

William  
Morris

HARPER DICTIONARY OF  
CONTEMPORARY USAGE

# HARPER DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY USAGE

William and Mary Morris

WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF A PANEL OF  
136 DISTINGUISHED CONSULTANTS ON USAGE

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## DEDICATION

To WYSTAN HUGH AUDEN, who contributed to this work in its early stages and who wrote: "As a poet, there is only one political duty and that is to defend one's language from corruption. And that is particularly serious now. It is being corrupted. When it's corrupted, people lose faith in what they hear, and that leads to violence."

And to HENRY LOUIS MENCKEN, who in earlier years, perhaps unwisely, encouraged us in the first of our lexicographical ventures, and who wrote: "To the man with an ear for verbal delicacies—to the man who searches painfully for the perfect word and puts the way of saying a thing above the thing being said—there is in writing the constant joy of sudden discovery, of happy accident."

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## PANEL OF CONSULTANTS ON USAGE

In most instances the identifying notes following the panelists' names were supplied by the panelists themselves. In a few instances, the descriptive phrases were taken from *Who's Who in America*.

- SHANA ALEXANDER, editor and writer, columnist, *Newsweek* magazine  
CLEVELAND AMORY, writer, radio and TV commentator  
BENJAMIN APPEL, writer  
MICHAEL J. ARLEN, staff writer, *The New Yorker* magazine  
ISAAC ASIMOV, writer, lecturer, biochemistry professor  
W. H. AUDEN, poet  
SHERIDAN BAKER, educator  
JOHN O. BARBOUR, Associated Press newsfeatures writer  
STEWART BEACH, editor, writer and historian  
ALVIN BEAM, book editor, columnist, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*  
SAUL BELLOW, writer  
JULES BERGMAN, science writer  
CHARLES BERLITZ, linguist and writer  
SIMON MICHAEL BESSIE, writer, editor, publisher  
BARRY BINGHAM, SR., editor and publisher, *Louisville Courier-Journal*  
ALTON BLAKESLEE, science editor, the Associated Press  
HAL BORLAND, author, naturalist, columnist  
JOSEPH A. BRANDT, former city editor and retired educator  
JOHN BROOKS, journalist and historian  
HEYWOOD HALE BROWN, author, TV and radio commentator  
ART BUCHWALD, writer, internationally syndicated columnist  
ANTHONY BURGESS, novelist, essayist, linguist  
BEN LUCIEN BURMAN, novelist  
JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS, political scientist, winner of Pulitzer Prize in history  
ABE BURROWS, playwright-director, winner of Pulitzer Prize in drama  
MELVILLE CANE, lawyer, poet  
CASS CANFIELD, senior editor, Harper & Row, author of *The Incredible Pierpont Morgan*  
TURNER CATLEDGE, newspaperman and author  
JOHN CHAPMAN, former drama editor, *New York Daily News*  
JOHN CIARDI, poet, columnist, contributing editor, *Saturday Review*, and past president, National College English Association



