

Make Me A Pedant Lord — But Not Yet

Don Anderson

'POLTROON. An abject and contemptible coward. From Old Italian *poltrone*, lazy good-for-nothing, apparently from *poltrire*, to lie indolently in bed.' In a word, ME.

There I was helpless in my hospital bed, an eminent anaesthetist (or anaesthesiologist, if the Americans take over our language as they have our hotel rooms) about to insert a needle for an antibiotic and saline drip into my right arm — my writing arm! — and he asks me what I do and I admit to being a member of the University of Sydney's English Department (happily, I don't have time to confess to being a newspaper columnist) and he turns out also to be an aesthetician, when it comes to matters linguistic.

One of his sons, he informs me, sounding a note of betrayal of which Oedipus' dad would not have been unproud (pardon me, George Orwell!), recently used 'criteria' as a singular noun! And did I know that journalists had to be given lessons in how to write? The drip inserted, he lent (loaned?) me a copy of *Waynespeak* to cheer me up.

But I have to confess to behaving like an abject coward before the needle was properly inserted. Not a physical coward, mind you, but a moral coward. Faced with the linguistic conservatism and absolutism that, it seems to me, so often characterizes the professions other than those based on a humanities education, I capitulated completely. Yes, I said, yes, yes, blooming yes. Anything to mollify him.

I confessed, with more heat than I truly felt, to being obsessed that 'only' be placed only in its correct position in a sentence. I said that I found 'different to' utterly unacceptable (things 'differ from' other things). I deplored 'quote' being used as a substantive in place of 'quotation'. I detested 'enormity' being used where the writer (not the speaker; I was and am talking about written English) meant that something was 'enormous'. I had strong opinions about the place of 'however' in a sentence; about split infinitives; about 'protagonists'. I think I convinced him I was on his side, for he hitched me up painlessly to my drip.

In truth, I am less than confident about the rightness of any of these linguistic positions. I don't know of a great writer who doesn't break many of the so-called rules of grammar (Scott Fitzgerald couldn't spell to save his life, but that's a

different matter. What are editors for?). If I find any of my students has a writing problem, particularly a problem in writing a straightforward prose, I don't send her (or, in about 15% of the student population, him) to a rule-book. I suggest they read masters of the plain style. I used to recommend Hemingway's short stories and George Orwell's essays. Today, being more aware on several fronts, I add Jayne Anne Phillips and Helen Garner and Gerald Murnane (the last for commas, particularly).

How can I deplore 'quote' being used as a noun when that scourge of the tautology, Alex Buzo, does just that in a review of a biography of Kenneth Tynan, and no less a writer than Sylvia Lawson, author of *The Archibald Paradox*, also uses it as a noun in the *Times Literary Supplement*? My attempt to hold this particular fort is, in the words of G. A. Wilkes (editor of the Australian Edition of *Collins English Dictionary*, from which all definitions in this piece are taken), a 'losing battle'.

I was reading Alan Boardman and Roland Harvey's *Great Events in Australian History* to The Child the other day. In the chapter 'The First Fleet' we read: 'As they settled down in their new surroundings Phillip and his men began to realize the enormity of the task ahead'. Given that neither the text nor the illustrations anywhere mentions a single Aborigine, it may seem trivial of me to point out in the Bicentennial year that 'enormity' ought to be 'immensity'.

The *Collins Dictionary* is most interesting on this. It says: 'USAGE. In careful usage, the noun 'enormity' is not employed to convey the idea of great size, but that of something outrageous or horrifying'. So we have, along a continuum, Strictly Correct English, Careful Usage, and English As-She-Is-Used.

As opposed to my anaesthetist, I had always regarded myself as a linguistic latitudinarian. As I write this piece (but *only* as I write — thank you, Gustave Flaubert) I seem to have turned into a closet conservative. To tell the truth, I think I am plain confused.

But I cannot suppress a shudder when last week's *Time* uses 'dysutopia' when it means 'dystopia' (consult the *Collins Dictionary* on this). Nor can I abide students (or colleagues, for that matter) using 'protagonists' as if there could be more than one 'protagonist' in any one work of fiction. On this topic, consult Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1926; revised edition 1965). This delightful, and perhaps delightfully eccentric if etymologically purist entry, will inform, nay harangue, you to the effect that only Greek scholars, 'who perhaps do not matter', will concern themselves with the (etymologically) correct usage. And who is a Greek scholar these days? My sainted editor (thank you, Taki), that's who! Thus I tread softly and carry a big lexicon.

In a feeble pretence of a conclusion, it seems that in matters of usage, in the words of the American poet Charles Olson, who is echoing the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, 'the only thing that does not change is the will to change'.¹

¹This appeared, in a slightly different version, as my 'Behind the Lines' column in the Books pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, 30 January 1988.