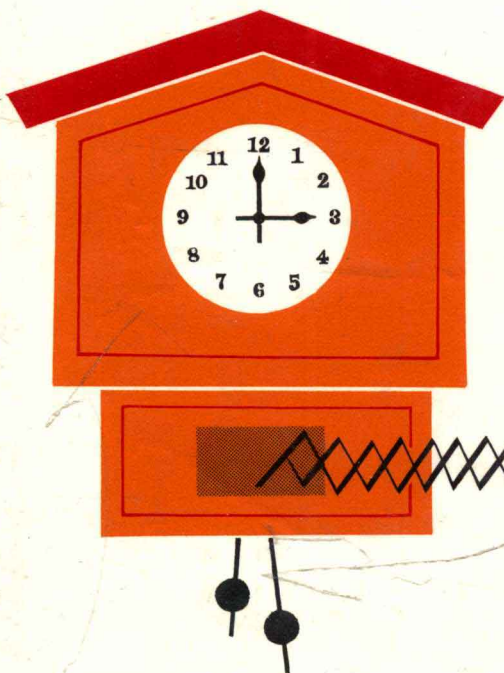


PHILIP HOWARD



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JUNK BOND
ARGY

A WORD IN TIME

A WORD IN TIME

Philip Howard

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
JED

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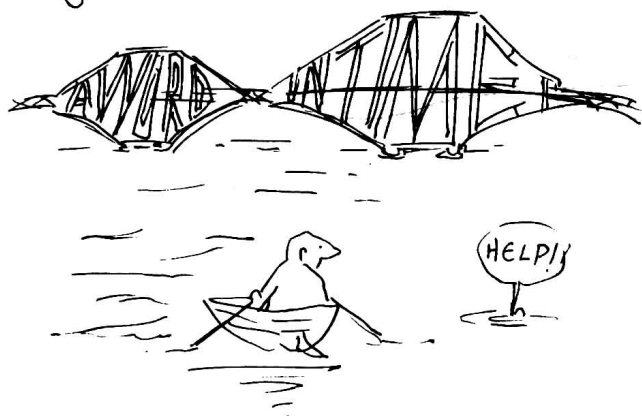
For the English Muse

*Multa novis verbis praesertim cum sit agendum
propter egestatem linguae et rerum novitatem.*

(Especially since we often have to use new words because of the poverty of the language and the novelty of our topics.)

Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, I, 138–9

INTRODUCTION



LANGUAGE IS THE only full democracy. It is open for anybody who wants to use or abuse it. No two people use English in exactly the same way. A person's idiolect is his or her individual linguistic system, which differs in some details and idiosyncrasies from those of all other speakers and writers of the same language. We can recognize the handwriting, or the lisp, or the turn of phrase of someone we love out of all the other millions of hands, and lisps, and idioms in the world. So we all have a voice in making and changing the English of our times. Of course, in this democracy of Babel, some people have louder voices than others. Poets, imaginative writers, bestselling authors, pop singers and other cult figures, broadcasters of all media, politicians, celebrities and such cattle have more influence on the language than mute

inglorious Miltons, because their words are more widely broadcast. Modern communications spread the word faster than ever before, drum it in more repeatedly and emphatically than ever before, and so change it faster than ever before.

Some people, like the Prince of Wales, feel threatened by the change in their language, as they read and hear the verities they were taught at school eroded and ignored by the rising generations. But language has to change continually, to meet the new needs of the new world and the new inhabitants of the world. To resist linguistic change is as doomed to failure as the exemplary effort of the Prince of Wales's ancestor, Canute, to stop the tide coming in at Westminster – or was it Southampton? It is more profitable to observe the change, to lie back and enjoy it, and if possible to steer it in a helpful rather than an unhelpful direction.

Observing the changing language is as endless a job as painting the Forth Bridge. The proverb is something musty (*Hamlet* – Shakespeare was an obsessive word-watcher and word-innovator) in a concealed quotation, which is part of the changing face of English. That Forth Bridge in the cliché is now a hundred years old, and no longer a wonder of the newspaper-reading world, having been replaced in celebrity by the road bridge opened in 1964. And, in any case, the twenty-eight men employed by British Rail continually to paint the cantilever railway bridge of 1890 do not start at one end and work their way across to the other, and then go back and start again. They go at it piecemeal, attacking the places that look most in need of a touch of paint.

As soon as the Forth Bridge is painted, it starts to rust or wear out, or whatever painted bridges do. As soon as English is observed, in a dictionary or a book like this, it just carries on changing, making the book out of date. The early letters in the second edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, some of which have not been revised since 1884, are now grotesquely out of date.

