

eponym

catch 22



John Silverlight OF THE OBSERVER WORDS

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WORDS

JOHN SILVERLIGHT

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in association with
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WORDS

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Also by John Silverlight

**THE VICTORS' DILEMMA: ALLIED INTERVENTION IN THE
RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR**

INTRODUCTION

The seeds of this collection of articles were sown one day in the late 1960s by an articulated lorry roaring past my house. At first I merely felt irritation, then I wondered, why 'articulated'? 'Articulate', I thought, meant able to express oneself, but what did that have to do with this noisy great brute? The Shorter Oxford provided the answer. The verb 'articulate' did indeed mean to express oneself, but a much earlier sense was to attach by a joint: an articulated lorry was one with a joint. 'Articulate' was derived from an old root *ar-* : to join; so was the Latin *ars* : art or craft.

Some months earlier I had begun work on a book on the Allied intervention in the Russian civil war, a confused and confusing episode. It was not easy just to sort out in my own mind the main events and their consequences, let alone organise the material into a coherent, readable narrative – unlike most of the hundreds of books I was having to read, plus the mountains of official documents. The experience did not do much for life at home or at *The Observer*, but it taught me something about writing. As I worked on, more and more despairingly, it seemed that what I was trying to do was like nothing so much as a job of carpentry, or rather joinery: fitting bits together so that the joins were not noticeable or, if they did show, they were not too obvious.

So there I was, slogging away at 1919, not making much progress, when this lorry came thundering by, sending me to the dictionary – and to the discovery that my vaguely formulated thoughts about joining were absolutely right. That is what writing is about. The comparison still comforts me today, even if I don't find the job any easier, whether it is a 200 000-word book, a 2000-word article, or the 200-word or 300-word pieces collected here.

The opportunity to express the interest in words aroused that day came in 1979 when the Editor of *The Observer*, Donald Trelford, suggested that as part of a series of background articles I was doing on current events I might occasionally write about words – new, difficult, misused, whatever; one he had in mind

was 'parameter'. It took nearly two years, by which time 'Words' had become a regular feature in the paper, to work up the nerve to take it on.

One of the first pieces was on the confusion, thanks to their similar appearance, of 'deprecate' (from *de*, down or against, and *precari* to pray), to disapprove of, and 'depreciate' (from *de* and *pretium*, price), to belittle. Rather pleased with the little polemic I had knocked out, I showed the draft, over lunch at Antoine's in Charlotte Street, to Professor Randolph Quirk, then Quain Professor of English Literature and Language at University College, London, now Vice-Chancellor of London University.

'Very good, very good', he said. 'But if you'll forgive my saying so, you sound a bit like an Eastbourne colonel.' The two words, he said, share an area of 'semantic overlap', and then, very patiently, he explained how it had evolved. At first 'deprecate' meant ward off by prayer (the meaning of the Latin *deprecari*) and 'depreciate', decline in value; later the first took on the sense of protest against, and the second, cause decline in value; so to the not-so-different senses, to express disapproval of ('deprecate') and to disparage ('depreciate'). The piece, when it appeared in print, was a good deal less emphatic than the draft.

But although that lesson was as crucial as the discovery about 'articulate' and 'art', I still yearned, if less hotly, to say, 'This is correct; this, in contrast, is incorrect.' I owe my final cure of the itch for certainty to Dr Robert Burchfield, Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionaries. 'English grammar', he writes in *The Spoken Word: a BBC Guide*, 'is a complicated system never quite mastered by the best speakers of English. The best writers and speakers avoid grammatical solecisms by keeping clear of areas which contain problems that would reveal their own uncertainties.'

Even before that booklet was published, Dr Burchfield had explained to me how he saw his job of editing the Supplements to the Oxford English Dictionary. Like the great Sir James Murray and his fellow OED editors, he was recording the history of the English language; he was not telling people how to use that language. My own approach now became clear to me. I was never going to be (in Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien's phrase) a lord of lexicography, such as Professor Quirk or Dr Burchfield. What I could do was report on usage and its changes.

I am also much indebted to Professor A. C. Gimson, Emeritus Professor of Phonetics at University College, London. Faced with the opposite of unanimity among dictionaries about the

pronunciation of 'controversy' (*controversy* or *controvery*?), I consulted a lexicographer friend. 'Let's see what "Gimson" says', she replied. ' "Gimson"? 'Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary – A. C. Gimson's the editor.' That was my introduction to a book that has been invaluable – and to a person whose help has been equally so. Certainty, as I now know, is unattainable. Authority is rare, but if one looks hard enough it can be found. Professor Gimson has it. (As for 'controversy', both pronunciations are equally common.)

