Language, life, the universe


Why are so many people insecure about their language? Why are they so linguistically aggressive? These were the questions I left you with at the end of ET2.

Several people sent me a list of pet hates, of course — and it’s always interesting to see these, because one day they’ll provide valuable evidence of changing attitudes to the language. If a change in, say, tenses, is taking place in English at the moment, you can be sure that a lot of sharp-eared people will spot it straight away; many will condemn it; and much publicity will be generated, in the form of letters to the press, or radio feedback shows. If these letters can be kept, they’ll make a valuable archive one day. It’s impossible to see the extent of change in a language when you’re part of it. But fifty years later, the change will probably stand out, as clear as a bell.

I’ve kept mine — ever since I started puzzling over attitudes to English usage (to my recollection, something over 20 years ago, when I unexpectedly had a piece published in the *Liverpool Echo* in a debate header, believe it or not, ‘Let us preserve the tongue which Shakespeare spoke!’). My impression is that the letters do reflect some interesting changes over time — though I’ve never made a detailed analysis. When a new usage comes in, they tend to begin: ‘I am appalled to hear a....’ Next, they become differently: ‘Is it too late to stop the...’. Then do your dislikes come from? This is a very difficult question, it seems to me, and I’m not totally convinced by it. I think there’s more to language attitudes than differences of personal taste. And I think there are some basic differences between language and music which weaken any analogy. ‘Rules’ of grammar are not much like ‘rules’ of composition or musical analysis — though several people (notably, Leonard Bernstein) have tried to find parallels. There is a much clearer divide between what is acceptable in language and what is not. The sequence of sounds +r+s+ is acceptable in English at the beginning of a word (e.g. *spring*), but not at the end — and s+r+p isn’t acceptable at all. You don’t get this kind of arbitrariness with sequences of notes. And what are the musical equivalents of such grammatical rules as ‘Add an -s to form the third person singular of the present tense’ (e.g. *run — runs*) — not forgetting the exceptions which a grammar must allow for as well (e.g. *has, is, does, say*)?

Several readers go in for a mixture of linguistic and social explanations — which is where my own feelings about the matter lie — at least, so far (see below). The linguistic explanation is at best a partial one, referring to such factors as the need to avoid ambiguity, maintain intelligibility, and so forth. Anna Dunlop of Edinburgh, for example, introduces this line of reasoning:

‘Add an -s to form the third person singular of the present tense’ (e.g. *run — runs*). The argument is, of course, that this is an unavoidable change in usage as the language penetrates all facets of life, and it’s a common feature of all languages.

But this still leaves open the question of why people get upset about split infinitives. By contrast, Sybil Sarel of Stromness adopts a social psychological argument:...
resent that those who 'misuse' English are getting away with it', and despite their shoeshine, are financially much more prosperous, and are more adulated (pop stars, TV personalities, and the like) than we who, in our younger days, were never allowed to write so ungrammatically or so attractively, and would have been ostracised, not adulated, if we'd done so.

'Ostracised' is a significant word - that is, by the social class to which you might aspire to belong. If you want to appear 'educated', in the eyes of society, then you had better follow the rules that educated people lay down, otherwise you will be considered 'uneducated'. These rules may be to do with what you say or write (such as the obligatory reference to obscure authors), or when you say or write it, but far more important is how you say or write it. Following the rules of spelling is a crucial first step - with punctuation lagging some way behind. Since the 18th century, these have been real rules, which we break at our peril. Following the usage rules of the grammatical handbooks - largely the invention of influential grammarians, but psychologically none the less real - is a crucial second step. Breaking those can be just as serious for your public image as an educated person.

My final extract comes from Janet Binkley of Newark (Delaware), who takes up the social argument, but proceeds to a deeper psychological explanation.

Why do people display such emotion when it comes to questions of usage? The answer can be given at two levels, I think. The most obvious level is, as you suggested in your column, that people have a vested interest in following the rules. The most obvious vested interest is that of social status. This can include professional status - I've worked for years with editors, and I notice each new generation of young editors taking their knowledge of the rules as a mark of superiority over the authors they deal with.

But I think we can look at a deeper level - we need to see where the vested interest came from. After all, our real social status is a very complex thing, involving a great deal more than making a few 'slips' in usage, and being impervious to our own slips. I suggest that the deeper cause is the attempt to reduce psychic dissonance - the theory of the American psychologist, L. Festinger, in the early 1960s. Basically, Dissonance Theory says that anyone who is forced to do something unpleasant will either rebel (and take the consequences) or will rearrange their value systems to make the unpleasant thing into one that is considered valuable. The more unpleasant it was, the stronger will the individual later defend it as valuable.