Nevertheless, we must look at the language. It is our most precious common possession. And this is a good time to look at it, as we rush, chattering and scribbling and 'destroying' the language towards the second millennium Anno Domini (or, if you prefer, of the Common Era): one of the topics in this book is the small but knotty problem of dating. *A Word In Time* is a serious (but not solemn) survey of the state of English at the end of the twentieth century. It covers the field from spelling to uneducated new pronunciation, and from grammar to the etymology of new slang. It asks which of the new words of the Nineties are going to find a permanent place in the language, and which are going to fade away like mayflies: thumbs up for 'bimbo', thumbs down for 'Thatcherism'. It examines the changing grammar of tiny words such as 'a' and 'on', and the semantic reasons for describing a flower as a 'non-edible vegetable' in Eurojargon. It deals with big matters such as the divergence between American and British and all the other Englishes, and small matters such as the change in semantics and idiom that makes a rude double entendre out of Parson Woodforde's diary for January 9, 1765: 'Mr Bridges Priest Vicar of the Cathedral at Wells called upon me this afternoon. I took him with me up to Mr Clarke's where we supped and spent the evening. Mr Bridges made himself very disagreeable to all the Company and exposed himself much.' Is the notion that you must never split an infinitive as old-fashioned as the notion that you should never strike a lady? And should we be calling her a lady in the first place, before we strike her, anyway?

As the diplomats say, in another phrase that is showing its age, it is a *tour d'horizon* of English as it is today. It takes the robust view that we live in exciting linguistic times, but that our language is evolving for the new world of the Twenty-Ones, or whatever we decide to call the next century, rather than decaying. Some of the chapters and themes first appeared as warning-shots in my 'New Words for Old' column in *The Times*, and have been expanded,

corrected, improved and enlarged with the magic new ingredients from the correspondence they provoked. Readers of *The Times* are still keen word-watchers. Many of them have become friends as well as arguers and mentors. I salute all such good friends and wordsmiths, in particular: Denis Baron, Paul Beale, Peter Brown, Henry Button, Robert Burchfield, Bert Canning, Frank Collieson, Gay Firth, Roy Fuller, Peter Glare, Patrick Hanks, John Harris, David Hunt, Peter Jones, Bernard Levin, Edwin Newman, Edward Quinn, Anthony Quinton, Randolph Quirk, Isabel Raphael, Cormac Rigby, Alan Ross, J. M. Ross, William Safire, Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson, John Sykes, Laurence Urdang, David West, and Laurie Weston.

CONTENTS

	Introduction	ix
1	The Past Perfect	1
2	Nineties Neology	8
3	Lingo	15
4	Time Warps	25
5	Pronunciation	31
6	Spelling	38
7	AmerEnglish Splits	43
8	Split Infinitives	49
9	Punctuation	56
10	Apostrophe	60
11	Gaspers and Screechers	69
12	Hyphens and Accents	74
13	Plural Puzzles	82
14	Cumulative Nos	88
15	Articles	94
16	I and Me	99
17	Prepositions	104
18	Sandboy	110
19	Wooden Spoons and Old Blues	115
20	Parrot	120
21	BC-AD	126
22	Gentleman	131
23	Liberal	136
24	Personal Names	141
25	Public Names	149

A WORD IN TIME

26	Argy-Bargy	155
27	Bimbo	160
28	Word Changes	166
29	Picking the Right Word	172
30	Wicked, Bloody, Devilish	178
31	Word Games	183
32	Colours	190
33	Blue	198
34	Janus Words	205
35	Fornication	213
36	Lily-White Boys	219
37	Slang	225
38	Doublets	231
39	New Words for Old	237
40	Nouns of Assembly	243
41	Fashion Words	247
42	Modern Proverbs	255
43	New Jargon	261

1

THE PAST PERFECT

Delusions of Grammar

The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it. It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him.

Pygmalion, preface, 1912, by George Bernard Shaw

WHEN, IN HIS latest populist tirade at the end of 1989, the Prince of Wales complained about the 'dismal wasteland' of modern English, he was talking unhistorical and Old-fogeyish rubbish. His is not a new grumble. People have been whingeing that the English language is going to the dogs, and that the young are no longer taught to speak or write proper, ever since English has been written down. When you consider how in its history English has changed from being a fully inflected language, losing almost all its declensions, conjugations, and comparisons, the dual voice, and many other fine grammatical inflexions, it is remarkable how little anxiety that English is somehow decaying or even dying has found its way into the records.

