

TO USE OR NOT TO USE

ET will naturally and rightly serve as a forum for the discussion of 'good', 'bad', 'correct', 'incorrect', 'standard', 'non-standard', 'substandard' and other kinds of usage. Because we have to open the discussion somewhere, DAVID CRYSTAL has agreed to boldly go where many have gone before – and afterwards wished they hadn't.

I recently read a book called *The Queen's English*, by Henry Alford. Here are two quotations, taken at random from it:

- 'Look, to take one familiar example, at the process of deterioration which our Queen's English has undergone at the hands of the Americans. Look at those phrases which so amuse us in their speech and books; at their reckless exaggeration, and contempt for congruity...'
- 'A correspondent asks me to notice a usage now becoming prevalent among persons who ought to know better; viz. that of 'you and I' after prepositions governing the accusative...'

Both of these points, I am sure, will ring several bells with most readers of this magazine. What may be less obvious is that the 'Queen' the author is referring to is Victoria, not Elizabeth. Henry Alford's book appeared in 1863, and sold 10,000 copies in five years.

Now set against this the following sequence of comments, all made by listeners to the BBC in the early 1980s, and taken from letters sent to me when I presented a series of radio programmes on English usage some time ago:

- 'The BBC has lately developed a distressing habit of giving words extra syllables, which are not normally pronounced as syllables.'
- 'What is this strange new species called *businessm'n*? What has happened to *businessmAn* and *businessmEn*?'
- 'It appears that only common, badly spoken people are now employed by the BBC.'
- 'Away back in 1953 in a broadcast interview with Sir Edmund Hillary on his return from his ascent of Mount Everest, he used the completely ungrammatical phrase *never ever*, and its use has been growing ever since.'

The words to notice, in these letters, are 'lately', 'new', 'now' and 'ever

since'. These listeners all seem to believe that the points of usage which they dislike are innovations – features of a modern trend in the language, promoted by the BBC. In fact, all the issues they complain about, and several more besides, are referred to by Alford over 50 years before the BBC was born.

I suppose I must have received over 1000 letters about English usage, following that radio series. I was very impressed. I never got that kind of response after writing *Prosodic System and Intonation in English!* It taught me two things: that a surprisingly large number of people still listen to the radio; and that a staggeringly large number of *them*, far more than I had expected, worry about usage enough to spend time and money getting their point across.

But what sort of people? In one programme, I asked people who intended to write in to tell me about themselves – in particular, their age. The results were quite unequivocal: of all the people who owned up, over 90% were over 50 – and there was only one under 40, a secondary school girl who could not understand what all the fuss was about (the programme that week had been on split infinitives). Most of the letters were nostalgic, harking back to a period when the writers claimed the usage problems which worried them did not exist. In the BBC context, famous old announcers such as Alvar Liddell were frequently cited as models of excellence. Alvar Liddell would never have used an intrusive *r*, said one listener. *I went to the archives and listened. He did.* Outside the BBC, famous authors were likewise cited. Lord Macaulay would never have split an infinitive, wrote another listener. *I went to look. He did.*

There seems to be a lot of misinformation about, so in a recent Penguin book, *Who cares about English usage?*, which was based on the BBC programmes, I tried to do something which is not normally

attempted in usage books. My intention was not to praise or condemn, but to identify and explain. I believed it would make a difference if the context of these issues was clarified. Why is there a usage issue at all? Where has it come from? What points of view are there, and who adopts them? I thought that if I were able to introduce some *FACTS* into the debate – for example, the reasons for the development and antagonism over split infinitives – then this would help people to develop a sense of perspective about usage which would make them feel more confident and less intolerant. There is a blank page at the back of the book which asks for feedback, and this has started to come in.

The results to date are quite absorbing. The book has not been out long, so perhaps it is too early to say. But I am gaining the distinct impression that knowing the facts, insofar as they are available, *makes very little difference*. The main reaction so far can be summarised thus: 'I was very interested to read about X (where X is any of the usage topics covered), and I agree that I am silly to worry about it so much and should be tolerant when I observe it – but I still *hate* it and wish you would condemn it!'

Where do such deep-rooted attitudes, of worry and antagonism, come from? Is it simply a matter of age and schooling – of old habits dying hard? Is personality involved in some way? Or are there deeper social or psychological values at stake – some kind of vested interest in knowing and living according to the rules, even if the rules no longer apply? Why else should people pay so much attention to that tiny tip of the grammatical iceberg which deals with such issues as split infinitives, and ignore the vast areas of grammar which lie beneath the surface?

Perhaps the young – and the not so young – readers of *ET* will shed some light on the matter.