

The Fight for English – 1

Two scripts for Lingua Franca, ABC, November 2006

At the beginning of January this year, *The Fight for English* wasn't even thought of, let alone written. In this programme I'll tell you how it happened, and why.

It all started when another new book, called *How Language Works*, appeared that month. This was a book of 73 chapters dealing with all aspects of language and languages. A sort of 'how it works' book. Bit like a car manual, really. In just one place, in two paragraphs in Chapter 69, I let off a broadside against those who in recent years have been advocating a policy of 'zero tolerance' in relation to language. I was thinking of Lynne Truss's *Eats Shoots and Leaves*, in particular. Do you remember her sub-title? 'The zero tolerance approach to punctuation'. That's an unhealthy development, I suggested. Zero tolerance is the language of terrorism and crime prevention. Issues to do with language usage are much more varied, complex, and subtle.

Well, it was as if I'd printed those two paragraphs in capital letters and all the colours of the rainbow. Reviewer after reviewer homed in on them. It was as if I'd not written the rest of the book. I bumped into a friend a few days later and he said he'd been reading in the papers about my new book on English usage. But it's not a book on English usage, I howled! But it must be, he said. All the reviewers say so.

I retired, licking wounds. And then I thought, What is going on here? Why does this happen? Why are people still so hung up about English usage? Have they always been like this? Will they always be like this? I decided to write my next book.

It was Lynne Truss who was bothering me most. Unimaginable millions have bought *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. It was the publishing success story of the new millennium. But I have to admit to being completely taken aback. The book originated as a Radio 4 series of four programmes called 'Cutting a Dash'. I was a consultant for that series, and one of Lynne's contributors. We got on fine. I thought her approach was delightful, the right blend of serious interest and quirky thinking. Punctuation had never been a sexy subject, ever. If anything was going to make it so, I thought, this series would be it.

But a book? Never. After the interview, we were reflecting on the public interest - or rather, lack of it - in the subject. Write a book on punctuation? I remembered Eric Partridge's guide, and a host of other long neglected accounts that I have on my shelves. None of them sold brilliantly, and all now gather dust. And I made the stupidest remark of my life. 'I wouldn't bother, Lynne. Books on punctuation never sell!'

So what do I know? I still have no clear idea why that book has done so well. Why did people buy it? Did you buy it? If you did, what did you hope you'd get out of it? Was it just to have an enjoyable read? Or did you think that a book on punctuation will somehow solve all your language problems?

Eats, Shoots and Leaves represents a whole genre of books that have been around for over 200 years. Manuals about English usage. Books of linguistic etiquette. They have sold well, and they all make the same claims. Read me and all shall be well – linguistically, that is.

But does reading a usage manual help, if you have some language difficulties? The sad fact is: not much. If usage manuals had lived up to their promises, we would be home and dry by now. The Dean of Canterbury, Henry Alford, published his usage guide in 1860: he called it *The Queen's English*. That didn't stop people worrying. Forty years later, the Fowler brothers published theirs in 1906: *The King's English*. That didn't stop people worrying. A century later and we can see the corpses of usage manuals littering the battlefields of English - Gowers and Partridge in the UK, Strunk and Levin in the USA. If any one of these had worked, we would not have needed the others.

Reading a book on usage is an attempt at 'Do it yourself' linguistics. It is bound to fail, because it is too late. Linguistic education needs to take place while we are young. That's when

we can find the time, resources, and help. Very rarely do people get all three when they are older. Learning a language - mother-tongue or foreign - is a long and complex exercise. It needs a steady and systematic approach. It certainly can't be reduced to a few succinct points in alphabetical order in a usage manual.

I'm not against usage books, as such. I have written one myself. And there are some fine modern examples of the genre, such as Pam Peter's *Cambridge Guide*, which try to explain rather than condemn. All I'm saying is that they're not a panacea. They don't solve the underlying problem of obtaining systematic help about language. But they do have a value. They help to alert us to the issues of change that worry people. And they draw attention to those features of language where it is all too easy to be lazy or careless, and where sense or intelligibility suffers as a result.

But the result of reading a usage book should be to enthuse the reader about language. Any language is a wonderful, complex thing. It's something to explore, to master, and to be proud of. It is not something about which one should feel inferior or ashamed.

Yet millions do feel linguistically inferior. And their inferiority complex is reinforced by the mug that stares out at us from many a newspaper advertisement: 'Are You Shamed By Your Mistakes in English'? Deep down, everyone who has bought a usage book – and millions who haven't – thinks, 'Yes'.