- JAMES B. CONANT, president emeritus, Harvard University  
 GEORGE CORNISH, former editor in chief, Encyclopedia Americana  
 ROBERT CRICHTON, novelist  
 ROBERT CROMIE, author, journalist, radio and TV commentator  
 WALTER CRONKITE, broadcast journalist, CBS News  
 WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS, associate justice, United States Supreme Court  
 LEON EDEL, author, educator, winner of Pulitzer Prize in biography  
 WILLARD R. ESPY, writer, humorist, light poet of sorts  
 ALEX FAULKNER, C.B.E., chief American correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, London, 1939-1974  
 THOMAS FLEMING, novelist and historian  
 CHARLES BRACELEN FLOOD, author, past president of P.E.N.  
 GEROLD FRANK, author, editor, foreign correspondent  
 STEPHEN H. FRITCHMAN, Unitarian minister and writer  
 ERNEST K. GANN, author  
 MAXWELL GEISMAR, historian and critic of American literature  
 HARRY GOLDEN, editor, publisher, writer  
 A. B. GUTHRIE, JR., writer, occasional speaker, foe of despoilers whether individual, corporate or governmental, whether of language or land  
 SYDNEY J. HARRIS, syndicated columnist, Field Newspaper Syndicate, and drama critic  
 RICHARD EDES HARRISON, cartographer, author, editor  
 WAKEMAN HARTLEY, newspaperman and publisher  
 S. I. HAYAKAWA, writer and former college president  
 GEOFFREY HELLMAN, contributor of several thousand pieces to *The New Yorker* magazine and author of informal histories of the American Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian Institution  
 PAUL HORGAN, novelist, historian, educator  
 NORMAN HOSS, managing editor, American Heritage Dictionary  
 JOHN K. HUTCHENS, journalist, editor, drama and literary critic  
 ELIZABETH JANEWAY, novelist, critic and student of social mythology  
 HELEN L. KAUFMANN, author of books on music and musicians  
 PINCKNEY KEEL, journalist  
 WALT KELLY, cartoonist, creator of *Pogo*  
 ALEXANDER KENDRICK, news correspondent and author  
 WALTER KERR, Sunday drama critic, *The New York Times*  
 CLARK KINNAIRD, editor, historian, biographer  
 LESTER KINSOLVING, religion columnist and White House correspondent, National Newspaper Syndicate  
 IRVING KOLODIN, music critic  
 STANLEY KUNITZ, poet  
 CHARLES KURALT, TV news correspondent  
 LAURENCE LAFORE, writer, professor of history  
 DANIEL LANG, staff writer, *The New Yorker* magazine  
 JOHN LEAR, formerly science editor of *Saturday Review*, science consultant to Crown publishers

- ROBERT LIPSYTE, novelist and sportswriter  
 JULES LOH, journalist and author  
 WALTER LORD, author  
 RUSSELL LYNES, editor, author  
 DWIGHT MACDONALD, critic  
 HENRY W. MALONE, educator, author  
 BILL MAULDIN, political cartoonist  
 EUGENE MCCARTHY, former senator; writer, lecturer, and poet  
 DAVID MCCORD, author, critic, poet  
 PHYLLIS MCGINLEY, writer, poet  
 JESSICA MITFORD, author, critic  
 HERBERT MITGANG, author, member of the editorial board, *The New York Times*  
 WILLIE MORRIS, novelist  
 WRIGHT MORRIS, novelist  
 WADE MOSBY, writer, editor of supplements, *Milwaukee Journal*  
 DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN, ambassador, educator  
 EDWIN NEWMAN, correspondent, NBC News  
 URSULA NORDSTROM, editor, writer  
 STANTON PECKHAM, editor, book critic  
 HARRIET PILPEL, attorney, writer and lecturer  
 FRANCIS T. P. PLIMPTON, lawyer, diplomat  
 GEORGE PLIMPTON, author, editor, TV commentator  
 DAVID POLING, clergyman and columnist for the Newspaper Enterprise Association  
 ORVILLE PRESCOTT, writer, formerly literary critic for the daily *New York Times*  
 PETER S. PRESCOTT, book critic, *Newsweek* magazine, author of *A World of Our Own*,  
*Soundings*, and *A Darkening Green*  
 F. D. REEVE, author, educator  
 FRANCIS ROBINSON, assistant manager, Metropolitan Opera  
 LEO ROSTEN, author, social scientist  
 BERTON ROUCHE, staff writer, *The New Yorker* magazine  
 RICHARD H. ROVERE, Washington correspondent, *The New Yorker* magazine  
 VERMONT ROYSTER, political columnist and editor emeritus, *Wall Street Journal*  
 HARRISON SALISBURY, author and editor  
 LEONARD SANDERS, editor, literary critic  
 DAVID SCHOENBRUN, reporter and writer  
 HAROLD SCHONBERG, senior music critic, *The New York Times*  
 MARK SCHORER, writer  
 DANIEL SCHORR, broadcaster and former newspaperman, Washington correspondent  
 and former foreign correspondent, CBS News  
 ERICH SEGAL, classicist, author  
 ROBERT SHERRILL, Washington correspondent for *The Nation*  
 CHARLES E. SILBERMAN, author, magazine editor  
 DOLORES SIMON, copyeditor, Harper & Row  
 WALTER W. "RED" SMITH, a noble Moor in the service of the state. However, if that  
 seems flippant, just say "sports columnist, *The New York Times*."  
 JEAN STAFFORD, writer, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in fiction