There are still more debts: to Mrs Lesley Burnett, who after working with Dr Burchfield on the OED Supplements is revising the Shorter Oxford; to Miss Valerie Adams, Lecturer in English at University College, London, and colleague of Professor Quirk in the English Language Survey there; to *Observer* colleagues, especially Trevor Grove; to my wife and two sons; most of all perhaps to readers of *The Observer*, who, almost from the start of the column, have been responding to it, favourably, unfavourably, always helpfully.

A word on presentation. The entries are in alphabetical order because it seemed a more helpful way of arranging them than in, say, subjects (I suspect many of them would defy categorization) or the order in which they appeared. However, they remain journalism. They were undertaken seriously in the hope that they would inform and entertain, not in order to instruct: this book is in no sense a would-be dictionary or 'guide'. It is a collection of articles, some fairly timeless but many of them reflecting what was happening when they were written – the Falklands fighting, for instance. So, rather than try to edit out such expressions as 'last week', 'last month', 'recently', etc., the entries have been dated. It can be taken that undated material was added by the author while the collection was being prepared for book form.

ACID RAIN. The Rev. C. F. Warren, of Machen, near Newport, says he has heard that this expression was first used in 1872. Geoffrey Lean, *The Observer's* Science Correspondent, agrees: the chemist Robert Angus Smith coined it in his book *Air and Rain* published in that year, claiming that the acid air in Manchester bleached fabrics and acid rain damaged vegetation.

Scientists say 'acid rain' is an oversimplification: acid is carried in rain, gases and in clouds and fog. But the term is powerfully evocative and there is no easy alternative. A possibility, says Mr Lean, is 'acid fallout'.

16 OCTOBER 1983

ACUMEN. Browsing in a book on words by the American columnist William Safire, *On Language* (published in the US), I was surprised to read that while most people prefer the pronunciation *acumen*, *acumen* 'is preferred by lexicographers'. Surely not, I thought, and went to my dictionaries. Collins and Longman showed *acumen* first, as I expected. However, the Concise Oxford and the American Webster's showed only *acumen*. Worse still, Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary showed *acumen* as the preferred pronunciation.

Someone I think of as embodying the people on whom Daniel Jones based the first (1917) edition of the Everyman dictionary – Southern English families 'whose menfolk were educated at the great public boarding schools' – said, 'I would never dream of saying it that way.' Another woman, less well educated but with an instinct for pronunciation, said, 'I wouldn't know what you meant if you said *acumen*.' Recently (see PRONUNCIATION) I wrote that in an uncertain world 'Gimson' – Professor A. C. Gimson is the dictionary's present editor – 'is a great comfort.' He is, but I am worried about this one. So, I gather, is he, even to the extent of considering revising the entry in the next edition.

6 SEPTEMBER 1981

AMELIORATION. Some twenty years ago I was proud to describe myself as permissive. Now, thanks to the word's 'worsening' in meaning (see PEJORATION), as in 'permissive society', I would hesitate to do so. Brooding on these matters, I had the feeling that pejoration was more common than the opposite process, amelioration. An English don persuaded me that this was indeed only a feeling. Here are three examples of amelioration. 'Fond', in its first OED definition, is 'insipid': 'If the salt be fonnyd it is not worthy' – Wycliffe, 1388. 'Nice' is 'foolish, stupid, senseless'. 'Shrewd' is 'depraved, wicked, malignant'.

Jean Aitchison, of the London School of Economics, writes in her paperback *Language Change: Progress or Decay* (Fontana) that 'there is no evidence that language is either progressing or decaying. Disruption and therapy seem to balance one another in a perpetual stalemate.' Quite. As I have come to feel more and more strongly: change, yes; decay, no.

(Caxton, Jean Aitchison writes, held the moon responsible for change. 'And certaynly our langage now vused varyeth ferre from that which was vused and spoken whan I was borne. For we englysshe men ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone, which is neuer stedfaste but euer wauerynge one season and dycreaseth another season.'))

