

Columnist declares war on 'multiculturalism'

Australian columnist Frank Devine shared his views on Fowler, politically correct language and the proliferation of global English at our September meeting.

I've spent all my life in journalism and I've divided it pretty much equally between being an editor and being a writer. I'm glad I've now subsided into the writing side because editing is far too dangerous.

When I was a young newspaper sub-editor years ago I had the task of doing the home handyman section of the *West Australian*. I was pretty keen and I worked hard on it. There was a construction, a kind of kit garage that you nailed to-

gether. I made up a page of copy and then wrote an absolutely no-nonsense headline to go along with the diagram: 'You Can Put This Big Garage Up Yourself'. I still haven't quite lived it down.

It's been a very good two years, I think, for editors and dabblers in the written language generally. Last year we had Pam Peters' wonderful *Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* that sweeps aside all the debris of Fowler and his snobbish assertiveness. And this

year we've got Robert Burchfield, the celebrated chief editor of the Oxford dictionaries, finally bringing Fowler to justice.

I know I'm probably stepping on dangerous ground, but from the earliest conscious period of my life I was irritated by Fowler. I thought some of his category headings were amusing but pretentious, and I thought his assertiveness and facetiousness were the work of

continued on page 2

Next meeting: Tuesday 7 October 1997

Thoughts on the role and meaning of 'style'

Lindsay Mackerras, editor of the AGPS *Style Manual* (rescheduled from July)

Lindsay Mackerras is well qualified to help us explore what 'style' is all about—that exciting tension (well, exciting for us editors, anyway) between 'rules' and 'usage', consistency and common sense, creativity and 'correctness'. Lindsay has been with the Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS) for 10 years. Previously Managing Editor, she currently fills the dual role of *Style Manual* editor and Manager, Standards and Style. She also edits the newsletter *Stylewise*, which she founded three years ago.

6.30 pm for 7 pm in the Rooftop Function Centre, 4th floor, Australian Museum (enter from William Street). Drinks and light refreshments provided. Please **RSVP by Friday 3 October** to (02) 9552 0039 (voicemail). Members \$10; non-members and those who don't RSVP, \$12.

Coming meetings:

4 November: John Gibbons, from the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney

2 December: Christmas party

War

continued from page 1

somebody who really wasn't comfortable with the English language. He sounded like he'd been immersed in rigid lessons when he was growing up and just hadn't shaken loose from them. I think 70 years of the Fowler heresy did language a bit of harm and inhibited people. It introduced a kind of class system into language which made people, perhaps especially in the colonies, inhibited and unwilling to try their own magic on the raw materials of English.

I don't think anyone actually set out to shoot Fowler down, but the assembly of databases with their potential to collect and study English usage and to update them constantly did presage the English bully's downfall. So I cheered when Pam Peters came along, and I cheered when Burchfield came along.

I was impressed by the last paragraph of his preface, which reflects my attitudes towards the state of English. His book is 'written at a time when there are many varieties of standard English, all making different choices from the material notionally available to them. It is also a time when pessimists are writing gloomily about declining standards, the loss of valuable distinctions in meaning, the introduction of unappetising vogue words and slang. But I refuse to be a pessimist. I am sure that the English language is not collapsing—more severe changes have come about in past centuries than any that have occurred in the twentieth century—and in the English

language, used well, we still have, and will continue to have, a tool of extraordinary strength and flexibility.'

A global language

But what I'd most like to talk to you about this evening is the coming of English as the global language, which is proceeding at a pace that startles me. I spent some years in Japan in the 1960s and although there was great emphasis on teaching English, no Japanese actually spoke English. They could read Hardy, but they couldn't hold a conversation in a pub. But about three or four years ago, after 15 years away, I was back for a visit. I was simply astonished how almost every young adult could speak heavily accented, slightly hesitant English that was fluent in the sense that the user knew what he was saying and was prepared to risk a response.

The fact that ASEAN has English as its language of business produces an odd anomaly now that there are Europe-ASEAN conferences regularly. All the ASEAN people sit around listening to the English speeches and looking at the English language documents, whereas the Europeans, clinging tightly to their own national languages, have to rely on the earphones for translations. The Europeans are a step behind the ASEAN members—the English-speaking Singaporeans and Malaysians—especially at the cocktail parties.

A quite good unpretentious book has been published by the Macquarie University National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, called

The Australian Learners Dictionary. It's a textbook for people learning English as a foreign language, and Macquarie hopes to sell it in Asia. It is an Australian dictionary, but not aggressively Australian. Its chief editor, Chris Candlin, had some interesting observations when I talked to him recently about the effect of global English. He believes it already shows signs of being a source of power. Fluency in English as a foreign language puts people in front of their countrymen who aren't so good at it. Candlin thinks Doctor Mahathir's influence and prominence in ASEAN is several steps ahead of the true weight of Malaysia in the area. He attributes that to Mahathir's expert command of English.