How has all this happened? How have we been made to feel so ashamed of our own language? It wasn't always like this.

It's only human nature, of course, to make fun of people who are different from yourself, and it's a matter of circumstance whether the ridicule is friendly or malicious. From the Middle Ages there are reports of upper-class people ridiculing the way uneducated people speak. Ordinary people ridiculed the way educated people spoke, too, of course – though usually from a safe distance.

In Britain, the ridicule began once the social prestige of the south-east of England had been established, with the rise of London and the presence there of the court. Regional accents and dialects were the first things to be criticised. If you spoke in a regional way, you were provincial in the worst sense – socially inept, ignorant, and unintelligent.

The greatest writers, such as Chaucer and Shakespeare, saw through these emerging stereotypes. Shakespeare never ridicules native English accents and dialects. His targets for satire were people who put on linguistic airs and graces, who tried to be what they were not, and who used language as part of the process. Thus we see the pretentiousness of Osric and Holofernes reflected in their speech. He also pokes fun at people who try to use big words and get them wrong, as with Dogberry and Launcelot Gobbo. Foreigners attempting to speak English were fair game too, especially if they were the enemy (as with the French). But regional speech is never a target.

Things got worse as a standard language evolved. A linguistically diverse nation needs a standard language to permit mutual intelligibility. And there is a very close association between a standard language and writing. This is because the written language is something which can be controlled. It is not a natural medium of language, as speech is. It has to be learned, through formal processes of teaching, usually in school. If a country is to have a standard language, it has to be taught. And writing is the best medium for introducing it.

That is why spelling is so important. It is the defining feature of the standard variety of a language. Grammar and punctuation are important too, but spelling is the critical thing. Nowadays, we can get away with a certain flexibility in punctuation, and also in grammar, but there is very little leeway in spelling. With just one or two exceptions (such as informal emails), if you spell incorrectly you will, nowadays, be considered careless, lazy, or uneducated, or possibly all three. But that is a modern notion. It didn't exist in the Middle Ages. It took three hundred years for standard English to develop into something like the form we know today, and for the criticisms to start coming in.

Who started the fight over English? You have to realize that in the 16th century there were no grammars, dictionaries, and other linguistic resources devoted to English. So who did people turn to when they wanted guidance about usage? In a word: authors. And during the 17th and especially the 18th centuries, several authors set themselves up as arbiters of English usage.

Why did they do it? Because they felt the language was in a state of chaos. They saw spelling becoming increasingly complicated. They saw writers out of control, inventing new words whenever they wanted to - playwrights such as Shakespeare among the worst offenders. They saw everybody using slang. All over the country there were millions who were talking and writing differently from those in the cultured south-east. It had to stop.

They were right. It was millions. The population of England doubled between 1550 and 1650, reaching 5 million. It was 6 million by 1700. New cities were rapidly growing all over the country. Britain had never seen such an increase in the numbers of regional speakers as took place in the 17th and 18th centuries. We might interpret this as a sign of linguistic vitality. But what one person sees as an enriching diversity, another person sees as a divisive fragmentation. To the observers of the time, such as Jonathan Swift and Lord Chesterfield, this was evidence that the language was headed for disaster.

It wasn't just the increase in regional speakers which worried them; it was the change in their social character. These were not rustics. They were businessmen, merchants, and industrialists, an increasingly powerful sector of society, whose numbers would be further swelled as the Industrial Revolution progressed. And they were an increasingly genteel section of society. The growth of the gentry, a class below the peerage, became a major feature of 17th- and 18th-century life.

And how were you to behave, if you had become a member of this new class of gentry? Books of etiquette came to be written. One influential book was by Lord Halifax, who wrote *Advice to a Daughter* in 1688. All aspects of behaviour had to be dealt with - how to bow, shake hands, wear a hat, hold gloves, eat with a fork, pour tea, use a napkin, or blow your nose in public. And, above all, how to speak and how to write correctly.

And so, as the 18th century approached, a new generation of language custodians emerged, meeting the need for linguistic security. Follow the rules in my grammar, said Lindley Murray, and you will be safe. Millions believed him. The era of usage books had begun. How they fared I'll talk about in the next Lingua Franca.