- ELVIS STAHR, JR., president, National Audubon Society, former president, Indiana University
- REX STOUT, author
- FRANK SULLIVAN, author
- GAY TALESE, writer
- HOWARD TAUBMAN, formerly music critic, drama critic, and critic-at large, *The New York Times*
- DAVIDSON TAYLOR, arts consultant, former vice president, CBS and NBC, and dean, School of the Arts, Columbia University
- HAROLD TAYLOR, writer, educator, former president, Sarah Lawrence College
- ROSS McLAURY TAYLOR, educator, novelist, historian
- EVAN W. THOMAS, book editor
- LOWELL THOMAS, author, radio and TV commentator
- MIMS THOMASON, news executive
- LIONEL TRILLING, critic, university professor emeritus, Columbia University
- BARBARA TUCHMAN, historian, twice winner of Pulitzer Prize in history
- EARL UBELL, director of news, WNBC-TV
- BILL VAUGHAN, associate editor, Kansas City *Star*
- WILLIAM C. VERGARA, science writer
- JUDITH VIORST, writer
- GEORGE WALD, professor of biology, Harvard University, winner of Nobel Prize for physiology
- DOUGLAS WATT, writer and critic
- A. B. C. WHIPPLE, assistant managing editor, Time-Life Books
- CHARLES L. WHIPPLE, former editor of the editorial page, Boston *Globe*, now ombudsman and special projects writer for the *Globe*
- T. HARRY WILLIAMS, professor and writer
- HERMAN WOUK, novelist and playwright
- CHARLOTTE ZOLOTOW, editor and writer

## INTRODUCTION

The *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* differs in many respects from other handbooks of guidance in the use of our language. First, it reflects the collaborative efforts of some 136 writers, editors, and public speakers chosen for their demonstrated ability to use the language carefully and effectively. Their opinions on scores of the knottiest questions of disputed usage are reported, both in the form of percentages of approval and disapproval and by citation of specific comments from members of the Usage Panel.

Equally important are the contributions, reported here anonymously, of thousands of readers of our syndicated newspaper column. For nearly a quarter of a century we have maintained a dialogue with people in every part of this country who are concerned about the state of the language and, indeed, with readers of English language newspapers in Mexico and Japan. As a result, many hundreds of questions never before treated in a usage guide are discussed in this dictionary. These are actual problems, put to us by people seriously concerned about the niceties of good speech and writing. Some of the matters discussed will surprise you and some will surely amuse you, but it should be borne in mind that every one of them is genuine and every one of them has at some time posed a problem.

The readers who raise these questions represent a cross-section of the reading public—male and female, young and old, laymen and professional writers, and, naturally, the editors of papers carrying the column. As a result, this dictionary treats of virtually every aspect of today's language—idioms, Slang, vogue words, and regionalisms, as well as all the vast range of words used in Formal speech and writing. Many of the entries in this dictionary record usages regarded as improper or Substandard by careful users of the language—"infer" when "imply" is meant, "disinterested" for "uninterested," "irregardless," and the like. Obviously the main purpose of the volume is to call attention to such inaccuracies and thus to correct or eliminate them.

A second purpose of this dictionary is to show by discussion and example the standards of linguistic usage adhered to by those who use the language well. In this undertaking we make every effort not to be dogmatic and, most assuredly, not dictatorial. Even had we been so inclined, the reactions of our panelists and consultants would have convinced us otherwise, for of the many



scores of questions put to these panelists, only one received a unanimous verdict. On every other point, we had yea-sayers as well as nay-sayers. Inasmuch as all the panelists have amply demonstrated their ability to use the language effectively, this lack of unanimity is proof that language is no static thing to be fixed by rules. Rather it is ever-growing, ever-changing, and the often-expressed hope of the panelists as well as of the editors is that the changes may be influenced only for the better.

