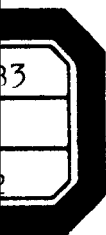


English Usage

A guide to first principles

Walter Nash



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A guide to first principles

Walter Nash

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It is not the acquisition of any one thing
that is able to adorn,
or the incidental quality that occurs
as a concomitant of something well said,
that we value in style,
but the principle that is hid . . .

– Marianne Moore, 'To a Snail'

It were good therefore that men in their innovations would
follow the example of time itself, which indeed innovateth
greatly, but quietly and by degrees scarce to be
perceived . . .

– Francis Bacon, 'Of Innovations'

General editor's preface

Simply a list of some of the questions implied by the phrase *Language, Education and Society* gives an immediate idea of the complexity, and also the fascination, of the area.

How is language related to learning? Or to intelligence? How should a teacher react to non-standard dialect in the classroom? Do regional and social accents and dialects matter? What is meant by standard English? Does it make sense to talk of 'declining standards' in language or in education? Or to talk of some children's language as 'restricted'? Do immigrant children require special language provision? How can their native languages be used as a valuable resource in schools? Can 'literacy' be equated with 'education'? Why are there so many adult illiterates in Britain and the USA? What effect has growing up with no easy access to language: for example, because a child is profoundly deaf? Why is there so much prejudice against people whose language background is odd in some way: because they are handicapped, or speak a non-standard dialect or foreign language? Why do linguistic differences lead to political violence, in Belgium, India, Wales and other parts of the world?

These are all real questions, of the kind which worry parents, teachers and policy-makers, and the answer to them is complex and not at all obvious. It is such questions that authors in this series will discuss.

Language plays a central part in education. This is probably generally agreed, but there is considerable debate and confusion about the exact relationship between language and learning. Even though the importance of language is generally recognized, we still have a lot to learn about how language is related either to educational success or to intelligence and

thinking. Language is also a central fact in everyone's social life. People's attitudes and most deeply held beliefs are at stake, for it is through language that personal and social identities are maintained and recognized. People are judged, whether justly or not, by the language they speak.

Language, education and society is therefore an area where scholars have a responsibility to write clearly and persuasively, in order to communicate the best in recent research to as wide an audience as possible. This means not only other researchers, but also all those who are involved in educational, social and political policy-making, from individual teachers to government. It is an area where value judgments cannot be avoided. Any action that we take – or, of course, avoidance of action – has moral, social and political consequences. It is vital, therefore, that practice is informed by the best knowledge available, and that decisions affecting the futures of individual children or whole social groups are not taken merely on the basis of the all too widespread folk myths about language in society.

Linguistics, psychology and sociology are often rejected by non-specialists as jargon-ridden; or regarded as fascinating, but of no relevance to educational or social practice. But this is superficial and short-sighted: we are dealing with complex issues, which require an understanding of the general principles involved. It is bad theory to make statements about language in use which cannot be related to educational and social reality. But it is equally unsound to base beliefs and action on anecdote, received myths and unsystematic or idiosyncratic observations.

All knowledge is value-laden: it suggests action and changes our beliefs. Change is difficult and slow, but possible nevertheless. When language in education and society is seriously and systematically studied, it becomes clear how awesomely complex is the linguistic and social knowledge of all children and adults. And with such an understanding, it becomes impossible to maintain a position of linguistic prejudice and intolerance. This may be the most important implication of a serious study of language, in our linguistically diverse modern world.

Walter Nash's book tackles an important topic for this series:

Preface

I once had the notion of calling this book a guide *for the time being*; the phrase actually remains in its final sentence, the fossil of a discarded intention. 'For the time being' was to be read in a double sense. I supposed, in the first place, that serious students of usage and style might find the book helpful as a first step towards more advanced studies; and in the second place I wished to acknowledge my own limitations – as indeed I still do. For the time being, these chapters represent all that I can usefully say on a very complex topic.