Our original Anglo-Saxon language-fathers were illiterate pirates when they waded ashore in Kent and Essex in the fifth century. But they already had rune-masters who kept the alphabet and other sacred traditions of the tribe. No record survives, but the existence of rune-masters implies that they were there to preserve the status quo of

language, and tick off the young for making a dismal wasteland of traditional English.

King Alfred the Great asserted that English was taught bloody badly in his preface to his translation (the first into English) of Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis* (before AD 896). A copy was sent to each bishop, with a view to the spiritual and linguistic improvement of the clergy. Much of the rest of Alfred's *œuvre* is devoted to repairing 'the decay of learning' in England, indicating that his grasp of how language works was almost as shaky as that of his descendant, the Prince of Wales. In 1066 the Norman Conquest transformed the English language as well as the English kingdom. For nearly three hundred years Norman French was the official language, and French literature was dominant in Europe. In their settlements the peasant Anglo-Saxons still spoke their regional varieties of English, but for official business of law or feudal duty or government, they had to use French. You can see English going to the dogs in the texts, for example with the introduction of the Romance *qu-* to replace the Old English *cw-*. No doubt Old English Fogeys of the period regarded this as a horrendous solecism, though interestingly no trace of their horror survives.

Printing, personified by Caxton (c. 1422–91), opened the gates of English to more mischievous foreign influences, sending it farther to *les chiens*. The Renaissance, a time of linguistic as well as cultural and religious ferment, took two opposing attitudes to the decay of English. On the one hand innovators such as Sir Thomas Elyot (1499–1546) tried to save English from what they described as 'barbarousness' by introducing 'eloquent' new foreign words from the Classics and the Continent. On the other hand conservative scholars such as Sir John Cheke (1514–57) rejected what they described as 'inkhorn' terms, and urged a return to the 'pure currency' of native English words. You can see the contemporary argument being dramatized in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Shakespeare, wonderful wordsmith, always on the lookout for a plot or a theme, made the best of both

sides in his contemporary war of the words. Nobody used more, or stranger, or more un-English words (33,000 compared with Racine's spare vocabulary of 2,000). Nobody could use the common Old English monosyllables to greater effect.

Dryden took the side that English was going to the dogs. In his dedication of *The Rival Ladies*, 1664, he wrote: 'I have endeavor'd to write English as near as I could distinguish it from the tóngue of pedants and that of affected travellers. Only I am sorry that (speaking so noble a language as we do) we have not a more certain measure for it, as they have in France, where they have an Academy erected for that purpose.' Jonathan Swift was also an 'English is going to the dogs' grumbler. In 1712 he published his *Proposal For Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, putting forward numerous misguided suggestions in the continual quest for the fool's gold, of 'ways to fix it for ever'. It is a perennial delusion that it is possible or desirable to fix English for ever. Each new generation naturally needs to change it to suit its new needs. The only 'fixed' languages are described as dead, because nobody uses them for everyday purposes any more.

Samuel Johnson started as a going-to-the-dogs fixer, and was spacious-minded enough to recognize his delusion. In *The Rambler* of March 14, 1752, he was a fixer and purifier: 'I have laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations.' One of the principal reasons for which he started his *Dictionary* was to stop the decay of English once and for all; but he came to recognize that decay is a daft metaphor for a living language: 'If the changes that we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as with the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure.' Because it is such a mongrel language from all the dogs that bark around the world, English more than any other language is full of barbarism, colloquialism, licentious

idiom, and irregular combinations. The characteristic sound of English down the centuries is cacophony and uproar. As Shakespeare recognized, the thing to do is to make use of the novelties and barbarisms that express your purpose. Those that are found useless or ugly or boring by the democracy of English speakers and writers are going to drop out of the language anyway.

The great Victorian educators saw their function as instilling cold baths, Christianity, cricket, and 'correct' grammar. Thomas Arnold (1795-1842), the hidden hero of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*: 'As for rioting, the old Roman way of dealing with that is always the right one; flog the rank and file, and fling the ringleaders from the Tarpeian Rock.' Other eminent Victorians saw the advantages of the flexibility of English. That wild and endearing genius, Samuel Taylor Coleridge: 'It may be doubted whether a composite language like the English is not a happier instrument or expression than a homogeneous one like the German. We possess a wonderful richness and variety of modified meanings in our Saxon and Latin quasi-synonyms, which the Germans have not.' By now American English was becoming dominant in the growth of English, by sheer weight of numbers. Contrary to the snobbish and insular fears of the fixers, this is a great strength, not a weakness. Walt Whitman took the point in his *Slang in America*, published in 1885: 'View'd freely, the English language is the accretion and growth of every dialect, race and range of time, and is both the free and compacted composition of all.'

