



# BETTER ENGLISH

## G. H. Vallins



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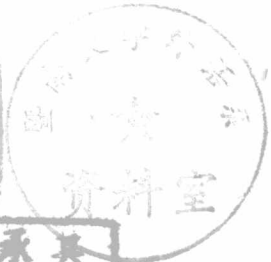
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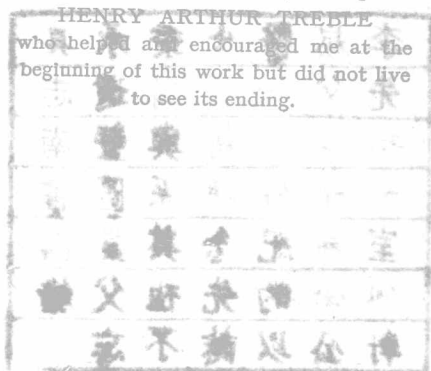


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Dedicated to  
the memory of my friend  
and fellow-worker in many enterprises  
HENRY ARTHUR TREBLE  
who helped and encouraged me at the  
beginning of this work but did not live  
to see its ending.



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## NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In this edition a number of corrections and a few additions have been made. I am grateful to reviewers and correspondents who have pointed out errors and omissions; in particular, to Studienrat Eitzen of Hamburg, who put me right on several matters of detail and suggested many additional entries in the Index, the most important of which I have now included, and to Mr. G. V. Carey, the author of that excellent book *Mind the Stop*, who gently and courteously chided me on certain points of punctuation. I may add that certain omissions were deliberate, the words or constructions concerned having already been dealt with in my previous book *Good English: How to Write It*.

G. H. V.

## NOTE TO THE THIRD EDITION

I have to thank several readers for pointing out misprints and errors in the earlier editions. In this edition all the misprints have (I hope) been corrected, and I have tried to put right what my generous critics have, with justice, found to be wrong. I cannot do better than repeat my final remark in the Note to the Fourth Edition of *Good English*, that "their kindly interest has encouraged and their erudition has challenged me".

G. H. V.

## PRELUDE

IN my former book on language, *Good English: How to Write It*,<sup>1</sup> I stated certain principles that govern the writing of the language, and illustrated them with examples of English, mainly bad, from some half-dozen magazines and newspapers. This book follows the same plan. It is in fact a sequel to *Good English*, and it has the disadvantage, or the advantage, of all sequels, that it can be fully understood only by those who have read its predecessor. Quite often it harks back to *Good English*, to which indeed I have often made detailed references. Certain principles of grammar or matters of usage have been restated, emphasised, elaborated, or even modified. But in the main it leaves the world of accident and syntax for that of idiom, figure, the logical expression of thought, the niceties of language. *Good English* dealt with the elements of writing, and by precept and example put the reader on his guard against basic error. This book discusses important trifles that are in reality not trifles at all, and urges a perfect correspondence, within the limits of language, between thought and its expression. It keeps continually under fire the unsound sentence which is apparently sound, and does not avoid subtle distinctions where subtle distinctions are necessary. That is why it is called *Better English*.

But, as in all books on the writing of English, the problem of usage arises. One or two critics and correspondents have chided me for avoiding the issue in *Good English*, for sitting on the fence between grammar and usage, for failing to pronounce upon this and that. I can quite understand why. We are all proud of the democratic freedom of our language, and secretly regret that it is not an autocracy. But we are not usually aware that our regret arises from the fact that at one comparatively short period there was a kind of autocracy—not absolute or

<sup>1</sup> See p. 2.



authoritative—in English. That period begins with Cobbett, about 1800—strictly, perhaps, a little before; and ends during the first quarter of this century. It ends, that is, as far as the pundits, the grammarians, the self-appointed guardians of the language are concerned; but for most of us it has not ended even now. For that autocracy, as I have called it, was strongest in the first fifty years of compulsory education (1870–1920). The grammar taught in schools had to have its rights and wrongs, like arithmetic. And that tradition remains to this day. Nor is it to be wondered at. After all, the formal rules of grammar can be taught, but not the indefinable spirit that underlies usage. What is more, we remember them, as much to the schoolmaster's surprise as our own. Indeed, some of them have already developed into superstitions.