He says similar things about Lee Kuan Yew, a Cambridge graduate who, I think, for reasons other than their language, assembled around him while he was prime minister of Singapore, a kind of Oxbridge palace guard. Candlin thinks, and I think it's very logical, that their perfect command of English assisted them significantly in gaining practically unchallenged political power in Singapore.

My own feeling following the Candlin logic is that it was his perfect Cambridge English that enabled Lee Kuan Yew to establish himself as an important international leader when, in fact, he was effectively only the mayor of a medium-sized city—somewhat less populous than Sydney, and somewhat less sophisticated than Sydney. Nevertheless, he demonstrates the power often given to non-native speakers of English who gain a strong grasp of it.

However—and this is the point I want to make most and to which Candlin drew to my attention first—the fact that we as native speakers will soon be able to speak our own language in every corner of civilisation is some advantage, but I don't think we should count it to last. And I think there's quite a hazardous potential side effect to it. The non-native speakers of English, like Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew, and hundreds of thousands of others in positions of some power and importance, are not studying English and mastering it because they want to be like us, or share our culture, or admire us particularly. They want English because it enables them to keep a bit of an eye on what we are up to, especially in the United States, and to be able to score points for their side.

Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

Membership

Membership of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. is open to anyone working as an editor in the print media, and anyone who supports the society's aims.

Membership runs for a calendar year. 1997 fees are \$45 for new members (\$25 if joining after 30 June) and \$40 for renewals.

For a membership application form, phone (02) 9552 0039, or write to PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007.

Blue Pencil

The society's newsletter, *Blue Pencil*, is mailed to members monthly, except for January. We welcome your comments and contributions. Please mail them to Merry Pearson at 55 Collins St., North Narrabeen, NSW 2101, or fax or e-mail them to her as per the committee list on the back page.

Deadline for the November issue is Monday 13 October.

David Crystal, who has a good book on the subject, *English as a Global Language*, points out the English that's employable is not going to be the English that expresses our—that's Australia or England or America's—culture and history and social shape. It's going to be a very utilitarian English.

Crystal says that people who use the Internet or write scripts for international productions already use a kind of utilitarian futuristic English that takes the form of, for example, omitting phrases you know are understandable in your own culture, but that you know will not be understood well by the person you're talking to in Afghanistan or Chile. So you leave out these familiar, intimate phrases and usages of English, and so global English, or Standard World English as Crystal calls it, is taking on a streamlined, perhaps slightly heartless or soulless character.

Crystal then takes the further step of saying that within 50 years there will be far more speakers of English as a second language than speakers of English as their native tongue. Even the huge number of native English speakers in the United States will be small compared to the huge numbers speaking English as a second language.

He goes on—I'm being a bit interpretive here—to say that those who use English as a second language for international communications probably will have an advantage over us native speakers because they will have a language from their own society and culture which is uncorrupted by being sent out into the world for promiscuous use. They will have their own uncorrupted language which they can use to speak with members of their culture to express feelings that have grown out of a culture developed over hundreds of years. And they'll also have this utilitarian language with which they can make practical contact with the rest of the world.

But we native speakers of English run the risk of a steady erosion of our English English or our Canadian English or our New Zealand English by falling into utilitarian political English habits of expressing ourselves. I believe this is a very plausible prediction. Candlin thinks it's a likely event, and Crystal seems in his book to be quite convinced and writes a warning tale.

So this great circle brings me to the question of editors and how valuable we

are, because there is a coming need, perhaps a pressing need, to preserve our English as an expression of our culture. I think to let it degenerate in any way is a bit of an undermining of the security of our society. And I think perhaps that we editors have been a little bit lax in the last few years. I know this is entering into the extremely controversial area—so I'm particularly happy to do it—of political correctness, which is the practice of forcing, imposing, words and phrases on people because it suits a small group who want to discern their point of view as being right.

Linguistic engineering

Burchfield says in his entry about linguistic engineering: 'This phenomenon is more marked and more strident in the 20c. than at any time in the past.' Never before in history has there been such an attempt to impose manufactured words put together deliberately to influence people's phrases.

A quotation from the English *Sunday Times* in 1991 says: 'Something is wrong with the United States of America that threatens the whole basis of the Great Society's role as protector of the free world and inspiration for those who yearn to be free. American politics is being corrupted and diminished by the doctrine of political correctness, which demands rigid adherence to the political attitudes and social mores of the liberal left, which exhibits a malevolent intolerance to anyone who dares not comply with them.'

