

THE
KING'S ENGLISH

BY

H. W. FOWLER *and* F. G. FOWLER

Compilers of THE CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF
CURRENT ENGLISH

*No levell'd malice
Infects one comma in the course I hold.*

TIMON OF ATHENS, I. i. 48.

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PREFACE

THE compilers of this book would be wanting in courtesy if they did not expressly say what might otherwise be safely left to the reader's discernment: the frequent appearance in it of any author's or newspaper's name does not mean that that author or newspaper offends more often than others against rules of grammar or style; it merely shows that they have been among the necessarily limited number chosen to collect instances from.

The plan of the book was dictated by the following considerations. It is notorious that English writers seldom look into a grammar or composition book; the reading of grammars is repellent because, being bound to be exhaustive on a greater or less scale, they must give much space to the obvious or the unnecessary; and composition books are often useless because they enforce their warnings only by fabricated blunders against which every tiro feels himself quite safe. The principle adopted here has therefore been (1) to pass by all rules, of whatever absolute importance, that are shown by observation to be seldom or never broken; and (2) to illustrate by living examples, with the name of a reputable authority attached to each, all blunders that observation shows to be common. The reader, however, who is led to suspect that the only method followed has been the rejection of method will find, it is hoped, a practical security against inconvenience in the very full Index.

Further, since the positive literary virtues are not to be taught by brief quotation, nor otherwise attained than by improving the gifts of nature with wide or careful reading, whereas something may really be done for the negative virtues by mere exhibition of what should be avoided, the examples collected have had to be examples of the bad and not of the good. To this it must be added that a considerable proportion of the newspaper extracts are, as is sometimes apparent, not from the editorial, but from the correspondence columns; the names attached are merely an assurance that the passages have actually appeared in print, and not been now invented to point a moral.

The especial thanks of the compilers are offered to Dr Bradley, joint editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, who has been good enough to inspect the proof-sheets, and whose many valuable suggestions have led to the removal of some too unqualified statements,

some confused exposition, and some positive mistakes. It is due to him, however, to say that his warnings have now and then been disregarded, when it seemed that brevity or some other advantage could be secured without great risk of misunderstanding.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* itself has been of much service. On all questions of vocabulary, even if so slightly handled as in the first chapter of this book, that great work is now indispensable.

H. W. F. F. G. F.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

IN this edition new examples have been added or substituted here and there.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

AT the end of a quarter century, during which the sales of our book have maintained a yearly average of nearly two thousand copies, I am bound, in presenting a third edition, to thank the public for so unexpected a continuance of favour. To authors so didactic as ourselves, however, a greater joy than that of surviving a quarter century would be any evidence of having proved persuasive. But such evidence is extremely difficult to find, or to rely upon when found. It has sometimes seemed to us, and to me since my brother's death, that some of the conspicuous solecisms once familiar no longer met our eyes daily in the newspapers. Could it be that we had contributed to their rarity? or was the rarity imaginary, and was the truth merely that we had ceased to be on the watch? I do not know; but a glimmer of hope has made the present revision, with occasional notes and changes, an agreeable task.

H. W. F.

September, 1930.

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CHAPTER I VOCABULARY

GENERAL

ANY one who wishes to become a good writer should endeavour, before he allows himself to be tempted by the more showy qualities, to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid.

This general principle may be translated into practical rules in the domain of vocabulary as follows:—

Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched.

Prefer the concrete word to the abstract.

Prefer the single word to the circumlocution.

Prefer the short word to the long.

Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance.¹

These rules are given roughly in order of merit; the last is also the least. It is true that it is often given alone, as a sort of compendium of all the others. In some sense it is that: the writer whose percentage of Saxon words is high will generally be found to have fewer words that are out of the way, long, or abstract, and fewer periphrases, than another; and conversely. But if, instead of his Saxon percentage's being the natural and undesigned consequence of his brevity (and the rest), those other qualities have been attained by his consciously restricting himself to Saxon, his pains will have been worse than wasted; the taint of preciosity will be over all he has written. Observing that *translate* is derived from Latin, and learning that the Elizabethans had another word for it, he will pull us up by *englishing*

¹ The Romance languages are those whose grammatical structure, as well as part at least of their vocabulary, is directly descended from Latin—as Italian, French, Spanish. Under Romance words we include all that English has borrowed from Latin either directly or through the Romance languages. And words borrowed from Greek in general use, ranging from *alms* to *metempsychosis*, may for the purposes of this chapter be considered as Romance. The vast number of purely scientific Greek words, as *oxygen*, *meningitis*, are on a different footing, since they are usually the only words for what they denote.

