

The Language of Democracy

SOME years ago Mr. Edmund Wilson complained—bootlessly, it appears—about what was then a new solecism, the word “massive” used to qualify things that are not, cannot be, massive. Mr. Wilson observed that the adjective properly describes a physical object whose mass is considerable, and by extension a physical object of large size and great weight. Grants of credits to foreign nations, or retaliation against them for their warlike acts, could not, as in John Foster Dulles’s usage, be massive. They could be other things, including wise or foolish, but, by the genius of the language, “massive” was a quality denied to threats or blandishments as to gossamer or moonshine. As we all know, Mr. Wilson’s complaint has been massively ignored. Oddly enough, the error flourishes only among those who pass for educated. The workman will refer correctly to a massive casting; one has to ascend as high as the Personnel Department to hear of massive lay-offs, and to the Olympus of the board room itself to learn of plans for a massive expansion of sales.

Clearly, there is a class of persons whose careers depend on their being able to summon words that can kill seven at a blow. And the principle of selection seems to be the same that Dryden attributed to a poetaster of his day: “He fagotted his verses as they fell, / And if they rhymed and rattled, all was well.” Or, as the floorwalker said when discovered with his hand in the till, “Go away. Can’t you see I’m too drunk to know what I’m doing?” It must be some such intoxication that induces a man who is looking for a job to claim that he is “seeking a position.” Seeking, as if it were the Grail he was after. And position. But on second thought, I suppose we must sympathize with his reluctance to say “job,” a word with an unfortunate history, some part of which survives in “jobbery,” and that in one ugly monosyllable tells you anyway more than you want to know about work done not for love but for money. In the same way, I suppose we should forgive the unfortunate who promises to “contact” us. Life has dealt with him so harshly that he shies away from touching his fellows, to the point where he refuses even to get in touch with them—or call or write—unless he can put it in Latin, which is impersonal, antiseptic, and high-toned. But still, there is a powerful temptation when we are told, “I’ll contact you,” to

answer, “Don’t contact us. We’ll contact you.” Or as the children say, in much better English, “Not if we see you first.”

Those examples of the high-pressure vocabulary suggest that it is not necessarily the long word or the one of learned origin that is chosen when the situation calls for overkill capacity. The desiderata seem to be abstractness, remoteness, and something that suggests a connection with science or technology. The use of “type” in place of “kind” or “sort” is by now almost universal. “What type of person is he?” says Everybody, making unconscious obeisance to the god of the shop and the laboratory. If he feels a special reverence for the stockshelves of the Parts Department, he may contract the expression further to, “What type person is he?” The answer comes, “Oh, a high-type person,” and the hyphenated construction expresses the mechanical analogy that the speaker has at the back of his mind. The lucky man is being compared to a double-action model, or an overhead-cam model, or a quick-release model. In fine, to a manufactured object, machined to definite specifications, and with all the kinks and bugs ironed out.

SOME of the popular technicizing terms appear to have come into the language under the influence of the German scientists we captured in 1945 and who have been making rockets for us ever since. (I wonder if the Russians owe a similar linguistic debt to the Germans *they* captured and who are making their rockets.) “Breakthrough” sounds German to me, and I certainly don’t remember hearing the word before the Second World War, though the nation was equally given to celebrating trifles in those days. “Fallout” is another example of the *furor Teutonicus*, I imagine, and a number of unfortunate formations on the same pattern—“dropout,” “cookout.” Here, though, I think we must distinguish between promiscuous neologisms and native examples of more legitimate ancestry, for example, Mark Twain’s expression, “a regular old tore-out,” which is probably born of metaphor from the time-honored “a real old rip.” And “blowout,” of course, meant a gorgeous feast long before it came to signify a species of automotive mishap. (I confess that I used the last phrase because it is a triumph of unconscious comedy, rivaled only by that nineteenth-century invention, “a melancholy acci-

dent.”) Some forms that are not particularly attractive in themselves are ennobled by their associations. “Sit-down” has an honorable origin, and so does the new “sit-in” and the brand-new “teach-in.” But nothing can quite make up for the inherent gracelessness of such words. They are, as it were, the warrant-officers among words, neither enlisted men nor yet gentlemen-by-act-of-congress. For “holdout” and “standout” it is hard to imagine an excuse.

