

OUR LANGUAGE

ANGUS ROSE



'Our Language' comprises a series of articles written by Mr Angus Rose for publication in **The Natal Witness** during the past year and a half. The articles reflect Mr Rose's lively interest and expertise in the English language - qualities that he exercises to the full not only in his capacity as Editor of English-language publications at Shuter & Shooter (Pty) Ltd in Pietermaritzburg, but also as regional convenor of the Pietermaritzburg and District panel of 'Grammarphone'. ('Grammarphone' is a telephonic service instituted by the English Academy of South Africa in 1984 to answer queries from members of the public on matters pertaining to the use of English.)* Mr Rose is an experienced teacher of English,

having served at a number of schools in England, Portugal and South Africa. He has also taught at the Natal Training College, and was Head of the Department of English at the Johannesburg College of Education for twelve years. In addition, Mr Rose has

*See the article 'Grammarphone: a Linguistic Lifeline' by Ernest Pereira, in **English Usage in Southern Africa**, Volume 15.1. 1984.

served on the Council of the English Academy of South Africa, and in 1986 was elected President of the Academy for a three-year term. We are grateful to him and to **The Natal Witness** for the opportunity to reprint selections from 'Our Language' in **English Usage in Southern Africa**.

DO YOU MEAN WHAT YOU SAY?

Throughout most of the English-speaking world, 'grammar' is no longer taught in schools, universities or anywhere else. For some years - even decades - English has 'got by' without the restraints of formal grammar, and few people would seem to bemoan its absence. Have we, in fact, lost anything? Are we better off without its inhibiting grip?

Most of us would probably say we don't need it, and of course that's true in most instances. Grammar is like a lifebelt: pretty useless until you need it. Only when we come to the occasional odd situation do we pause to wonder if the grammar is 'correct'. The committee wish or wishes? The chairman or his deputy has or have? Commensurate with or to? What's the difference, if any, between 'The captain said the lady was drunk' and 'The captain, said the lady, was drunk'? Moses' beard or Moses's beard?

All these are really questions of what we might call 'grammar' and in many cases grammar will supply the answer to our problems.

But (and why shouldn't we start a sentence with 'but'?) what is grammatical isn't always sensible or even acceptable. 'The congregation is asked to remove its hat' is grammatically 'correct'. So is 'It is I'. So too is Chomsky's famous sentence 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously'. But we don't speak - or even write - like that. At least, I hope you don't.

There is a distinction between what is acceptable in written English and what is permissible when spoken. Grammar, alas, takes little notice of these distinctions.

The dissatisfaction with grammar arose because being 'correct' all the time became a little tedious, and there's little point in interrupting a conversation to point out the error of a speaker's ways, especially when you can follow quite easily what he's talking about. There's no difference in meaning between 'It's I' and 'It's me'. There's a world of difference, however, in the impression you get of the speaker who uses the former ver-

sion. When we speak, we hesitate, split infinitives, misplace adverbial phrases and clauses, fail to finish sentences, leave out verbs ... the list of 'errors' has no end. But our listeners still manage somehow to understand what we're driving at.

Of course, some situations require us to take more care with our language than do others. If we are addressing a public meeting, or pleading in a law court, our language 'register' will differ from that we use while reminiscing in a bar. If we mix registers, we shall be in trouble, inviting a rebuke from the judge who wishes a more formal version of 'chatting up the bird' to be inscribed in the court records.

GRAMMAR: A COMMON PATTERN

By 'grammar' we mean all the rules that govern the form of the words we use, whether in written or spoken English. 'My sister smokes cigars' is correct grammar, while 'My sister smoke cigar' is not. Nor is 'My cigar smoke sister'. English grammar, and it is not alone in so doing, demands that if you have a singular subject 'sister' then the verb must also be singular 'smokes'. This is known as the rule of concord. 'Smoke' is not singular and is therefore not acceptable.

