the field of

lexicography. They have done an excellent job in making Gowers come alive again, in the linguistically more-aware 1980s. They have based their work on Fraser's edition, and followed the same principles as he did – substituting contemporary examples, taking account of changes in usage norms, and so on, but at all times trying to retain the flavour of the original.

The most important changes are the addition of a chapter on recent trends, consisting of comments on the growth in informal expression, sexist language, the influence of science and technology, and of new varieties of English (US, UN, EEC, etc.). Another chapter offers for more detailed study six specimens of connected prose, illustrating different levels of success. There is an interesting new section on the language and design of modern official forms. The comments on

individual words and phrases, originally spread throughout various chapters, are now brought together into a single chapter of over 300 items (though it could as easily have been twice as long). Many of Gowers' original list have been silently dropped, as they no longer attract attention (e.g. *repercussion*, *sterilise*); several new usages have been added (e.g. *hopefully*, *ethnic*). Stylistically, the main change has been to eliminate the unconscious sex-bias in the older use of language (*plain man* becoming *plain person*, and so on).

Two things must strike anyone reading this new edition. First, how rapidly popular opinion changes about English usage. Words and phrases being roundly condemned a generation ago now raise hardly a hackle (e.g. *glimpse*, *position*, *sense* as verbs). And secondly, how Gower's main precepts are as sensible today as they were when he first presented them: 'Be short; be simple; be human'. I nearly wrote 'adumbrated', in that last sentence. Such is the beneficial effect of reading again this intelligent and sympathetic book. □

Acknowledge

It is pleasanter to write 'Thank you for your letter' than merely to *acknowledge* it.

Acquaint

Prefer *tell* or *inform*. To acquaint oneself is to *find out*, and to be acquainted with something is to *know* it. *Acquaint* is a starchy word.

Acquire

Use *get* or *buy* or *win* according to which you mean.

Action

In managerial jargon, *action* is used as a verb, as in 'Please action this report'. This is a convenient piece of shorthand for *take action on*, but the longer phrase should be preferred for public pronouncements.

Adequate

Where possible, use *enough*. To have an adequate standard of living is, in simple parlance, to have enough money.