
Mainstream English

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A response to the prescriptivist/descriptivist skirmishes between Bryan Garner on the one side and Tom McArthur and Richard Bailey on the other

[Editor's note Further comment is welcome on any aspect of the 'scriptivist' debate.]

The Hundred Years War

Whenever describers and prescribers of the English language meet, they don't exchange views in balanced and civil discussion. They fight.

They've been at it again in *ET*. Tom (Describer) McArthur began this bout with 'academies of one, charge of the Light Brigade, dodgy, plenty of personal – and opinionated – commentary and advice, [and] self-selected', taunting Garner with unschooled English that real unschooled writers never write, though, perhaps like the rest of us, they might say it: 'kind of ... like ... y'know ... all that stuff' (*ET*60) – a habit self-confident and fully-schooled English users adopted some 200 years ago.

Flaunting flouts and unconscionables (*ET*64), Bryan (Prescriber) Garner taunts back, grapples (two 'assaults', one 'campaign' and one 'in the other camp') and lays about him with abandon(ment of discretion): 'abuse, balderdash, besotted, blather, debased, demonize, dogma (twice), dogmatize, dreary gruel, heights of inarticulacy, hijacked, ignorant, mess, misuse [and] within reason, to stigmatize' – and that's only what I've collected from their four rounds in *ET*.

If the scene weren't so frustrating from a teacher's point of view, I'd find Garner's complaint, 'usage dictionaries got hijacked by the descriptive linguists' funny – PRESCRIBERS OUTFLANKED. BASE CAMP TAKEN. FOULPLAY CLAIMED – and I'd be tempted to adapt Mercutio's curse and lay it on all scribes,

A plague o' both your houses!
They have made hard work for me

and for everyone else, except that, as a teacher, I need them both.

Frustration and hard work for six reasons: first, Garner presents contradictory messages. His explicit message reads, 'No one seriously wants to halt all change in a living language, but change shouldn't be "too rapid, reckless, and wanton"' (*ET*66, Garner quoting F. L. Lucas). But he, like other scribes, also sends an implicit message: 'there has been an assault on linguistic standards' (*ET*64). This metaphor should remind English users of the original meaning of standard: 'the distinctive ensign of a sovereign, commander, nation, etc.' (*OED*). A sovereign's standard, like the standard foot, may be moved but it doesn't change. Defended by the barons and their soldiers, it stands or falls.

Secondly, misuse: 'Why should linguists believe [Garner asks, *ET*64] ... that language, of all human activities, is uniquely incapable of being misused or abused?' But among activities language is unique in this respect. Think of jumping, cycling, washing, swimming, walking and other activities. Suppose there was one Standard and many 'debased' walks. Learning to walk correctly would then be complex, as

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Garner says writing is. Among three babies, Bryan, Tom and Tony, one, fearing shame and failure, might never have got off his bottom¹.

Thirdly, abuse/invective: I've never been in an American courtroom, but I have seen films which, I assume, represent accurately what goes on there. So, I'm sure I'd be daunted by Garner striding around, putting his face close to mine and asking me hostile questions.

That's bad enough. But, if he abused my language, a 'mess all around' (ET66), how could I redeem myself? 'Some usage is debased. And the ignorant do pass on errors' (ET64). After being publicly slagged off, what could I say that would help me or my case? Could he reassure me with: 'I'm only "stigmatiz[ing] within reason" (ET66)? I'd know that it isn't just Garner who thinks about English like that – the judge and jury almost certainly do too. '[I]ntelligibility isn't the touchstone [of credibility]; good usage is' (Garner ET66): my English is debased, therefore I'm ignorant and not a credible witness. Saying as little as possible wouldn't help me, for my silence might support the other 'signs of ignorance'. Garner stamps authority on prejudice.

Fourthly, scribes have been abusing each other so long – the media and public cheering prescribers and scorning describers – that they've poisoned the subject. Yes, language users need a consensus to communicate easily, but abusing each other makes consensus hard to achieve. 'Maybe' writes Garner (ET66) 'those who study language could learn something ... about balance and civility'. I agree but, since his civility includes 'assaults, bloodying Fowler's nose, balderdash' and the like, I see we live in different cultures. Other users must stand aloof and observe this linguistic warfare objectively.

Fifthly, 'it's almost as if fifty years of the twentieth century never happened,' laments McArthur (ET60). But it's sadder than that: it's nearly 100 years since Saussure, but describers have still not found a way to show enquiring minds that language is a field for objective study every bit as interesting as birds, flowers, rocks, cod or clocks².