So when in *The King's English* (1906) the two Fowlers made a new approach to 'grammar', and H. W. Fowler finally popularised the term *usage* in the title of his great book (1926), we were caught, like the early Christians in the Pauline churches, between the law and the spirit. And that is where we are still. On the one side is the belief, fostered and developed through school and school examinations, that certain constructions are wrong—'bad grammar', as the phrase was—and on the other the undoubted fact that eminent journalists, learned writers, and great literary men quite frequently use them. It is for this very reason that most of us are interested in points and problems of language today. What seemed sure is no longer sure. We are bewildered. Nesfield was a hard task-master; but at least we knew where we were with him. Usage as interpreted by Fowler, whilst polishing off (a little too brusquely sometimes) a few old bogeys like the split infinitive, only raised problems hitherto unsuspected and doubts that almost prevented us from ever again putting pen to paper. We were in the new democracy of usage, the custom of the practised and practising writer, and behold! it seemed more autocratic, more hedged about with laws and penalties, than the old autocracy of the schoolmaster.

And so, in a sense, it is. I revere Fowler only this side

idolatry. But I have this against him. Too often he wrote not of modern usage but of what he considered should be modern usage. So well did he write (though, as Somerset Maugham says, he had no ear for prose), and with such authority, that he became in spite of himself a dictator. *Modern English Usage* is a kind of paradox; it seeks to give rigidity to what is essentially flexible, and provides a tested and accurate standard for what (rather oddly) is better measured with a rough working rule. Some of his own sentences are so carefully (I had almost written 'meticulously') fashioned according to his own pronouncements that they hardly read like English at all.

The general result of all this is that, in spite of the change of emphasis from grammar to usage, there is still a gap between precept and practice. And this is partly because there is a kind of hang-over from that carefully formulated system to which I have already referred, and usage is incongruously forced into the straight-jacket of grammar. To give a simple example. The loosely related participle phrase was common in the eighteenth century even in such 'correct' writers as Addison and Swift. Then it was outlawed by the pundits, and writers on language have, for the most part, followed them, as I have myself both in *Good English* and in this book. But to judge from the examples on pp. 58-60 from contemporary magazines all published within a period of at most three weeks, the usage persists. And it would seem that if usage is really the criterion of good English, then the loose participle is by no means to be condemned. The same argument holds for certain other constructions that have a similar long and tolerably honourable ancestry.

There is, however, a fallacy in it. After all, the fact remains that syntax has been tightened up during the last hundred and fifty years. We cannot ignore Cobbett, Nesfield, and Fowler, who at different times and in their own different ways formulated certain 'laws' that should govern the writing of English. They were often dogmatic, sometimes wrong, now and then cranky; and the first two set up a good many Aunt Sallies that Fowler and later writers have rather perversely knocked down. But for good or evil they unofficially standardised the language.

They made a grammatical system and Fowler called it usage. There is no putting the clock back. Modern usage cannot escape the learned attentions of those who, in a phrase of Pepys, reduce it to an alphabet.

So in this book, as in *Good English*, I have accepted, sometimes with reservations and usually with tolerance, the established conventions of syntax. In the matter of idiom I have been more severe, holding that established idiom is (with spelling) the most surely fixed element in the language. I do not forget of course that certain idioms die out and others are born; but I have contended that a living idiom is not to be tampered with. For that reason the section on 'mixed idiom' in *Good English*<sup>1</sup> is here elaborated, with many more examples, as being of particular importance.

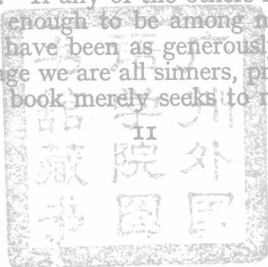
I have tried to keep an open mind on the question of new idioms and new words, or old words with new meanings. Whenever I read Sir Alan Herbert's amusing and often prejudiced *What a Word!* and his later articles on the same subject in *Punch*, I wonder what all the fuss is about. During the seventeen years or so since that book was written many of the words he condemns have been accepted and others have dropped out, in the natural progress of language. This is where usage is most democratic, and therefore most impatient of the autocrat; and in time it usually has its revenge on him. I have used the word 'prejudiced' of Sir Alan; it applies equally to most people. Often our prejudice arises because a word is what Shakespeare called 'overworn'. I have one against *integrated*, which I aired in *Good English* (p. 198); and I had much ado to prevent myself from airing another in this book, against the word *awareness*. But I refrained, remembering that—luckily for the language—our prejudices tend to cancel out; and an individual word is finally accepted or rejected by a kind of popular intuition. True, men who speak with a certain authority have some influence. Fowler frightened a whole generation off *meticulous* and Sir Ernest Gowers may, perhaps, reconcile the next generation to *teenager*. But in the main, like Gallio of old, we care for none of these things.

<sup>1</sup> pp. 153-67.