English is also not unique in demanding that, in most instances, a noun should have a determiner of some kind - a, an, some, many, our. There are, of course, exceptions; there always are in English and that is why English is a difficult language for people to learn. Plural nouns don't need determiners: 'My sister smokes cigars'. Nor does a proper noun: 'Many artists imitate Picasso'.

Grammar, then, tries to establish a common pattern of word formation: singular verbs usually end in -s: past tenses in -ed; one child, several children. It also demands that words be in a certain order which, if changed, alters the meaning. 'The prime minister ate the trout' is not the same as 'The trout ate the prime minister' even though the actual words themselves are identical. Change the order of 'You have been snoring?' and the sense changes from statement to question.

All this seems quite sensible and straightforward. We all KNOW these things. Why then all the fuss about grammar? Why did we chuck it out of the window? Why was it ever in school in the first place? What has taken its place, if anything?

Let's try to answer the last question first: What has taken

grammar's place? In many cases, the answer is 'nothing at all' - and that is why we are in several kinds of linguistic hot water. People - school pupils, teachers, university lecturers, doctors, lawyers, housewives, secretaries - sooner or later find themselves faced with a situation in which they don't know whether their language is 'wrong' or 'right'. In many cases it doesn't matter much either way. But there ARE some situations when we are reluctant to expose our grammatical inadequacy.

In many - perhaps most - of these situations our knowledge of grammar is just not enough to help us. What's more, we don't know where to look for the right answer. Hence the growing need for language 'clinics' (a word suggesting some kind of linguistic ill-health) like Grammarphone, together with a spate of reference books on English usage.

GRAMMARPHONE

To be on the receiving end of some of the enquiries directed to Grammarphone is both rewarding and informative. Rewarding because it is always good to help those in difficulties; informative since much is to be learned from other people's problems. Perhaps it would be of interest to share some thoughts with you about Grammarphone, and how the situation appears from the other end of the telephone line.

By far the most encouraging aspect of the whole venture is the genuine interest shown by people in all walks of life in the language they use. My log-book for the last three months records enquiries from a clergyman, a professor, a municipal departmental head, an advertising copywriter, a doctor, an architect, several teachers and lecturers, housewives, pupils, lawyers, an army conscript, an art organiser, a museum official and several retired gentlemen.

Their queries cover an amazing spectrum of language matters. Quite common are 'complaints' arising from the fact that much of the English used today - both spoken and written - differs from that which the callers were taught. 'We were never allowed to write so and so' is a common refrain.

Often they 'don't like' what they have read or heard, but cannot say exactly why. 'I'm quite sure it's not right' they say. So I spend some time trying to untangle grammatical demands from personal preferences, and do my best to persuade the caller, first, that there is no obligation on him to lower his own standards or depart from his own preferences; second, that few linguistic matters can be simplistically apportioned to 'right' or

'wrong' categories; and third, that language (English in particular, thank goodness!) is a dynamic, constantly evolving process, continually adopting new ways and sloughing off old, outmodish practices which have lost their efficacy.

Of course, English grammar does prescribe or lay down certain barriers or restraints across which it is unwise to stray if you intend to say what you mean and mean what you say. Certain rules have to be learned and obeyed: the rules of concord, for example; some tense sequences; word order. You can't generally get away with 'Me and my mother is wanting to not be there'; or 'She flexes her muscles (sic) and biffed him the eye in'. You will notice, however, that even though the grammar abounds in faults, the meaning is not entirely obscured, such is the malleability of English.

One of the most valuable of all characteristics of English is indeed its flexibility, its tolerance, its willingness to allow you to say something in an amazing variety of ways, some not even grammatically 'correct'. No smoking! Not to smoke! Don't smoke! Smoking forbidden! Please - no cigarettes or cigars! Out pipes! Please refrain from smoking! You are earnestly requested not to smoke! The possibilities are almost endless.

Many enquiries or complaints are, fortunately for the Grammar-phone team, easily answered with the aid of one reference book or another.