Sadder still, the study of grammar sprang from usage. In 1774, one year after Lord Chesterfield died, about 200 letters he'd written to his illegitimate son, Philip, were published. An instant success, they stayed in print longer than the first modern English grammar (Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English*

Grammar, 1762), and contain much advice on linguistic propriety. On 1 November 1739 Chesterfield wrote to Philip, then seven years old, about 'a Man who speaks in publick':

It is not enough to speak the Language he speaks in, in it's utmost purity and according to the rules of Grammar, but he must speak it Elegantly, that is, he must chuse the best and most expressive words, and putt them in the best order.

Compare Garner: '[I]ntelligibility isn't the touchstone; good usage is' (ET66). Chesterfield wrote another still more Garneresque sentence:

When you come into Parliament, your reputation as a speaker will depend much more upon your words, and your periods, than upon the subject.

– 9 December 1749

But my first extract shows that writing English well is hard for fully-schooled Lords too. I copied what Chesterfield himself wrote (Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone, U590/C6/1). In the *Everyman* edition this sentence appears as:

It is not enough to speak the language he speaks in, in its utmost purity, and according to the rules of grammar, but he must speak it elegantly, that is, he must use the best and most expressive words, and put them in the best order.

In his Preface, Lowth wrote:

[T]he principle design of a Grammar of any language is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that Language, and to be able to judge of every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not. The plain way to do this is to lay down rules ...

A rule is not a natural law; it's a human prescription. Head teachers' rules, for example, don't describe their pupils' behaviour. Lowth, worried by 'incroachments' like *I have wrote*, 'authorised by the example of some of our best Writers', abused the forms he rejected, and their writers – 'absurdity, abuse, barbarous, inexcusable, perverted, very great Corruption' – not Garner's words mostly, but loud-mouthing nonetheless.

Two and a half centuries later, fully-schooled English users don't class language with geometry (a matter of objective study) but with colouring (a matter of usage, good taste and vulgarity). I lament this because users of

English who don't understand how English does its job – convey meaning – will always be in thrall to those they think do. Women and natives used to be in thrall too.

Sixthly, as I've said in *ET* before, modern grammarians describe only part of English grammar, but this part they and most others call 'THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE' – misleadingly, for it's only the English that's formally taught as all the English there is – Schooled English, as I call it. Prescribers, professional and amateur, take what the grammarians leave out and shame its users – people I spend my leisure time with. Teachers must then restore their students' confidence in their own English before they can teach them how to use English well. After 260 years of quite uncalled-for abuse, escaping to linguistic self-reliance will

be hard work. But I'll describe how I might start here and now in Maidstone, England.

A lesson: does this man lack credibility because of the way he writes?

A few months ago I saw in the house of Andrea Sloman, a friend here in Maidstone, a text, written by 'Mike Lowry', a c.50 year-old pigeon fancier for a pigeon-fanciers' magazine. It was his second version. He wrote his first one by hand, but Sloman said she'd check it if he typed it and began his sentences with capitals. Below is an exact copy. This expository prose has the main characteristics of 'Written Speech', partly schooled writing since at least the early 1800s:

LONG DISTANCE WIDOWHOOD

To fly long widowhood to start you must have birds of right origin from generations of long-distance widowhood pigeons i that must be belgian origin.
MY widowhood team would only be 24 widowhood cocks.
5 BEFORE i put my team on widowhood I would get them super fit then put them on widowhood.
THE size of my loft for the cocks would be 12ft x 8ft..
THE size of my loft for the hens would be 10ft x 8ft. with aviary with inch & half battons fitted in their.
10 I pair my widowhood team up in the first week in january so that i can get an early round of youngsters out of them. the hens are sitting ten days on eggs take them away. THE cocks are on widowhood at this stage i will start training them up until the first race. i prefer them to
15 fly home around home twice a day for at least an hour. IF they do not fly round home well then i will train them.
THE hens will be given depurative from sunday round to
20 friday, on friday they will be given full widowhood mixture the same will be given on sat this makes them more keen for the the widowhood cock on his return from the race. when he returns from the race he will be given depurative also on sunday with brewers yeast and lemon on
25 it.
MONDAY morning depurative on monday eve he will be be given 50% depurative and 50% widowhood mixture the same tues wed thurs friday they will be given widowhood mixture as much as they want this will be taken away
30 dinner time on friday.
FRI eve at 6pm the hens will be put with the cocks for half an hour when they are all down in the bowls basket them for the club.
THE cocks are not let out of the loft on sunday complete
35 rest. mon they are given a bath and the routine starts again.

- 1 Such writers punctuate unsystematically, or not at all.
- 2 Their basic unit is the tone group, not the sentence, which is a unit of writing not of speech, unless you've been schooled to speak in sentences.
[These two characteristics are linked: if you don't write sentences, you don't punctuate well or at all because fully-schooled writers have developed punctuation to suit their own writing. Without help from a dedicated punctuation system, readers find some Written Speech difficult to understand because they have to read more 'by ear' than they do for a schooled text – how, for example, could 'Lowry' indicate his intonation in 'MONDAY morning depurative' (l.26)?]
- 3 Such writers tend not to embed information; they chain it sequentially: for example, 'they will be given widowhood mixture as much as they want' (ll.28-9).
- 4 They use far more Anglo-Saxon than Latinate lexis.