During the course of composition, I became aware of a third sense lurking in this key phrase. As I consulted various Usages published during the last eighty years, it struck me that books of this kind may be called political acts, to the extent that they appeal to a favoured, socially stable class of right-thinking people, whose assumptions they both inform and confirm. Because their authors have seldom if ever recognized openly the social implications of their work, Usages have become almost an artificial genre, handing down their encapsulated dogmas, losing touch with usage and users, losing touch with time, stiffly ignoring the need for the social philosophy of language which should irradiate such books. I say *should*; alas, I cannot claim to have supplied the defect on my own behalf, or to have done more than indicate (notably in my final chapter) an awareness of what is generally wrong with this species of text. I should like to attempt a new kind of Usage; but for the time being, I have composed one along more or less traditional lines.

At the outset, I proposed to write a very short text comprising a few basic prescriptions for written usage. The model proposed to me (but not by my present editor and

publisher) was W. Strunk and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*. This undertaking, the remains of which can be traced in my Chapter 3, confirmed for me what I already knew about the limitations of the *prescriptive*. I began to expand the scope of the book by essaying a broadly *descriptive* text, which could easily have run into several exhaustive (or exhausting) volumes. Signs of this effort are apparent in Chapter 2, an attempt to review the principal resources of English grammar in relationship to questions of style. At length it became clear to me that the aim of a work of this kind should be neither *prescriptive* nor ambitiously *descriptive*, but *constructive*; that is, that I should try to demonstrate and discuss helpfully the stylistic choices available to the user of English. This discussion, contained for the most part in Chapters 4 and 5, relates mainly to problems of written English. A final stage in composition I have already mentioned; in my Chapters 1 and 6 – the framing chapters of the work – I raise questions of usage in the general context of language and society. Chapter 6 in particular may appear to be severely critical of some venerated authorities. I must therefore insist that it is by no means my intention to be destructive (whoever writes about language lives in a glass house), but only to suggest that we should question conventional wisdoms, even to the extent of thoroughly revising our ideas of how problems of usage should be propounded and solved.

This description of the book's progress through stages of composition may suggest a haphazard and planless growth. I naturally hope that reading will dispel any such impression. An argument is developed from chapter to chapter, and is supported as fully as possible by illustrations. Some of these are of my own invention; some are taken from newspapers and journals (the source is in all cases acknowledged); and in one or two instances, wishing to indicate how 'usage' touches the extremes of casual colloquy and literary art, I have used passages of fiction or expository prose. I am sure that in developing my theme I have overlooked matters which many readers will think I should have treated; and I am equally sure that in many places I have sinned against principles of sound usage, even against principles I have myself endorsed. This is the destiny of all who dare to tell language what to do. We are apprenticed to fallibility.

In Chapters 1–5, quotations from literary and other works are furnished with details in full of title and author. In Chapter 6, where continual reference is made to a number of books on usage, I have adopted a system of abbreviated reference, by letter and number, which is clarified in the prefatory note to the Bibliography. The latter is a brief list of books on usage, style, rhetoric, and related matters. Some of these works are discussed in my text; others are listed, with brief annotations, for their potential value to students of this subject.

It only remains to thank those who have helped me to bring this book into being. My greatest debt is certainly to Michael Stubbs, a shrewdly perceptive and mercifully patient editor. I owe Ronald Carter my thanks for his tactful encouragement, particularly at a time when I was inclined to put the work aside as an irredeemable miscalculation; and for their kindness in reading and commenting invaluable on an early draft of the manuscript, I must express my appreciation to Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short. These were the sponsors of my work; and theirs will be a great measure of the credit if, on going out into the world, it makes friends.

Note to paperback edition

Since the first issue of my book, a new edition of Sir Ernest Gowers' *The Complete Plain Words* has appeared. I would have wished to alter the page-references in my Chapter 6, to fit this excellently revised text. Some editorial deletions and changes of wording, however, have made a simple adjustment impracticable. Accordingly the text cited by me remains that of the 2nd edition, by Sir Bruce Fraser.