But (and somebody will no doubt blow his top for my beginning not only a sentence but a paragraph not with one but with two conjunctions!) by far the greater proportion of complaints really have no defensible standpoint. They often say something is 'wrong' because 'I was taught to say ...' or 'We were never allowed to write ...'. Even less convincing are the complaints which boil down, in effect, to 'This is wrong because I don't like it'. Ask them why infinitives should not be split, or sentences end in a preposition, and the reply is almost always 'Because I was taught so', which is about as logical as wearing long trousers on a modern tennis court, a fashionable practice at the beginning of the century.

GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY?

Teachers of language today are concerned not so much with actual mistakes as with the reason for their occurrence. You get little fun or profit from telling someone who says 'My mother and father has gone to Turkey' that he's wrong and should say 'have' rather than 'has'. A red line through the word and 'Minus 1' in

the margin don't really advance matters, either educationally or socially. A quick investigation into **why** the writer used a plural subject with a singular verb may suggest a profitable course of remedial action. The reason may be the interference of another language, Afrikaans, for instance, which has no plural verb form.

The modern use of 'hopefully' is a frequent source of near-apoplectic reaction from older folk. Where they permit 'We waited hopefully for the pub to open', their indignation is boundless on encountering 'Hopefully, my mother-in-law will soon stop chattering'. Of course, the two meanings of 'hopefully' are different. The former means simply 'hoping' or 'waiting expectantly'; the latter means 'it is devoutly to be wished that ...'. For the life of me I cannot see what is **wrong** about the second use. 'Hopefully' is an adverb - like wonderfully or inadvertently. Indisputably, we may, if we choose, begin a sentence with an adverb. Today, you have an example or two. Hopefully, the editor will not expunge them.

The wonderful thing - or rather **one** of the many wonderful things - about English is that you may break every rule in the book if you wish to, provided you have a good reason for doing so. By the same token, if you have a rooted antipathy to 'hopefully' or any other aspect of English, there is no rule which compels you to write or say what you do not wish. When, therefore, you feel tempted to let your blood pressure rise unduly at some aspect of English usage you don't particularly like, before you judge it 'wrong', just quietly decide whether you are thinking with your brain or your duodenum. The latter is a notoriously fallible linguistic instrument.

BENDING THE RULES

The trouble with relaxing the rules is that there's always somebody who takes advantage of the fact, oversteps the mark and spoils things for everybody else. When we say that it is possible to break virtually every rule in English, there is the tacit assumption that we must have a valid reason for doing so. We can justifiably split an infinitive if, for instance, we are intending to deliberately show just how unwieldy and ugly such errors are likely to unhappily become.

We may break rules if we are intentionally amusing, or entertaining or didactic or persuasive or satirical or - in the case of much good literature - where a special emphasis draws our attention to some specific point or feature. Shakespeare broke most of the rules at some time or other, and by doing so drew

our attention both to the rule (which was not his intention), and to a particular aspect of the statement he wanted to make especially significant in that context.

Occasionally Shakespeare, like Homer, nods and his syntax becomes convoluted to the point of absurdity. In **King Henry VI part 1** (which, to give him his due, was not entirely his work only) Joan of Arc vows her allegiance to the King of France with these garbled words:

I am prepared: here is my keenedged sword
Deck'd with five flower-de-luces on each side
The which, at Touraine, in Saint Katherine's churchyard
Out of a deal of iron I chose forth.

Hum! But to get back to the liberties English allows us - liberties we too often abuse. One of these is the freedom to invent new words, or new shades of meaning for existing words. All branches of science, computers, politics, new disciplines like psychology and sociology, all these have augmented the standard vocabulary with their own specialised jargon.

Advertising is especially inventive, and concocts all manner of buzz-words whose ephemeral fashion, by its very intensity, signs their death warrants. Much governmental writing, for instance, contains a plethora of ghastrinesses which, happily, are unlikely to live long. Prioritisation, debourgeoisement, on an annualised basis, dieselisation are some such horrors.

Equally obnoxious are those phrases so abundantly present in much academic writing where the main aim seems to be to impress the gullible. 'Classroom situational discourse' means, presumably, purposeful teacher-pupil discussion. 'Pragmatic inter-tribal deconscientisation' means I know not what. It really isn't worth the deciphering, for such licence abuses the liberty English allows us.