The Fight for English - 2

In the last Lingua Franca I asked the question: Where have all the usage books come from? And why? Lynne Truss's *Eats Shoots and Leaves* is the latest in a long line of manuals offering help to the linguistically insecure. Why did so many people buy it? In my new book *The Fight for English*, I decided to explore the questions: 'Why do so many people feel linguistically insecure? Who is to blame? And what is the solution?' I argue that a policy of 'zero tolerance', as advocated by Lynne and others, is totally the wrong approach. Rather, we need to appreciate the true range and complexity of language. We need to be masters of our own language. We don't want to be in the position where somebody else's language masters us. That's when people start feeling ashamed, and perfectly fluent speakers end up saying such things as 'Ooh, I don't speak English very correctly'.

Who is to blame? It's the generation of grammarians, lexicographers, and elocutionists who wrote a series of influential books in the second half of the 18th century. People like Robert Lowth and Lindley Murray for grammar. Dr Johnson for vocabulary. John Walker for pronunciation. 'Every polite tongue has its own rules', asserted Lindley Murray. And it was the job of these writers - all self-appointed authorities - to make sure that these rules were known, appreciated, and followed.

You have to understand the mindset of these people, for this would colour our entire way of thinking for the next 300 years. It can be summarized in four steps:

Step one: Left to themselves, people don't speak or write correctly.

Step two: Grammars and dictionaries are therefore needed in order to instruct society in the correct ways of speaking and writing.

Step three: No-one is exempt. Even the best authors, such as Shakespeare, break the rules from time to time.

And then, step four: If even Shakespeare breaks the rules, this proves the need for guidance, because lesser mortals are even more likely to fall into the same trap.

So there you are. Even Shakespeare gets it wrong. No wonder people began to feel insecure.

Murray and the others wrote their books, told everyone how they should be speaking and writing - and, amazingly, everyone accepted their dictates. Even Lord Chesterfield, one of the most caustic critics of the time, bowed before the language authorities. This is what he had to say about Dr Johnson. 'I will not only obey him, like an old Roman, as my dictator, but like a modern Roman, I will implicitly believe in him as my pope'. As my pope! These writers were infallible. If they said you shouldn't put a preposition at the end of a sentence, you shouldn't, and that was all there was to it. Don't do it.

And so people didn't. Or rather, they tried not to. And they failed. It is after all an ancient feature of the English language, and it is impossible to do without it. Even the authorities break their own rules some of the time. Lindley Murray, who tells everyone off if they put a preposition at the end of a sentence, does it himself. And you find the same thing happening for all unrealistic rules.

That is the point. These are artificial, invented rules, introduced to provide an easy way of distinguishing 'us' versus 'them'. To be upper-class, to be educated, is to speak and write according to these rules; if you don't, you are lower-class, uneducated. It is an 18th-century view of life which I think is quite out of place today.

When people hear me say this, they think: Ah, Crystal is saying there aren't any rules. Oh no no. Of course there are rules. A language is a system of rules. Grammar books tell us what these rules are. I have written a grammar book myself. I know what the rules are. There are about 3500 of them in English.

But 'don't end a sentence with a preposition' *isn't* a rule in English. Nor is the claim that you should never split an infinitive. And so on, for about 30 other claims that were introduced into our lives by these grammarians. These are *options* in the language - usages which the language allows us to do. But they are not obligatory rules. And to suggest that they are, and that all of us are wrong if we fail to use them, is to my mind the biggest con in the history of English linguistic history.

It's the same with punctuation. Here too people have tried to find rules where there aren't any. Take the one that bothers Lynne Truss and others so much. Using an apostrophe to mark a plural ending. The classic case is *potato's*, with an apostrophe before the *s*. There should be zero tolerance here, she says. An apostrophe is only to be used to express possession, never, never, never for a plural. Do you believe this? I can feel you nodding from here. But you are wrong.

I can make you use an apostrophe for a plural right now. Think of this next sentence in your mind and work out how you would write it down. Ready? 'Dot your i's and cross your t's'. How are you going to write *i's*? It can't be '*i* - *s*'. That would be really confusing: it would look like the word *is*. You have to use an apostrophe after the vowel. And the same applies to 'do's and don'ts' and lots of other examples.

So we do use an apostrophe, sometimes, to express a plural. We do it when we want to pluralize an unusual noun, such as an abbreviation or a date - as in *the 1960's* - or when it ends in a vowel, such as *i* and *do*. And that is why you see *potato's*. The word ends in a vowel, and people feel a little uneasy about just adding an *s*, because it makes the word look like *potatoss*. That is why greengrocers do it. But they have illustrious precedents. Even Dr Johnson includes a

number of words in his dictionary with an apostrophe before a plural ending, such as *volcano's* - apostrophe *s*.