I'll now check Lowry's prose against Garner's 'normative conventions that aspiring writers of expository prose need to learn' (ET66):

- 1 *Adopt a relaxed, natural tone.*
Lowry's prose is very relaxed and natural. Should Garner emend his convention: 'but not too relaxed or natural'? If so, why?
- 2 *Synopsise complicated matter.*
Lowry summarises too much for a non-pigeon-fancier like me. But then, he wrote for other pigeon fanciers, not for me.
- 3 *Maintain a cohesive train of thought.*
Lowry's text is organized and cohesive. He divides it into two sections like a cooking recipe: ingredients + method. He sequences his weekly and yearly routine logically. He could have arranged information about his treatment of cocks and hens more clearly – perhaps. When teaching English at this level, I know from past experience with German recipes, apple cloning and car repair manuals that teachers shouldn't evaluate a text before they've established what the writer means; if they do, they risk highlighting their ignorance. I said above that speech writers chain their information. But this pattern has one exception – they usually put *if*-clauses before the main subject, as Lowry does in ll.16–17. But by adding 'then', he seems to turn the two clauses from subordinate + main into balanced co-

ordinates, like 'just as so'. He achieves the same balance with 'BEFORE ... then' (ll.5–6). Note that he keeps his rhythm when he abandons the personal style (I + Active Verb, l.19) for a formal one (Subject + Passive Verb), which enables him to return later to triumphant personal style, 'basket them for the club' (ll.32–33).

- 4 *Support ideas with adequate evidence.*
Lowry: not applicable here because he's describing his method, not arguing that it's better than anyone else's.
- 5, 6, 7 *Vary sentence structure/sentence length/paragraph length.*
Lowry's text is Written Speech, so he doesn't write sentences. But he does vary his tone groups and paragraphs in structure and length.
- 8 *Connect ideas from sentence to sentence, and paragraph to paragraph.*
Lowry connects his groups with pronouns and noun repetition, not with such sentence connectors as *therefore*, *however*, etc.
- 9 *Omit unnecessary words.*
Lowry's text is leaner than I expect from other, Schooled writers. He has a good sense of balance and rhythm, which I don't want to destroy by cutting words. I can find only two places where I might cut words as unnecessary: the ringform argument, 'put ... on widowhood' (ll.5–6) and 'in their' (l.9). I wouldn't cut apparently unnecessary words – 'widowhood' (l.21) – which he wrote on purpose.
- 10 *Observe recognized grammatical niceties ...*
Lowry's text is unconventional, and his 'violations of grammatical niceties' unusual. I wouldn't have been surprised if, for example, he'd written the local form 'took' for 'taken' (l.29). What he does do, as do other writers of Written Speech, is leave out a verb that can be easily understood especially in the final element of a chain - 'also on sunday ...' for example, (ll.34–35), but also as a heading, 'MONDAY morning depurative' (l.26) – unusual, but allowed by Written Speech grammar.
- 11 *Observe recognized distinctions between similar words that are easily confused ...*
Lowry wrote words in full that he almost certainly conflates in speech ('I would', for example, l.5), but, as writers can do, he shortened words that he utters in full, 'tues wed thurs' (l.28). He spells well – only one typo, 'generatons' (l.2) and one mistake, 'their' (l.9).

As it stands, Lowry's text doesn't communicate easily – too many places which first-time readers have to reread for meaning.

Sloman's version

There are two directions in which teachers/editors can take this text to make it easier to read. First, we can take it out of the writer's control and alter it to fully-schooled English. This is what Sloman did.

To fly long widowhood, you must have birds of right origin from generations of long distance widowhood pigeons. I think that they must be of Belgian origin.

My widowhood team would only consist of twenty-four widowhood cocks.

Before I put my team on widowhood, I would ensure they were at optimum fitness.

The size of my loft for the cocks would be 12ft x 8ft and for the hens, 10ft x 8ft. with aviary fitted with 1.5 inch battens.

I pair my widowhood team up during the first week in January so that they can produce an early round of youngsters. The hens sit on the eggs for ten days and then I take them away. The cocks are on widowhood at this stage. I will start training them up until the first race. I prefer them to fly around home twice a day for at least an hour. If they do not fly around home well then I will train them.

The hens will be given deparative from Sunday round to Friday. On Friday they will be given full widowhood mixture. The same will be given on Saturday. This makes them more keen for the widowhood cock on his return from the race. On his return he will be given deparative also on Sunday with Brewers' Yeast and lemon on it. On Monday morning he will be given deparative and on Monday evening, 50% deparative and 50% widowhood mixture. The same will be given on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday, the cocks will be given as much widowhood mixture as they want but this will be taken away at Friday dinner time.