(Gowers, Sir Ernest, *The Complete Plain Words*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 3rd edn, revised by Sidney Greenbaum and Janet Whitcut, 1986.)

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The usage trap

'This boy calls the knaves jacks.'

– Estella, in Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

Reactions still triggered off by the sound of a vowel, the cut of a coat, the turn of a phrase. . . Once imbued with such reactions it is impossible to escape them; I know that until the day I die I shall be unable to escape noticing 'raound' for 'round', 'invoalve' for 'involve' (on that one an Army officer of my acquaintance used to turn down candidates for a commission).

– Diana Athill, *Instead of a Letter*

CONDITIONAL CLAUSES have always caused trouble to the semi-educated and the demi-reflective; to the illiterate they give no trouble at all. Most well-educated and well-speaking persons have little difficulty.

– Eric Partridge, *Usage and Abusage*

And so the upstart is put in his place, ambition is repressed, the meritorious sheep are distinguished from the barely deserving goats. How disagreeable these pronouncements are, and how embarrassing! – for few will read without a pang of misgiving the quotations that head this chapter. We are all inclined to judge others by their language, but we like to suppose that our comments are strictly fair and reasonable; the suspicion that in some matters we might be every bit as snobbish, reactionary, or pedantic as the worst of our authoritarian neighbours is disconcerting. But are these crude acts of discrimination inevitable? Or can we, recognizing in ourselves the only-human habit of being right, learn to tem-

per our dislikes, to make honestly reasoned observations, to counter prejudice with constructive argument? That question represents the theme of this book. We are to consider problems of usage and principles of style, but above all else we must try to understand how language is at our creative disposal; and how only by exploring its resources do we begin to free ourselves from the *usage trap*, that prescriptive snare that disables and confines the rule-giver as effectively as it intimidates the ruled.

1 Speaking and writing

Let us first look at a commonly received idea: that speaking is a debased activity, necessarily inferior to writing. This belief was firmly held in the eighteenth century, a time when men of letters were anxious to see the language 'fixed' in secure, correct, and durable forms. Here, for instance, is Dr Johnson on the theme of conversation versus composition:

A transition from an author's books to his conversation is too often like an entrance into a large city, after a distant prospect. Remotely, we see nothing but spires of temples, and turrets of palaces, and imagine it to be the residence of splendour, grandeur, and magnificence; but, when we have passed the gates, we find it perplexed with narrow passages, disgraced with despicable cottages, embarrassed with obstructions and clouded with smoke.

(*The Rambler*, no 14, 5 May 1750)

The imagery of architecture (making language the 'edifice' of thought) typifies the classical view of composition. Nouns of large compass (*splendour, grandeur, magnificence*) suggest the scope of creative design in writing; participles denoting merely human predicaments (*perplexed, disgraced, embarrassed*) criticize the muddle of speech. Order and permanence are the virtues Johnson has in prospect, and he sees them in well-tutored, well-housed Composition, not in semi-educated, alley-dwelling Conversation.

The gross unfairness of this is that the image is allowed to dictate the terms of the argument. All that Johnson is really saying is that if you really have time to plan and style, to

consider its structure and refine its style; whereas when he enters into conversation he must do the best he can to meet the demands of the fleeting moment, and act his part in situations which he cannot wholly control. This does not mean that speech is a form of linguistic jerrybuilding. It implies that there are techniques of writing and somewhat different techniques of speaking – different, but nonetheless governed by ascertainable principles. The notion of principle and technique in spoken language, however, is alien to the authoritarian spirit. Does not the very etymology of the word *grammar* – *grammatikē tekhnē* – denote ‘the art of letters’? There is a rooted belief that if speech has any design, any resemblance to a style, it is by derivation from writing. The progression suggested in the *Rambler* passage is significant. A move is made from books to conversation, measuring the inadequacies of speech by the fixed standard of writing; not from conversation to books, discovering the peculiar features in which writing must differ from speech.

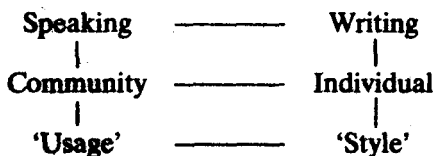
Such attitudes, long ingrained, encourage the assumption that in speech and conversation a style is hardly possible, or is available only in the form of a deliberate bookishness. Whenever criteria of acceptability or ‘correctness’ are applied to speech, it is seldom with the primary aim of promoting communication and effective discourse; nearly always, the object is *social* acceptability, the correct behaviour of a class, a coterie, a generation. The effect of this is stultifying. If you dissociate the study of speech from its proper connection with the study of creativeness in language, you allow it to become a mere adjunct of genteel nurture, like etiquette or discreet tailoring. You make a word a blow to self-esteem; you let a man’s vowels decide whether he is fit to hold a commission.

At the same time you complicate the difficulties of written language, because to affirm the status of writing as a higher thing than speech, an exacting craft, a linguistic attainment beyond the scope of the ‘semi-educated’ and the ‘demi-reflective’, you must burden it with delicate rules and quasi-regulations. You may decide, for instance, that sentences ought not to begin with *and* (this book begins and ends with such sentences); or that *tolerant* is ‘incorrect’, an aberration from *tolerant of*; that *whilst* is obsolete; that *when . . . ever* (as in *When did Americans ever flinch from the truth?*) is a mis-use

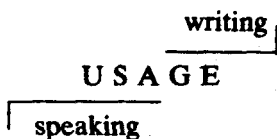
of *whenever*; that *such a(n)*, as in *He was criticized for inventing such an unbelievable character*, is a dubious idiom, the preferred construction being *He was criticized for inventing so unbelievable a character*, or *for inventing a character so unbelievable*. These examples, all but one taken from a reputable manual, typify the prescriptive spirit that makes the usage trap. The rule-giver becomes inordinately sensitive to vagaries of expression; he seeks out deviations that allegedly impair communication or reflect imprecision of thought. But it is rare for such pronouncements to be truly relevant to an efficient use of language. They are often like superstitions, to be observed for fear of incurring the penalty of some nameless curse. They do little to support the would-be writer; on the contrary, they complicate the problems of putting pen to paper.

2 Usage and style

To contrast speaking with writing is to imply other oppositions: of the community, negotiating *usage* through collaborative exchanges, and the individual, self-communing, shaping a *style* in isolation. First thoughts on the subject suggest these correlations:



But this is faulty in at least one respect, its restriction of *usage* to *speaking*. *Usage* surely means the consensus of practice in using language, whether in conversation or composition; it is a notion that embraces both modes of verbal activity, implying complementation rather than contrast:



Spoken idiom is adopted into writing through the naturalizing agency of correspondence, of newspapers, of advertisements, of all kinds of public communication; while in its turn writing influences many varieties of speech. As users of the language we learn to assess current conditions. Our judgments tell us that a particular expression is appropriate to speech, but perhaps not to writing; or to informal communication but not to formal exchanges; or that it belongs to writing rather than to speech; or that it is acceptable in writing and speech alike.

These judgments are related to a view of the individual and the community. The personality is not, after all, so mechanically constructed that we can firmly distinguish the effects and products of 'individual' experience from those of 'communal' interactions. The roles of private being and social being overlap. Then from this commerce of individual with community, and from the complementation of written usage and spoken usage, *styles* emerge; styles of creative individuals, writing, in isolation from their fellows, yet always conscious of community, interaction, speech; style of socially effective speakers, in company, bound to the passing moment, improvising, yet aware of individuality, of design, of linguistic resources drawn from the practice of writing. Modes of writing and speaking are subject to change. Usage changes continually, and irresistibly, though we may think all change is for the worse; and with changes in usage come gradual modifications in style and in views of style. Samuel Johnson, a classical writer with a *hankering* for lapidary permanence in language, knew about linguistic change, recognized the futility of trying to prevent it, and expressed his insight in a much-quoted sentence: 'To enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are alike the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desire by its strength.' The warning stands, for all writers on usage to heed.