Of course, things have moved on since Dr Johnson's time. A few people - chiefly publishers and printers - tried to standardize the use of the apostrophe in the 19th century, and they failed. Today there is enormous variation. Is it *Kings Cross* with or without an apostrophe? Should *Harrods* have one or not? Some firms go one way; some go another. We have *McDonald's* with an apostrophe and *Starbucks* without one. There are hundreds of examples like this in modern English. And because there is such divided usage, that is precisely why a policy of zero tolerance is wrong. Zero tolerance suggests that there are 100 per cent rules to be followed. The apostrophe isn't like that.

People who defend artificial rules usually fall back on the argument that they are needed for clarity. I am as keen on achieving clarity as anyone else. But the artificial rules of the old grammars don't help anyone to achieve it. There isn't a jot of difference in clarity between saying 'That's the man to whom I was speaking' and 'That's the man I was speaking to'. The first is more formal than the second, more appropriate for writing, and the second is more informal, more appropriate for colloquial speech. But they are both equally clear.

This word 'appropriate' is the key. To be in a position of power over the use of language you have to be able to choose confidently how to behave. The 18th century grammarians didn't allow for choice. For them, just one way was correct. Today, we need to be able to suit our language to the situation, just as we do our clothing. There are more linguistic demands being made upon us these days. One style of speech and writing doesn't suit all circumstances. And the world is getting more varied day by day - not least because of the Internet.

Appropriateness is the key factor, and that's what I see replacing the old notions of artificial correctness in the schools, such as in the new National Curriculum in the UK. One of the aims of education, whether by parents or by teachers, is to instil appropriate behaviour in children - which in the case of language means instilling a sense of linguistic appropriateness - when to use one variety or style rather than another. This is what the 18th-century approach did not do.

So, let's get back to *Eats Shoots and Leaves*. I agree totally with Lynne Truss's underlying message, which is to bring the study of punctuation back into the centre of the educational stage. I am as disturbed as she is when I see the rules of standard English punctuation broken. One of the jobs of education is to teach the written standard, and punctuation is part of that. If kids leave school not having learned to punctuate, then something has gone horribly wrong.

But a policy of zero tolerance doesn't allow for flexibility. It suggests that the language is in a state where all the rules are established with 100 per cent certainty. That's false. We don't know what all the rules of punctuation are. And no rule of punctuation is followed by all of the people all of the time.

A good linguistically based grounding in punctuation should give students a solid understanding of what the rules are - insofar as there *are* rules - and point out the difficulties in applying them. This is the kind of thing that is increasingly taking place now in schools. The next generation of schoolkids will have a much better grounding in language matters than ever before. So I am cautiously optimistic about the future.

But unfortunately none of this helps people who were educated in the barren years when there was little or no language training in schools at all. They would know such things as prepositions and split infinitives existed, because they would hear their bosses talking about them. And these bosses talked with such authority. 'Really, Smith, another split infinitive? Don't you know anything, lad?'

Everyone felt inferior, faced with such apparent knowledge. The fact that much of this knowledge was spurious would never have occurred to them. You can only argue against quackery by using evidence, which means knowledge, and they had none. So they tried to improve themselves, turning to books which claimed to solve all problems. Or turning to courses.

The face began to appear in newspapers, looking out at them accusingly. 'Are YOU shamed by your mistakes in English?'

If enough people tell you you are making mistakes, you begin to believe it. And because people do make mistakes, some of the time, it fuels the feeling of insecurity. Panic, even. So no wonder people feel they need help. No wonder they look for a book. And no wonder that they should choose Lynne Truss's, which is so elegantly written. But they wouldn't have done this if they had been taught well in the first place. If the right teaching is put in place - and of course that's a big if - the next generation will be much better off. They will be more knowledgeable and confident about language. They won't need to rely on prescriptive usage manuals any more.

My new book is the story of the fight for English usage - the story of a group of people who tried to shape the language in their own image but, generation after generation, failed. They looked at the language around them, and didn't like what they saw. 'Fight' isn't my metaphor, but theirs. 'We must fight to preserve the tongue that Shakespeare spoke' said one newspaper headline, years ago. These crusaders devoured grammars, exploded in fury, fought long and hard, and then they passed away, as a new generation of pundits appeared on the horizon. To coin a phrase: they ate, shot, and left.