The argument about whether or not English is going to the dogs has been around for donkey's years. For centuries atrabilious Robespierres have been calling for the return of 'correct' grammar, spelling, and (if they were Dr Arnold) the birch for offenders against either. It is worth asking these gloomy pseudo-grammarians when exactly, pray, was this golden age of grammar. When were the vintage years of English syntax? They always turn out to have been when those who think English is going to the dogs were at

school themselves, being taught 'correct' English grammar, and (if they went to the sort of private schools to which the Prince of Wales went) being whacked when they got it wrong. The rules of grammar are so fundamentally impressed upon them that they can still feel the sting in frosty weather. It is significant that these grumblers about the decay of the English language are all white, almost all men, almost all middle-class and (in the United Kingdom) privately educated, and all middle-aged, temperamentally if not temporally. They find themselves surrounded by new ideas, new culture, new books, new art, new language, new and younger rivals, and a new world they find threatening. The only thing they feel qualified to pontificate about is the English language. But when they say that English is going to the dogs or decaying, and that the young do not use it properly any more, and that the new words are ugly and the new grammar simply wrong, they are transferring their general *Angst* by displacement to the only common target that belongs to everybody who uses it: the language. Their problem is not the death of English, but what is described (in a shocking new metaphor) as the male menopause.

At one of the Prince of Wales's old schools, we were taught English grammar on strict lines derived from Latin grammar (conditional and final clauses, subjunctives, and so on) and interminable spelling bees of impossible words. It was quite fun for those of us who were good at it. I can still spell *diarrhoea* and *eschscholtzia* (better with the t, though it is sometimes omitted, to preserve the name of the German botanist and nomenclator who gave the Californian poppy his name in 1821) without pausing for thought. No doubt this is a remarkable talent. But it is a useless one, because this is the first time I have had to spell those words for years. It is simply not true that English is being used less well than it was a generation ago. We may not have a first division poet at present, but those are rare birds who come not in battalions, but single spies, and when the spirit moves. But more poetry, and

more varied and intelligent poetry, is being published in English than ever before. Ten times as many books are being published as were published a generation ago. Although most of them are a great waste of trees, in some categories (general fiction, genre fiction, school and university textbooks, biographies, children's books) the quality of the language seems vastly improved (which simply means that it is more appropriate to our age).

The cure for nostalgic admiration for the English of the past is to read it. A generation ago the general quality of tabloid pop newspapers was absurdly genteel, written by shop assistants for shop assistants as the snobbish Press Baron observed, impossible to read today without a snigger or a shudder. (We have reacted too far from their gentility, so that today the pop tabloids seem to be written by sex-crazed lager louts for sex-crazed lager louts.) Even in such a minor literary and oratorical form as royal speeches, the standard of the English has improved greatly, so that the British royals actually talk like real people sometimes, and even dare to imitate popular radio shows.

It is simply not true that the young are using English less well than they used to. They are just using it differently. A generation ago in darkest Suffolk and elsewhere, adult illiteracy was widespread. Most children left school at fourteen, just about able to read and recite by rote well-loved passages of the Bible and English literature, and went straight onto the land or into the factory or shop.

What happened was that a generation saw the world and got some education during the Second World War. After the war there was a necessary reaction against the absurdly narrow and élitist teaching of English grammar, spelling, and literature, as though the only respectable kind of English was what is described as the Queen's English (oddly, since the Royal Family have not been in the least literary since George IV, or possibly Charles II), as pronounced and written in the better boarding schools and older universities, and in middle-class homes in the south-eastern corner of England.

As always with necessary reactions, some enthusiasts for change went too far in the opposite direction, throwing out basic grammar and spelling in favour of a sloppy, let-it-all-hang-out self-expression for children. Anything that anybody said or wrote was deemed as 'correct' as anything else. This is not true. Of course there is a lot of slop, and cliché, and obfuscation, and illiteracy, and incoherence around. There always has been, dear Prince. The cure for supposing that our ordinary forefathers used English better than we do is to read them. Usually only the writings of good writers survive. But there are substantial records of ordinary men and women speaking preserved, for example from the time of the English Revolution in the Putney Debates; and pretty sorry, ungrammatical stuff it is.

What we need now is a sensible middle of the road between the absurd old Victorian rigours that treated English grammar like square-bashing on the parade ground (if you passed out in your final parade of grammar and pronunciation, you had worked your way into the middle class), and the new encouragement of children to express themselves, building on the grammar and vocabulary of past generations, but finding their new language for the Nineties. That is the way that language works, and has always worked. The English language itself is just fine. Reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated.