
Analysing the huge mailbag: Reception of John Honey's *The Language Trap*¹

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A controversial publication inspiring linguistic comments
by members of the general public

1. Introduction

Just after the start of the research project Bridging the Unbridgeable: Linguists, Prescriptivists and the General Public in 2011, we laid our hands on a file called 'Reactions to L. Trap'. The file contains well over 200 documents: letters, picture postcards, notes, newspaper clippings, and various other items, almost all of them relating to the reception of a pamphlet called *The Language Trap*, written by John Honey (1933–2001)² and published in 1983 by the British National Council for Educational Standards (NCES). The file was offered for sale by Plurabelle Books in Cambridge as part of the late John Honey's library, and acquiring it offered a unique opportunity to study the reception of this highly controversial publication, not only by linguists, but also by the general public. Both groups responded in large numbers to the publicity the pamphlet inspired, in the press as well as on the radio.³

The Language Trap was published early in February 1983, upon which Honey sent copies to various people to inform them of the publication, but also as part of what appears to have been a carefully planned publicity campaign. This is evident from the fact that on February 14, Valentine's Day, as one of Honey's correspondents pointed out (JH/21c),⁴ summaries of the contents of the pamphlet were simultaneously published in four newspapers, *The Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph* (*The Times* first paid attention to the pamphlet on February 23 in an article by John Vincent).⁵ *The Times Educational Supplement* (TES) wrote about the pamphlet on February 18, its first opportunity as a weekly journal to publish about it. The article was written by Peter Newsam, Chairman of the Commission

for Racial Equality, and, like Honey, an educationist (Oxford Education Society). Newsam had been one of the early recipients of *The Language Trap* (JH/149), and Honey also sent copies to Howard Giles, editor at Multilingual Matters, for the purpose of having the pamphlet reviewed in the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*. Giles informed Honey that he 'sent on a copy of your letter to our Review Editor, John Edwards ... as well as the pamphlet itself' (JH/12), and a review appeared later that year (Edwards, 1983). Furthermore, one of the earliest documents in the Honey Papers, a hand-written note dated February 2, 1983 from the Director of Leicester Polytechnic (JH/67)⁶ where Honey was Head of the School of Education and Dean of the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (JH/2), acknowledged the receipt of 'the **advance**



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copy of “The Language Trap” (bold type is used for emphasis throughout this paper). Honey probably wanted to inform his superior of the possibility of a critical reception of the publication in the press. The Director’s note ends with the words ‘I do hope that it attracts the favourable reviews that it deserves’.

Much of the debate following publication of the various accounts of *The Language Trap* took the form of a stream of Letters to the Editor, though not in the popular press, Graddol and Swann (1988: 111) note. In an appendix to this article, five so-called trails of responses in the press are listed: in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, the BAAL Newsletter (British Association for Applied Linguistics), *TES* and the popular press. From the contents of the Honey Papers it appears that not all Letters to the Editor that were produced in the course of the debate were actually published. I have, for instance, not found any published evidence of James Milroy’s letter to *The Guardian* of March 9 (JH/53b) written in response to Honey’s letter in *The Guardian* of the day before in which Honey replied to a Letter to the Editor from James and Lesley Milroy published on March 1, accusing them of turning to the press without having read *The Language Trap*:

IT IS a basic rule of fair play that one does not attack an opponent’s argument until one has actually heard what that argument is. Yet Lesley and James Milroy (March 1) have done just that, and on the basis of a selective and slanted newspaper report they have hastened to attack what they call my ‘oversimplified’ views (*The Guardian*, 8 March, 1983, 13).

