

Introducing ... a new series on

Language-atrophy

Contributions very welcome. Please note we don't care about split infinitives, inelegant repetition or direct objects following the verb *to be*. Our concern is, also, close to but not quite the same as Orwell's with phrases like "the fascist jackboot is thrown into the melting-pot." Dr Johnson reports poor Swift as having in his last days "lost distinction". We are bothered by a third-realm senile decay of language (very "modern", of course) which is losing the *différences* which Saussure tells us make the sense of language in use. If language somehow evolved from mammalian noises it did so by way of distinguishing the sense of one grunt from another. It seems now to be going in the other direction. This is not an advertising mag. but it is fair to say that Michael Wallerstein's *Dear Mr Howard* gives many examples of what we have in mind. This is one aspect of a public language which seems to us to be increasingly losing the capacity to say anything at all. The language should not be allowed to head for a kind of absolute equality in which everything is the same as everything else.

It is surprising how often cliché, the over-use of a word or phrase to the point of the loss of its meaning, merges with actual misunderstanding as in *drawing a line in the sand*. This is unfailingly said by "the media" when a modern politician hopes, usually in vain, to stop some embarrassing development. King Canute could have told them that a line in the sand is washed away at the next tide and is if anything an example of impermanence. Nobody trying to mean anything could possibly use the phrase.

This series can run as long as the magazine and as long as the editor wishes, and so we backdate it with examples from every month since we started and kick off with the following two free extras:

1 *House and Home*

House and home is a characteristic Old English doublet (kith and kin, time and tide) in formation, but not in sense, for there is still a difference between house and home. (Doublets can anyway sometimes contrast, as in *thick and thin*.) The difference was sentimentalized in the Victorian age with samplers declaring "East, West, Home's Best" and the song "Home Sweet Home" ("Be it never so simple, there's no place like home"). *House* would not be a substitute. We do not go to our long house unless like myself we happen to live in one. Homing pigeons could not be renamed housing pigeons and on the website you could not begin with a house page, though publishers do have a house style.

The BBC nevertheless treats the words as exact synonyms and reporting plans to provide large numbers of new dwellings in the

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South-East, inevitably refers to “home building programmes”. [1] In the newspapers homes can be built, bought and sold. In the ordinary distinction-making language it is houses, not homes, that are built, bought, sold; and people make homes in their houses. On the other hand it surprises me that the coalescence of house and home has not spread to the day-schools, where they still do not divide pupils into homes, but quite artificial “houses”.

My guess is that there were two driving forces behind the coalescence. The selling off of council houses to their tenants was part of the Conservative drive to a “property owning democracy” for which slogans like “owning your own home” were natural enough, with assonance a bonus to the alliteration. If you are at home in your house and the house is offered to you for sale you might think without solecism of owning your own home. There is even some possible point in the phrase “mobile home” instead of “large caravan”. The romantic origins of *caravan* are probably lost in our ordinary understanding, but people who live in big ones while their houses are rebuilt understandably want to cheer themselves up with the thought that it is a home-from-home.

The decisive influence is commercial. Warm feelings associated with *home* were seized on by house-agents and mortgage providers. Own your own home? Do it with the aid of a *home loan*, a rather Tennysonian phrase. You could make Victorianate songs out of them:

Home, home, home, home fain would I be
Home with a home loan in my own countree.

Mr Major wanted us to be at home with ourselves. It sounds desirable, whereas there is no particular point in being in the house. So, naturally, house agents began talking about *selling homes*.

At this point there should have been resistance. After all, the difference between house and home, like the difference between love and like, like the difference between persuade and convince, like the difference between deny and refute, is a useful and valuable part of the language. The one thing that cannot be done to a home, as against a house, is to sell it. The home can be *sold up*, that is, the bailiff’s men can enter and sell the goods and chattels out of which the home is made, but only a house can be sold, not a home.

Instead of resisting the loss of distinction, the BBC encourages it. Once upon a time the BBC was particular about English. There is no reason beyond the general misery why even a liberal and democratic nation should not have some regard for its common language. *All* the French “media” are concerned about French. Until the English reaction starts all we can do is note the situation.

But: *protest every time*. If the house agent offers to sell you a home, say that you have come to the wrong shop.

The end of the process if it continues can only be the vanishing of one of the words. Perhaps the upshot of the great constitutional experiment on which New Labour has embarked without, apparently, a moment’s thought, will be a reformed Home of Lords.

2 All Time is Eternally Present

the breakdown of the tense system in “the media”

It is so commonplace as to be hardly noticeable that the morning paper comes out with news of what will happen in the afternoon or tomorrow. The usual explanation is that someone about to make a speech or an announcement sends a copy to the media—or more likely a highlighted and bullet-pointed summary, for in the rush of production the “media” people cannot be expected actually to read speeches—so that it will make the day’s news, the danger being that if they wait for the press to report the actual event, by the time it gets published it will be mere history and therefore of no interest. This means that there is normally no way of knowing whether speeches were actually delivered as predicted. Other future events are “leaked”, so that we learn what will appear in a White Paper next week or next month.