3 Language on the move

One very good reason for not huffing *proscriptions* and puffing *prescriptions* is that time and chance are liable to blow your house down. Swift angrily dismissed *nowadays* as a piece of modish cant; but nowadays everyone says *nowadays* (apart

from wretches who prefer to say *at this moment in time*). Reading Eric Partridge's strictures on the expression *present-day* (which, in 1947, he condemned as an 'unnecessary synonym' for *present* or *contemporary*), I reflect a little sheepishly on my own tetchy resistance to our telecasters' *modern-day*, which seems to me abominable usurper of good old honest *present-day*. Time rings in the new words – rings in *nowadays*, rings in *modern-day*, rings in *telecaster*; and is not to be reasoned with. Dr Johnson was right; you cannot fetter a phrase, or manacle a manner of speaking.

There are changes in language which are readily understood, and which allow of scholarly explanations. With a little knowledge of phonetics and articulatory processes, we can interpret some changes in pronunciation. Acquaintance with the system of grammar, as a way of representing modes of perception and cognition, may help us to account for certain changes in syntax; we can see how similar constructions are confused, how one grammatical pattern develops analogously from another, how the struggle to express distinct perceptions leads to the creation or modification of syntactic resources. Our vocabulary, too, is demonstrably the product of cultural and psychological rulings. Scholars can show us how the meanings of words are changed or extended, how new words are brought into being, how one word usurps another, how there is such economy in language that no two words in living use can have exactly the same value.

All such changes – documented, classified, studied in the light of linguistic principle, psychological motive, historical fact – can be related to some sort of unifying hypothesis. They suggest a science, or at least a plausibly reflective account, of language on the move, in its slow budgings and re-alignings. But some usages are too close to us, too intimately bound up with personal experience, too fragmentary, too *complex* in being so close and so brokenly perceived, for us to be able to relate them to anything as cool and scientific as a hypothesis. They hardly enter into our experience as knowledge; they are more appropriately compared with gossip.

4 The gossip of change

Consider, for a digressive page or two, some personal examples of this 'gossip' of change. My father always called the knaves *jacks*; but my mother, who had been a domestic servant in a well-to-do household, never called them anything other than *knaves*. Moreover, she consistently referred to *court cards*, whereas my father said *face cards* (much to her amusement). They both pronounced the word *advertisement* with the accent on the third syllable, and stressed *controversy* on the second. My father pronounced *launch* and *staunch* to rhyme with southern British English *ranch*, having acquired the habit, I always supposed, from the naval personnel he met during the course of his work in a shipyard; if taxed or teased about it, he would reply that he was speaking the King's English – the king in question being George V.

Whenever my mother *laid*, or my father *set*, the table, they would put out *serviettes*. My mother, whose formal education ended at the age of eight, regularly mismanaged certain constructions, notably the relative clause: *I was going to pay the coalman last Saturday, which I might say he didn't come, so I couldn't*. My father, who left his grammar school at the age of twelve, could deftly negotiate all hazards of syntax, and had been instructed with such punitive rigour that he never, to the best of my remembrance, made a spelling error. My mother's use of language was vivid and original. She invented words to compensate for her occasional want of standard dictionary items (*teapotliddous* = 'vapid', 'inane'; *tittybotlous* = 'infantile', 'pusillanimous'); made frequent use of robust if somewhat opaque similes (*daft as a wagon horse*; *black as Dick's hatband*); and had a blunt way with bleak facts (*he's about ready for his box and another clean shirt'll do him both* = 'he will soon be dead'). My father liked 'fine' words (never a *beginning* if an *inception* could be arranged), and, when moved, dearly loved a literary turn of phrase (habitually referring to the graveyard, for example, as *our last resting place*).

On the rare occasions when I play cards, I refer to the *jack* either as a *court card* or as a *face card*. *Knave* is for me a 'literary' word, to be used humorously or parodically (playing-card knaves go with *looking glasses* and *drawing*