In the unpublished letter, James Milroy explains why they wrote to *The Guardian*: ‘Professor Honey’s pamphlet was not obtainable in university bookshops in Birmingham, Sheffield, Manchester and London, and we have been unable until this week to discover the address of the publisher’ (JH/53b). This had indeed led to a lot of letters in the Honey Papers from people approaching Honey personally for a copy of *The Language Trap* instead of writing to NCES. Milroy added: ‘In view of the wide publicity Professor Honey’s work has received (**presumably by deliberate policy of the publisher**), it is entirely “fair play” that readers should learn that not everyone involved in language teaching is likely to agree completely with Professor Honey’s views’. ‘Leaked to the press’ are the words Lesley Milroy used in a private letter to Honey (LH/6a), dated March 9, in which she responded to an earlier

letter from him telling her how ‘very upset’ he had been ‘that you should have chosen to attack me so strongly . . . before you have even read my pamphlet *The Language Trap*’ (LH/134, March 2). The Milroys were not alone in this: many other people wrote to the press without having read *The Language Trap*, and Honey reproached them all for doing so, both publicly and in private. He thus wrote to Marian Whitehead (JH/133) from the School of English, University of London, whose letter to the *TES* had appeared on March 4, calling her letter ‘impetuous’, and telling her how ‘amazed’ he was ‘at the willingness that some people have to blunder into commenting on things others have written, before they’ve actually read them’.

2. Usage problems and the general public

If the public side of the debate was mostly conducted by linguists – Richard Hudson and the Milroys in *The Guardian*,⁷ John Vincent in *The Times*, Roy Harris, David Crystal and Peter Trudgill in the BAAL Newsletter and Roy Harris in *TES* (Graddol & Swann, 1988: 105–11) – the publicity surrounding the publication of *The Language Trap* produced many letters from members of the public addressed to Honey directly as well. Letter writers mention having heard Honey on the Jimmy Young programme, on the Today programme or World at One on BBC Radio 4, all on February 14, and on BBC Radio 3 the next day, probably on the Rush Hour programme. In a reply to one of these letters, Honey referred to the ‘many radio and press interviews which resulted from the enormous media attention given to my newly published pamphlet *The Language Trap*’ (March 11, JH/50), and in another, dated March 18, he mentions ‘a dozen radio interviews in February’ (JH/138), noting that the pamphlet is ‘selling like hot cakes, thanks to all the publicity in the Telegraph, Guardian, Times and TES’. Altogether, Honey received 108 letters, notes and postcards from readers and listeners, most of which he replied to personally.⁸ One letter of March 23, written by his secretary, Judith Smith, apologises for the fact that ‘Professor Honey has had an enormous mailbag as a result of the great publicity given by all the media to his new publication’ (JH/120). There are quite a few references in the letter collection to the ‘huge mailbag’ that Honey had to deal with (e.g. JH/124): as many as 20 letters came in on March 2 alone.

Several letters to Honey deal with usage problems, inspired by the nature of the controversy over *The Language Trap* – the question of whether or not to teach Standard English in the schools, as advocated by Honey. Other letters tell the story of frustrated teachers who were no longer allowed to teach grammar in their English classes, a controversial topic discussed in detail by Cameron (1995) (see also Ager, 2003). These teachers in distress must have been drawn to the opportunity of pouring out their hearts to a professor of education who appeared to be standing up for their cause. Usage problems form a key interest in the Bridging the Unbridgeable project, as witness our regular contributions to *English Today* between 2014 and 2016. In many of these brief publications we invited readers to respond to questionnaires which served to elicit data for our research, and we regularly asked informants to tell us about their ‘pet peeves’, usage problems they were particularly critical about. Writing about features like the flat adverb (as in *go slow* vs. *slowly*), the use of *literally* as an intensifier, the plural of *octopus*, and the acceptability of the dangling participle (as in *Pulling the trigger, the gun went off*) or of *have went*, we also hoped to identify usage problems that are not yet part of the prescriptive canon, which comprises so-called ‘old chestnuts’ (Weiner, 1988: 173) like the placement of *only* or the split infinitive. Trying to elicit such information is usually a tricky process, since asking specifically for what people might consider problematic rarely produces anything that is not already dealt with in the vast amount of usage advice literature available. The Honey Papers include letters from people writing to him on the spur of the moment, upon hearing an interview with him on the radio, to consult him about linguistic features they considered problematic, and on which they sought his advice (which he usually supplied). In this paper, I will focus on these letters in particular, since they allow us to gain insight into what were considered usage problems during the early 1980s. The Honey Papers offer first-hand information on this topic, produced spontaneously rather than in a forced setting like an interview. This makes the information contained in the letters unique, and of great value for sociolinguists and scholars interested in prescriptivism.