This is the beginning of a coalescence of time that has been taken further by some computer magazines. Don’t miss the current issue!—so someone had the bright idea of bringing out next month’s issue the last week of this month. But then we go further and I have seen the month-after-next’s issue on sale this month, so that in February you can buy the April issue. Now, is this month, from the point of view of the purchaser, February or April, or a kind of perpetual present that includes both?

“Will” in news reporting must nevertheless count as still extraordinary. To smooth the transition from old-fashioned literate English I propose the re-introduction of Anglo-Saxon practice. Then as now the present tense can have a future sense, as in “We’re off to Philadelphia in the morning.” But in Old English this present-as-future was far more common, and “will” expressed intention rather than prediction. If the papers were to use the simple present, “Today Mr Blair rights the wrongs of England, tomorrow he rights the wrongs of Iraq and the day after he rights the wrongs of Iran ...” it might be easier to get used to the very odd eternity to which the media seem to be trying to induct us.

The present tense is also habitually used in headlines for what happened yesterday. “Rider falls to death” *The Times* tells us.[2] Any other tense would have been noticeably out of the ordinary. (Fifty years ago it would have been “Fatal Fall of Rider”.) This places the story in an eternal present, though actually about an event some time in the past, for the report was of an inquest. “Bigamy not my problem, says Abu Hamza”[3] though of course the report was of what this person had “vowed” (which people are always doing in the press though rarely if ever in real life outside courts of law and churches) last night. “Pope arrives yesterday” is possible in this timeless world.

The modern perpetual present embraces the present moment of already being in the future and the present moment of the past-as-present. If the past is recognized as the past it is by way of exclusion, so that instead of “in 1988” “the media” will always say—despite the

ever-present declared intent of saving words—“*back* in 1988”, a bygone age for which the simple preterite is required to express absolute difference. The lapse of time signified by “back” tends to get shorter, so last January I heard “back in December”.

So we are heading back towards the Old English system of two tenses, of which for us only one really matters. The truly prophetic journalist might try the Hebrew practice of doing without Indo-European styles of tense at all, so that everything said could be interpreted as past, present or future at discretion.

The modal system can complete its disappearance at the same time. Much of the media-reporting consists of dialogues between buildings. Number Ten Downing street will say one thing but Clarence House will contradict it and Buckingham Palace will not be amused. This ought all to be present indicative active, as above. Already, it is never “The Vatican *may* say” or “The White House *might* retort.” I used to think that when politicians used “will” instead of “would” when discussing the hypothetical situations to be brought about by their policies they were just spinning, trying to insinuate that the future really will be like this. I now think it more likely that in their semi-language the future, the present, the actual and the possible are all one, as Lawrence put it, “all of a piece, like madness”.

Misuse and Cliché Month by Month

June

reunion of old boys

Ex-president Giscard D’Estaing, “Grand Old Man of European Politics” according to the *Financial Times*[4] and veteran of the Emperor Bokhasa’s Diamonds, has written a Preamble to the new Constitution of Europe in old-fashioned Frenchy great-gesture rhetoric. One word (in English translation) stood out not because it is unusual but because of its position in this would-be historical document, the word *reunited*. “Believing that reunited Europe intends to continue along this path of civilisation, progress and prosperity” (Well, no doubt it does, God help it!)

Reunion is often offered in England as the goal of the European Union. But in English *to reunite* means the regaining of a state of union which has previously existed. When was that, then? Germany was never in the Roman Empire. After the death of Charlemagne the Holy Roman Empire had ever decreasing claim to dominion outside Germany and in any case never included the great and extensive Nordic world. (To be sure, Norway is excluded from the Reunion.) After the Great Schism Christendom was split down the middle of Europe, and M. Giscard’s ambitions do not extend to undoing the Reformation.

The explanation is probably a piece of astute French diplomacy.

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French *réunion* can mean English reunion and *réunir* to reunite, but a French *réunion* is more commonly just a union or get-together without any implication that those getting together have ever been together before. *Réunir* is “to gather, assemble, muster”. By retaining the word in a language where it means only to unite again, the French are able to suggest that all we are doing is putting together the pieces of a whole shattered by the unfortunate kind of nationalism that does not recognize French cultural supremacy.

If Europe is “reunited” guess what culture M.Giscard, quite supranationally, expects to be dominant!

university

The Government announced this week that it is changing the definition of the word “university”. Education Minister Margaret Hodge says the term will no longer be restricted to academic communities that conduct scholarly research across a range of disciplines. In future, specialist bodies, such as art colleges, will be able to upgrade to university status, as the polytechnics did in the Eighties. “The most important requirement is the quality of an institution’s teaching,” said Hodge.[5]

Setting aside possible questions about the “scholarly research across a range of disciplines” conducted at such centres of excellence as the University of Worcester or the University of North Lincolnshire and Humberside: has “Hodge” bothered to ask herself why the word *university* became distinct from *school*? For Claudius, in *Hamlet*, the two were still the same. If the essential activity of both is teaching, why distinguish?

By “Hodge”’s reasoning the inner city colleges founded by her party may also start calling themselves universities.

The actual difference between a university and a school is not definable by reference to either teaching or research. The latter, as far as England goes, started in earnest in London three hundred years after the medieval heyday of the universities and more than a hundred years before London had a university itself. Universities ignored research for many years. The “teaching” at genuine universities, also, is often quite bad.

“Hodge” evidently doesn’t know a university when she sees one. In this country definitions can be decreed by government *fiat*; but it is not within the power of any government to determine how a word is used. Stalin changed a lot of definitions without managing to change meanings.

Could it be that in ten years to attach the word *university* to any institution will be proof that it is *not* a university? and that people will still be aware of the situation despite the efforts of all governments to abuse the language?

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July

stunning

Classic FM aims with commercial precision at a certain audience who, they hope, will “relax” with the “smooth” classics. This is said over and over again in the silly voice which according to the received wisdom of the advertising “industry” makes us buy things. The performances are nevertheless occasionally allowed to be “stunning”: “Stravinsky’s stunning *Firebird Suite*” (as against what? his invigorating *Firebird Suite*? A listener unfamiliar with Stravinsky would take *stunning* as part of the title). *Stunning* is therefore a form of smooth relaxation, but not, surely, the relaxed and smooth frame of mind induced in oxen in the pre-hygienic slaughterhouses by the stunning hammer?

There comes a point where a metaphor gets so far from its origins that a bright writer will remind herself that it needs reviving. So the distinguished wine correspondent of *The Financial Times*, Jancis Robinson, announces some South African wines as not only *stunning* but *painfully stunning* (31 May 2003). This is to some extent an oxymoron, for to be stunned is to lose the sensation of pain along with other sensations. But in ordinary English “painfully stunning” must mean something unpleasant, which seems not to have been what the distinguished lady intended.

August

tragic

Habitual misuse destroys firstly the possibility of proper use and then any sense at all. Lord Hutton could not possibly have held his first press conference without talking about Dr Kelly’s “tragic” death. What phrase but *terrible tragedy* could the hypermodern Mr Blair have possibly used? so use it he did, more than once. But what could be less tragic than the death of poor Dr Kelly? *Tragedy, tragic*, are amongst the important words the correct use of which differentiates the educated and the uneducated, and the concept of tragedy is notoriously one well worth attention. What *tragic* means is, for instance, the subject of a series of books published by the Brynmill Press. Mr Blair went to Oxford. It is evidently possible now to be an Oxford graduate and uneducated. And what of *terrible*? What terror could this event imaginably cause Mr Blair but in the comical sense of the terror of losing his “job”?

“In a development that stunned cabinet ministers ...” as the *FT* put it [6] a judicial inquiry was announced. To stun (above) is to be reduced to insensibility by a blow usually to the head. Loss of language is a symptom of stunning.

September

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putting new systems in place

This one is not so much a misuse of language as a correct use which demonstrates a mode of thought to be senseless. The news was that the gatecrasher of Prince William's 21st birthday party had, after climbing a wall to get into Windsor Castle, set off a series of seven alarms in the police control room and been recorded more than once by the closed circuit television, for instance inquiring the way from a contractor. One of the alarms had been attended to: the policeman turned it off and reset it. When it immediately went off again it was ignored. Mr Oliver Letwin, shadow home secretary, was questioned about the matter [7] in a quite commonsensical way by Nick Clarke: the systems had worked so what was wrong? Mr Letwin steadily refused to give any other answer than that *the systems needed to be improved*.

Next general election let us congratulate ourselves on the fact that the Conservatives if elected will put new systems in place in Windsor Castle. Next time the gatecrasher will perhaps set off as many as a dozen alarms before he gets in.

October

industry

The papers are full of *the gambling industry*, to be much developed as part of New Labour's plans for improving the quality of life and rejuvenating Britain. Need one say more? Is it not *obviously* wrong to call gambling an industry? This series is being started because the obvious is not obvious. *Industry* is one of the words like *skill* compulsively added to a number of standard words. "No qualification without aberration," as Austin said. Gambling is just gambling, with different degrees of commercial organisation. The drive behind *the gambling industry* is to suggest that gambling is not gambling. The phrase is a euphemism. If industry means anything at all it is the contradiction of gambling, which is not industrious.

Plenty more where these came from ... namely the British establishment. Our advice is: mock them, relentlessly!

References

- 1 BBC Radio 4, 8.00 a.m., 05.03.03
- 2 31 January 2003, p. 15 3 *Ibid.*, p. 2
- 4 29 May 2003
- 5 *The Week*, 7 June 2003, p. 7
- 6 19 July
- 7 *The World at One*, BBC Radio 4, 14 August 2003