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THE SCIENCE OF LINGUISTIC LAISSER-ALLER

Louis Foley

Those of us who are unapologetically devoted to the cause of correct English are not necessarily so hopelessly oldfogyish as some of the "scientific" popularizers of linguistics take us to be. We are not harking back to any imaginary "good old days." Some of us would say unhesitatingly that the *best* English of today, all things considered, is the best there ever was. We are not disposed, however, to accept blithely on the ground of "usage" just any sort of careless confusion or ignorant corruption merely because it has considerable currency. Indeed, one may well contend that there is less excuse for such things now than ever before.

A favorite method of argument of those who espouse the blind worship of "usage" is to becloud the issue by confronting us with a mixed batch of specimens involving indiscriminately various sorts of things. Along with errors of ancient date which only the most pedantic-minded would fight against now, they include flagrant examples of slipshod confusion and muddled thinking.

They will, for instance, take a good deal of trouble to defend saying "It's *me*," which is surely one of the least offensive of common corruptions.¹ It seems trivial compared to the final establishment of *you* as a nominative, which took place long ago. Any reader of the King James Bible must know that in the older language the subject pronoun was *ye*, and *you* was used only for the object. So from a historical point of view, "You went" is no better than "Him and me went." Also *you* was always plural in meaning, and naturally was not used in addressing a single person. Now, except in the conservative style of traditional ecclesiastical forms and old-fashioned poetry, we have completely lost the second-person singular pronouns, *thou*, *thy*, and *thee*. (Insofar as *thee* persists in Quaker dialect, it is used with utter disregard for grammar, as in "Thee does.") Thus modern English is no longer capable of expressing, by the actual words, the very real difference in attitude between intimate familiarity and formal address, as other languages easily do.

These changes have irrevocably taken place. They have come to seem perfectly "natural," and no one would seriously contemplate

1. e.g., Robert P. Price, "Who's There? It's Me," *The Torch*, July 1956.

trying to undo them. Such things could happen when our language was in a state of flux, when the bars were completely down, and when scholarly people who wrote in Latin despised English anyhow. In our day of widespread communication, of general literacy, and of much-vaunted education, there is nothing like the same excuse for allowing ignorance or sloppiness to triumph unhindered.

It is really a rather curious state of affairs when “new scientific principles” are mentioned in the same breath with saying that “English teachers and scholars . . . no longer regard such locutions as *ain’t*, *can’t hardly*, *to please sit down*, *these kind of*, *the reason is because*, and *can I have a cookie?* as unforgivable crimes.”² This collection of examples is indeed a mixed kettle of fish, going all the way from what everyone *knows* is incorrect to what never was really wrong at all.

Theoretical defense of *ain’t* as a contraction of *am not* has not much to do with reality. For one thing, elisions have shifted with the passing of time. Just as the *’tis* of our ancestors has change to *it’s*, so we now naturally say *I’m not*. This, however, is not the real point. It is perfectly clear that the typical *ain’t*-user employs the word as an all-purpose negative for all persons, singular or plural, with all verbs. It serves not only for past and present, but with “gonnuh” takes care of all negatives in future tense. So it is an unmatchable example of indiscriminate substitution for all manner of proper forms. Going along regularly with all sorts of other crudities, it is the “classic” example of the most shiftless speech, which it inevitably suggests. Of course, just *because* it is so obviously bad English, it may be “fun” to use when you know that people know it is not your natural way of talking!

Other items in the list display lack of regard for exactness in expression, but the last-named involves no question of grammar at all. As a fixed formula of politeness, “May I?” simply preserved the older verb *may* which has been generally replaced by *can*. The politeness is in the implication of authority in the person addressed; without his permission, you *can’t*. No one need be particularly shocked by the mere translation of a fossil formula into more modern idiom.