3. The letter writers’ linguistic complaints

Broadly speaking, three types of complaints occur in these letters, concerning American influence on

British English, the language of broadcasters, and Honey’s own language use. In addition, a number of language features are discussed which the letter writers were particularly critical of. One letter writer, a Mr D., aged 70, from Scotland,⁹ found the use of American *billion* acceptable only ‘for the sake of misunderstanding & brevity’, while ‘shudder[ing] to think that the golfer should become TAHM WAHTSON as it is pronounced by Mark M’Cormick or that we should lose the T from the language because Americans & pop singers convert waiting into wading’ (JH/75). The letter is part of a longer correspondence with Honey, and in an earlier one (JH/8a), D. complained about words like *number*, *couple* and *group* occurring with a plural verb, while a fictitious example in the letter, ‘*e don’t know no f--- g better*, suggests that he is also critical of *h*-dropping, *he don’t*, double negation and the use of *fucking* as an intensifier. Another letter writer critical of Americanisms is a Mr S. from Somerset, who identified himself as ‘a former grammar-school teacher brought up on the grammar of English, French and Latin’ (JH/21b.a). S. had heard Honey on Radio 3 on February 15 (having read the account of *The Language Trap* in the *Daily Telegraph* the day before), and had been struck by Honey’s pronunciation of ‘the indefinite article “a” to rhyme with “day” instead of with “the” and in this you are certainly in line with practically every public speaker nowadays on radio and TV’. ‘Is this now standard English?’ he wanted to know, adding that he considered the usage a ‘barbarism’, and that he ‘had thought it one of those importations from the U.S.A. that sweep this country and become fashionable, like “basically” and “a — situation” both of which one can count on hearing in every “public” speaker’s opening sentence’. Honey replied by agreeing with S. on the barbarism of rhyming ‘a’ with ‘day’, adding in his own defense that having listened to ‘the tape recording my wife made of my interview’, there were ‘only two such examples out of a score or so uses of the indefinite article’, and that such ‘infortunities’ are only natural when ‘fluent speakers ... “think aloud”’. However, he added, ‘the practice must be fought!’

American influence on British English is a topic raised by Honey himself in his reply to Mr W. from near Manchester, who used to work for the local government. In his letter (JH/143a, March 14, 1983), W. complained about the use of *you was* and *they was* by a former boss (‘a member of the Chartered Institute of Secretaries’ no less), and also about the fact that he heard ‘more bad English’ on the radio, such as *got* and *get* (*I’ve*

got a pen), which he called ‘ugly words because in most contexts they are superfluous’. In addition, he wrote that he is ‘sick of hearing the phrase “sort of” (*I was sort of looking for an answer*, as used by the actor James Fox). W. concluded by saying that he thought it ‘a mystery ... how the accent used by royalty, the public schools and the BBC ever came to be accepted as correct’. Instead, he wrote, he would prefer to hear an accent on the radio like that used by Lancastrians, who would not say *oda* for ‘other’, ‘bawth wota’, or ‘Radio foe’. Honey’s reply reads that on the use of *get* and *got*, ‘British English is yielding to American English’¹⁰ but that we have ‘[s]o far ... flinched from yielding to the American form “gotten”’. As for which accent ‘can be called “better” than another’, he explained that there ‘is a great dispute among specialists in phonetics and sociolinguists’ about this, by which he may have been alluding to the criticism from linguists his pamphlet had evoked in the papers.

If the use of a non-rhotic accent on the BBC was criticised by one writer, so was intrusive /r/ in a letter from an anonymous Scot who responded to an article about *The Language Trap* in the Scottish *Sunday Standard* (JH/135). The article had appeared on February 27, on the front page no less, bearing the headline ‘Lawrs of speech that Scots get wrong’ (JH/144). The article, which was based on *The Language Trap* as well as on an interview with Honey conducted by telephone (JH/52), quite understandably produced the kind of response from this ‘angry Scot’, as he signed himself, concluding his letter by saying ‘I would say we are pleased enough with our Scots language, so please keep your hands off’. In the *Sunday Standard* article Honey is quoted as saying: ‘The best thing a Scot can do is come to England ... I want them only to speak in an intelligible way’ – words that provoked the response, quoted in the same article, from a lecturer in English Studies at Stirling University (who herself was English) that such an attitude reflects ‘supreme arrogance’. In his reply to a letter from a Mrs N. from the Shetland Islands, inspired by the article in the *Sunday Standard*, Honey admitted that he ‘had made a few unguarded comments to a journalist from the Sunday Standard over the telephone, and I dread to think what he had made of them in his piece’ (JH/52).