his quotations; he will puzzle the general reader by introducing his book with a *foreword*. Such freaks should be left to the Germans, who have by this time succeeded in expelling as aliens a great many words that were good enough for Goethe. And they, indeed, are very likely right, because their language is a thoroughbred one; ours is not, and can now never be, anything but a hybrid; *foreword* is (or may be) Saxon; we can find out in the dictionary whether it is or not; but *preface* is English, dictionary or no dictionary; and we want to write English, not Saxon. Add to this that, even if the Saxon criterion were a safe one, more knowledge than most of us have is needed to apply it. Few who were not deep in philology would be prepared to state that no word in the following list (extracted from the preface to the *Oxford Dictionary*) is English:—*battle, beast, beauty, beef, bill, blue, bonnet, border, boss, bound, bowl, brace, brave, bribe, bruise, brush, butt, button*. Dr Murray observes that these 'are now no less "native", and no less important constituents of our vocabulary, than the Teutonic words'.

There are, moreover, innumerable pairs of synonyms about which the Saxon principle gives us no help. The first to hand are *ere* and *before* (both Saxon), *save* and *except* (both Romance), *anent* and *about* (both Saxon again). Here, if the 'Saxon' rule has nothing to say, the 'familiar' rule leaves no doubt. The intelligent reader whom our writer has to consider will possibly not know the linguistic facts; indeed he more likely than not takes *save* for a Saxon word. But he does know the reflections that the words, if he happens to be reading leisurely enough for reflection, excite in him. As he comes to *save*, he wonders, Why not *except*? At sight of *ere* he is irresistibly reminded of that sad spectacle, a mechanic wearing his Sunday clothes on a weekday. And *anent*, to continue the simile, is nothing less than a masquerade costume. The *Oxford Dictionary* says drily of the last word: 'Common in Scotch law phraseology, and affected by many English writers'; it might have gone further, and said '“affected” in any English writer'; such things are antiquarian rubbish, Wardour-Street English. Why not (as our imagined

intelligent reader asked)—why not *before*, *except*, and *about*? Bread is the staff of life, and words like these, which are common and are not vulgar, which are good enough for the highest and not too good for the lowest, are the staple of literature. The first thing a writer must learn is, that he is not to reject them unless he can show good cause. *Before* and *except*, it must be clearly understood, have such a prescriptive right that to use other words instead is not merely not to choose these, it is to reject them. It may be done in poetry, and in the sort of prose that is half poetry: to do it elsewhere is to insult *before*, to injure *ere* (which is a delicate flower that will lose its quality if much handled), and to make one's sentence both pretentious and frigid.

It is now perhaps clear that the Saxon oracle is not infallible; it will sometimes be dumb, and sometimes lie. Nevertheless, it is not without its uses as a test. The words to be chosen are those that the probable reader is sure to understand without waste of time and thought; a good proportion of them will in fact be Saxon, but mainly because it happens that most abstract words—which are by our second rule to be avoided—are Romance. The truth is that all five rules would be often found to give the same answer about the same word or set of words. Scores of illustrations might be produced; let one suffice: *In the contemplated eventualty* (a phrase no worse than what any one can pick for himself out of his paper's leading article for the day) is at once the far-fetched, the abstract, the periphrastic, the long, and the Romance, for *if so*. It does not very greatly matter by which of the five roads the natural is reached instead of the monstrosity, so long as it *is* reached. The five are indicated because (1) they differ in directness, and (2) in any given case only one of them may be possible.

We will now proceed to a few examples of how not to write, roughly classified under the five headings, though, after what has been said, it will cause no surprise that most of them might be placed differently. Some sort of correction is suggested for each, but the reader will indulgently remember that to correct a bad sentence satisfactorily is not always possible; it should never

have existed, that is all that can be said. In particular, sentences overloaded with abstract words are, in the nature of things, not curable simply by substituting equivalent concrete words; there can be no such equivalents; the structure has to be more or less changed.

1. Prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched.

The old Imperial naval policy, which has failed conspicuously because it *antagonized the unalterable supremacy of Colonial nationalism*.—*Times*.

(stood in the way of that national ambition which must always be uppermost in the Colonial mind)

Buttercups made a sunlight of their own, and in the shelter of scattered coppices the pale *wind-flowers* still dreamed in whiteness.—E. F. BENSON.

We all know what an *anemone* is: whether we know what a *wind-flower* is, unless we happen to be Greek scholars, is quite doubtful.

