Lord Lucan: 'missing' or 'on the run'?

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Lexical choices and social class in British English

Introduction

In November 1974 a murder took place which, both at the time and in retrospect, provided British journalists with material for countless articles. Richard John Bingham, 7th Earl of Lucan (generally referred to as 'Lord Lucan') apparently killed his children's nanny with a blunt instrument, attacked his wife, and then fled his Belgravia home. His whereabouts since then, and even (despite the fact that he was declared dead in the High Court in 1999) the question of whether or not he is still alive, continue to be a matter of sporadic discussion in the media and among the general public. As British National Corpus (BNC) evidence shows, Lord Lucan is now sometimes lumped together in the conversation and writings of the British with other creatures and objects whose existence is the stuff of legend rather than of scientific certainty:

> [1]GX9 4072 Forget the Loch Ness Monster and Lord Lucan, the Yeti and the Holy Grail.

A week after the murder took place (14 November 1974) the writer and theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, commenting from his generally socialist standpoint on the world, made some observations about the case in his diary (Lahr, 2002: 202–3). These provide the starting point for this article.

> Last week, Lord Lucan, a millionaire gambler, murdered his children's nanny mistaking her in a darkened house for his estranged wife … What has happened since then is a perfect illustration of the influence of class on British justice. Firstly: four days passed before the police issued a warrant for Lucan's arrest … Thus Lucan had ample time to leave the country if he chose.
>
> Next, the press reported that many of his friends were 'dedicated men' who would not hesitate to shelter him. Would Ginger Noakes' pals have been described as 'dedicated men'? Or as 'underworld cronies'? Assumption: it is honourable to hide a wanted lord, but squalidly criminal to hide a wanted commoner.
>
> Next: the TV newscasts all used the phrase 'Lord Lucan is still missing.' With Ginger Noakes, it would have been 'Noakes is still *on the run*.' (Italics in original).

These three paragraphs contain separate claims, which can be dealt with one by one. Tynan states that there was a delay of four days between the murder itself and the issuing of a warrant for Lucan's arrest. In fact, some sources put this at five days, with the murder taking place on 7 November and the warrant being issued on 12 November. In this first matter, therefore, Tynan appears to have reported the facts to his diary with reasonable accuracy, and certainly with no exaggeration.

The second claim here is that the media, in the context of how the apparent murderer escaped, used the phrase 'dedicated men' (which, of course,

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has a generally positive sense) to describe friends who might conceivably have taken it upon themselves to hide or spirit away Lord Lucan. It is alleged by Tynan that a phrase such as that would never be used of those shielding a suspected murderer from the *hoi polloi* (such as the fictional Ginger Noakes). About this claim, I leave the reader to make her or his own judgement. However, like the third and final claim it seeks to draw our attention to issues in English language use in relation to social class.

I shall devote rather more attention to the final claim. It is surely an important part of language awareness to be sensitive to the nuances of lexical choice in particular contexts. For example, if Tynan is accurate in stating that British TV news reported Lord Lucan as 'missing', this might be regarded as euphemistic. McGlone & Batchelor (2003: 257) define a euphemism as 'an expression referring to a stimulus that is perceived as more polite than the stimulus's conventional literal label'. Describing Lord Lucan as 'missing' could, perhaps, be regarded as more polite (or, indeed, more respectful, to a peer of the realm) than to report that he has 'fled', 'run away' or is 'on the run'. However, at least one other motivation is apparent for choosing one lexical item over the other: being 'on the run' entails remaining alive; whereas 'missing' admits the possibility of death.

In the remaining part of this paper I shall look briefly at some causes of lexical variation in English language use, and relate this to an investigation, using BNC data and media reports, into the extent to which Tynan's intuitive reactions to the use of 'missing' and 'on the run' are justified. I shall, among other things, compare media reporting of Lord Lucan's alleged crime and subsequent escape with reports relating to Ronnie Biggs, an equally notorious, but non-aristocratic, criminal from a similar era. Indeed, this paper, while fundamentally about English language use and of relevance to the present day, also focuses, in part, on three somewhat different near-contemporaries: Kenneth Tynan (1927–1980), literary critic and hedonist; the 7th Earl of Lucan (born 1934, presumed dead), soldier, merchant banker, gambler, and alleged murderer; and Ronald 'Ronnie' Biggs (1929–2013), train robber.

British English language use and social class

Despite the passing of the years, popular articles about the British English/social class nexus have a tendency to mention George Bernard Shaw's comment (from the preface to his *Pygmalion*) that 'it is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him'. However, the British focus on social class shows few signs of abating: a recent (2013) survey of 360,000 people on behalf of the BBC, directed by Professor Mike Savage (London School of Economics) and Professor Fiona Devine (University of Manchester), produced a new social class model for the UK based around seven labels, including 'elite' and 'precariat'. At almost the same time, a national competitor television network (ITV) noted, rather unsurprisingly, on the basis of research (*Tonight* programme, 25 September 2013), that those they surveyed seemed to regard speakers of Received Pronunciation as more intelligent and more trustworthy than those with regional accents traditionally associated with the working-class, such as Brummie (Birmingham) and Scouse (Merseyside).

Many readers may be familiar with the distinction between U and non-U English, popularized by the British writer Nancy Mitford but actually originating from Ross (1954). U English is defined as the variety of English (pronunciation, vocabulary) typically used by upper-class speakers and writers, while non-U English is the kind generally associated with middle-class speakers.[2] The example most often cited in this context is that Ross decreed (using his own intuitions as guide) that 'serviette' was non-U, but 'table-napkin' was U. He also declared 'chamber pot' and 'toilet-paper' to be non-U while 'pot' and 'lavatory paper' were U. Since Ross wrote his paper sixty years ago, we might be tempted to imagine that such ideas are no longer current, having gone the same way as the quill pen, the charabanc and the Betamax video format. However, they are still with us on the website of Debrett's (www.debretts.com), 'the trusted source on British social skills, etiquette and style'. The website gives the following advice:

> If you are anxious to pass muster in more class-aware environments you should remember the basics: loo or lavatory never toilet; sofa never settee; napkin never serviette; supper never tea; drawing room or sitting room, never lounge or front room.

Advice of this sort purports to school individuals in the art of sounding more 'upper class' than, in fact, they may be. However, whether one describes Lord Lucan as 'missing' or 'on the run' does not turn on how one wishes to present oneself in terms of social

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class. Instead, the choice of one expression over the other may be influenced by one's attitude to hereditary peers, such as Lord Lucan.

Deference to those of aristocratic stock is still inscribed in British English. Oxford Dictionaries (online) advises that 'His/Your Lordship' is used in the UK as 'as a respectful form of reference or address to a judge, a bishop, or a man with a title'. Similarly, it notes 'My Lord' is 'a polite form of address to judges, bishops and certain noblemen'. The question of precisely which 'noblemen' is left to the good sense and upbringing of the reader.

From such definitions, a reader can see that respectful vocatives are still in use in Britain in relation to peers of the realm. Indeed, in the upper chamber of the UK parliament (The House of Lords) such terms of address are mandatory:

> Lord Jay of Ewelme (Crossbench):
> My Lords, I join the noble Lord, Lord MacGregor, on my own behalf and, if they will permit me, on behalf of my colleagues on these Benches, in saying how much we regret the departure of the noble Lord, Lord Grenfell, and how much his speech today shows why we will regret it as much as we shall. (*Hansard*: HL Deb, 28 March 2014, c708)

Evidence suggests that the British still retain a good deal of respect for Lords, Earls, Dukes, Princes and the like. In September 2013, the Prime Minister (David Cameron) and the Leader of the Opposition (Ed Miliband) competed with each other in expressing delight, in the House of Commons, at the birth of Prince George, and in using this as an opportunity to sing the praises of the monarchical system. Cameron noted 'what a vital part of our national life the monarchy is', and in response Miliband hailed 'the unique service that our monarchy renders to the British people'. Professional politicians to their fingertips, neither would say such things unless they thought that the majority of voters felt the same way. On that basis they are right to do so. According to the British newspaper the *Daily Telegraph* (27 July 2013), for instance, a recent poll suggests that the majority of British people see no benefit in republicanism, with some two thirds of those polled (66 per cent) thinking that Britain is better off as a monarchy. Hence, it is just possible that some British people (including journalists) might be unconsciously influenced by deferential attitudes to their 'betters' to use less negative language when describing a fugitive Lord than they would when describing an 'ordinary person' in the same position.

Lexical choice and point of view

It is often the case that the connotations of terms used in English to label people, states, activities and events gradually change over time. For example, as Burridge (2010) points out, adjectives meaning 'old' (when applied to people) such as 'geriatric' and 'senile', were respectful terms in the 19th century but acquired negative associations in the 20th century. Other terms used to describe the old can be seen as euphemisms: 'senior citizen'; 'the elderly'; 'older people' (older than whom?). The post-retirement phase of life is sometimes referred to in terms of precious metals:

> TM Retirement (LP) is a limited premium participating whole life plan that offers lifetime annual cash payouts from age 65. It is designed to cater to your retirement needs throughout your golden years, while providing you with comprehensive coverage and liquidity when you need them most. (Marketing material from Citibank Singapore, noted by the present writer in 2012)

> The new silver generation will mostly be well-educated and relatively financially independent when they retire. (*Singapore Straits Times*, 22 May 2010)

Such references to gold and silver must be intended to give a positive spin to old age. Compare, for instance, the term 'silver generation' with the term 'grey Pound', often used in the British media to refer to consumer spending by those of middle-age and above:

> The 'grey pound' has played a significant role in lifting Britain out of the recession, research published today claims. (*This is Money*, 7 February 2014)

Academics discussing such matters often mention the contrast between 'terrorist' and 'freedom fighter' (see, for instance, Ganor 2002). It is possible to argue – though this is perhaps simplistic – that whichever term we choose in a particular context is due to our own, primarily political, view of the subject's actions rather than on any of the subject's objectively intrinsic attributes. The BBC, no doubt in its efforts to be, or to appear, impartial has of late begun to make much use of the term 'activists':

> Secret filming finds armed activists in Damascus. (BBC 20 January 2012) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/16662892

The distinction between an 'armed activist' and a 'freedom fighter' may appear somewhat elusive.

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However, in selecting the former term, presumably the BBC is seeking not to seem to be taking sides.

It is not difficult to find in contemporary use of English in the mass media other instances where lexical choice may shape, or be intended to shape, reader or listener interpretations. Consider these examples (Robescu, 2008: 62):

> Sarkozy walks out on '60 Minutes'. (*New York Times*, 29 October 2007)
> Sour Sarkozy storms out of TV interview. (*The* (*London*) *Times*, 29 October 2007)

Another recent example from personal experience comes from breakfast TV in Singapore (Channel News Asia programme 'a.m. Live'). The presenters usually begin by offering a rundown of what is to come. When doing so, they sometimes use the phrase 'on the show today'. However, news is always reported during the transmission, and this, unfortunately, sometimes involves terrible tragedies and loss of life, such as plane crashes, earthquakes and bomb blasts. On days when awful events such as these are to be reported, the presenters seem to switch to 'on the programme today'. Perhaps 'show' is felt to carry connotations of entertainment which 'programme' does not.

Kenneth Tynan's claim about 'missing' versus 'on the run' shares some similarity with examples of this sort. His contention is that, just as 'silver generation' casts a positive light on old people, while 'grey Pound' does not, and just as 'show' may provoke thoughts of spectacle and colour more easily than 'programme' does, so 'missing' carries fewer negative connotations than 'on the run' when used to describe someone involved in an apparent felony.

Lord Lucan: 'missing' or 'on the run'?

In this section I shall use a few examples from free online BNC and media reports to investigate and discuss the missing/on the run distinction. Free online BNC only provides one example of 'missing' collocating with 'Lucan' (four words either side of the node).

> CH2 1142 Credit bookmaker Mr Meinertzhagen, who is divorced from Georgina's mother, was a close friend of missing gambling peer Lord Lucan.

No examples of 'on the run' in close proximity to 'Lucan' are available. Such scanty evidence neither supports nor casts doubt on Tynan's claim. However, newspaper reports in the years immediately after the 1974 murder do seem to use 'missing' – particularly, for some reason, in Australia:

> Scotland Yard detectives searching for Lord Lucan, missing since the murder of his children's nursemaid last November … (Canberra Times, 27 June 1975)
> Mr Kenneth Knight, who was detained after a Goondiwindi court appearance so that police could check his identity, was not the missing peer, Lord Lucan … (Canberra Times, 25 October 1979).
> Lord Lucan, who has been missing for seven years … (Canberra Times, 4 November 1981).

UK newspapers echo this use of 'missing' in more recent times. A 2013 *Daily Mail* story refers in its headline to the 'mystery of missing Lord Lucan'; while in the same year the *Daily Mirror* claimed that 'the missing peer' had escaped to the Scottish island of Eigg in the aftermath of the killing. A website containing information about the case (www.lordlucan.com) declares itself to be 'the official website for the missing 7th Earl of Lucan'. In all these cases it might be argued that 'missing' is chosen mainly because there is a desire to pique the interest of readers by leaving open the possibility that Lucan might still be alive.

Whether or not Kenneth Tynan is right to allege that the use of 'missing' to describe Lord Lucan occurs because of 'the influence of class', it is certainly the case that the word does continue to appear in articles pertaining to the 1974 murder. Note that children who cannot be found are typically described as 'missing' too:

> ANL 1150 Never a one has had a report of a missing child.

> K5D 2588 They did not want to hear another missing child public-address call again.

> J76 831 If the child were missing, for example, publicity in the press and broadcasting media could assist.

In the case of missing children, we may infer that they are not to be held responsible for their disappearance, but have innocently wandered away or been abducted by physically stronger individuals against their will. It is difficult to see how such connotations can transfer to Lord Lucan.