N.’s letter is the longest letter in the Honey Papers. It offers details about the Shetland dialect, but also argues that dialect speakers can, with a bit of effort on the part of the listener, be understood while they are quite able to understand standard

English themselves. People like her husband, she added, who do not travel or ‘are not required to write reports or read documents’, might not have a great need for standard English. For all that, she believed that ‘a graded grammar of the English language for use throughout both primary and secondary schools’ would sell very well, aimed especially at ‘all teaching staffs below about age 40’, and supported by ‘in-service training, seminars & so on’. ‘The money will roll in!’ she added. As for herself, she would have been a member of the ‘grammarless generation’ – a term used by Keith (1990) to refer to speakers in the UK who had been taught no grammar in school during the 1970s and 80s (see Ebner, 2017: 377) – if her family hadn’t moved to Scotland when she was nine, upon which she experienced ‘a revelation, a blinding light explaining all the functions of language that I’d blindly ½-formulated myself till then’. Her greatest worry as a trained teacher of English and French is the same as Honey’s, and which was one of the points he made in *The Language Trap*: ‘What has now happened is that a whole generation of teachers has grown up who know no English grammar, & many of them have no working knowledge of a 2nd or 3rd language either. Yet they hold our children’s future in their hands’.

The Honey Papers contain more letters in support of Honey’s cause. But they also include one other angry letter, by a man called A.S., from Staffordshire, who accused Honey of ‘wander [ing] into blandard English’, a word of which he says ‘[y]ou may have the copyright ... if you wish’.¹¹ The word, which is not in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), may have been slang at the time – the author used more slang in his letter, like *Dicker* for ‘dictionary’ (not in the *OED* either), adding ‘oh dear’: he was clearly taunting Honey as he wrote; *blandard* is explained in the online *Urban Dictionary* as a contraction of *bloody standard*. S. said *blandard* refers to ‘a form of speech which creates distrust in hearers, or at least some hearers’, and the word that put him off when he heard Honey ‘speak on radio today’, February 14, was *quite*. This is ‘an unnecessary word’, he said, and one that has two meanings, ‘very’ and ‘not very’. ‘More important,’ he added, ‘when you said “It is quite (very) clear” I knew you were pontificating, and started to distrust what you were saying’. Inspiring this kind of criticism, not directed at the content of the message but trying to disparage the speaker, typically characterises prescriptive writings. Lynne Truss, for instance, was criticised in some of the reviews of *Eats Shoots and Leaves* (2003) for not sticking to

the punctuation rules she had outlined herself (del Rosario Medina Sánchez, 2013). S. concluded by saying that ‘the real question is have you invented a way of teaching grammar which does not create the stultifying misery of older methods, or the nit-picking of correcting trivial mistakes in the midst of a (fine) piece of creative writing?’ This is a key question, and one that has continued to worry linguists and teachers down to this day. The letter contains a PS: ‘Don’t bother to answer. I am not a teacher and of no influence’.

There is another letter telling Honey not to bother to reply, but in this case it was because the letter writer, a Mrs R. from Bradford, ‘understand[s] pressure of work to Educators like yourself’ (JH/21c). It is a multi-coloured document written on the backs of letters that suggest this writer was something of a professional complainer – on language this time: the use of *cos* for ‘because’ (‘a lot of Politicians do it . . . THE QUEEN does it THE D. of Ed does it . . . Newly Royal Weds DO IT!!!!’) and ‘unemployed teenagers up here [who] seem to say “FINK” a lot Wonder why cos its COCKNEY!!! is it NOT’. Other letter writers complained about the BBC ‘engaging “professional speakers” who lack a basic knowledge of English grammar and desecrate the language daily’, as one letter writer from Herefordshire put it (JH/22a), adding that ‘the B.B.C. should remember its duty as laid down in its charter and set a continuous good example’ and that ‘[t]he idea that anything goes’ – a common misunderstanding which Honey (unsuccessfully) tried to correct in *The Language Trap* – ‘will ultimately mean we shall have our own English Tower of Babel’. Another letter writer, from Norwich, asked Honey if ‘the expression “GOING TO GO” is incorrect grammar’. It used to be so in his youth, the writer explained, ‘but now this expression is so freely used on T.V.’ (JH/40a). He likewise added that ‘we expect the B.B.C or I.T.V to set a good example but what do we get’. BBC broadcasters were criticised in other letters for using *different to*, and for over-using *very*, as in *very, very hot*, and *totally*: ‘it is always “totally” unrealistic or “totally” unacceptable’ (JH/74, March 28). This letter writer, Mr W., has already been cited for complaining about his former boss’s language (JH/143a, March 14), and he once again wrote to say that he would:

... prefer a good regional accent to that of the BBC and the public schools. It has been said that sex is what posh people have coal delivered in. How an accent which fails to distinguish between the ‘e’ in

‘sex’ and the ‘a’ in ‘sacks’ came to be regarded as correct is a mystery to me.

Some six months later, Honey responded to a letter from a member of the BBC listening panel, who had consulted him on the occurrence of ‘hesitation phenomena such as . . . hum-ing and ah-ing’ which Honey said would not have occurred ‘before the mid-1950s when most sound broadcasting was based on scripted interviews’ (JH/106a). In the same reply Honey commented on the occurrence of a sentence coordinator (*and, so*) even when there is no link with what came before. Honey concluded by saying that he hoped that ‘[o]ne day . . . the BBC will invite me to address their announcers and presenters about how I feel they could make improvements in the way they speak’, a suggestion that his correspondent said in his reply he passed on ‘to the Head of Broadcasting Research at the BBC’. Whether an invitation ever materialised I do not know.

One final letter worth quoting is from a certain J.B., BA, MA, who described himself as someone ‘who left school at 14, never having received any credible instruction in formal grammar’, but who worked his way up to becoming ‘a sort of sociologist and teacher’. As Head of Campus of a school in Sheffield, he was particularly critical of a colleague applying ‘for a senior post in adult education’ but who didn’t know how to spell, ‘frequently uses “guy” for “man”, and . . . has a tendency to interject “like” ungrammatically into descriptive accounts’ (JH/29a). D’Arcy (2007: 392), however, identifies as many as four different vernacular functions of *like* – quotative *like* (‘we were **like**, “Yeah, but . . .”’), *like* used as an approximative adverb (‘to go **like** thirty miles’), the use of *like* as a discourse marker (‘but **like** she’s the funniest’) and as a discourse particle (‘She’s **like** dumb or something’) – and because the letter writer didn’t illustrate his comment with examples, it is unclear which of the four uses of *like* he was particularly critical of. All functions except for quotative *like*, according to D’Arcy, have long been in use, which may have been true for the usage criticised here, too. The comment is nevertheless of considerable interest, since the fact that the person criticised in the letter was a man confirms D’Arcy’s point that, contrary to general belief, gender differences are not at issue here. But because, as she argues, all uses of *like* ‘sound the same’ (2007: 411), it may well be that the letter writer was alerted to his colleague’s usage by the general increase of quotative *like* at the time, a usage possibly ‘introduced by the Valley Girls in the early 1980s’.

4. Other new pet peeves?

Though the above uses of *like* are widely criticised today, criticism is only beginning to find its way into English usage advice literature (Tieken-Boon van Ostade [in progress](#)). It is therefore interesting to see that it was already commented upon by one of Honey's correspondents. Other usage features commented on in the letters are, however, not new: Americanisms, as Crystal (2018) has shown, were already parodied in *Punch* during the 1860s, and some usage guides, such as Kingsley Amis's *The King's English* (1997), even devoted separate entries to them. The use of plural verbs with nouns like *number* or *group* which one letter writer disapproved of was already prescribed by Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1926), probably the best known English usage guide in the 1980s. As for the objection to the use of *different to* (rather than *from*), this, according to Fowler, is due to 'a superstition': quoting the *OED*, Fowler writes that *to* is 'found in writers of all ages'. Using *from*, he concludes the entry, is not wrong: 'on the contrary, it is "now usual" (*OED*); but it is only so owing to the dead set made against *d[ifferent] to* by mistaken critics' (1926: 113–14).