5 JUNE 1982

ANIMALS (and judges). Why do so many magistrates and judges describe violence as animal-like behaviour? When some youths appeared in a Brighton court after August Bank Holiday disturbances, the chairman said to one of them: 'You behave like animals, you must expect to be herded like animals.' Whatever the youth did, if he was guilty of unprovoked violence, he was not acting like most animals: practically the only species that attacks its own kind without provocation is Man.

Even more offensive is the judge who tells a man convicted of rape that he has behaved like an animal. Again, males of practically every species except ours approach females only when they have unmistakably signalled that they are ready for mating.

20 SEPTEMBER 1981

ANIMALS (unusual). Sandbach's Dictionary of Astonishing British Animals is the latest title in a series of 'micro-tomelets' (the word was coined by the *Times Literary Supplement* some years ago) published by J. L. Carr. Entries include:

'**Dick Whittington's Cat** is portrayed on the cover of this book [in a print of Whittington], indisputable proof that his tale is true.'

'**Charles Kingsley's Wasp**, saved by the author from drowning, afterwards lived in a cleft in his dressing room wall.'

'**Ronald**, having led and, astonishingly, survived the Charge of the Light Brigade . . . was put to pasture quite close to this publisher's office [in Kettering]. His head and tail may be seen . . . during the summer months.'

'**Wessex**, d. 1927, a rough-haired terrier, having bitten several eminent literary critics, was rewarded by Florence Hardy with an expensive wireless set.'

The author, Mr R. G. E. Sandbach, is a retired museum curator.

There are errors. A dog (Lyon) is mentioned as having been 'present at Lord Byron's death at the Battle of Missolonghi (1824)'. Byron died of a fever that year in besieged Missolonghi during the Greek War of Independence; the battle – when the Greeks tried unsuccessfully to break out – took place in 1825. And in the entry on Barnum's elephant Jumbo I was sorry not to see the jingle, 'Jumbo said to Alice, "I love you";/Alice said to Jumbo, "I don't believe you do./If you really loved me, as you say you do,/You wouldn't go to Yankeeland/And leave me in the Zoo." '

But these are minor faults. The book is a tiny treasure, just right for, say, the birthday of one of those awkward friends who have everything.

21 AUGUST 1983

APPEASEMENT. 'We have also had to struggle against the appeasers of the Foreign Office' – *Daily Mail*, 5 June. 'This insidious minefield of compromise and appeasement' – *Daily Mail*, 15 June. No doubt about it: 'appeasement' is a thoroughly dirty word, has been ever since Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich on 30 September 1938. It was not always so. In

1929 J. M. Keynes wrote approvingly of Winston Churchill as an 'ardent . . . advocate of . . . appeasement . . . in Germany, in Ireland, in Turkey'. Just a decade later the *New Statesman* was writing of 'proposals that smell of appeasement' (both examples from Volume I of *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*).

Writing about PEJORATION and AMELIORATION (see entries) I had the impression that both processes were arbitrary. A closer look at examples in the OED has made me think again: 'The iuste goddis neuer appease theyr yres [ires, angers] against vniuste men' (1534). Here I detect a note of disparagement. That note is even stronger in Johnson's 'to appease enmity by blandishment and bribes' (1750). I now think that words that undergo pejoration or amelioration have within them from the start the potential for such change. Predestination?

4 JULY 1982

ARGENTINE/-IAN. In line three of its admirable 'Portrait of the Week' the current *Spectator* refers to 'Argentinian forces', in line seven to 'the Argentine navy', in line 22 to the 'Argentinian fleet', and in line 34 to 'Argentinian insistence'. Overpage Ferdinand Mount refers eleven times to 'Argentinian' or 'Argentines', once to 'Anglo-Argentine negotiations' and once to 'Anglo-Argentinian projects'. Final score in the whole issue: '-ian' 15, '-ine' 9, 'Argie' 1.

The *Spectator* is one of our more literate journals, but as a weekly it has time to polish its prose. Dailies and evenings, with four or five hours between going to press and starting work, can be forgiven for the occasional slip. Loyal to *The Observer* though I am, I would not bet on its consistency.

There is no doubt as to which is 'correct'. The country calls itself *Republica Argentina* – in English, Argentine Republic, less formally the Argentine or Argentina. Logically-minded folk insist that since the word 'Argentine' is an adjective, to call its people 'Argentines' is like saying 'Germanians'. But usage notoriously defies logic, and the useful Oxford Dictionary for Writer and Editors says that 'Argentinian' is tending to replace 'Argentine'. Dining with friends two nights ago I went round the table asking which they used. Six said '-ian'; one (whose

mother tongue is Hungarian) said '-ine'. The dictionary could be right.