The feminist effort to impose words on people is doomed to failure because there has never been a successful imposition of ways to talk on English users. But it has had the effect, as have a lot of politically correct impositions, of stultifying conversation and debate. It has inhibited the growth of the language, and it is something which should be fought against passionately, fanatically, by editors. I think that we editors have been quiescent about letting the politically correct impose language on writing. I know that our duty is, up to a point, to let the author have his way, and just guide and nudge him on his chosen route, but I think we also as editors have some kind of responsibility for challenging words and phrases as to their true meaning.

I won't go into a lot of examples, but I've always hated the word 'multicultural'. I came to Australia after a long

time in the United States, when the word was already well launched. I didn't know what it meant. Of course I inquired what it meant, where it came from, and even to this day I'm not sure I know.

I now understand it was in fact an imposed word that was aimed at the country, and the minds of Australians, by well-meaning government officials who were alarmed at the influx of Indo-Chinese refugees after the Vietnam War. That influx caused some antagonism, and so this awful word was created, 'multiculturalism'.

We were a country that overnight was to be a multitude of cultures, instead of being 'Australian' as Australians have always thought of themselves as being. [Being Australian] was something to be proud of and to admire, and this was expressed in the now almost archaic term 'New Australian'. Unfortunately, the idea of somebody being a New Australian, which gave cause to feel pleased and hopeful and welcome, came to be regarded as derogatory.

But 'multiculturalism' is a basically meaningless word or, if not meaningless, so full of ambiguity and so resisting of entry to its meaning that it can be corrupted and seen as something you said of wogs anyway. The whole purpose of having tolerance was destroyed. You never thought of yourself as being part of the multitude of cultures; only somebody else's cultures were 'multi'. They were new and unfamiliar and of people still groping around not knowing the right number of the bus to take and not remembering *Crocodile Dundee*.

So I have my sword as a writer now. I have less influence of course over language than I had when I was an editor, but I've decided to wage a war on 'multicultural', and not only to refrain from ever using the word myself, but to evangelise anybody close to me, to persuade them never to use it again.

I think the answer to 'multicultural' is to abandon it, replace it with nothing; there's no need for it, it's done no work, it's a bad word, let's forget about it. And all we editors have got to join in the ceaseless fight to keep our own Australian form of English healthy and pure and to fight against any attempt to artificially impose on the language, and on us users of it, words that other people want us to have to express their views rather than ours.

continued on page 4

War

continued from page 3

Comment: You brought up two points—one is being aware of global English as something quite distinct, and the other is being aware of local English as an expression of our culture. The two things are totally separate and hard for editors to keep in tension. I didn't realise it until just now, but this is obviously going to be a very big area that we're all going to have to be prepared for—perhaps through training.

Don't you reckon it's very plausible that a Frenchman, speaking global English very well, but also speaking French, remembers everything—his family, his childhood, the Rabelais, Molière. His French is not a global language. His French will be perfect, whereas there's a strong risk, especially for regularly travelling Americans and Australians, of having their English whittled away. They'll be speaking this basic global English, maybe for weeks at a time, and they'll come back to Seattle, and it will be too much of an effort to read much of the classics of American English. Mark Twain is quite complex really. And so they'll begin maybe even thinking in global English. You're probably right that it's something which the good editing courses should take into account.

Comment: How can you say [global English] doesn't have any culture? It has different words, it has new words. You may not like the new words—they may be awful and ugly and clumsy, but I think they express what this climate's about. It's really different, and it's really changing. I don't know that it's anything less.

Comment: And everybody isn't moving on the international scene anyway. There've always been a few people who stay at home and keep using Australian English.

Well, those are the people who are using English as a cultural expression here, but that doesn't take away from the fact that there is another global level of English evolving.

Question: But why will it then impose its 'horrid weight' upon the lovely vibrant Australian language?

Because we'll grow used to it is the theory, which I actually support. We'll grow used to leaving out rich colourful idiosyncratic Australian expressions which we construct ourselves on the basis of these unusual words that are our very own. We'll leave them out when we're talking in English by Internet or telephone to a Chinese guy or a Tibetan or Argentinian, and we'll grow unaccustomed to using the full riches of our own vocabulary and ability to play with language.

Comment: Isn't this a reflection of the way people are living—the lives they live aren't colourful and idiosyncratic, but a lot more bland and international? I've just spent my first day at work in a big bureaucracy today and I felt that.

Comment: The TV sitcom would be a good example of the internationalisation of language.

