



CHINA SHOP

Pedants' Corner

George Orwell maintained that one of the keys to good writing was to delete any phrase or sentence of which you are particularly proud. Personally I have my own rule, which is to delete any phrase or sentence which I could imagine Stuart Littlemore saying with a raised eyebrow. However, much though it grieves me to admit it, Orwell definitely had a point about the English language.

Although he abhorred the use of jargon, and no doubt would have balked at the use of the verb 'to impact upon', Orwell wasn't very much concerned with the debate over 'correct grammar', Americanisms and standard English, which are still the stuff of most dispute over language. Clarity of meaning, he thought, was everything, which I suppose means that he wouldn't have got too upset, as some people seem to, about greengrocers advertising 'watermelon's', although he might have drawn the line at the sign in my local milkbar which offers 'Shtzals' (schnitzels, presumably, although I've never dared order one).

It's hard to sympathise wholeheartedly with the traditionalists on this issue, especially those, like the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Alan Petersen, who denounce any attempts to eliminate sexist language. But if there's one thing more irritating than a pedant, it's someone who doesn't know the difference be-

tween 'its' and 'it's'. The freethinkers who proclaim the primacy of common usage over 'correctness', grammar, spelling and even meaning, share "the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes" as Orwell put it.

These are the sort of people who will accept any barbarism on the grounds that the struggle against new words and usages is not only futile, but reactionary and even historically inaccurate. They not only don't know the difference between 'alternate' and 'alternative' or 'imply' and 'infer', they don't think it matters. If you wince at a word like 'workstation', they are liable to point out that it was first recorded in the works of Jonathan Swift in 1753. They take immense pleasure in the fact that Shakespeare spelled his name in a variety of different ways. As an excuse for bad spelling (or no spelling) this has always seemed to me equivalent to justifying violence in films like *Terminator II* by saying, "well, of course, Gloucester had his eye gouged out in *King Lear*".

Newspapers haven't quite fallen so low as to abandon all pretensions to consistency yet, but perhaps more importantly, they wilfully spread the virus of banality which Orwell identified. "Prose", he said, "consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house". He would surely recognise this tendency in headlines such as: 'Next, the Mother of All Level Playing Field-Led Recoveries We Had to Have'. Or paragraphs which begin: 'The reality is that *One Nation*, far from kick-starting the banana republic economy, has failed to fast-track the microeconomic reform we need to become the clever country'. As one English journalist put it so succinctly a couple of years ago, "we are taught to avoid cliches like the plague".

If cliches spread with alarming speed (almost, you might say, like wildfire), the same is no less true of various stylistic devices. My pet hate over the last few months has been the number of sentences starting with "As well...". Word seems to have gone round the *Sydney Morning Herald* in particular, that to write "As well, the Prime Minister said...", instead of "The Prime Minister also said..." is modern, snappy style. But maybe I'm just an old fuddy-duddy.

There is one small problem with all this pedantic pontificating, which is that Orwell originally wrote his essay (*Politics and the English Language*) in 1946. If things were getting so much worse then, and still appear to be on the downward path now, you would think that the written word was no longer capable of communicating the simplest of messages. In the same way that people have always said that the streets were safer at night 20 years ago, so the perceived decline in the written word is passed on from generation to generation. You can imagine groups of religious scholars clustered round the first copies of the bible to roll off Caxton's press, gloomily shaking their heads and muttering that "it's not like it was in the old days".

Orwell thought that language decay was a symptom as well as a cause of intellectual laziness, which would be curable by rigorous discipline on the part of writers, although often his remedies (like cutting out all the enjoyable bits) sound more like self-flagellation. Nevertheless, I can't help but agree with him, even if it means making dubious alliances with the pedants and traditionalists in what is, after all, 'Australia's leading progressive magazine'. But then maybe Orwell was right too, when he said that 'progressive' is a word "used in most cases more or less dishonestly". If progress means putting apostrophes where they were never meant to go, then leave me out of it.

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