

10-1-1969

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Recommended Citation

Foley, L. (1969). Just Who is the "Mistaken Purist"?. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 10 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol10/iss1/2

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JUST WHO IS THE "MISTAKEN PURIST"?

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Not long ago a reviewer of Wilson Follett's *Modern American Usage* quoted from that book as a sample of its "good advice" a declaration concerning adverbs. "The belief that adverbs should end in *-ly* is hard to down in the mistaken purist, and one often meets the tone of reprobation about the short forms. A newspaper will comment quizzically on the public authorities that have *given outright approval to road-signs like 'Drive Slow.'*"¹

Such a statement does not indicate any very clear understanding of the ways of language, our own in particular. One does not have to be a "purist" to recognize certain simple principles as they naturally work out. This they tend to do rather steadily on the whole, in spite of the befuddlement kept up by people who stubbornly refuse to look into the true nature of our speech, the *real* "usage" which is not altogether subject to individual whim.

Using good grammar is not, and never was, a matter of slavishly following arbitrary "rules" supposedly dreamed up by the much-maligned so-called "purists." It is not even strictly necessary to know the conventional terminology for the different parts of speech. Long before a child ever knows the word "adverb," for instance, he will have acquired a very definite *feeling* for the idiomatic use of adverbial expressions—if he is ever going to have it. Unless one already has a quasi-instinctive feeling for the grammatical system, the names for the various parts of its structure can have no meaning. These terms, however, enable us to talk about it conveniently. So we can become more conscious of the means by which we express ourselves, and learn to use them more precisely and more gracefully.

The way adverbial forms have evolved in English is quite understandable if one takes the trouble to look into it. Obviously nowadays everyone thinks of *-ly* as the natural ending for adverbs. So true is this that children sometimes use it to form adverbs that hardly exist, as "funnily" for example. This feeling about *-ly*, however, deep-rooted as it seems to be, is a comparatively modern phenomenon. Originally *-ly* was an *adjective* ending, and we still have a number of adjectives which bear witness to that older usage, as do *manly*, *womanly*, *saintly*, *cowardly*, *seemly*, *woolly*, and others, for which

1. ABWA *Bulletin*, February 1967, p. 25.

we have no corresponding adverbs at all. We have to say, for instance, "in a manly way."

This ending is a worn-down remnant of *like*, which in Old English was spelled *lic* and pronounced like our word *leek*. As apparently in all languages, our adverbs were formed from adjectives. In Old English this was done by adding another syllable, a final *-e* which of course was pronounced. So for *manlic* (manly) the adverb was *manlice*. But by no means all adjectives ended in *-lic* to start with; *hat* (hot) became adverbial as *hate*, and so on. When with the corruption of the language—call it simplification if you prefer—the final *-e* which marked the adverb dropped off, the old distinction was lost. Only after that was it possible for *-ly* to become the characteristic *adverb* ending that it has now unquestionably been for a good while.

In Old English the adverb for the adjective *slow* was naturally *slowe*. With the dropping of the final *-e*, there was no longer any distinction, until the evolution of *-ly* into the standard mark of an adverb made *slowly* inevitable. There is no more settled "law" of language than the way a certain manner of handling grammatical form, once it has become established for the great majority of words in a given class, will be applied to others not originally in that class at all. Thus various verbs once irregular have become regular. The irregular forms that persist are words that everyone learns very early in life, before he has become thoroughly aware of the standard patterns. That is why it seems "natural" to carry on with a few examples of otherwise obsolete ways of forming plurals, such as *men*, *women*, and *children*, or with such "strong" verbs as *go*, *went*, *gone*, or *think*, *thought*, *thought*. As for continuing use of *slow* as an adverb, we shall come back to that presently after noticing something else.

Despite the triumph of *-ly* as our standard adverbial suffix, we have a number of common adverbs which no one dreams of using otherwise than in their "flat" uninflected form. The explanation, however, is not the same as what we have seen in the case of old plurals or surviving irregular verbs. In fact it seems quite clear that the "flat" adverbs that remain with us might long ago have joined the overwhelming majority in *-ly* had there not been unavoidable semantic obstacles to prevent.

Let us consider for instance a few of the commonest examples: *high*, *low*, *near*, *hard*, *even*, *still*, and *wide*. "He threw the ball *highly*" would sound ridiculous because *highly* is specialized in a figurative sense; we say that a dish is "highly seasoned," or that the result of

some effort is “highly satisfactory.” *Low* cannot be replaced by *lowly*, not only because the latter is an adjective but because it suggests humility or inferior social rank, as in “the meek and lowly.” The adverb *nearly* now too strongly connotes “almost” to supplant *near* in its literal sense of “within a short distance.” In the eighteenth century it seemed quite idiomatic to say that something “nearly concerns us,” but now it is necessary to substitute *closely* to make the meaning clear.