Speaking of the German language, when I was a boy the announcement, “Hopefully, I’ll go next week,” or “I’ll go, hopefully, next week,” conveyed a very different message than it does nowadays. Firstly, it told us that the speaker was a foreigner, or possibly a religious enthusiast, given the unexpectedly insistent adverb. But in either case, it meant that a spirit of hope would accompany him on his peregrinations. “Hopefully” could be nothing but an adverb expressing the frame of mind in which he would carry out the action. Now, as it happens, the Germans have an expression, *hoffentlich*, whose colloquial use is, “*Hoffentlich* I go next week.” Who do you suppose won the last world war? The most respectable periodicals in the country are printing contributions by the most respected writers, in which “hopefully” means “I hope to” or “I hope that.” But before 1945 those writers would have had to say what they meant.

This is as good a point as any to consider the contention of some modern lexicographers that usage is the final arbiter of elegance. That claim is most often advanced in defense of vulgar neologisms, or just plain vulgarity, and it represents itself as being objective, scientific, and democratic. Objectivity and science in this context mean statistics, and democracy means the linguistic prejudices of the lexicographer. But surely those words have loftier meanings? Democracy, for example, is not a taste for plebescite, but a passion for political responsibility. And since it is a passion, it flourishes only among people who are capable of being passionate. In this connection, then, counting noses is not being objective but merely uninterested—and also disingenuous. For when the dictionary-makers I am referring to appeal to usage, they do not specify whose usage they have in mind. They would like to have it appear that they mean just folks, the backbone of the nation. However, the majority of the population, including me, can scarcely get through a spoken sentence without using expressions that are technically blasphemous or obscene, and are not to be found in the popular word-books compiled on folksy principles. So that their message comes down to this: If your speech is notably graceless, corrupt, and ignorant, don’t you mind. Your neighbors are in the same

fix. And I'm a lexicographer, and I say it's all right.

The reason for being starchy in such matters, and passionate rather than permissive, is that the language of cultivated speakers and writers is precise, subtle, and beautiful. The cultivated speaker, of course, is not necessarily the person who has a degree in linguistics. Indeed, so far as vocabulary and syntax are concerned, the conversation of the professional middle class nowadays is like the imitation whipped cream dispensed from those grease-gun affairs in soda fountains. It is synthetic, without either calories or flavor, and it is delivered under high pressure. For nourishing speech, one has to go to the country. But the point of art is to improve on nature, and turn rude energy to something express and moving. In one of his poems Paul Goodman boasts of "Excellent sentences I make, Better than any other man's." That's the spirit. And now, if you please, what is the source of Mr. Goodman's affection for the expression—repeated dozens of times in his prose works—This, that, or the other thing is *importantly* true? That usage is a curious example of provincialism, in which the province is just about limited to Mr. Goodman. I suppose we do know why he does it. He is a man of the world, and he has learned that truth can be trivial. He means to put us on notice: "Not this truth, dear reader. I made it myself, and I can attest that it is importantly true." Possibly, but need he brandish a solecism in order to persuade us?

But if "importantly" is Mr. Goodman's very own solecism, he shares a barbarism with half the nation. After reciting a list of facts, he will say, "Now, this means. . . ." Or after delivering himself of one of his characteristically illuminating aphorisms, he will explain, "This is because. . . ." English makes a subtle distinction between "this" and "that" in such cases. When the thing referred to is an argument or a proposition, it is felt to be an abstraction, remote rather than near at hand, yonder rather than right here, and so we say, "That is because . . .," using the particle that suggests spatial separation. But German has only a single demonstrative for "this" and "that"—*dies*—and *dass*, the cognate of our "that," is used only as a relative. I think that German and Yiddish have influenced American English to the point that for many persons "this" and "that" represent an embarrassment of riches. But Mr. Goodman does make "excellent sentences" in prose and verse when he is in the vein, and therefore one wants to say to him apropos of his lapses what Hamlet says to Laertes during the fencing match: "You do but dally; I pray you, pass with your best violence; I am afeared you make a wanton of me."