On Friday evening at 6pm the hens will be put with the cocks for half an hour. When they are all down in the bowls, I basket them for the club.

The cocks are not let out of the loft on Sunday as they require complete rest. On Monday they are given a bath and the routine starts again.

Sloman wrote full sentences and changed punctuation, where needed for easier understand-

ing. As a word-aware secretary should, she also replaced some of Lowry's Anglo-Saxon words with her/our own Latinate ones: 'consist of, ensure, optimum, produce, require'. Full sentences and Latinate lexis are required by Chesterfield/Lowth/Garner, for propriety or credibility, but they aren't needed for easier understanding. Two hundred years ago propriety was more difficult to learn than credibility is now – and more expensive – because schooled (Refined) English was more unlike speech than schooled (Standard) English is now. If Sloman had been editing this text then, she might have made the sentences even longer and used more Latinate words – 'possess' for 'have', for example, and the sexist and inaccurate 'receptive' for 'keen'. Propriety and credibility are applied to writing like a veneer, which makes writing well more difficult – *and* reading.

The second direction in which we can take Lowry's text leaves it in his control and helps him learn to write for easy understanding. My lesson plan for Lowry and his text would include the following steps:

- 1 Let him hear what his text does to me. Read it aloud to him, as I read it to myself the first time with puzzlement.
- 2 Make him think about his readers. What do they need to know?
- 3 What could he do to his text so that it immediately makes the sense he wants?
- 4 Discuss the opening of his 'method' section, which (to a non-pigeon-fancier) isn't clear.
- 5 Why did he change from active to passive verbs? What difference does this make?
- 6 Make him aware of pronoun problems.

Towards a third Lowry version

We might end up with this:

TO FLY LONG WIDOWHOOD – to start you must have birds of right origin from generations of long distance widowhood pigeons – I think that must be Belgian origin. My widowhood team would only be 24 widowhood cocks. Before I put my team on widowhood I would get them super fit, then get them on widowhood.

The size of my loft for the cocks would be 12ft x 8ft. The size of my loft for the hens would be 10ft x 8ft, fitted with aviary with inch & half battens.

I pair my widowhood team up the first week in

January so that I can get an early round of youngsters out of them.

The hens are sitting ten days on eggs – take them away – the cocks are on widowhood. At this stage I will start training them up until the first race. I prefer them to fly around home twice a day for at least an hour. If they do not fly round home well, then I will train them.

The hens will be given depurative from Sunday round to Friday. On Friday they will be given full widowhood mixture – the same will be given on Saturday. This makes them more keen for the widowhood cock on his return from the race. When he returns from the race he will be given depurative – also on Sunday with Brewers Yeast and lemon on it.

MONDAY MORNING – depurative. On Monday evening he will be given 50% depurative and 50% widowhood mixture – the same Tuesday Wednesday Thursday. Friday they will be given widowhood mixture as much as they want. This will be taken away dinner time on Friday.

FRIDAY EVENING AT 6pm – the hens will be put with the cocks for half an hour. When they are all down in the bowls, basket them for the club.

The cocks are not let out of the loft on Sunday – complete rest. Monday they are given a bath and the routine starts again.

This is still not Standard English. But it's more schooled than it was, and easier to understand even though readers must learn a new reading method – with the ear as well as with the eye.

But this demand doesn't buck the trend. I'd like Garner to make a case for putting 'good usage' before 'intelligibility' because Schooled English is becoming less exclusive, more eclectic and more like speech than it was. Today's retort 'Says who?' doesn't imply English users think 'no use of language is better than any other' (ET64). It may imply they put intelligibility first: 'I have took', for example, confuses no one, and, if 'there' had the same spelling as 'their', this would help all writers and confuse fewer readers than 'read' already does.

By emphasizing usage (credibility) less and function (readability) more, Mainstream English – schooled English for the twenty-first century – can accept Englishes from many tributaries, including 'Lowry'. ■

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FROM OUR FILES

Bin Ladenism

...[An article by Ibrahim Nafie, the editor of the 'semiofficial' Egyptian daily Al Ahram, stated] that America was deliberately making humanitarian food drops in areas of Afghanistan full of land mines. Mr Nafie added: "Similarly, there were several reports that the humanitarian materials have been genetically treated, with the aim of affecting the health of the Afghan people. If this is true, the U.S. is committing a crime against humanity by giving the Afghan people hazardous humanitarian products." ... So is it any wonder that people on the Egyptian street hate America? Such is the game that produced bin Ladenism.

– Thomas L. Friedman, 'No Wonder the Muslim Man in the Street Misjudges America', *IHT*, 7 Nov 01.