For anyone acquainted with the background of present-day English, it is no secret that here and there certain forms, made possible only by ignorance, crept in and were finally established. We know, for instance, that “pea” became settled as an artificial singular because *pease* sounded like a plural. Similar misunderstandings have fared

2. *ibid.*

variously. Though generally forgotten now, a generation or two ago it was not uncommon to hear country folk refer to a dead body as a “corp” because *corpse* sounded plural to them. “Shay,” as in “the one-hoss shay,” a corruption of *chaise*, is now well-nigh sunk from sight with the passing of horse-drawn vehicles, and other examples have perished along the way. *Agenda* originally meant “things that must be done,” and *opera* was the Latin plural of *opus*, but these words were fixed in their modern singular meanings before becoming really current in English.

From one point of view, such instances simply demonstrate what the really *basic* “usage” is—the *system* which makes any language what it is, and which a person having a natural feeling for the language follows instinctively. Only by some education does he become aware of exceptions and the reasons for them. In our time, however, there is surely no longer the extenuation there might once have been for not distinguishing *medium—media*, *criterion—criteria*, *phenomenon—phenomena*, *stratum—strata*, or *datum—data*.

“Usage” is an indispensable support of language, but it is not everything. As our means of expression have slowly and painfully evolved through centuries, the real progress that has been made has been always in the direction of precision, of straight thinking, of discrimination, of recognizing finer distinctions. What makes bad English bad is differences of quality which are not difficult to demonstrate. Essentially it is the result of insensitiveness to anything but the grossest differences between ideas; in various degrees it indicates a lack of the mental discipline which we might legitimately expect of an intelligent person who has had the benefit of some education.

As an example of what he calls “use of *like* as a conjunction,” Dr. Bergen Evans quotes a sentence from Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* “Life is hard for a girl like I.” Of course he understood that the girl’s remark was *meant* to be “sub-standard” to show her as “an uneducated person,” but he seems to misinterpret the implication. It is rather absurd to speak of “implying the suppressed *am* [which] makes this *like* a conjunction.”³ Not much detective insight is required to see how the satire was intended. Her thought-pattern was employing *like* as a preposition all right enough. Being her simple self she would have said “like *me*,” as anyone naturally does. She translates it to the ridiculously unidiomatic *I* because in her shallow-mindedness she takes that to sound more “refined.” She

3. Address before Managing Editors of the Associated Press, 1963.

had dimly grasped that, for instance, "He and I went" is more respectable than the "Him and me went" which remains perennially current on the lowest levels of speech. So she supposes that "I" is a fancier substitute for *me* just about anywhere. She is putting on airs in the same crude way as those who say, "They invited he and I," though they would never say, "They invited I." What makes her talk amusing is that in her simple-minded affectation she distorts the idiom so unnaturally.

This reminds me of one time years ago when I was introduced to a young lady at a public dance. She was attractive in appearance, and had an air of poised assurance. To make conversation, I asked her if she had been present at a certain event of not long before, "Were you there?" Quite seriously she replied, "Yes, I *were*." The obvious deduction is irresistible. No doubt, in her customary environment, people used *was* in all cases: "we was," "you was," "they was." She had been around enough to sense that *were* had somehow a higher social tone. So, when you found yourself with a "were" person, the trick to show that you really belonged was just to substitute *were* wherever you would say *was*. She was a true blood-sister of the preferred blonde.

The typical kinds of error in grammar have been being made generation after generation for a long time. Yet it would surely be stultifying to claim that centuries of "usage" have made them *correct*. Characteristically they show the sort of fumbling that happens when a statement is not clearly conceived from the beginning as a coherent whole. And certainly there is nothing particularly *American* about such confusions.

Just for an off-hand example, Daniel Defoe in *Roxana* (1724) had the lady saying "there was none to dine but *he* and *I*," "jesting between her and *I*," "discourses which happened between my maid Amy and *I*." James Boswell in his *London Journal*, a generation later, spoke of "a day eagerly expected by Dempster, Erskine, and *I*."

