

## Reviews

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Bryson, Bill. *The Penguin Dictionary of Troublesome Words*. Penguin Books. 192 pages. Paperback.

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The trouble about books that offer guidance on English usage at a popular level is that they are likely to be read least by those who need them most. Still, the mere fact that this book has gone into a second edition is encouraging.

Bill Bryson is an American who has worked in Britain for more than ten years and is now assistant home editor of the *Independent*, probably the most highly regarded of Britain's 'quality' newspapers. He is a man of good sense, with a practical approach and a commendably lucid style. He preaches the gospel according to 'British' English.

For the most part he steers his way successfully between the traditionalists on the one hand and the libertarians on the other.

Like Robert Burchfield, chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionaries, in his admirable handbook for BBC writers and speakers, he often advises readers to avoid usages, however defensible, if they are widely scorned by educated persons.

Craven counsel? Capitulation to pedantry? Maybe; but it is, after all, the task of writers, particularly journalists, to communicate effectively, not to parade their up-to-dateness.

Bryson concedes, for example, that there is a clear shift towards treating *data* as singular and that it will probably be unrecognisable as a plural within a generation. 'I vote for the plural,' he writes, 'but until a consensus emerges you are probably better advised to keep plural, at least in formal writing.' In contrast, though on the same principle, he recommends *graffito* where the plural form, *graffiti*, has, for practical purposes, almost replaced it.

He endorses the view of *The American Heritage Dictionary* that the looser use of *hopefully* (as in 'Hopefully we shall be there by nightfall') is grammatically justified by analogy to similar uses of *happily* and *mercifully*, but that it is now 'such a bugbear to traditionalists that it is better avoided on grounds of civility, if not logic'.

Bryson is perhaps at his best in identifying superfluous words: *sell off*; *slow down*; *plan ahead*; *temporary respite*; *weather conditions* (as favoured by the SABC); and the *true facts*. To these he might have added the current addiction of South African journalists and broadcasters, *patently obvious*.

The main defect of this book is that it lacks the comprehensiveness that could reasonably be expected of a publication that calls itself a dictionary. A list of omissions would be long and tedious; but one that will cause surprise among journalists of the older generation is what Fowler might have called a 'sturdy indefensible', *Rev Jones*, still indefensible but now sturdier than ever. Does Bryson believe the battle to be so totally lost that there is no longer any point in raising the question?

For this reviewer, no catalogue of *taaloggas* - to use the vivid Afrikaans word - is complete without *may* instead of *might* (Hitler may have invaded Britain in 1940); *willy-nilly* used as though it meant *haphazardly*; *the drugs traffic* (are we soon to have a *shares market, liquors stores and toys-cupboards?*); *As much as I like him* instead of *Much as I like him*; and *with the result being* instead of *the result being* or *with the result*.

This edition is described on the cover as 'expanded'. If there are to be any further expansions they could be usefully applied to widening the range of topics, even if this means shortening some of the rather long, if quite enjoyable, dissertations on tricky points.

James McClurg

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Jones, Leo and Kimbrough, Victoria. *Great Ideas*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.

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Leo Jones and Victoria Kimbrough have come up with some great ideas for teaching listening and speaking skills. Their package consists of a teacher's manual, a student's activity book and a tape cassette, which, taken as a whole, constitute a course on English communication.

The Jones and Kimbrough approach is firmly student-orientated. The purpose of the exercises in the student's handbook is to stimulate real conversation, and many of these activities encourage students to get to know one another better by asking questions, issuing instructions, initiating telephone calls and discussing personal tasks. Because most of the activities require students to