A word on the history of the panel may be in order. The fundamental idea behind it is, of course, that the day when one person—be he H. W. Fowler or Frank Vizetelley—could dictate the rights and wrongs of language are long past. Changes in the language are too many and too rapid for any one person to pass judgment on all the matters involved. The idea of gathering opinions from a variety of qualified users of the language was first suggested to your editors by a monograph of the National Council of Teachers of English—*Facts About Current English Usage* by Albert H. Marckwardt and Fred G. Walcott, published in 1938. This pioneering survey was “an attempt to find out what various judges have observed about the actual use or non-use by cultivated persons of a large number of expressions usually condemned in English textbooks and classes.” The authors submitted questions to a group of judges including linguistic specialists, editors, authors, businessmen, and teachers of English and of speech. The last-named group, not surprisingly—considering the sponsor of the project—outnumbered all other participants combined.

It seemed to us, in organizing the panel of consultants for the *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage*, that the general user of the language would be better served by a panel with many fewer teachers—though we do have some very distinguished members of that profession on the panel—and relatively more writers and editors. So in April 1971 we invited a number of the leading authors and editors—men and women who had demonstrated their ability to use the language well—to participate in our work to the extent of answering queries put to them on a series of ballots continuing, as matters turned out, over the next four years. Response was immediate and enthusiastic, as you will see from the comments quoted in many of the entries in the body of this dictionary. Their interest and dedication is perhaps even more remarkable in light of the fact that all were serving as unpaid consultants. Their reward, as we noted in our letter of invitation, “chiefly lies in the realization that they will have played an important role in recording the standards of usage respected by today’s foremost writers.”

Many of the panelists had strong opinions about the state of the language today. Here is a sampling of their comments.

SHANA ALEXANDER: Thank you for service to language and fun for me.

BENJAMIN APPEL: Language is language, for better or for worse; shaped and molded by many hands and mouths (particularly mouths). A great civili-

ization makes its own language; a corrupt one. . . . Well, all of us know only too well what has happened and what is happening to this country of ours. As writers, we should see to it that our words serve as a delaying action.

**ISAAC ASIMOV:** The English language is the finest tool for communication ever invented. Since it is used indiscriminately by hundreds of millions, it is no wonder that it is badly misused so often. All the more reason for those who can to hold the standard high.

**JOHN O. BARBOUR:** The test is whether or not words reach their intended targets in the mind of the reader—engendering, beyond dictionary meaning, tone, mood, accent. Even then, as precisely aimed as a word is, the target may move unless restrained by context. And all of that fails if the writer's idea was murky in the first place.

**STEWART BEACH:** I hope the panel will overwhelmingly flout the incorrect and flaunt the correct.

**SIMON MICHAEL BESSIE:** It becomes increasingly clear to me that I am becoming freer in my acceptance and use of changes in language. Aren't we all?

**BARRY BINGHAM, SR.:** We are constantly in your debt for your gallant fight on behalf of the English language.

**ALTON BLAKESLEE:** Language, like people, should keep breathing, changing, aging, mellowing. Some new words and usages enrich our language and us. Others debase. Let a careful jury continue watch.

**HAL BORLAND:** The spoken language is supposed to be the testing ground for new words to enrich the language, but I find that Madison Avenue, TV, and too many of the high-school crowd don't even know the old words. How can they give us new and better ones? I have no choice but to hold on to the old, precise language and hope it survives.

**JOSEPH A. BRANDT:** New words are like strangers you meet for the first time. Usually your first impression is one that lingers; however, you may change your mind. So the use of words remains in the last analysis a choice of dropping the words that annoy or continuing the new ones which somehow do fuse vitality into the sponge which we call the English language. If a sponge picks up an abrasive, it hurts when you squeeze the sponge, just as an objectionable word or usage lowers your sense of dignity of the language.

**JOHN BROOKS:** I don't feel that the language is necessarily disintegrating or being irrevocably debased. It is widely misused, and the misuse is disseminated by the media. But eventually, as in the past, the valuable neologisms will survive and the worthless ones will disappear.

**HEYWOOD HALE BROWN:** It apparently needs saying again that language should be, ideally, as accurate as it is beautiful—a mixture of art and arithmetic.