Certain ways of muddling sentence-structure which are wearisomely common in modern journalism were fully exemplified in the reign of Queen Anne by Joseph Addison, the outstanding writer of that much-praised Augustan age of English prose. In *The Spectator* for July 20, 1711, he wrote: "My worthy friend Sir Roger is one of those who is not only at peace within himself, but beloved and esteemed by all about him." Immediately forgetting the false start "of those," he finished the sentence as if the phrase were not there. All he really had in mind was "one who is," as the subsequent "him-

self” and “him” clearly show. Avoiding the clutter of unnecessary words might have helped to keep in focus the plain thought: “Sir Roger is not only at peace within himself . . .” Needless to say, it is not a question of denigrating eighteenth-century prose. For its time, some of it was wonderful, but even its best is no peerless model for us to imitate now.

Everyone who has given the matter any thought must realize that words are continually acquiring new meanings through natural association of ideas. This process has been occurring since no one knows when, and only more rapidly as time has gone on. It operates in general through two different kinds of figure of speech, metaphor and metonymy; we start calling something by the name of something it seems to resemble or by that of something so closely connected with it that one immediately suggests the other. The common everyday vocabulary also is continually changing like styles in clothing, amusements, or household equipment. We forget the names of things we no longer use, and without effort learn those of new styles and new inventions. The elaborate terminology of mediaeval armor or of falconry, for example, is probably now familiar to fewer people than can easily speak Latin, and the working vocabularies of many activities of only one or two generations ago are a completely dead language for anyone living today. The new words of our own time—as dictionary-publishers seem never to realize—are the last words the average person who is in touch with current events ever thinks of looking up.

The mere matter of development of new words, and new meanings for old ones, has no necessary connection whatever with the question of what is correct English. Many inevitable changes one may readily accept or even welcome, and still object to expressions which represent nothing but careless confusion, without which they could never arise.

We do not have to countenance the heedlessness which confuses the opposite points of view of *imply* and *infer*. *Comprise*, which goes along with *comprehend*, *comprehensive*, *comprehensible*, and other words from the same root, stands for the idea of taking in, including, or containing. In recent times a good many newspaper writers have treated it as merely a somewhat fancier synonym for *compose*, which represents the opposite idea of combining constituent elements. How much miseducation has thus been perpetrated may be seen in the 1964 Republican platform: “. . . Republican leadership will move immediately to establish an international commission,

comprised of individuals of high competence in NATO affairs . . .”⁴

Disinterested, meaning impartial, not influenced by hope of personal gain, is carelessly assumed to be the same as “uninterested,” whereas they are based on quite different senses of *interest*.

In the last few years we have been seeing tank-trucks used for transporting oil and gasoline labeled “flammable.” This truncation of a well-established word was of course intended as an extra-fool-proof precaution to avoid all danger of confusion between our two very different prefixes *in-*. The negative prefix of *incapable*, *incompetent*, *incongruous*, or *inconspicuous* has nothing to do with the *in* (as opposed to *out*) of *inflammable*, capable of being set on fire—of carrying the flame *in*. With no risk of misunderstanding, we keep on as before with the figurative use of *inflammation* or speak of being “inflamed” with passion. “Flammable” simply adds to the inconsistency of which English already had quite enough. And there would hardly be any point in a label to say that something *could not* be set on fire!

Correct English is not, and never was, a matter of mere subservience to arbitrary “rules,” as the proponents of permissiveness blandly assume. For anyone having the true feeling for the language, a correct expression will commonly be the simple and natural one, rather than the cumbersome jargon of wordy affectation, such as the ungrammatical use of “due to the fact that” instead of *because*, or “prior to” instead of *before*.

“People often hurl at me the word *permissive*,” says Dr. Bergen Evans. “They say, ‘You are permissive.’ What do you mean ‘permissive’? There are 300 million who speak this language. What am I to do? Club them all over the head?”

Now there should be no mystery about what “permissive” means. It represents an attitude which, if we held to it consistently, would simply eliminate any real teaching of English. It means cheerfully accepting any kind of sloppy makeshift or ignorant confusion as soon as a good many people seem to find it comfortable.

