

Blue Pencil

Newsletter of
The Society
of Editors
(NSW) Inc.

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July 1999

Unfriendly persuasion

Pam Peters spoke at the society's June meeting about the prescriptivists of language usage and their tactics for getting us to swallow their linguistic medicine.

The following is a version of a paper Pam Peters presented to the Style Council in Melbourne in February. Pam is an associate professor in Linguistics at Macquarie University and convenor of its Graduate Diploma in Editing and Publishing. She founded the publication Australian Style and wrote the Cambridge Australian English Style Guide.

People who go into print on the subject of English usage do so for many kinds of reasons. They may see themselves as 'guardians of the language' and, as soldiers and generals for the resistance, they articulate their positions for the defence of English. Sometimes this is a thinly veiled strategy for defending their own preferred usage. Others more proactive make it their moral duty to curb linguistic licence. This was the express purpose of the American, Wilson Follett, who thundered against the permissiveness of post-war usage.

Yet various others, such as Ward Gilman of the *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989), entered the fray to explore the range of English usage and compare dictionary evidence with usage book recommendations to see what the controversies really involved. This work is at the *descriptive* end of the scale. The others I mentioned are very much at the *prescriptive* end of the scale.

My paper takes a long look at prescriptivists and their various techniques of persuasion.

Many prescriptivists come from professions where it is part of their duty to persuade the novice in a certain direction. Quite a number of usage books are written by teachers, academics or educators, others are by professional writers, often the senior editors of

newspapers. Both kinds of people are inclined to go into print on usage and, by virtue of their professions, they typically have a prescriptive slant.

Fowler, who is often thought of as the arch-prescriptivist, had been both a

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Next meeting: Tuesday 6 July 1999

Personal histories

with Pieter Koster

Of the many stories emerging from Australia's various immigrant populations, most are self-published, often quite successfully, but few are professionally edited. According to Pieter Koster, author of *Coming to Australia*, the idea of seeking the services of an editor would simply not occur to these writers. And yet, he says, in most cases the text would definitely benefit from an editor's attention. Is this an untapped area of work for us? What are the opportunities? What are the problems? How could we overcome them?

Pieter Koster is an instructional designer and project manager at OTEN-DE, creating vocational distance learning materials for TAFE students. He has previously taught English language to migrants and written several textbooks for overseas publishers. *Coming to Australia*, recently reprinted, is based on his mother's letters home to Holland in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Level 5, Thakral House, 301 George Street, Sydney (right on top of Wynyard Station). 6.30 pm for 7 pm. Drinks and light refreshments provided. Non-members welcome. **RSVP by Friday 28 May** to (02) 9294 4999 (voicemail). Members \$12; non-members and those who don't RSVP, \$15.

Coming meetings:

3 August: Carl Harrison-Ford—on editing fiction, dealing with authors and other esoteric skills

7 September: Mark Macleod of Hodder Headline—on trends in educational publishing.

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teacher and a newspaper columnist. With his younger brother, he published the original *King's English* in 1906, and then the *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* in 1926. The impact of that book has been so substantial that the word *usage* now has the additional meaning of what people prescribe or think is right rather than what is common practice. Fowler is the originator of that particular definition of *usage*.

The appeal to correctness

People with a professional commitment to guiding the novice in usage often have to do it in a short time and by the most direct means. Whether you're instructing the junior writer or the novice journalist, the word *correct* tends to come in. And in prescriptive books or talkback radio commentary on language, those

who contribute often toss in the word *correct* to underscore their preferences.

There are at least two definitions of *correct* that are not always sorted out in the use of the word. On the one hand, it's used to say 'this conforms with the truth of what really happened' or to the facts of the physical world. On the other hand, it means conforming to an accepted standard of social correctness, as in 'correct behaviour for an undertaker'. These two definitions are rather different judgements. One relates to reference points in the external world, while the other is socially constructed. These are not often distinguished when people use the word *correct*. The prescriptivists often hope to convey the first when, in fact, they probably mean the second.