Above all, I have usually welcomed a new word that expresses in itself what could otherwise be expressed only in a phrase. Thus *editorialise* (p. 197) seems to me an admirable way of saying 'make editorial comments upon'. The genius of the language for ellipsis and telescoping (p. 36) is not to be thwarted by our own arbitrary likes and dislikes. *Teenager* itself happens to be one of my dislikes; but as it fulfils this condition of verbal brevity I would not raise my voice against it. Neither am I over-much concerned about the etymological or phonetic construction of words. Here, as in other ways, the wind bloweth where it listeth. There are so many hybrids among established words that I see no reason whatever for excluding a new one if on other counts it passes muster. A rich vocabulary has its embarrassments, but these are to be preferred to the embarrassments of poverty.

The doubts that have arisen in these modern days about the meaning of such words as *democracy*, *liberty*, *freedom*, *welfare* and *peace* have brought to the fore the comparatively new art or science of semantics. Into this realm of linguistic analysis I have rarely entered. This is only another way of saying that my concern has been with function rather than with meaning. Of *welfare* in the phrase 'the welfare State' I should content myself by saying that it is a noun-adjective. What it means I leave to the semanticists, if the word may be allowed. Truth to tell when I read Mr William Empson, for example, on the use of a single word or image in Shakespeare, I am bewildered and incredulous and frightened. I also feel a little sorry for Shakespeare.

As in *Good English*, I have taken my examples mainly from 'literary' newspapers and magazines. This time, acting upon a hint in a review of *Good English*, I have given their names. These examples were gathered in a period of weeks, not years. There is no significance in the fact that one or two magazines are more frequently represented than the others. They happen to be the ones I regularly read—that is all. If any of the others had been fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to be among my 'regulars', they would no doubt have been as generously represented. In our use of language we are all sinners, prone to carelessness and error. This book merely seeks to reveal our sins and



exhort us to repentance. It will, I know, have its own mistakes, which the reader will detect and to which, ironically, I may myself be blind.

Throughout the book I have sought the reader's co-operation and asked his opinion. And towards the end (pp. 187-203) I have even gone so far as to set him an examination paper. I hope this will not frighten him. In answering it myself (pp. 204-20) I have taken the opportunity of dealing with some points that could not conveniently be dealt with in the text.

*Better English* has profited from many just and erudite criticisms of *Good English* by reviewers and correspondents in England and overseas. For these and to them I am sincerely grateful. Now and then they made me wince, sometimes they provoked me to disagreement, and always they compelled me to think again. I learned much from them—and not least (I trust) the grace of humility. Finally, to Mr George Kamm, to whose encouragement and help *Good English* owed much, this book owes even more.

In one or two particulars I have departed from my practice in *Good English*. Except in quotations, where of course I have followed the original, I have omitted the point (.) when the last letter of a complete word is included in a contraction, and have made a clean sweep of points from groups of initials representing titles, etc.; for example, I have written *Mr* not *Mr.* and *BBC* not *B.B.C.* But I have kept the points after initials in personal names, after initials representing the points of the compass, and in conventional contractions like *p.* for *page* and *i.e.* for *id est*, 'that is'.<sup>1</sup>

The chief contractions used are as follows:

COD	<i>Concise Oxford Dictionary</i>
SOED	<i>Shorter Oxford English Dictionary</i>
RCR	<i>Rules for Compositors and Readers at the Oxford Press</i>
DT	<i>Daily Telegraph</i>
JL	<i>John o' London's Weekly</i>
L	<i>The Listener</i>
MG	<i>Manchester Guardian</i>
NS	<i>New Statesman</i>
O	<i>Observer</i>

<sup>1</sup>See *Good English*, pp. 126-8.

## PRELUDE

<i>RT</i>	<i>Radio Times</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Spectator</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>The Times</i>
<i>TES</i>	<i>Times Educational Supplement</i>
<i>TLS</i>	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>Time and Tide</i>

Here and there the origin of a quotation is not given. This means nothing more than that the original cutting was carelessly or inadequately marked.

Words or compounds (like *as well as*) commented upon in the text are italicised, and groups of words are enclosed in single quotation marks. Double quotation marks are used only for literary illustrative quotations.