**BEN LUCIEN BURMAN:** I am anything but a snob in my social relationships.

But I'm a terrible snob regarding language. I can't abide words that through debased usage by adolescents, commentators or careless authors appear overnight in our literature and, like nouveau riche Southern red-necks who have found oil on their property, try to make ugliness and ignorance fashionable.

**ABE BURROWS:** The word Grammar is the etymological parent of the word Glamour. That is, glamour in its original meanings: magic; a spell or charm. Those wicked criminals who commit high crimes against grammar, i.e., saying "between you and I" or "He invited she and I to a party," shall have an evil spell cast over "they" for all of their miserable lives. Outside of simple grammatical errors and solecisms, my objection to some "newly accepted usages" is based on my ear. Perhaps it's because most of my work is in the theatre. Obviously language can't be rigid. I feel, however, that "good grammar" has to be "good sound."

**MELVILLE CANE:** The language needs to be refreshed. What I object to is not the addition of new words, but the misuse of old words. My favorite example is the word *demean*, which is generally accepted as signifying disgrace, while in reality its derivation connotes behavior, demeanor which has no adverse connotation, but simply represents an attitude or state of mind.

**JOHN CIARDI:** Are there any enduring standards of English usage? I think there are only preferences, "passionate preferences," as Robert Frost used to say, the level at which any English speaking person chooses to engage the instrument—the orchestra—of the language. In the long run the usage of those who do not think about the language will prevail. Usages I resist will become acceptable. It is worth remembering that Swift inveighed against "mob" as a vulgar corruption of "mobile vulgus." He thought he was right to resist—"mob" must have sounded to him as "rep" for reputation sounds to me today—yet English speaking people decided that he was wrong. It will not do to resist uncompromisingly. Yet those who care have a duty to resist. Changes that occur against such resistance are tested changes. The language is better for them—and for the resistance.

**ROBERT CRICHTON:** The challenge to the language is the inclination and desire of institutions and government and persuasive people to turn the concrete into the abstract. When that happens language dies, which is probably the unconscious desire of these groups. This is the killing wound; all the rest is mere stult for Band-Aids.

**WALTER CRONKITE:** Language has many functions from simple communication to the emotional stimulation of great literature and it is not necessary that the rules should be the same for all forms. However, for those who write and speak formally—presumably setting the standards of proper usage—there must be exercised the utmost care to prevent debasement of the language through too hasty acceptance of the vernacular.

LEON EDEL: The media are changing our language and ritualizing it. "Have a good day"—now universal—is a TV gift to America and has become meaningless. . . . If TV speech could be improved, our young would speak more accurately. But I suppose that isn't your problem.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: One very important reason for the creation of the *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* is the hope that it will influence all users of the language to a greater accuracy and precision in its use. To that extent it is our problem and the problem of all contributors to this dictionary.]

ALEX FAULKNER: When all is said and done, the geniuses will make their own rules. What journalists, not as a rule being geniuses, can do is to try (not too slavishly) to keep the Pierian Spring undefiled and to yelp loudly whenever they catch the careless, the commercial, the bureaucratic, and the technological making a mess of the language.

GEROLD FRANK: I am appalled by what is happening to written English and feel it affects me almost subliminally, and for the worst. Carelessness and letting go of standards seem to have their own almost magical quality as precedents. The thing to do is fight, and be aware.

STEPHEN H. FRITCHMAN: As one whose craft demands the use of language I shall join the long march of protest against its disfigurement, corruption and betrayal, however long it takes. I believe in evolution, in change and in flexibility, but none of these transformations calls for the butchery now going on. I am neither paranoid nor paleolithic, just a freedom fighter for clarity, beauty and joy. Is this too much to ask for?

MAXWELL GEISMAR: I am on the side of good language, change and flexibility.

A. B. GUTHRIE, JR.: The English language is so fine a tool that misuse of it seems to me shameful. It has room for growth, of course, but allows no smudging as people smudge it who equate "imply" and "infer" and "comprise" and "compose." Exactitude should be the rule of all who speak or write for audiences or readers.