The synonyms of *correct* point you very much in the direction of the first definition, where people use the word *right*, for instance, as a synonym for *correct*. That suggests some sort of ultimate truth. The antonyms, like *error* and *mistake*, also suggest that there is

something profoundly and morally wrong, implying that a particular usage is part of the moral firmament. *Correct* claims the moral high ground, and that's why it is so hard to argue when people throw the word in. It seems to claim that ultimate truth-value when, in fact, there is only the second level of correctness to deal with. But the use of *correct* serves to disarm objections and demurrals about how absolute the truth is, implying that no discussion can be entered into. That is obviously an authoritarian posture on usage without the guarantee that it's also authoritative.

Correct comes easily in discussions of usage, but you can't keep repeating the word *correct* for obvious reasons. So, it becomes incumbent on prescriptivists to explain the premises of their judgements about what's right and wrong. A context of reference has to be provided. If you look carefully at what prescriptivists do, you'll find interesting object lessons in the art of persuasion, in the metaphorical sticks and carrots that they provide to support their judgements. They conjure up a variety of scenarios and value systems.

Health and hygiene

In his book, Kenneth Hudson makes the metaphor of health and hygiene the reason for preferring certain sorts of usage. Health matters are always attention-grabbing; the newspapers make a great deal of health issues. Everybody wants to be healthy, so the causes of disease are to be avoided. Hudson goes straight for it with his *Dictionary of Diseased English*. He proposed an accompanying 'Anthology of Diseased English' in order to do justice to all the examples of execrable language he has garnered. He didn't, in fact, produce the anthology, but instead a sequel to the dictionary, which is called *The Dictionary of Even More Diseased English*. For one who rails at ambiguity, he provides us with a worrying title: is it *even more diseased English* or *even more diseased English*?

In his introduction, Hudson proves to be the prince of the poisonous metaphor. He identifies the 'carriers of infection' as the 'padders and puffers', the 'inflators', the 'whitewashers' and the 'confidence tricksters' who need to be 'identified, isolated and wherever possible cured'. He finds various professions, including wine writers and

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Membership

Membership of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. is open to anyone working as an editor for publication (print or electronic documents), and anyone who supports the society's aims.

Membership runs for a calendar year. 1999 fees are \$45 for new members (\$25 if joining after 30 June) and \$40 for renewals.

For a membership application form, phone (02) 9294 4999, or write to PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007.

Blue Pencil

The society's newsletter, *Blue Pencil*, is published monthly, except for a combined January/February issue. Your comments and contributions are welcome. Mail them to Merry Pearson at 55 Collins St, North Narrabeen, NSW 2101, or fax or email them to her as per the contact details on the back page.

Deadline for the August issue is Monday 12 July.

Advertising rates:

Full page, \$90; Half page, \$50 (horizontal only); One-third page, \$35 (vertical or horizontal); Quarter page \$25 (horizontal only); Sixth page, \$20 (half of one column). Inserts: \$50 per hundred for DL-sized or A4 pre-folded to DL size. Circulation: approximately 275.

Committee meetings

All members are welcome to attend the society's committee meetings. The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 13 July. Unfortunately, the Graphic Arts Club has closed its doors. The time and new meeting venue are still to be determined. Contact a committee member for details if you wish to attend.

restaurateurs, particularly dangerous contributors to the disease, and he offers a grossly dyspeptic image of poisoned food to highlight his images.

Illiteracy is also a contaminant. The linguistic disease is an illness close to madness, he even claims. It 'rots both society and the individual'. And in case the health metaphor has left you unmoved, he adds the whiff of criminality, as he speaks of 'dragging the pond' for examples. In this context, other latent health metaphors prod one's consciousness as he rails at 'a plague of' this or 'an epidemic of' that, or 'a rash of' the other. Idioms like these are value laden and about as close to a universal negative as you can get. It's for your own good, he's telling you.

Social acceptability

The incentive of social acceptability is also part of the prescriptivist's armoury. This is less predictable than health as an instrument of persuasion, but it's effective enough for the middle band of society. A little bit goes quite a long way for anyone who wants to be sure that their usage doesn't disqualify them from membership of a social group.

Social acceptability is used as a blunt instrument by Kingsley Amis in *The King's English*. To stress 'formidable' or 'controversy' on the second syllable marks someone as a berk, as member of a lower social class than one's own. Other pronunciation foibles he associates with wankers, defined as pretenders to a higher social class than your own. He marks out all these options in terms of a middle band of society—obviously his own—and neither lower or upper.

More subtle appeals to socioeconomic identity are to be found in Burchfield's new edition of 'Fowler', in his entry on *alright* versus *all right*. Spelling it as one word will definitely put you on the wrong side of the 'social divide', and he put the Australian literary magazine *Southerly* on that side because of its use of *alright*. He calls it a 'popular' source, something I'm sure the editor of *Southerly* would be horrified to know. It does display an unfortunate ignorance of the status of the magazine. He evidently divides the world into two kinds of society, not the haves and have nots, but the *alrights* and the *all rights*.

Education

Education is another similar parameter. Many prescriptive writers play on the feeling that 'correct' usage choices are to be taken as signs of educational distinction to be worn on one's sleeve. The need to demonstrate one's good education, or at least avoid being thought of as someone without it, is again one of the motivators used more or less obliquely by prescriptivists. Burchfield from time to time connects his dispreferred usage with the 'moderately educated' and the phrase *educated usage* recurs as his highest form of recommendation. You too can join him amongst the Oxford dons by opting for that alternative.

Burchfield's carrot was Fowler's stick. Fowler's years as a school teacher still seem to speak from the pages of *Modern English Usage* in his caustic comments on usage and expressions that are 'slovenly', 'lazy' and 'illiterate'. They sound like the teacher commenting on student scripts. Again, he's playing on fears of being thought under-educated in the enigmatic alternatives of usage.

Group solidarity

The need to belong to the right group, in terms of social and educational background, or to the more amorphous army of 'careful writers'—to use Bernstein's term—is the common incentive of much usage prescription, a way of getting with the strength. But just what majority usage is in a given context, and how the prescriptivists can speak so unequivocally about it, are questions they would prefer you not to raise. Often personal preferences seem to be used on the basis of little evidence and their deepest problem is to avoid making their recommendations appear to be idiosyncratic. This would certainly explain the rather frequent use of passive constructions such as, '*fewer* is to be preferred', '*less* is to be shunned. Those 'agentless passives' are a time-honoured device for avoiding the issue as to who and how many people are involved in the business of avoiding and shunning.

It's a familiar strategy in bureaucratic documents, and George Orwell satirised it masterfully in *Politics and the English Language*. In usage books, agentless passives allow the author to sidestep the question as to who actually prefers or shuns something. It's

presented instead as the impeccable judgement of an indefinitely large group. For prescriptivists, there's safety in numbers, especially if the numbers are uncountable. The need for implied groups helps to explain why prescriptivists only rarely allow themselves the use of the first person singular.

The difficulties it creates are evident, interestingly, in Nick Hudson's *Modern Australian Usage* (nothing to do with Kenneth Hudson of *Diseased English*). In Nick Hudson's treatment of *all right*, he foregrounds *alright* as the common form and argues that it is sensible and meaningful. But in a final sentence, he notes, 'as it happens, I find it hard to write *all right* as one word, but that is my problem'. Hudson's frankness on this is appealing, and it allows the reader to decide whether to go with the one or the many. Few other usage commentators are brave enough to indicate where they may be out of step with the majority, though it is a well-known argumentative tactic for putting down somebody else's usage. If you can make that usage out to be just 'personal preference', then no one need take it seriously.

This tactic was used very perversely against a contribution to last year's *Australian Style* in an article on the spelling of *draft/draught*, the work of Phil Helmore, a naval architect at the University of New South Wales. Helmore had been able to show that amongst the profession of naval architects, those trained in Australia regularly used *draft*, whereas those trained in Britain preferred *draught*.

Helmore also published his findings in a professional newsletter for the Australian naval architect and got a huge reaction from a fellow vice president who wrote to insist that Helmore was expressing his personal opinion in favour of *draft*. There was no acknowledgement of the fact that Helmore's conclusion was based on the pattern of preferences shown by 30 other professionals. The comment was simply a debunking tactic.

The expression of personal opinion is clearly an Achilles heel in usage judgement, though usage commentators may occasionally expose themselves to the reader this way and feel they lose no authority thereby. However, their editors and publishers might find it distinctly uncomfortable, and perhaps a potential

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threat to market confidence in the book. This might explain why, in Gowers' 1965 edition of Fowler, some of Fowler's more cautious comments have been overridden or left out to ensure that his image as an unequivocal judge of usage is maintained. If you check the 1926 edition with the 1965 edition, you can see the later edition removes such comments as such and such 'is an opinion only'.

In the Gowers' edition, Fowler's tolerance for things like dangling participles in certain circumstances is edited out and hardened up with examples that are said to be 'most flagrant'. The complexity of Fowler's original, more personal text has been short-circuited to avoid suggestions of alternative opinions and practices. Usage prescriptions have to be monolithic.

The desire to remove all signs of idiosyncrasy can be traced also in successive editions of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. The usage judgements are taken from the Harper

Heritage Usage Panel, which the dictionary publishers formed in the 1960s and 1970s out of a huge number of big names of literature. It comprises about 170 people with famous names, mostly American and a few British, but enough to sell to the nation that these writers really know what usage is. They were given something like 500 usage questions on which to pass judgement, and selected items were then reproduced in the Harper Heritage Usage Book of 1975.

One of the questions focused on the word *finalise*, a very hot word in the United States in the 1970s. Isaac Asimov commented that 'I associate the phrase with administrative gobbledygook for which I have a hatred. I'm far more tolerant of mistakes of honest ignorance than those of false gentility, and I firmly believe God is too!'

Harrison Salisbury: 'Those who use finalise should themselves be finalised. Bernstein scared it out of the Times writer's years ago.'

Francis Robinson: 'Another reason the country's going to hell.'

These very idiosyncratic comments and many more came from the Harper

Heritage panel and were reproduced in the first *Harper Heritage Usage Book*, maybe to liven up a book that otherwise was not the most exciting. They were selectively used in the first edition of the *Heritage Dictionary* in 1969. In later editions, the juicy comments tended not to be attributed to anybody in particular, then removed, replaced by the percentages of users endorsing or rejecting the usage. The idiosyncratic stuff was progressively reduced to bland numbers.

The second edition says that 90 per cent of the usage panel found *finalise* unacceptable, but by the next edition the sentence, 'We will finalise plans for a class reunion', was unacceptable to only 71 per cent of the usage panel. Reducing the idiosyncrasy also reduces the level of objection perhaps!

In such examples, you see how prescriptive publications underscore their judgements by reference to the opinion of a group, reliable for its size and/or its respectability. Only in the case of the Harper Heritage Usage Panel is the group actually identified, and in the prelims you'll find a list of the 170 people.

Usually, the group is amorphous and there by implication, as the unspoken agents of the agentless passives, or ill-defined social constructs such as 'the educated' or 'careful writers'. The prescriptivists who invoke these abstract communities need support for what may be very personal preferences in usage. They rarely try, as Phil Helmore did, to find out what the usage of others is really like and why it is variable or different. There's a distinct shortage of external evidence, from either primary or secondary sources, to support the typical prescriptive commentary.

Prescriptive commentary works by divorcing usage issues from their real-life contexts, constructing ideal communities in which absolute standards of correctness are to be found and good practice is uniform. There's no hint that usages are changing. The prescriptivist waxes strong on overgeneralisation, with no suggestion of any counterevidence. Readers are provided with social and sanitary incentives to accept their judgements in the metaphors and value systems of prescriptivist rhetoric. The one thing that prescriptive commentators are slow to provide is broadly based evidence of usage.

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OPPORTUNITIES ... FOR DUMMIES

IDG Books Worldwide, Inc, which produces the successful For Dummies reference series, has formed a joint venture company, IDG Books Australia Publishing Corporation Pty Ltd. The new company will be publishing for the local market in a variety of subject areas including business, sport, home and garden, and computer software instruction.

IDG Books Australia is searching for experienced and professional freelance editorial staff including technical writers and editors, copyeditors, proofreaders and indexers with internet access and advanced skills in style and templates in Word 97 for PC. Experience in Quark and Pagemaker for Mac is desirable but not essential. If you are interested please contact:

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COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

The 1999 committee met for the fifth time on Tuesday 8 June 1999.

Standards and accreditation issues

(working group: Rhana Pike, Cathy Gray, Jo Healy-North, Bruce Howarth)

A meeting of the national standards working group (convened by SA's Kathie Stove) is due to be held in Sydney in late July to compile a draft for discussion by the various state societies (see Standards workshop on page 6 this issue). Another working group meeting may then need to be held to produce a final version—perhaps later this year—which will be put to CASE

and submitted to the various memberships for adoption.

Editorial Services Directory

Now entitled *Editorial Services Directory 1999-2000*, the register has been published and will be made available for a full 12 months (until June next year). A searchable electronic version (for Windows) will be provided free on disk to those who request it when ordering a copy of the print version, and the directory can also be searched on the society's Web site.

Training

Grammar for Editors is being organised by convenor Terry Johnston for

Saturday 24 July, and other workshops will be confirmed once the member survey results have been analysed.

Member survey

124 responses have been received to our 1999 member survey. Again, this a very good response rate: thank you to all those who participated. The results are currently being analysed and will be published in a future issue of *Blue Pencil*.

Other matters

If you'd like to contribute in any of these areas, contact one of the committee members involved (see list page 6).

Persuasion

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It seems to me that if you have to find preferable usage, you would want to refer to people that you know speak well and write well. Just as we allow for taste in art and so on, can we not allow for taste in English writing and English speaking, too?

The thing about appealing to great authors is that we don't all appreciate the same ones. The opinions coming out of the Harper Heritage group are actually quite diverse and they're not equally good models to all people. The point about their being diverse is crucial. What seems a shame is when the bland numbers that say 71 per cent of the panel approved or disapproved, you don't get any sense of the real reaction to the usage.

I remember hearing you on the radio speaking to a caller who was complaining that we were losing nuances in language. I think his example was *compared to* and *compared with*. What you said to him was 'you may use this, but you as a writer [and I think he was a journalist] have to be prepared for many people who read what you're writing not to be conscious of the nuance that you're creating'. So, it's a matter of awareness.

That's vital for editors to know. Take the distinction between *enquiry* and *inquiry*.

In Australia, the situation is somewhat normalised, or made more prescriptive, by the fact that the government's style manual and those of many newspapers say to use *inquiry* wherever you are. Those who make a distinction, like banks that say *enquiries* for the individual who has a question for the bank manager and the government *inquiry*, the planned one, will never be comfortable with the thought that *in* means both to quite a lot of readers. But if you're aware of this, you won't try and make too much hang on the difference. For better communication, it actually pays to be aware of distinctions that others don't make. This doesn't necessarily mean that they're corrupting the language, because it's always making extra distinctions and losing distinctions. This is the way language changes. So long as what you want to communicate doesn't hang on this, it's not a problem.

Editors are in a unique position in terms of prescription and description, because in a sense we are forced to make decisions about a particular way of doing things and we just look for rationale for making that decision. I'm just wondering whether you see the world as always having people who believe that there is such a thing as diseased English and there will

always be the prescriptive versus the descriptive. Is it a pulling and pushing that will go on forever, in terms of the way language evolves?

The evidence I've put before you, and your comments, show that for most people language is a value-laden thing. We are not all likely to become totally neutral or neutralised in this respect. For me, the important thing is that the world of usage is often bigger than the prescriptivists allow. For editors, if you're reading manuscripts where somebody is writing something which is one of the acceptable variants, it's probably easier for the editor, and probably better in dealings with the author, not to strike it out. So, the more one knows about the alternatives, the variants that are around, the better.

You also need to think about the audience. Sometimes it doesn't really
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New members

A warm welcome to the following, who have joined the society since mid-May:

Heather Jamieson
Linda Littlemore
Michelle Patane

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Work begins on the sixth edition

The contract for the sixth edition of the Australian government *Style Manual* has gone to a Canberra-based consortium, Snooks and Co. The group is led by Loma Snooks, freelance editor and the Canberra representative in the current review by the Council of Australian Societies of Editors of editorial standards. Other members have contributed to previous editions of the *Style Manual*, including Michael Harrington, Lindsay Mackerras, Pam Peters, Cris Pirie and David Whitbread.

The sixth edition is the first to be outsourced, and will be the first to appear in both print and electronic versions. Accommodating print and electronic styles is part of the challenge of its design. The product is due at the end of 2000.

NOTICE BOARD

Grammar for editors workshop

There's still room in the society's day-long grammar for editors workshop, presented by Robert Veel (BA, DipEd, MEd), on Saturday 24 July. Use the enclosed form to book by Friday 16 July. For more information contact the convenor, Terry Johnston (phone/fax 9337 4126; mobile 0413 801 948; email: terry.johnston@tafensw.edu.au).

Galley Club meetings

Upcoming Galley Club meetings include the Awards ball on 23 July and the AGM on 18 August. Location and cost to be advised. For information, contact Anders Hagberg (phone 0414 851 437). RSVP to Hari Ho (fax 9878 8122 or email hari.ho@gbpub.com.au).

Standards workshop

We hope to hold a Saturday afternoon workshop in late August (probably 21 August) to discuss the draft national standards for editing being developed by the Council of Australian Societies of Editors (CASE). All members are encouraged to participate as these standards will, in a sense, form the core of our profession in future. More details next meeting or, in the meantime, contact Cathy Gray (details at left).

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matter what the author thinks so much because you've got a large audience. You want the message to be as clear as possible. Therefore, you might want to go with the majority sort of expression, whereas the term the author has used might be a minority one.

You're talking about making a judgement about whether what is written is actually going to impede communication, aren't you? What is the fundamental is whether this different, perhaps minority form is necessarily going to impede communication.

I have no problem with usage books showing what is a safe, a tried and true, way of doing things. I do have trouble with the implication that there is only one way, and the problem with the prescriptivists is that they often don't suggest that anything else will do.

Has anyone produced a linguistic Darwinism, about the survival of the fittest mutations in language?

The raw material for it is in some of the introductory material in the big Oxford. I always find it impressive the way they clocked the different forms, say, of every verb. I was playing around with *clothe* and *clad* the other day, as to whether *clad* had any surviving usage in English. Actually it has quite a lot, but not as the past tense or even the ordinary active perfect tense. When you look at the Oxford entry on *clothe* (*clad* was originally a past tense of *clothe*), you've got all the indications as to when the forms *clothed* and *clad* and more were used, with indications as to which century it's last recorded in. So, you do have a sense of things that have mutated and gone extinct.

Maybe some of the mutants were only actually used in one document, whereas the others were in many. That's not so obvious. They're all there just as variants as if they were all equally weighty.