## CHAPTER I

### "IN NUMBER AND PERSON"

Verbs, of which there must be one at least, expressed or understood, in every sentence, must *agree in person* and in *number* with the nouns or pronouns, which are the *nominatives* of the sentence; that is to say, the verbs must be of the same person and same number as the nominatives are. Verbs frequently change their forms and endings to make themselves *agree* with their *nominatives*. How necessary is it then, to know what is, and what is not, a nominative in a sentence!—COBBETT: *A Grammar of the English Language*

COBBETT, as always, is refreshingly dogmatic; he never fails to call a spade a spade. "How necessary is it to know what is, and what is not, a nominative in a sentence!"—and sometimes how difficult to determine its number and person! It is in fact remarkable how often we have to ask ourselves such questions as 'Is the subject singular or plural?', 'Have I actually joined the two nouns, or are they still grammatically separate?', 'How does the verb agree with two pronouns of different person?'. In brief, the simple agreement outlined by Cobbett is not so simple as it looks. This the examples given below will sufficiently illustrate; and it is hoped that the comments will at once reprove the careless and help the careful writer.

#### *Collective Puzzles*

A wide series of views of the English scene, of architecture, historic events, transportation and industry, of celebrities and sporting subjects, can be seen in *The Times Picture Library*, and are available for reproduction.—T

True, the noun *series* has the same form in the plural as in the singular, and itself looks like a plural; but the indefinite article here seems to stress the singular. However, the plural verb can be explained if not quite forgiven, especially as attraction (see below) has also been at work.

## "IN NUMBER AND PERSON"

And row upon row of delicate green now breaks the monotony of the carefully prepared beds.—S

Even Cobbett would be hard put to it to determine exactly what he calls his 'nominative' in this sentence. It is best explained as a collective hyphenated expression (*row-upon-row*), in which each separate row is thought of in turn, not the whole number of rows at once and together. The verb is, therefore, correctly singular; indeed, a plural verb would destroy the useful and effective idiom. So also with *after*: 'Ship after ship *sails* [not *sail*] by'. But see p. 206.

One or more gas-rings, hot plates or portable electric ovens are not by themselves enough to be called a cooking stove or range.—Census Paper, 1951

This piece of telescoping (see p. 42 ff.) results in an expression that is more concise than logical. Again we have to resort to imaginary hyphenation and assume that *one-or-more* is a kind of collective adjective idiomatically qualifying a plural noun: the *one* is entirely lost in the *more*. Rather oddly, the parallel expression *more than one* is singular—'More than one man *has* [not *have*] been dismissed'.

'Here is ...'

- (a) Here is a university town, students and professors, and gaily unhappy wives, and lovers, and the outlying farmers.—O
- (b) Here is no prophet, no moralist, no great genius entertainer, no stylist even.—TT

"There is pansies, that's for thoughts", said Shakespeare; and the formula 'There/Here is' often tends to be independent of the subject that follows it. The singular (*is*) steadfastly remains, even when the subject is a long list ( $a + b + c + d \dots$ ), and some of the items in it are themselves plural, as in sentence (a) above. Within limits, the reader may use his discretion; but here are one or two suggestions:

- (i) The singular (*is*, 's) has become idiomatic in certain types of expression before a simple plural, as in the Shakespeare quotation above. We say 'There's





peaches for tea', 'There's ten minutes to go'. But the usage is colloquial; in formal writing the plural is recommended.

- (ii) If the subject is multiple, the singular (*is*, *'s*) is permissible if each item of the subject is singular; in other words, the force of attraction has its way. The plural tends to be a trifle stilted; but the fastidious writer will probably prefer it. If some of the items are plural, the plural verb (*are*) is preferable where the first item is singular (thus, sentence (a) would begin 'Here *are* a . . .'), and necessary where the first item is plural. But this applies only to sentences in which the subject is truly multiple.
- (iii) Note that in sentence (b) the subject is not multiple but alternative (no prophet *or* moralist *or* entertainer *or* stylist), and the verb, since each item is singular, must itself be singular; 'here *are*' would be wrong. Or we may think of the sentence as an ellipsis (see p. 51) for 'Here is a man who is no prophet, moralist etc.'

### Attraction

Four simple examples are quoted without any comment except that this error ("a matter", says Fowler, "of carelessness and inexperience only") seems to be becoming more common. The subject in each sentence is italicised; the verb is printed in small capitals, and its attracter is in black type:

The *passion* for maps, for the study of geography, and for the organization of **voyages** of discovery or trading **trips** ARE largely Elizabethan in origin.—*JL*

The *worth* of its **contents** ARE sufficiently well known.

There are occasions when the *validity* of Fleet Street's **complaints** about the newsprint shortage ARE more acceptable than others.—*NS*

However, even if *New Writing* must share in the common guilt of intellectuals for our present distresses, its vital *achievement* in the pre-war and war years **STAND** unquestioned.—*NS*

There is one idiom in which attraction legitimatises, as it were, an otherwise false agreement. We say 'A quarter of