

FORUM: COMMENT AND RESPONSE

A COMMENT ON 'EDUCATION AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE MASS MEDIA'
(*English Usage in Southern Africa*, Vol. 15 No. 2, 1984).

May I perhaps enquire if you have had any comment on the article by Alan Campling headed 'Education and the Language of the Mass Media'. I was always taught that good English depended on readily understood simplicity, not on the high-sounding grandiose jargon which is so evident here.

Without fear of contradiction I think this must be the most verbosely indecipherable article ever to appear in ENGLISH USAGE. I feel certain that few people attempted the lengthy and complicated word usage analysis exercise which appeared on pages 22 and 23. Having been involved in a weekly syndicated newspaper education column for several years, including a section called 'Essentials of English', I dread to think what would have happened had readers been required to evaluate word usage by such complicated and roundabout machinery as has been employed here. Perhaps Mr. Campling's article could have benefited from the scrutiny of Mr. Tom McChee ("Spelling Pronunciations" *English Usage in Southern Africa* Vol. 15 No.2, 1984. pp.36-40). Your comments would be both interesting and useful. Thank you.

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ALAN CAMPLING RESPONDS

That "good English depends on readily understood simplicity" is bad, sad and dangerous to teach. 1) There are many circumstances in which simple English fails to communicate, or Barbara Cartland is a better writer than Bertrand Russell and Sapa superior to Shelley. 2) Millions of students exposed to the fallacy have concluded "I cannot write even simple English, I shall never be able to manage more advanced language, I shall give up trying" although getting complex thoughts into simple expressions is extremely difficult at times and among the best remunerated jobs, as, for example, in technical copywriting. 3) People who approach the language as if it were simple, instead of concentrating because it is not, get into hideous sloppy habits. Thus "Without fear of contradiction I think ..." although no thought unexpressed can be contradicted and what is intended is "Without fear of contradiction I assert ..." which is a pompous Victorian cliché on the standard of "may I perhaps inquire ... I dread to think ... roundabout machinery ..." which is at least unintentionally picturesque, and "high-sounding grandiose" which is tautologous too. Malice apart, Ms Smith in these ways supports my central contention that what has always been taught can do more harm than what has never yet been taught.

JOHANNESBURG

A COMMENT ON R.M. GILFILLAN'S LETTER

Mr Gilfillan asks, with some despair, what should be regarded as "acceptable English in our national written examinations", given his belief that "the primary aim of L2 teaching should be the achievement of communicative competence" (*English Usage in Southern Africa*, Vol. 16 No. 2, 1985). Is the problem not that our "national written examinations" do not elicit communication, are themselves not realistic, relevant or communicative, and therefore have little relationship with Mr Gilfillan's perceived aim of L2 teaching? Current measurement of L2 proficiency is based almost entirely on the student's ability to match a pre-ordained level of correctness in a very narrowly defined dialect of formal, written English.

If our teaching objective is communicative competence (a rather vague, if very useful term), then surely this is what we should be evaluating in examinations? Acceptability of any given linguistic form would then depend firstly on the success with which it conveys the speaker's meaning, secondly on its appropriacy to the particular communicative context, and thirdly on the effect it has on the audience.

Many South African English teachers find themselves currently in the state of being that Mina P Shaughnessy (Basic Writing theorist) calls "Guarding the Tower".¹ Here the teacher sees him/herself as a last outpost of civilization, preserving a precious heritage from the onslaught of barbarous hordes. There is the constant fear that the slightest lowering of our defences will mean the end of English as we know it, a total vandalization of our language.

It is tempting to dismiss these attitudes as elitist linguistic imperialism, and to propagate large scale egalitarianism along the lines of - "Comrade, I hear you and value you as an individual, and any way you express yourself is fine." There are obviously situations where this kind of attitude is desirable, if we wish to keep lines of communication open. An ESL examination is not necessarily such a situation, and perhaps this is just one of those sobering realities that we have to accept and disseminate as such to our students. (Along the lines of - "Comrade, I hear you and value you as an individual, but this particular communicative act requires these standards of you.")

It should go without saying, however, that the fact that some sort of arbitrary dialect has autocratically to be set up as a standard for examination purposes does not imply that variations from this standard are unacceptable in communicative contexts other than that of evaluation of performance. Life itself is the test of communicative competence, and each native speaker - L2 speaker interaction will set its own norms and levels of error acceptability.

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¹SHAUGHNESSY, Mina P. "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing" in TATE, Gary & Edward P J CORBETT. *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. Oxford University Press. N.Y. 1981.