Among the “300 million” who use some kind of English—if there are that many—naturally the language is used with all degrees of skill or lack of it. In speech as in any other form of human activity, there are those who value orderliness and clarity, who care for precision and clear-cut distinctions, and those who couldn’t care less. The ways of the latter do not need to be taught; these are easily acquired by just letting things go.

4. *The National Observer*, July 20, 1964.

What is the real purpose of “teaching English” anyhow? Is it supposed to be the inculcating in students of the idea that any sort of crudity of expression is quite all right if a good many people use it? There is no need to *teach* “sub-standard” English; every alert person becomes sufficiently familiar with it in the process of growing up. Instruction in that is amply provided by radio and television programs and other media, as by the hit-or-miss conversation one can hear at any time. What does need to be taught by precept and practice is clear-cut thinking, decent respect for the honest meanings of words.

“Actually,” says Professor Price, “the scientific point of view does not ask for a complete overthrow of tradition, but rather a recognition that there are different kinds of English.” Well, we didn’t think anyone was really advocating a “complete overthrow” of all standards; rather it has been a matter of clouding the distinctions which they serve to mark. Common sense must enable anyone to perceive that there are “different kinds of English.” That they exist would be recognized by many who could not reliably point out exactly what it is that makes the difference. The harm that is done by the “scientific” approach is in creating the impression that by and large one kind is as good as another, that “usage” no matter how careless or ignorant is the only thing that matters. To be sure, if one pays close attention to “the fine print” of what the permissivists have to say, it transpires now and then that their views are not quite so extreme as appears at first. The general effect of their pronouncements, however, has been a softening of linguistic discipline, a weakening of decent standards which need to be upheld.

Commonly the people who are fond of talking about a “scientific” approach to expression, as against what they consider arbitrary theory, seem to regard “correctness” in English as a matter of artificially imposed rules. They assume that teachers who try to inculcate correct English spend their time making students memorize rules. Now many of us who do believe in correctness found out a good while ago that that was not the way to get it. You acquire a skill by working at it and seeing “how the thing works.” Then you do not *need* the “rule,” an abstract generalization which you could state anytime in your own words if you wished. For anyone of reasonable intelligence it is not difficult to see and to explain the differences between good English and bad.

It is perfectly possible to be quite at ease in using good English, or to teach it, without employing what Dr. Evans calls “horrendous

words” such as *pluperfect*, *future indicative*, *subjunctive*, or *nonrestrictive clause*, just as one can get along very well without such Latinisms as *horrendous*. The technical terms of grammatical nomenclature are naturally meaningless until *after* one is quite familiar with the things they stand for. They are merely convenient means of exact expression for the person who goes beyond the mere *use* of language to talking about language itself. For anyone educated to that point, they precisely express relationships which could only be clumsily described in any other way. As is well known, however, acquiring precise vocabulary in any field of thought can sharpen one’s perception of the ideas which the words represent.

It is merely an arbitrary declaration to say that “rules of grammar” are “usually simply half a dozen shibboleths that assert status.” Whether a person ever consciously learns “rules” or not, either in the main he will conform to the system or else he will be incoherent and unclear. In many situations, no doubt, he may manage to convey simple ideas well enough for his purpose in spite of crudity and confusion in their expression. He will merely be adding gratuitous information about himself, his taste, his perceptiveness, his self-respect. People who truly master good English, and habitually use it, must be motivated by something more deeply a part of them than desire for cheaply-won “status.” They care for apt and graceful expression with the same kind of feeling for orderliness that makes us like to see cleanly-shaved faces, neatly-combed hair, well swept rooms, houses well built, gardens well tended, unlittered streets. They enjoy having things done right. Along with whatever else, at bottom that feeling is required for achieving what President Kirk of Columbia has called the first quality of an educated man, the primary duty of a college graduate, “clarity and precision in his spoken and written communication.”⁵

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5. Commencement address at Bates College, reported in *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 24, 1964.