GEOFFREY HELLMAN: The state of the language is a shambles, just to give an illustration.

PAUL HORGAN: As never before, language is the servant of commercial interests, chiefly through advertising and its most powerful arm, television. Catering to a huge indiscriminate public, the medium must resort to the lowest vulgate, and even, in effect, invent a new and more debased set of verbal signals, to entertain in order to sell. Like children learning to speak, the pop audience uncritically repeats what it hears; and, so, popular usage is created and soon has the force to corrupt immediately a language hitherto more slow to change and develop. Solecisms deliberately appealing to the illiterate, imprecision and exaggeration to the point of men-

dacity, along with governmental and academic jargon (v. "parameter" commonly used now by learned panels to mean "perimeter"), all create with irresistible swiftness a new language largely useless for serious purpose, including the aesthetic. Perhaps we are seeing something new for English—a language divided into two levels of taste, form, and meaning: Low English, created by commercial education, and High English, the survival of evolving traditions based on decent literacy unaffected by the commercial motive.

ELIZABETH JANEWAY: Since language is a tool of communication (*the* tool, if you wish) it should be precise. It will never be utterly so, for individual experiences will never quite match each other, and the expression of this individuality creates a tension within language which (I suppose) is a cause of vitality and richness. Nevertheless, we must strive for precision on pain of losing our ability to talk together at all.

HELEN L. KAUFMANN: New words are bound to creep into the language; that's the way it grows. The trick, for writers especially, seems to be to winnow the wheat from the chaff, to bestow their blessing only on what words appear meaningful, euphonious, and enduring, and hope that the others will die a natural death. The English language is constantly in flux, probably no worse today than it was when Chaucer took it in hand and Shakespeare improved on it.

ALEXANDER KENDRICK: Everybody talks about the state of the language, but nobody seems to do anything about it.

CLARK KINNAIRD: We should all be aware that language is one of the last forms of popular expression wholly free of statist control, beyond Russia, China, and their satellites. People at large still have the right to adopt, simplify, or transform meanings.

LESTER KINSOLVING: Someone once defined a classic as a book which would never be read unless assigned in class. Would that assorted intelligentsia, on campus and off, cease the incomprehensibility of writing obviously for each other and try to write for us lesser mortals. Such intellectual snobbery, together with the jargon of the bureaucratic reports, constitutes more of a threat to communication than slang.

STANLEY KUNITZ: The English language is a remarkable instrument, equipped to name and describe everything imaginable and to register the most evanescent thoughts and feelings. Poets know that the exact words are there, if only they have the patience or cunning or luck to find them; they even believe, given the riches at their disposal, in the possibility of marrying sense to sound in the most complex and satisfying of harmonies. They also know that the language is not a fixity but a changing phenomenon, attached to its ancient roots but forever seeking augmentation and renewal. A society indifferent to right words is a society grown careless of its life-giving values.

LAURENCE LAFORE: I am inclined to think that my notion of what is and what is not proper is largely formed by age: I accept the usages which were general in my adolescence, when I first began to write with any consciousness of form. I am strongly averse to most habits of speech which have developed since—but I am aware that if I had been born thirty years earlier I should have written “averse from” instead of writing “averse to.” I think, however, that there is a reasonable defense to be made, a sort of program of planned obsolescence, of this attitude. It is worthwhile, perhaps, to postpone acceptance of new forms for a generation, since a good many of them will disappear into the oblivion of dead slang. Some usages that seemed on the verge of acceptability when I was growing up are now forgotten. I think, for example, of the usage of “capable” in the sense of “able” or “competent.” No one says nowadays, “She is a very capable person.” To be old-fashioned today is to avoid having one’s writing appear old-fashioned tomorrow. I decline to use words like “meaningful” or “life-style” or “hopefully” and “presently” in their current, distorted meanings. I hope and believe that my refusal may mean that, ten years from now, my writing will be less dated.

JOHN LEAR: That TV and radio performers are debasing the language is as obvious to me as it is deplorable. But the spoken word and the written word are and ought to be distinct. So the distortions of usage committed by magazines and newspapers are a deeper and more lasting threat.