But how do you explain the great success of Australian soap opera? Because it is produced cheaply, it has a lot more talking than American shows because studio conversation shots are cheaper than location shooting. I reckon soap operas are pretty well written and we are, in fact, defending ourselves a bit by exporting into global English little flickers of our Australian cultural language.

Question: On the question of American versus British literary English of the last 50 years, which of the two do you think has been the healthier in terms of what's been produced?

Well, I think that, probably for reasons other than purely the use of language, that America has been more virile in the literary sort of English.

Question: What would you put that down to?

To the existence of a few writers of extraordinary ability: John Cheever, John O'Hara, John Updike, all those Johns. That's probably a kind of accident of history. But it certainly led to the enrichment of the language and also the absolute primacy of Hollywood. The need to produce freshness and attention-getting spoken language every minute when the bombs aren't going off has given vigour to American English, so I think American English is justly more influential and perhaps irreversibly growing stronger.

Comment: I've been here two years, and as an outsider I'm disappointed

that I can probably count on one hand the expressions I assume to be Australian. I think you're probably too self-congratulatory as a nation. I've heard it all before, not in England, but from television. It's largely American. The intonation patterns and the use of language are getting more and more American. I don't see a huge vitality in Australian English that is distinct from an American use of English, and I find that disappointing.

I'm a sort of foreigner in that I'm a New Zealander and I've also lived in the United States for a long time, and I'm conscious of there being a pronounced Australian language. G. Wilkes' *Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* has a terrific list. But there are also usages of commonplace phrases that have a laconic, mock-melancholy tone that is unique to Australia.

And Australia's the only country which has produced a widespread, non-derogatory slang word for woman, 'sheila'. Every other slang word I know for woman in English is either atrociously gross or aggressive or unpleasant or has overtones, but 'sheila' is without the slightest touch of hostility or denigration to it. It's a unique achievement.

Comment: I speak Greek—as my grandmother used to speak it 12 years ago—and I'm astounded when I come into contact with Australian people who speak Greek who are first-generation Australian. They've developed their own form of Australian Greek, and I can't really understand them. And it's amazing in only 20 years how much has changed.

Comment: I want to return to the subject of multiculturalism, because I'm unimpressed. These new words that you're saying we really don't want, they're handed down from governments. They're being used to describe what are basically very new things. There are very few instances in history of efforts to equalise people regardless of sex, regardless of race. This is a new thing in the world. There may be various periods of history when there's been a lot of stability in some countries, but generally not with this diversity. I think these words are

continued on page 5

NOTICE BOARD

Onscreen editing workshop

There are still a few places in the society's workshop on onscreen editing to be held on 18 October. Use the insert in this issue of *Blue Pencil* to register.

Style Council Sydney 97: Language and the media

Style Council 97 will be held at the State Library of New South Wales, Macquarie Street, Friday evening through Sunday, 21–23 November 1997. It will be preceded by a *Macquarie Dictionary* Third Edition Seminar on Friday afternoon, also at the State Library.

Style Council papers and discussions will include Language of Broadcasting, Language of Advertising, Language of the Internet, Newspaper Language, and the Language Media of Law.

The registration fees are: Style Council—\$220 before 31 October, \$275 after that date; Dictionary Seminar—\$25. For further details telephone Maureen Leslie on (02) 9850 9800.

Financial and legal editors and writers' network

Are you interested in meeting other professional financial and legal writers and editors? Do you plan, write or edit insurance policies, proposals, annual reports, legal commentary, forms, analysts' reports, consultants' reports, tender documents, training materials or highly technical brochures? Do you publish paper documents, on an intranet, the Internet or CD-ROMs?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, you might want to join a group for informal lunch-time discussions about writing and editing for financial and legal audiences. Topics may include: whether a writer or editor should be on a marketing/public relations team or in a section with the subject-matter experts; how to encourage staff to think about their audience; how to start a plain English program; communicating to staff how an editor/professional writer can

help; writing styles for electronic publishing electronically; and writing training manuals.

If this sounds interesting to you, send your name, areas of interest, suggested topics, days you are free at lunchtime, phone and fax numbers, and e-mail address to Danielle Sinani, Publishing Manager, or Irene Wong, Senior Editor, Australian Securities Commission, (02) 9911 2612 (phone), (02) 9911 2615 (fax), or wongword@ozemail.com.au. If there's enough interest in an informal network of writers and editors in the Sydney CBD, Danielle will arrange the first meeting.