The state of Poland, and the excesses committed by mobilized troops, have been of a far more serious nature than has been allowed to *transpire*.—*Times*. (come out)

Reform converses with possibilities, *perchance* with impossibilities; but here is sacred fact.—EMERSON. (perhaps)

Tanners and users are strongly of opinion that there is no room for further enhancement, but on that point there is always room for doubt, especially when the *export phase* is taken into consideration.—*Times*.

(state of the export trade)

Witchcraft has been put a stop to by Act of Parliament; but the mysterious relations which it *emblemized* still continue.—CARLYLE. (symbolized)

It will only have itself to thank if future disaster rewards its *nescience* of the conditions of successful warfare.—*Outlook*. (ignorance)

Continual vigilance is imperative on the public to ensure . . .—*Times*. (We must be ever on the watch)

These manœuvres are by no means new, and *their recrudescence is hardly calculated to influence the development of events*.—*Times*. (the present use of them is not likely to be effective)

'I have no particular business at L——', said he; 'I was merely going *thither* to pass a day or two.'—BORROW. (there)

2. **Prefer the concrete word** (or rather expression) to the abstract. It may be here remarked that abstract expression and the excessive use of nouns are almost the same thing. The cure consists very much, therefore, in the clearing away of noun rubbish.

The general poverty of explanation as to the diction of particular phrases seemed to point in the same direction.—Cambridge University Reporter.

(It was perhaps owing to this also that the diction of particular phrases was often so badly explained)

An elementary condition of a sound discussion is a frank recognition of the gulf severing two sets of facts.—Times.

(There can be no sound discussion where the gulf severing two sets of facts is not frankly recognized)

The signs of the times point to the necessity of the modification of the system of administration.—Times.

(It is becoming clear that the administrative system must be modified)

No year passes now without evidence of the truth of the statement that the work of government is becoming increasingly difficult.—Spectator.

(Every year shows again how true it is that . . .)

The first private conference relating to the question of the convocation of representatives of the nation took place yesterday.—Times.

(on national representation)

There seems to have been an absence of attempt at conciliation between rival sects.—Daily Telegraph.

(The sects seem never even to have tried mutual conciliation)

Zeal, however, must not outrun discretion in changing abstract to concrete. *Officer* is concrete, and *office* abstract; but we do not *promote to officers*, as in the following quotation, but to *offices*—or, with more exactness in this context, to *commissions*.

Over 1,150 cadets of the Military Colleges were *promoted to officers* at the Palace of Tsarskoe Selo yesterday.—*Times*.

3. **Prefer the single word** to the circumlocution. As the word *case* seems to lend itself particularly to abuse, we start with more than one specimen of it.

Inaccuracies were *in many cases* due to cramped methods of writing.—*Cambridge University Reporter*. (often)

The handwriting was on the whole good, with a few examples of remarkably fine penmanship *in the case both of boys and girls.*—*Cambridge University Reporter.* (by both boys . . .)

Few candidates showed a thorough knowledge of the text of 1 Kings, and *in many cases the answers* lacked care.—*Ibid.* (many answers)

The matter will remain in abeyance until the Bishop has had time to become more fully acquainted with the diocese, and to ascertain which part of the city will be most desirable for *residential purposes.*—*Times.* (his residence)

M. Witte is *taking active measures for the prompt preparation of material for the study of the question of the execution of the Imperial Ukase dealing with reforms.*—*Times.*

(actively collecting all information that may be needed before the Tsar's reform Ukase can be executed)

The Russian Government is at last face to face with the greatest crisis of the war, *in the shape of the fact that* the Siberian railway is no longer capable . . .—*Spectator.* (for) or (:)

Mr. J—— O—— *has been made the recipient of a silver medal.*—*Guernsey Advertiser.* (received)

4. Prefer the short word to the long.

One of the most important reforms mentioned in the rescript is *the unification of the organization of the judicial institutions and the guarantee for all the tribunals of the independence necessary for securing to all classes of the community equality before the law.*—*Times.*

(is that of the Courts, which need a uniform system, and the independence without which it is impossible for all men to be equal before the law)

I merely desired to point out *the principal reason which I believe exists for the great exaggeration which is occasionally to be observed in the estimate of the importance of the contradiction between current Religion and current Science put forward by thinkers of reputation.*—BALFOUR.

(why, in my opinion, some well-known thinkers make out the contradiction between current Religion and current Science to be so much more important than it is)

Sir,—Will you permit me to *homologate* all you say to-day regarding that selfish minority of motorists who . . .—*Times.* (agree with)

On the Berlin Bourse to-day the prospect of a general strike was *sheerfully envisaged.*—*Times.* (faced)

5. Prefer the Saxon word to the Romance.

Despite the unfavourable climatic conditions.—*Guernsey Advertiser.*
(Bad as the weather has been)