In 1981, so around the same time that the above letter writers sent Honey their linguistic comments, Robert Burchfield published a booklet with recommendations for BBC newsreaders, to avoid letters of complaint being directed at the BBC whenever what were perceived as linguistic mistakes were heard on radio or television. The letters in the Honey Papers confirm that broadcasters, and the BBC in particular, regularly came in for linguistic criticism at the time. One of the items listed by Burchfield is *different from/to/than*, which is not considered a very serious issue (receiving one star for objection only), but for which he recommends the use of *from* 'whenever possible' (1981: 33). Burchfield, too, prescribes the plural verb for nouns like *media* and *data*; the use of a singular verb form he classifies as 'unacceptable in any circumstances' (1981: 28). His least serious category includes what he called 'meaningless fillers', like *sort of*, commented on by one letter writer, and Honey's 'hesitation phenomena such as ... hum-ing and ah-ing' (1981: 35). The word *basically*, criticised by another letter writer, is not listed, but might have come into the same category. Burchfield does not condemn *got in have got for have*. While Fowler pronounced it to be 'good colloquial but not good literary English' (1926: 217), Burchfield, in the third edition of

the book, no longer advises against it (1996: 352).

Cos for 'because', objected to by the letter writer from Bradford, does not occur in Fowler (1926) but it does in Burchfield's third edition of 1996, which indicates that it had become a usage feature that evoked criticism in the meantime. Burchfield, however, does not condemn it, noting that it was 'first recorded in 1828, and used only in the representation of informal or regional speech' (1996: 185). The letter writer clearly noticed its widespread use, by supposedly authoritative speakers of English such as politicians and members of the royal family, which to her mind doesn't necessarily make it acceptable. Overuse of colloquial features, like the reduplication of *very* – commonly attested in the British National Corpus, a 110-million word corpus which covers the period of the Honey Papers (1980–93) – or the use of *totally* and popular interjections like *basically* and even *fucking* that some letter writers commented on, are characteristic of a process known as 'colloquialisation' which, according to Mair (2006) affected the English language during the twentieth century. It is in effect this development that the letter writers in the Honey Papers are critical of. Finally, the comment from the writer from Bradford on the use of *fink*, which she calls Cockney, is of interest, too, since TH-fronting is today characteristic of Estuary English, a 20th-century non-class-based variety (unlike RP) that originated in London and that spread 'to other cities and towns in the late twentieth century' (Beal, 2004: 198). The writer from Bradford identified the usage as far north as Yorkshire during the early 1980s. Though we won't know what the words 'a lot' mean in her comment ('unemployed teenagers ... say "FINK" a lot'), this comment is of great interest in the light of the spread of TH-fronting during the final decades of the twentieth century, which Kerswill (2003: 17) notes didn't occur in his '1983 cohort of seventeen 14–16 year olds' from Durham while it did some twenty years later. Estuary English, it might be mentioned here, was not a variety of English that Honey approved of, not surprising perhaps in view of his insistence on the teaching of Standard English in schools. In his later book *Language is Power* (1997), he writes:

[W]e must seek ways of trying to bring this new tendency in spoken standard English under control. This might be the first task of a newly founded Academy or its unofficial equivalent. (1997: 168)

A call for an English Academy, as this comment seems to represent, is remarkable to say the least, as it was rather more characteristic of the early eighteenth than the late twentieth century.

5. Conclusion

Instances of undesirable usage get noticed, according to Ilson (1985: 167), if they are widely used ('a lot'), but they only become usage problems, and as such candidates for inclusion in usage guides, if they can be discussed 'without giving offence'. The use of *fucking* as an intensifier is therefore unlikely ever to be treated in usage guides, in contrast to the new *like* and the overuse of empty interjections (*basically*) and of intensifiers (*very very*, *totally*), or the use of clipped forms like *cos* for *because*. It is interesting therefore to see that *cos* actually became a usage problem in between the two editions of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* discussed here. It would, however, take somewhat longer for the new *like* to enter the canon of prescriptivism, since this is something that is only happening now. What the letters from the general public in the Honey Papers have shown is that offensive usage is sometimes noted well before linguists or usage guide writers pick them up for analysis or discussion.