However, as a point of comparison, let us examine newspaper reports of the disappearance of the working-class criminal Ronnie Biggs, one of those who took part in the 1963 Great Train Robbery. Caught and sentenced to thirty years' incarceration, Biggs escaped from Wandsworth

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Prison in 1965 and subsequently sought refuge in Australia and, later, Brazil until he gave himself up in 2001. Do media reports typically describe him as 'on the run' or 'missing'? The answer to this question seems, at first, to be straightforward:

> 36 years on the run (From the 'Ronnie Biggs' entry in *Wikipedia*).
>
> 'I miss Bird's custard and warm London beer': How fugitive Ronnie Biggs longed for Britain while he was on the run in Rio. (*Daily Mail*, 7 January 2014)
>
> Great Train Robber spent more than 35 years on run after escaping from prison ... (*Guardian*, 18 December 2013)
>
> Ronnie Biggs poses on Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, while on the run in 1977. (*Guardian*, 18 December 2013)
>
> He spent the next nine years on the run after receiving plastic surgery (*Independent*, 3 January 2014)

These media reports are, however, all dated around the time of his death; the reports from which they are taken sum up his life rather than reporting his escape from Wandsworth. While it is true that recent media reports about Lucan often use 'missing' and reports about Biggs at the end of his life (d. 2013) frequently mention his years 'on the run', no conclusions can be drawn.

However, BNC evidence does show that the phrase 'on the run' (when not used to mean 'consecutively' – as in 'losing the Cup Final two years on the run') is commonly used of criminals and carries connotations of guilt:

> JJV 546 I knew he'd used firearms in the past and because he was on the run from prison.
>
> CH5 517 I've heard of prisoners going on the run to prove their innocence.
>
> CH6 735 Geoffrey Dudgeon, 35 – on the run from a Leicester jail when James Doy was shot dead last week in Rotherham . . .
>
> A49 596 A man on the run from Crumlin Road prison, Belfast . . .
>
> CBF 12953 Four remand prisoners were on the run . . .
>
> KIB 3371 A prisoner who's been on the run for more than six months has been recaptured.
>
> K3C 489 . . .on the run from the French Foreign Legion . . .
>
> BMS 3331 Are you on the run from the law?

Such data emphasize the fact that 'on the run' generally involves fleeing from guilt of some kind. This is also the case in the following extract from the *Independent* newspaper (12 June 1993) concerning the Marquess of Blandford (eldest surviving son of the Duke of Marlborough):

> His decline continued this week with his unceremonious arrest after five days on the run, and brief imprisonment for failing to pay . . . maintenance to his estranged wife, Becky. Hours earlier, he had boasted to the press that he was the 'new Lord Lucan'.

Contrary to Tynan's contention, it seems, aristocrats *are* sometimes reported to be 'on the run'. Indeed, journalists may have reasons for portraying them as such, at least in murder cases, since, as noted by Gekowski, Gray & Adler (2012) on the basis of qualitative data obtained from British national tabloid journalists, 'homicides involving . . . killers on the run, sensational elements and/or serial killers will almost always be newsworthy'.

Concluding remarks

This paper, initiated by Kenneth Tynan's 1974 observations on the disappearance of Lord Lucan, has looked briefly at some aspects of lexical choice in English, considering underlying motivations (conscious or unconscious) for selecting one word or phrase rather than another. On the particular issue of 'missing' versus 'on the run' in media reporting of the Lucan case, no strong conclusion has been reached. The choice of 'missing' in some newspaper headlines and articles about Lord Lucan may, as Tynan suggests, be motivated by deference to an aristocrat – or it may arise because writers, both at the time of the murder and later, wanted to hint at the possibility that Lucan might no longer be alive (due to suicide, for instance).

However, wider conclusions can be drawn. The choice of one word or phrase over another sets up semantic reverberations which the antennae of alert listeners or readers will pick up. Some examples are: 'show' versus 'programme'; 'lounge' versus 'sitting room'; and 'activist' versus 'terrorist'. Listeners and readers will, however, react in their individual ways to these choices, influenced by their life experience and world view. Tynan reacted in a particular way to the choice of 'missing' rather

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than 'on the run', but his political views were such that, for him, unfairly positive treatment of the British upper classes could be identified in places where others might have seen nothing of note. Tynan's observations are interesting and may well seem plausible to some, but empty to others. The inferences we each draw from a given text (about the writer's/speaker's point of view, political position, social class and so on) are nuanced, individual and strongly influenced by our accumulated life experience.

Notes

1 BNC reference numbers such as this allow identification of the source text.

2 The proletariat doesn't really seem to count!

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