25 APRIL 1982

ASHES. A hundred years ago today Australia for the first time beat England (by seven runs) in a test match on English soil. On 2 September the *Sporting Times* carried a notice, 'In affectionate remembrance of English Cricket which died at The Oval, 29th August 1882 . . . The body will be cremated and the Ashes taken to Australia.'

All that is generally known. Less so perhaps, at least to non-cricket fans, is the fact that real ashes do exist. They came into being, says Wisden, in 1883 when England won the series and 'some Melbourne women burnt a bail used in the third game' and presented the ashes, in an urn, to the England captain. They are now kept permanently at Lord's. (That explains why the Concise Oxford has changed its definition of 'the Ashes'. The sixth edition (1976) had 'imaginary trophy for winner of series of test matches between England and Australia'. In the seventh edition, which came out last month, 'imaginary' has been deleted.)

For years people have been arguing about what was in the urn — the remains of a bail? a stump? a bat? Even a jock-strap has been suggested (were jock-straps worn in the early 1880s?). An article in the August issue of *The Cricketer* said it was a ball. And on Friday, in the latest issue of the magazine, a letter said the urn was accidentally knocked over some years before it went to Lord's; the contents were replaced by ordinary wood-ash.

29 AUGUST 1982

AS/LIKE. When I was young, say in my early teens, I was not too clear about such things as conjunctions (e.g. 'as') and prepositions (e.g. 'like'), but I was highly, intolerantly, aware of the difference between those two words. One said (if one were impolite enough), 'He eats like a pig', or, 'He eats as a pig eats.' One did not say, 'He eats like a pig eats.'

To some people interchanging the two words is still

anathema. I am not so sure, though it does jar on me. Four dictionaries accept 'like' as a conjunction, two with slight reservations: the Concise Oxford describes it as 'colloq.' and the Longmans Dictionary of Contemporary English as 'infml'; Collins has no reservation; nor has the American Webster's New Collegiate, which quotes Keats: 'They raven down scenery like children do sweetmeats.'

That doughtiest of rearguard fighters, Kingsley Amis, commenting on the Concise Oxford example, 'cannot do it like you do', agreed that he would probably not *say* 'as you do'. But saying it, he insisted, was not writing it.

1 FEBRUARY 1981

AUTHOR. Sir James Goldsmith's offer of £50 000 for 'the best investigative journalism into subversion in the media' has predictably aroused controversy. I am concerned not with the merits or otherwise of the offer but with the wording of the announcement. In his letter to *The Times* on 16 September Sir James wrote: 'The journalist Peter Shipley . . . authored a document in which he described extremist and revolutionary groups in Britain and the funding of their publications.'

Leave aside the use of 'author' as a verb (it does appear as such in dictionaries although it is particularly unhappy here). What worries me is 'document': 'a piece of paper, booklet etc., providing information, esp. of an official or legal nature' (Collins). Webster's definition of the verb 'to document' includes, 'To equip statements with exact references to authoritative supporting information.'

A journalist documents an article by citing the documents on which his arguments or assertions are based — Mr Shipley does so with a 'List of References' on the back page of his pamphlet. The journalist does not himself write (or author) the documents.

27 SEPTEMBER 1981

AUTHORESS. In 1815 Jane Austen wrote to the Domestic Chaplain to the Prince of Wales, 'I think I may boast myself . . . the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress.' In 1885, however, in its article on

the word, the OED noted that it was used 'only when sex is purposely emphasised'. Otherwise, and especially in the sense of 'female literary composer', 'author' was used of both sexes. Indeed, the suffix '-ess' was already then going out generally for words denoting profession or occupation.

Some '-ess' words survive, including, surprisingly, 'authoress': twice in the *Spectator* and once in *The Observer* in the past few months. But there are fewer and fewer of them; among those that have disappeared are 'doctress' and 'editress'. One that is usually cited as being 'necessary' is 'actress'. Many women in the theatre prefer 'actor', and Anthony Powell, in *The Strangers All Are Gone*, the fourth volume of his memoirs, describes the word as 'slightly suspect'. I asked him why. It goes back to his youth. His parents would use the word 'actressy' of someone they disapproved of; a tart in the dock would often say she was 'an actress'.