Hardly has too definite a meaning of “barely” or “scarcely” to be used instead of *hard* in such a sentence as “They tried hard,” or “He fought hard.” Comparison of the two statements, “We have been coming *late* in the afternoon,” and “We have been coming *lately* in the afternoon,” shows a difference of ideas that effectively prevents *lately* from driving out *late*. *Even*, in such expressions as “even now” or “He rises early even on Sundays,” could not be replaced by *evenly*: “They spread the cement evenly,” or “The wall rose evenly all along the line.” The rare word *stilly* almost inevitably reminds one of Thomas Moore’s poem, “Oft in the stilly night.” Not only is the word fixed as an *adjective*, but it seems to have an undesirable tone, perhaps because it resembles *silly*. *Wide*, in “It fell wide of the mark,” cannot be replaced by *widely* because the latter has acquired another sense, “The magazine circulates widely,” “As a lawyer he is widely known.” Other examples might be cited, but surely these are sufficient to demonstrate that adverbs which have resisted being drawn into the *-ly* class have had compelling reasons for remaining as they are.

Use of *slow* as an adverb has no such justification, for it can have no other meaning than that of *slowly*. There has been nothing to prevent the latter from having the standard form like the great majority of our adverbs, and in fact that is what has long ago taken place. At least in most contexts, *slow* as an adverb can hardly sound quite right to the ear of any person who has a feeling for correctness of expression.

Here, however, is where the *real* would-be “purist” comes into the picture. Certain grammarians and etymologists have exerted their influence to counteract the natural evolution of our language. Ignoring the fact of that evolution, and enamored of Old English for its own sake, they “like” *slow* better because it seems closer to that obsolete tongue. So they defend it as “an ancient and dignified part of our language,”² though the claim of “dignity” for it in most cases would

2. Greenough, J. B. and Kittredge, G. L., *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*, Macmillan (1916), p. 199.

be laughable. Mr. H. W. Fowler admits with an air of regret “the encroachments of *-ly*,” but contends that “*slow* maintains itself as at least an idiomatic possibility under some conditions.”³ Any “conditions” which admit such “possibility” have to be special indeed.

No one with any sense of correctness at all—unless he were trying to speak pidgin—would say “He slow moved over,” or “The situation slow improved.” If a person says, “The construction is slow starting,” he must be meaning *slow* as an adjective; it is slow in starting, and the implication is that it has not yet started. It would not mean the same as saying, “The construction is slowly starting.”

Of course there are, as there have always been, those who have no feeling whatever for any kind of correctness in speech. It is no cause for surprise that they should show no more respect for differences between adjectives and adverbs than for other grammatical distinctions. “He done real good” is perfectly in the pattern of the lowest levels of undisciplined speech. Presumably, however, we are not taking as a criterion the “usage” of those who couldn’t care less about propriety or agreeableness in their language.

It seems as if hardly any old speech-ways ever fade out of common use without leaving fossil remains somewhere in the language. Examples are old meanings of words, generally forgotten, which subsist in adages and proverbial expressions, often leading to their modern misinterpretation. “Calling a spade a spade” was not a reference to garden implements, but meant speaking plainly about castrated animals instead of employing such euphemisms as “steer” or “gelding.” “The exception proves the rule” uses *prove* in the old sense of *try* or *test*, which had become virtually obsolete before it was revived within living memory in “proving-grounds.” As with such survivals of old meanings, so with archaic forms. For either, in fact, we often find examples in compound words, which may continue to preserve something no longer familiar elsewhere. Centuries ago, the Old English word *gos* became *goose*, but we still have *goshawk*. *Ware* is not commonly used now for “goods,” but we still have *warehouse*, *hardware*, and other reminders. So one might go on indefinitely.

A common kind of compound adjective is formed by coupling an adverb with a past or present participle. While participles are adjectival in their use, as verb-forms they are modified by adverbs, as indeed adjectives are anyway. In keeping with the phenomenon of

3. Fowler, H. W., *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, Oxford (1927), p. 542.

occasional survivals of archaic forms, some of these participial combinations still carry on with “flat” adverbs. We continue to use *new-mown* and *new-born*, in contrast to the more modern compounding of *newly-wed*. Likewise with present participles we have *easy-going*, and *slow* hangs on adverbially in *slow-growing* and *slow-moving*. Such stray items, however, are rather irrelevant to the currents of modern language.

What usually starts the argument about adverbs is, of course, the familiar road-sign, “Go Slow” (sometimes even *Slo*). We may suspect that more than one cause operates to keep that phrase alive. No doubt there is some kind of satisfaction in the neat coupling of two monosyllables that rime. That this should seem more attractive than correctness need not astonish us, if we reflect upon the passion for alliteration which continually leads English-speaking people to sacrifice grammar and meaning quite cheerfully for combinations of words beginning with the same letter: “cash and carry,” “lend lease,” or “a word to the wise,” where it was *knowledge* rather than “wisdom” that was meant by the Latin proverb thus translated.

Perhaps as important a reason as any is the simple fact that *slow* takes up less space than *slowly*. In this respect it is like the “thru” which one sees in similar places. That spelling cannot be considered “phonetic”—unless one has in mind the distorted pronunciation to be heard in some parts of the country as a dialectal peculiarity. In both cases, however, the intended meaning is clear enough; it takes care of the situation.

Finally we may hazard the guess that there may enter into the affair a certain taste for occasional sloppiness or incorrectness just for its own sake. It may be “fun” like saying “ain’t” once in a while, with people who know that is not your natural way of speaking. To take such items seriously, as if they really demonstrated anything about correct language one way or another, is to be a little bit foolish.