One example of Dissonance Theory in action came in America at the time of the Vietnam War. The young men who sacrificed most in Vietnam later were those who proclaimed most loudly that that war was needed. Those who suffered but saw the war as pointless were subject to considerable psychic dissonance, and were prone to later psychic breakdown. Those who resolved their dissonance by deciding that the war was valuable did not break down.

I'm suggesting that people cling to grammar rules for the same reasons. Having to learn rules that appear pointless (since they are contrary to the language surrounding us daily), the child resolves the dissonance by deciding the rules must be extremely valuable, and invests emotional energy in sustaining them from now on.

This is very much to the point, and I for one intend to read up on it. In the meantime, there's plenty to be done at a more surface level, noting the way language is changing, trying to work out why one area changes more than another, and analysing the effects these changes have. This column won't be short of material - though whether this author will be writing it depends on how long he can stave off his evidently impending psychic breakdown.

Angry Words

Passion is never far away when usage and abuse are discussed. People who no longer abhor physical violence and abominate war do not hesitate to use the most vigorous terms when talking about actual or perceived abuse of English, whether by wrong-headed individuals, misguided nations or virtually every user of the language save themselves. Some samples:

Other contemporary abbreviations, just as ugly, come to mind: 'Agro' for 'Aggression', and 'D emo' for 'Demonstration'. The English language is amongst the most beautiful and expressive in the whole of literature. Why truncate it in this hideous fashion? If the shortcomings are intrinsic, does it really take all that much longer to carry both words to their correct termination verbally and on paper? Both abbreviations look ugly in print and they sound even more uncouth. Then take 'ya' for 'yes'. It may be allowable in those parts of the United States where, by long custom, it has become an accepted idiom. But not, please, in England. [Doris M. Hodges, 'There was this man, y'see ... ', The Lady, June 77]

I have made myself hoarse telling English people my name is not 'Yte'. I still yell at the radio 'WHining', 'WHales', 'WHheel' and so on when my ear has been misled by the misuse of 'wining', 'Wales' and 'weal'. But what about the other dropped Hs? This morning on radio Scotland a South-eastern Englishman discussing DIY [Do-it-Yourself] spoke of 'A deesive' and 'A dear' when he obviously meant 'adhesive' and 'adhere'. Quite abhorrent (as opposed to 'A barrant') (Derrick White, letter to The Scotsman, 23 July 83)

The man from BBC Wales still looked unhappy. 'You just can't win in Wales,' he muttered. 'The other day I was introducing a programme from Llandaff Cathedral in Cardiff. The announcer called it 'Landaf', but I pronounced it 'Hlandaf'. It must have sounded awful - as if I was being pedagogical and correcting him. Anyway, the correct Welsh pronunciation is 'Hlandaav'. But if you pronounce names the Welsh way, one side says, 'Listen to those buggers being pedantic,' and if you use an anglicised form, the other side says, 'Why can't you pronounce things properly?' (Hugo Davenport, 'How to tell that Beanes means Baynz', The Observer, 18 Sept 83)

Grandma's heartthrob is standing up for a return to good grammar. Former matinee idol Rudy Vallee is mad as hell and he isn't going to take it anymore: 'I would like the president to appoint me to the FCC (Federal Communications Commission),' said Vallee. 'I want to be TV's czar of scripts and grammar! . . .

I get so angry when I hear 'yeah' instead of 'yes' and 'don't' instead of 'doesn't'.' Vallee told Oover Easy host Hugh Downs. 'We spend millions of dollars every year to teach our kids to speak properly. Then they turn on the television and all the work is undone. I want to stop that.' It is unlikely Vallee will be appointed to head the FCC, and that's too bad. A crackdown on language abuses is long overdue. (Mike Boone, 'Television's poor grammar is polluting the English language', Montreal Gazette, 29 Nov 80)

Ignorant cooks, with no palate and no interest in food, can spoil the best of raw materials, so that what might in more skilled and more sensitive hands have become a dish to be recalled with pleasure, ends up as nothing better than a repulsive, tasteless mess. So it is with words. Every language has better ingredients than English: no language has ever been more monstrously ill-treated and deformed by vandals and incompetents. The most beautiful instrument is always the most vulnerable to abuse and damage. (Kenneth Hudson, The Dictionary of Diseased English, Macmillan, 1977)