SOME COMMON QUERIES

Many of the points I shall consider below have been raised by people calling up Grammarphone for help and advice. The problems are thus real, not 'trick' matters invented by pedants merely to puzzle or tax those already sufficiently bewildered by the oddities of English!

Here is a recent query: 'When does one use "a" or "an"? Should one say "an hotel, an history book, an unique event"?' (Incidentally, 'a' and 'an' are known as 'determiners'; they are also called 'the indefinite article'.)

The broad answer is really quite straightforward. English uses 'a' before a noun or adjective beginning with a consonant, thus: a pencil, a ghost, a young calf, a hybridised plant. 'An' is used when a vowel follows, thus: an epigram, an unintentional error, an ill-informed statement.

Some people use 'an' before words like hotel or hospital. To do so is not incorrect, merely rather dated. The reason is that a number of words in English starting with an initial letter 'h' came originally from French, in which the initial 'h' is silent. Hôtel and hôpital in French are pronounced otel and opital. Ease of pronunciation therefore prompts the use of 'an' - provided, of course, that you are in the habit of talking about otels and opitals. Nowadays, most people write, and speak of, a hotel, a hospital.

On the other hand, we certainly do talk about an honour, or an honest opinion, simply because in English we now pronounce these words without sounding the initial 'h'. (When the 'h' is sounded, it is known as an aspirate.) But we do not generally talk about an history book, an historical site, because when we pronounce 'history' or 'historical' we sound the 'h'. (In some dialects in England, initial 'hs' are dropped indiscriminately, just as some words are indiscriminately aspirated as in: Orrible Orace ates hall high-anded hofficials.)

But an unique event or an uniforned guard are just not acceptable. For one reason, in both these words the initial letter 'u' is not really a vowel but a consonant equivalent to the sound 'you'. For another, the words themselves do not - and never have - come from a language where an initial sound has been subsequently dropped. An unicorn, an euphemism, an university are affectations of speech, like gels for girls, starnch (for staunch) and other oddities which have passed out of common usage. Further, such affectations are wholly without the justification that permits an (h)otel, an (h)eir, an (h)our, an (h)onourable mention.

Note also that we use 'a' in front of the letter 'o' when it is sounded as a consonant. We say a one-sided contest, a one-off event. But we say - and write - an only son, an onerous burden, because the initial 'o' in these instances is a genuine vowel.

A query came in to Grammarphone early on the morning of Friday, June 13. 'What is the word meaning fear of the number thirteen?' Well, the answer as you probably know is triskaidekaphobia, a simple little word formed from the Greek tr(e)is - three; kai - and; deka - ten; phobos - fear. That wasn't a particularly difficult query. Queriers never are when you happen to know the answer

Another enquirer asked about the correctness of using 'myself' instead of 'me' as in 'He is coming with myself to Durban'. Such usage is both ugly and incorrect, for the 'self' suffix turns a pronoun into a reflexive pronoun which has a special usage. The first is normally confined to actions or situations where one literally affects oneself: 'I hurt myself badly when I fell out of my pram' or 'They deluded themselves into believing that they had crossed the Rubicon'. We can also use a reflexive pronoun where special emphasis is required: 'She herself would never have complained in public' - implying that her husband was quite ready to do so. Or 'I myself have never fallen into the Orinoco' - though of course Uncle Algernon the explorer was quite accustomed to doing so. Be wary of where you put the reflexive pronoun, for casual word ordering can produce bizarre and ghoulish results: 'I have frequently hunted and shot myself.'

The use of a reflexive pronoun by itself as either a subject or object is not acceptable; except of course to those, like Malvolio, who are 'sick of self-love'.

SHILLY-SHALLYING

A common Grammarphone enquiry hints at some confusion between **shall** and **will**. The confusion has reached such proportions that often today we have to accept that, for some speakers, there just isn't any difference between the two words. Any speaker actually confused by the two isn't attempting to show their distinctive meanings.

Shall is the future tense verb form used with the first person singular or plural: I **shall** leave at once. We **shall** not be back until Thursday. **Will** is used for all other pronouns: You **will** look daft in that hat. The police **will** arrest you if you wear it. The rule similarly applies to the question form: **Shall** we go to Kingsmead? **Will** you be at home this afternoon?

If we reserve the rule and use **will** with the first person, the sense changes from the simple future tense and an element of compulsion, determination or threat is added: Despite what you say, I **will** write to him (i.e. I am determined to do so). He **shall** pay, even though you were responsible.

Such subtleties of meaning are fast disappearing from many peoples' speech, partly because the spoken word can be stressed to carry emphasis, and partly because the abbreviated conversational forms **I'll**, **she'll**, **we'll**, **they'll** eliminate the dis-

inction between **will** and **shall**. For users of English as a second or foreign language (referred to as ESL or EFL) the difference in meaning is really a superfluous luxury in these utilitarian days.

Should and **would** follow basically the same as **shall** and **will**. The meaning however is different, for both express either a condition or an obligation. I **should** accept his offer if I were you. He **would** reply if his mouth wasn't full of Chicken Marengo. These are both conditional. The sense of obligation is obvious in: You **should** be mowing the lawn, not vegging out in front of the TV, and They **should** not have locked Aunt Jessie in the bathroom.

We can use **should** and **would** in other senses too: Grandfather **would** sit for hours, sucking his empty Meerschaum. Here **would** simply means 'was accustomed to ...'. 'You **should** have been here when the result was announced' and 'They **should** be asleep by now' both have the sense of 'ought to'. We can use **would** to introduce a polite invitation: **Would** you like to join us for dinner? Somewhat more forceful is: **Would** you please stop that infernal caterwauling! which is not really a request but a stern command.

The common error '**should** of' (We **should** of told her to come with) should be avoided - unless you are particularly anxious to create a certain self-image in that particular social circle - but you ought not to use it otherwise.

SMALL BUT TROUBLESOME

A fairly common source of confusion is the little word **only**. A quick survey will show that it is more often than not misplaced in sentences, and thus conveys a meaning different from the one intended. Here are a couple of examples: We are **only** able to publish this introductory part; I've **only** been to India once. What the writers meant to say is: We are able to publish **only** the introductory part, and I've been to India **only** once.

The general rule is that **only** should be placed as close as possible to the word which it is intended to modify. Look back at the second versions of those two sentences and you will see how the repositioning of **only** clarifies the meaning.

Let us take a simple sentence: 'My sister rides horses' and put **only** in different positions and see how the meaning is altered. 'Only my sister rides horses' means nobody else in the family does. 'My **only** sister rides horses' means I have just

one sister. 'My sister only rides horses' means she doesn't feed or groom them. 'My sister rides only horses' has no real meaning, since we do not refer to 'only horses' as we talk about 'only children'. 'My sister rides horses only' means she is not in the habit of riding camels, donkeys or bicycles.

Have some fun with this sentence by putting **only** in different places: 'She kissed my uncle in the potting shed.'

Another bothersome little word is **of**, particularly when it is associated with another preposition. English usually says 'out of the window' or 'out of the frying pan' rather than simply 'out the window' or 'I threw him out the bathroom'. But we certainly do not require the **of** in phrases like 'off of'. You may recall a news report about a tiger which 'tore a bikini off of a model' during a photographic session. **Off** is quite sufficient, as any properly brought-up Bengal tiger knows very well.

A reader recently drew my attention to the newly fashionable usage among cricket commentators of 'a quick bowler'. I suppose the craze for novelty is responsible for the change from the customary 'fast bowler'. A 'quick bowler' is presumably one who is not dead (though sometimes it's hard to tell!) or else one who delivers more overs per hour than another. A 'fast bowler' delivers the ball at a higher velocity than does a 'slow bowler', which is what I think the commentators are intending to mean. So let's stick to fast, slow and medium bowlers and avoid confusion.