Mr Powell would not condemn '-ess' words in general and he quoted 'Queen and huntress, chaste and fair.' Of course; one would not rewrite Ben Jonson. But that apart, when are such words necessary? Dame Elizabeth Frink, asked about the word 'sculptress', said roundly that it was used 'only by the ignorant'. I once used the expression 'life peeress' when talking to Lady Wootton about an article she was writing for *The Observer*. Women in the Upper House, she said gently but firmly, are life peers.

6 FEBRUARY 1984

M. Grant Cormack, of Belfast, dislikes 'poetess' even more than 'authoress'. She writes that a woman poet she knew 'used to quote wryly: "The poet and the poetess/The little more – the little less."' Of seven desk dictionaries I have just looked at, only one, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (which is primarily aimed at foreign students) notes that 'poetess' is 'now rare'.

13 FEBRUARY 1983

AZANIA is the imaginary African country of Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief*. I have just learnt that it is also the name for

South Africa used by the Black Consciousness Movement (brainchild of the late Steve Biko) and its white sympathisers such as Nadine Gordimer.

29 MAY 1983

Ramsgate, Kent

DEAR SIR, *The Name 'Azania' was not invented by Evelyn Waugh. He must have taken it from the name by which Greco-Roman geographers and merchants knew the area of East Africa open to western trade: roughly the modern Tanzania. See, for example, J. Innes Miller, The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire, pp. 163–8.*

Yours sincerely

J. D. RENWICK

BALL. A potent word and one with an astonishing range of meanings, especially slang. Entries in Eric Partridge's Dictionary of Slang include: 'having a ball' for having a really good time; 'on the ball' as a description of someone who is alert and efficient; 'ball of fire' which, in the nineteenth century, meant a glass of brandy but now means 'a notably energetic and effectual person (usually male), often sarcastically in negative'.

There are less delicate uses: 'to balls something up', US 'to ball up' (more recently 'to ball' in the US also has the sense 'to have sexual intercourse', 'usually considered vulgar', says Webster's Collegiate); 'balls to you' (which a French dictionary of English slang published in the 1920s translates as '*zut pour vous*'). 'Balls' in this sense, like the diminutive 'bollocks', is described in dictionaries as 'taboo slang' or 'vulg'. But for centuries 'ballocks' (the original spelling) was standard English for testicles. The Oxford English Dictionary quotes John Wycliffe, 'All beeste that . . . kitte [cut] and taken away the ballokes is' (1382). It was still respectable when Queen Victoria was on the throne. (In the eighteenth century, according to Grose's Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue, first published in 1785, 'ballocks' also meant a parson. Partridge, quoting Arthur Bryant's book on Pepys, *Saviour of the Navy*, says this sense 'may be at least a century older, for in 1684 the Officer

Commanding the Straits Fleet always referred to his chaplain as Ballocks'.)

Less delicate still is the ribald Second World War song, to the tune of 'Colonel Bogey':

Hitler has only got one ball,
Goering has two but very small,
Himmler's got something sim'lar,
And poor old Goebbels
[pronunciation adjusted for emphasis and rhyme]
has no balls at all.

However, when describing the word as potent I was not thinking of mere ribaldry. Rather I had in mind Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', with its gorgeous implicit but vibrant sexuality:

Let us roll all our Strength and all
Our sweetness up into one Ball.

It is nice to think that one result of our having a ball could be that widows and orphans of former colleagues have more of a ball than they might otherwise have had.

Written for the 1982 Press Ball organised by the City of
London branch of the National Union of Journalists.

BIEN PENSANT. Is this the new fashionable term of abuse? It appeared on successive days last month in *The Times* and *The Listener*. In the first, Bernard Levin wrote about 'one of the most influential *bien-pensants* behind the Labour Party's educational policies', who said during a television discussion that 'he didn't know what the word "excellent" meant'. In *The Listener*, the historian John Roberts, reviewing Hugh Thomas's *An Unfinished History of the World*, wrote '*Bien-pensant* progressives would not approve. A story which culminates in a recognition of the primacy of place that any liberal must accord the United States, warts and all, risks rejection before it is read.'

The expression is not easy to translate. It began as an ironic description of an important part of the French bourgeoisie, especially in the provinces, as seen by French intellectuals: rigidly Roman Catholic in religion and right-wing in politics,