ROBERT LIPSYTE: During a recent schoolboard election in my town, the candidate I supported used the sound “prioritize.” Agonizing, I voted for her, then threw away my Word Sheriff’s paper star and went back to work in debasement.

JULES LOH: A writer ought to regard the language as a sailor the sea. The tried and familiar routes are the surest. Innovation is risky.

WALTER LORD: Good usage is whatever a panel like this says it is, and the only thing that makes this preposterous situation tolerable is that people can always, anytime they choose and by sheer weight of numbers, veto our decision!

EUGENE MCCARTHY: The integrity of language is always threatened, most seriously by those who have difficulty explaining themselves or who don’t want to explain. The English language, as used in the United States, has survived the assaults of the Pentagon and of the Johnson and Nixon administrations, as they attempted to justify and explain the Vietnam War. We must now look to new threats, although the Ford administration uses metaphors from football and from the furniture business, such as “the unvarnished facts” and “Truth is the glue that holds the government together.”

PHYLLIS MCGINLEY: I said I am a purist and I am. I hold the line as firmly as I can, although it’s a losing battle. But it is a pleasure to take up the



- sword in defense of the language and against its impoverishment.
- HERBERT MITGANG: Slanguage isn't language until mellowed by time; permanent written words should remain purer than spoken words. Consider the sentences of all advertisers, broadcasters, and presidential speechwriters "guilty" until proven innocent.
- WRIGHT MORRIS: In the vernacular, usage and abuse are inseparable.
- WADE MOSBY: We should relish the vigor brought to our language by the changing times—and at the same time retain the integrity to recognize the difference between casual intrusions and welcome additions.
- HARRIET PILPEL: It is important that students at high school and grammar school learn grammar, not only for the obvious reasons, but also because grammar can be fun. I am in frequent contact with many young people and it is clear that they have no notion of what used to be taught under the heading of "grammar." Their language is replete with "between you and I" and "I went down the road with Tom and he." If it is enjoyable as well as useful to parse a sentence (for example), shouldn't something be done about this special and apparently widespread deprivation?
- DAVID POLING: There are so many forces in opposition to clear and precise language: perhaps the age of multi-media and the expansion of the graphic arts is to blame. Alas, this boom has placed many in new positions of reporting and comment where they are unfamiliar with the written word and uneasy in a library. And some in creative writing are brilliant but lazy; their excellence of idea and imagination are punctured by poor grammar and the unwillingness to reach for a dictionary. But with this new usage dictionary there is hope.
- PETER S. PRESCOTT: There are areas where our language is disintegrating. I am quite serious when I say I am angry about this; as a writer I feel I have fewer tools with which to work. I wonder whether the increase in energy which our language has acquired in recent years (general acceptance of the vernacular in more formal modes of writing) is worth the loss of so many words of precision, such as *flout* and *disinterested*.
- F. D. REEVE: I've found that young people, minority groups, regional groups develop speech patterns to express their separateness and unity; that the schools teach only formal grammar, never usage; that consequently the responsiveness of language lies in colloquial speech, not in "standardized," falsely imitative pap of the schools and TV. To a trusted audience most people will speak readily and idiomatically, even "correctly," although they will insist that (because usage and grammatical norms do not go together for them) they cannot write. Indeed, what we need *any more*\* is not a Dictionary of Spelling (and you have to know how to spell it before you can find it) but a Dictionary of Usage.

\*"Any more" in the sense of "now" was one of the questions put to the usage panel of this book.

LEO ROSTEN: I, for one, find the options for oral English as against written English quite useful—indeed, invaluable. Let oral English be the proving ground on which some succeed and others are slaughtered. Much cant and kooky stuff from the 1960s has already been beaten back.

BERTON ROUECHÉ: It isn't slang that most threatens the well-being of our language, or even the violation of the accepted rules of grammar; it is the simple ignorance of the true meaning of words that is "presently" abroad among those too "disinterested" to care.

VERMONT ROYSTER: Looking back on the experience, I find that I frequently modified my instinctive purist's reaction when I forced myself to think about my actual usage. In some areas I found myself becoming increasingly tolerant of usages not found in dictionaries or grammars. For example, I am inclined to accept new and useful words—e.g., "staffer" instead of having to say "member of a staff," and even the transmutation of nouns into verbs or adjectives into adverbs when the resulting word fills a gap or avoids circumlocution. After all, we have long accepted the idea that a ship sails from port, even though it has no sails at all. We are indebted to slang and journalese for enriching the language in this way. The new coinages that fall by the wayside are those that fail. What I deplore is the debasement of the language, whether from violation of the simple and logical rules of grammar or from using a good, useful word wrongly. In both cases the fault is ignorance. In both cases the consequence is a breakdown in communication. Not only are all subtleties and shades of meaning lost, but in some cases there is actual misunderstanding between writer and reader. This occurs no matter whether it is the writer or the reader who is using the language wrongly.

HARRISON SALISBURY: The wonderful thing about language is that it is always changing and always growing.

DAVID SCHOENBRUN: I do not know how to arrest and correct the debasement of both written and spoken English except to take a vow not to contribute to the degradation myself. A great rabbi said centuries ago, "Perhaps I cannot change the world but I will try anyway and take care that the world not change me."

HAROLD SCHONBERG: New words make their way into the world. But improper grammar and incorrect usage are examples of intellectual sloppiness and must be fought. Language must be precise or it is not language.

DANIEL SCHORR: I accept the enrichment of language through change in the meanings of words through usage. But I do not accept simple confusion between words. *Flair*, as a bent or talent in some direction, sounds like but is not the same as *flare*, which is a matter of combustion. Let the language grow, but not get all mixed up.

ERICH SEGAL: Homer distinguished between winged and unwinged words. So should we. Dammit.

**ROBERT SHERRILL:** The really serious threat to our language comes from government functionaries and politicians who systematically use it to mislead and falsify. When a Kleindienst can avoid a perjury rap by slip-streaming a phrase or two, then people begin to think of language itself as being part of the sham. When they feel they cannot believe what they read or hear, then they will stop reading and stop listening, and that's when the language will start getting flabby indeed.

**WALTER W. "RED" SMITH:** In usage I accept what I have come to accept and reject what I don't accept. It is that subjective. In my lifetime, "hectic" has come to have newer meanings and this seems perfectly reasonable to me. But to make a verb of a noun like "gift" or "host" offends me to the soul. Why? Probably because these usages are newer than, say, "hectic" and because I'm older. In short, I rule from prejudice. Speaking as a curmudgeon, I insist that "presently" means "soon," rather than "at present," that "hopefully" means "in a manner full of hope" and not "I hope" or "they hope" or "it is to be hoped," and that "momentarily" means "for a moment," not "in a moment." That is, "briefly," not "soon."

**JEAN STAFFORD:** It is with passionate delight, and with sober responsibility, that I accept your invitation. On my back door there is a sign with large lettering which reads: THE WORD "HOPEFULLY" MUST NOT BE MISUSED ON THESE PREMISES. VIOLATORS WILL BE HUMILIATED. My friend and neighbor Berton Roueché and I several times a week on the telephone mourn the infusion of hogwash into the bloodstream of the American language: the tough and dandy darling is going into paresis. Do count on me as a dedicated physician who will even pay house calls in the middle of the night.

**ELVIS STAHR, JR.:** Contributing to this dictionary has been a special joy because of the sharing of panelists' comments. These I am sure will also delight many readers, and it is certainly encouraging to know that so many of the ablest users of words in our country react as I do to shoddy usages.

**REX STOUT:** Changes made by the genius and wit of the people are inevitable and often desirable and useful. Those imposed by ignorant clowns such as advertising copywriters and broadcasters are abominable and should be condemned by all lovers of language.

**FRANK SULLIVAN:** Some things grate on one, just as a personal reaction. Nothing would ever reconcile me to "like" as a conjunction, especially after those dreary television commercials. On "most unique" I always remember one time when I used it in something I wrote when on the *World* and that old precisionist, FPA, called me down. So I never made that mistake again. . . . "Contact" and all the nouns made into verbs, usually by Madison Avenue, grate on me, and so does the suffix "wise," also a contribution of the hucksters.