One of the effects of the ideology of standardisation, Milroy and Milroy ([1985] 2012: Chapter 2) argue, is the rise of a complaint tradition, and this complaint tradition (for the UK at least) has typically taken the form of Letters to the Editor (see Lukač, this volume). In the Honey Papers, the complaint tradition takes two forms, that of Letters to the Editor and of letters written directly to the author of the controversial document that inspired the first type of letters. The two types of letters, moreover, differ as to their authorship: while the Letters to the Editor were largely produced by linguists, the personal letters are from members of the general public. The first type of communication served to contribute to the debate on the question of the teaching of Standard English in the schools in public, while the second type concerned actual usage, showing perhaps most clearly where the real controversy lay: at the level of individual speakers or writers who were bothered by a particular usage or insecure about what to use themselves. Honey received a few angry letters but, as far as I know, no death threats, unlike Kate Burridge when she publicly suggested abolishing the possessive apostrophe (Burridge, 2010: 5–6). He did become vulnerable to general and widespread criticism in the media upon suggesting, similarly to

Burridge, that usage as a criterion should be taken into account when a contested language feature, the use of *I* for *me* in *for the Queen and I*, is widely attested across society, in the language of 'public figures, academics, royalty and others (not to mention the man/woman in the street)' (Honey, 1995: 8). Upon the article's appearance, Honey hit the newspaper headlines again: during the first week of October 1995, critical articles on the subject as well as on Honey himself appeared in *The Observer*, the *Leicester Mercury*, *The Times* and *The Independent*.¹²

Trying to capitalise on Honey's controversial reputation among linguists and the public at large, Plurabelle Books tried to sell the late John Honey's library by writing on their website early in 2012:

Someone said, conversations with Mr H contained many words, mostly his. He was a linguist of received pronunciation (RP), a historian of education, and an academic in the 20th century, with all the embarrassments this involves.¹³

We managed to acquire the Honey Papers at a bargain, and though more could be written about them than I have had space for here, I hope at least to have shown what a good bargain it was.

Notes

- 1 Thanks to John Edwards and Dick Hudson for providing me with background information relating to the reception of *The Language Trap*, and to Joan Beal for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.
- 2 It is thanks to one of the Bridging the Unbridgeable's former student assistants Cynthia Lange's careful detective work that we found out about John Honey's year of death (Lange, 2012). Publishing about John Honey and his work on the Bridging the Unbridgeable project's blog has since brought me in touch with Honey's family.
- 3 Graddol and Swann (1988: 97) also mention a 'BBC television programme', but I have found no reference to it in the letters.
- 4 Numbers refer to the documents in the file in the order in which the file first arrived.
- 5 This overview is based on the letters in the Honey Papers (see JH/21b.a); Graddol and Swann (1988) do not mention *The Daily Telegraph*.
- 6 All letters and other communication in the Honey Papers received a date stamp upon arrival. The Director's initials with which he signed the note are unfortunately illegible.
- 7 Richard Hudson also wrote a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, dated March 2, 1983. He enclosed a copy of it in a letter to Honey of the same date (JH/152a). Whether the letter was ever published I do not know.

8 Honey's replies have come down to us mostly in the form of carbon copies of typed letters, marked by the initials 'JS', Honey's secretary (JH/120). Only a few letters are in his own hand.

9 In contrast to the letters referred to so far, which were all from linguists taking public part in the *Language Trap* debate by writing to the press, I will refer to these other letter writers by their initials for reasons of privacy.

10 Is Burchfield (1996: 352) wrong, when he says that *Do you have* instead of *Have you got this book in stock?* 'is somewhat more common in AmE than in BrE'?

11 In the file, the letter was stuck to the back of JH/12a, so it is itself unnumbered.

12 I'm grateful to the late John Honey for sending me Xerox copies of the newspaper articles at the time they were published.

13 The page itself is no longer accessible. See, however, <https://bridgingtheunbridge-able.com/2012/01/30/sweet-honey/> (Accessed September 8, 2017).

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