WHOSE ENGLISH?

A lady who describes herself as a 'Pommy' (see if you can unearth the origin of that term) has a South African husband whose pronunciation of 'women' baffles her. The 'English' pronunciation of the plural of woman rhymes with 'swimmin'. In South African English, those narrowed vowels disappear until the word sounds like the plural 'men' with a 'woo' placed in front. We must accept that English is pronounced differently all over the world, and few people (myself included) would wish everyone to speak in the same way. We should lose much richness and colour were that to happen. We cannot, with any real justification, claim that one way is 'right' while the others are 'wrong'.

The comet recently in our southern skies used at one time to be called Hawley's not Halley's - though the spelling has remained unchanged. Years ago, men wore 'weskits; and had wrinkles on

their 'forrids'. So, Pommy lady, you'll just have to accept your husband's South African pronunciation - or wage a long, weary and probably unsuccessful campaign trying to change it.

One of the most stimulating, provocative and, for some, disturbing elements to emerge from the recent conference of the English Academy was the question, put quite simply, 'Whose English is it?' The chief impact of this stunning query was to throw at the Academy, and indeed at all who use English throughout the world, a special responsibility for the English language. A number of subsidiary questions depend from the original: 'Who is to set the standard?' 'Which is the "right" pronunciation?' 'Is it wrong to say "between you and I" or "different to"?'

Quite clearly, English is no longer the property and sole responsibility of those living in England: West Indians, Pakistanis, Indians, ex-Kenyans, Fijians, refugees from Idi Amin ... the list is endless. Nor does it 'belong' exclusively to those whose mother-tongue is English: Americans, Canadians, Australians, Singapores, Falkland Islanders, South Africans and refugees from Tristan da Cunha. And what about the countless millions who daily, in commerce, industry, sport, aeroplanes, schools, universities, taxis and public places use their own varieties of second language English as a *lingua franca* purely for communication?

Probably well over 600 million people throughout the world now possess some degree of fluency - even if only in spoken form - of English. The range of pronunciation is greater than ever before. What is idiomatic in one area is unintelligible in others; what passes as acceptable to some is anathema to others, an assault upon the ear. Which, if any, among all these spoken variants is the 'true' or 'right' one? Who, among all these myriad users of English has the 'right' - or even the 'right' qualifications - to lay down any sort of law regarding how English should be 'properly' used?

When we consider the written form of the language, we are faced with further, if similar, problems. What is the 'correct' spelling of a word? Must every sentence contain a finite verb? Why shouldn't we split an infinitive? Is the apostrophe in 'shouldn't' really necessary? What's 'wrong' with ending a sentence with a preposition? Will you eventually come round to accepting, albeit reluctantly, 'We're coming with'?

Another set of dependent problems concerns the values and 'cultural norms' inherent in English. Do we want every Zulu child to grow up speaking like Anthony Eden? On a more personal

level, how do you react - and are you prepared for - the Lord's Prayer being declaimed in your church by a priest with a decidedly 'Black' accent? How do you feel about an Indian reading the 8 o'clock TV news bulletin? What exactly is your objection to an Afrikaans-speaker interviewing a visiting German diplomat in English?

You won't need to be reminded that we live in a constantly changing world, and that a great many of those changes can be profoundly disturbing and perplexing. The only satisfactory way to cope with those changes is not to let them cascade upon us when we are either unaware of, or unprepared for them. For that reason, the English Academy will certainly be deeply involved in and concerned with trying to find answers to some of the questions posed. There are no easy, ready-made solutions, and only the most shortsighted and obdurate of us will, Canute-like, pretend that we can hold back the tide of linguistic change and advancement in English.

All worthwhile challenges, especially when they concern a worthwhile matter, deserve serious consideration. One thing is certain: we cannot preserve the status quo, and the inevitable changes and developments will ultimately concern us all. Disengage yourself and freewheel, and you'll find yourself left with a language few speak or understand. You'll probably feel quite lonely, too.

Further selections from 'Our Language' by Angus Rose will appear in the next issue of this journal.