Challenge in Diversity

The ASTC (NSW) Conference '97 will be held Friday 31 October and Saturday 1 November at the Mercure Hotel, St Leonards. This year's theme, Challenge in Diversity, recognises the diverse and changing skills required within the industry. Sessions are focused on the Internet—how to use both the Internet and intranets to disseminate information effectively; legal aspects, such as intellectual property, and the role of the Internet in building corporate cultures—and audience diversity. Diverse audiences—awareness of cultural differences in writing for diverse audiences. Other topics include: managing documentation; defining and estimating projects; the professionalism of technical writers; the *Style Manual* and electronic publishing (presented by Lindsay Mackerras from the AGPS); on-line editing; and designing forms. For further information, contact Jonica Paramor, phone (02) 92111 6590.

Editor to address Galley Club

Bernadette Foley, winner of the 1996 Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship, will address the 15 October meeting of the Galley Club of Sydney. Bernadette recently spent three months gaining first-hand experience of the North American publishing scene. Her presentation will focus on book production and design, and the structure of American publish-

ing houses, as seen through the eyes of a Sydney freelance editor.

The meeting will be at the North Sydney Oval Function Room, Fig Tree Lane (off Miller St), 6.00 pm for a 6.30 pm start. All-inclusive costs are \$20 for members and \$25 for non-members. Further information from Wendy Rapee at (02) 9499 4145.

War

continued from page 4

necessary because they describe new things. So let's be multicultural.

Well, I'm not personally indignant about it, you understand, but I do think the manufactured and imposed word 'multiculturalism' actually angers people. It was not understood in the way it was intended, and it caused an antagonism to the new cultures which were being seen to be imposed because the word was imposed. Have you actually had a conversation, a fairly intimate, social, informal conversation, in which somebody has used multicultural as his or her own choice of word?

Comment: Yes, I do it myself. [Several other positive responses.]

Well, I shouldn't have taken that tack, should I?

Comment: People may invent a word and the inventing is artificial, but if it takes root in the language and is used, then it becomes alive. I think that's the nature of English.

Well, I couldn't argue with that.

New members

A warm welcome to all those who joined the society from 18 July to 10 September:

Bill Duncan
Juliet Sheen
Barbara Cameron Smith
Clare Morgan
Pauline Waugh
Jocelyn Hargrave

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Acting on ethics

What do you think of the ethical standards in our industry?

The ethics subcommittee which began meeting last year invites your input. The questionnaire enclosed with this issue of *Blue Pencil* is intended as a means of exploring the dimensions of the ethical concerns that society members deal with on a professional level. The data gathered is for background material for a society meeting on the subject in April 1998 which could then lead to a national conference on ethics in the industry in 1999.

When completing the questionnaire, please consider the following points.

- We are interested in common understandings of ethics, so do not make any special effort to research a correct response.
- Preserve the distinction between ethics and efficiency. For example, vague job briefs are usually the result of sloppy thinking, a poor understanding of what editing involves, or simple disorganisation. Inefficient? Undoubtedly. Unethical? Not usually — unless the vague terms are an attempt to trick or bully.
- Preserve the distinction between ethics and etiquette. For example, people who do not return phone calls, are not punctual, force deadlines onto other people or overestimate their own brilliance, are annoying (to put it politely), but not necessarily behaving unethically.
- We offer anonymity to encourage candour. If you raise questions seeking a direct response, or want your views acknowledged personally, please include your name and contact number.
- If you have examples of unethical behaviour in the publishing industry or media and you would like them considered by the subcommittee, please send them either with the survey or under separate cover.

When you have completed the survey form, please return it to:

Ethics Committee

c/- PO Box 2229

North Rose Bay NSW 2030

At the moment the ethics subcommittee has four members:

Robin Appleton (02) 9560 1017

John Fleming (02) 9529 8638

Terry Johnson, (02) 9337 4126

Catherine Hocings e-mail: chocki01@postoffice.csu.edu.au;
(02) 9568 2618

We would welcome other society members who are interested in ethical issues to join our meetings, or to contribute by phone, mail or e-mail.

At the NSW Writers' Centre

Robin Appleton is convenor of a six-day weekend course, *The Publishing Process and Principles of Editing*, which will run from 9.30 am to 5 pm on 11, 12, 19, 25 and 26 October and 1 November. Topics include: publisher, author and copyright; principles of editing; parts of a book; lists, glossaries, photographs and captions; and indexing and proofreading.

On 2 and 8 November, Robin will present a *Practical Editing Workshop*, from 9.30 am to 5 pm each day. Participants will work on group and individual exercises, compare their ways of reading copy, and hear others' views on the processes by which decisions in editing are made.

For information, call (02) 9555 9757 or fax (02) 9818 1327.