—EMILE CAPOUYA.

The Right Word for It

A Dictionary of Modern English Usage, by H. W. Fowler, second edition, revised by Sir Ernest Gowers (Oxford University Press. 725 pp. \$5), is an enlightened reworking of a favorite guide to good language. David M. Glixon comments regularly on new reference books.

By DAVID M. GLIXON

"IT HARDLY deserves its title of 'dictionary,'" Sir Ernest Gowers writes of Fowler's original work in the preface to this updated edition, "since much of it consists of short essays on various subjects, some with fancy titles that give no clue at all to their subject. What reporter, seeking guidance about the propriety of saying that the reception was held 'at the bride's aunt's,' would think of looking for it in an article with the title 'Out of the Frying-Pan?'" And yet, increasingly since the publication of *Modern English Usage* in 1926, writers and teachers and lay word-users, when confronted with a doubt about usage, have asked themselves, "What does Fowler say?"—knowing full well that whatever he says will be worth reading because of his special way of saying it.

Margaret Nicholson, who made her own version of Fowler eight years ago (*A Dictionary of American-English Usage*), rightly called *Modern English Usage* "one of the most loved, and most provocative, reference books, as indispensable as a dictionary. . . . Fowler not only teaches you how to write; he is a demon on your shoulder, teaching you how not to write, pointing out and exhibiting, with terrifying clarity, your most cherished foibles."

Her fine book was intended as a somewhat simplified version of Fowler,

Retraction

THREE WEEKS AGO, David Dempsey reported on new churnings in publishers' subsidiary rights, royalties, and the race for successful authors in general. In the course of his column, Mr. Dempsey passed along in good faith an item about Random House's Bennett Cerf "beating off at least two raiding parties by giving Kathleen Winsor 75 per cent of the paperback royalties for her forthcoming novel, *Wanderers Eastward*, *Wanderers West*." We now learn we weren't even close. Random House's arrangement with Miss Winsor, made a year ago, was for 50 per cent of the royalties—the standard figure—and there have been no raiding parties. —THE EDITORS.

an adaptation rather than a replacement, with the addition of American variations. Nevertheless the title was something of a misnomer, since, despite the additions, the book piously retained too much of Fowler's British orientation to be an independent counselor on modern American writing and speech. (An even greater misnomer, as far as U.S. readers are concerned, is the title of H. W. Horwill's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*; it was written not to guide Americans in the use of the English language, but chiefly to give Englishmen an insight into our idiom.)

Sir Ernest Gowers, long an advocate of "plain words," has now provided a work that is a replacement for the original Fowler. And his sensitivity to the American language makes the book even more valuable to us today than the first edition has been during the past thirty-nine years. Most of the excisions are of words that would be more logically sought in a standard dictionary. For all its pruning, the new Fowler is still, fortunately, largely the old, though Sir Ernest has not been stymied by his piety. He has kept that brilliant table in which *humor*, *wit*, *irony*, and five other terms are succinctly differentiated according to their motive, province, method, and audience; he has kept (and expanded) the little treatise on *popularized technicalities* (with examples from mathematics, religion, war, psychology, and other fields); he has kept, in fact, a high percentage of the articles that have made Fowler the image of the crusty, stimulating, witty, and always reliable settler of doubts and teacher of good usage.

Moreover, Gowers has produced hundreds of fresh articles, many of them fully the equal of his master's. The two-column piece on *abstractitis* (a "disease now endemic on both sides of the Atlantic") will bear excerpting: "A writer uses abstract words because his thoughts are cloudy; the habit of using them clouds his thoughts still further; he may end by concealing his meaning not only from his readers but also from himself. . . ."

In a long new article about *ambiguity* and its causes he says that "the fault of this kind of writing is not so much obscurity as clumsiness. . . . It misleads the reader only momentarily, if at all, but makes him think the writer a fool for not being able to say what he means."

He writes of *meaningless words*, "a phenomenon perhaps more suitable for the psychologist than for the philologist"—senseless conversational words and phrases like *definitely*, *actually*, *you know*, *sort of thing*.

Besides a new article on *received pronunciation* there is a greatly enlarged general essay on *pronunciation*, con-

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