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DIDACTIC — LINGUISTIC SUPERSTITIONS

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'After', 'while' and 'whereas' are among the apparently simple terms intimidating writers these days, especially youngsters, because superstitions have attached to them. 'A woman was killed after an elephant trod on her' is a very common formulation whose essential development is not at all obvious. Superficially the observer would conclude that youngsters confuse being killed with being dead. As the woman was dead at the time that followed being trodden on, there is an inclination to identify that with her being killed then. I believe the analysis has to go rather deeper and farther; we are witnessing an offshoot of the abuse of 'while'.

I can still see in my mind's eye Miss Jobbins who impressed on me that 'And' and 'But' were not to be used to start a sentence. If she were still alive, she would be about 100 years old (as is, perhaps, that prejudice, which has since fallen away). Some of my contemporaries, I know, resolved to avoid that solecism by avoiding those two conjunctions. I have reason to suspect that many youngsters have the same superstition. Learning that the inelegant repetition of 'and' is to be avoided by the use of 'while' on some occasions, these sufferers use 'while' in and out of season where 'and' would be correct, notably abusing 'while' where the phenomena being conjoined do not occur at the same time

and do not last as long. At a guess I would say that on the radio, for example, 'while' should be replaced by 'and' some eighty per cent of the time. 'Hot, dry weather is expected next summer, while rainfall should be above normal in the winter' is a typical usage.

Another vaguely understood prohibition against repetition drives out 'while' in favour, wrongly, of 'whereas'. Because that word as it were magically solves the repetition problem, they go on to slap it in when 'although' should appear. This device at the same time eliminates the sort of trouble they equally vaguely associate with the use of 'although' where 'though' should be, or vice versa, or both. 'The price of bread is going up next week whereas the price of milk is coming down' is a borderline case. The writer might indeed have been contrasting the rise with the fall. Borderline cases make it hard for the pedant to attack productively such a formulation as 'The girls are knitting whereas the boys are embroidering'. Here, as the context shows, the writer wanted to indicate that these activities took place simultaneously. 'While' would have been appropriate, but, in addition to the influences discussed above, the writer no longer believed that 'while' connoted simultaneity, but regarded it as synonymous with 'and', which would not have conveyed the idea of simultaneity.

LINGUISTIC SUPERSTITION

Superstition can be a more useful teaching tool than reason. Most people respond more often to their conditioning than to their powers of reason. Consequently a teacher exploiting superstition can do more good than one unaware of the possibility of defying it.

A good example of linguistic superstition was provided when a junior newspaper executive instructed all his sub-editors to eliminate the word 'that', which was almost always redundant. They generally complied without argument or even due consideration, in part because sub-editors work at speed. One might almost say that they are esteemed more for their pace than for their precision, although - in theory, at least - an important part of their work is the elimination of imprecise language from reporters or agencies or contributors.

The instruction was made the more effective with the introduction of electronic editing. Its complexity and expense and amazing novelties compelled the staff, particularly in the early and formative stages of acquiring skill on the machines, to subordinate their reasoning faculties to the behaviour of the systems. Most notably there was a key which enabled the sub-editor to

order a hunt for a particular word and eliminate it wherever it occurred. It would be vain to deny that something of the fun known to the sorcerer's apprentice attached to this function.

Soon afterwards, though, a modest campaign had to be mounted to restore the word 'that' where its omission contributed to ambiguity or inaccuracy. 'The Minister said in Paris the price of wine would rise 'means one thing if 'that' appears before the word 'in' (the French will pay more). It means something else if 'that' comes in front of 'the price' (South Africans will pay more instead). But the campaign did not succeed. Revise editors had to continue inserting 'that' where it ought to be, as reporters and sub-editors continued to omit or delete it. The reporters picked up linguistic habits from sub-edited matter, regardless of whether the subs were good or the revise editors had the time to conceal bad subbing.

The campaign had to fail because it was based on the misapprehension that staff knew why the word 'that' was under attack in the first place. Neither they nor the junior executive leading the attack knew that. It is only marginally in newspapers but extremely significantly in magazines and in fiction that the word merits execration, but the junior executive did not know that and so was unable to explain it to the sub-editors. Thus a person with influence, acting in ignorance, was able to impose a superstition on others able to disseminate it. In magazines and in fiction, readers demand to be put in touch directly with the people who are being written about. The easiest way for writers to do this is to set down what the subjects said in the subjects' own words or an acceptable facsimile. 'The Minister said: 'The price of wine is going up' is better than 'The Minister said that the price of wine was going up'. The reprobated 'that' discourages the writers from presenting the subjects' language between quotation marks and encourages the writers to be seen to paraphrase, to give the writers' version of what was said, to interpolate the writer between the subject and the reader and so reduce the contact between them.

Finally, in connection with this example, it is notable that neither the campaign to reduce or eliminate the word 'that' nor the campaign to restore it, where desirable, had any effect on the reporters' or news agencies' or contributors' behaviour. The word is still being abused or omitted or redundantly included exactly as before.

How is superstition to be used positively, to inculcate good writing habits? Chiefly by recognising that it *is* a matter of habit and that good habits are exactly as easy to pick up as bad

habits; that is, by according superstition its rightful status subject to reason.

TAKING METAPHORS LITERALLY

In colloquial usage, the terms 'metaphorical' and 'literal' are customarily reversed, so that the latter is never used other than where the former belongs. In nearly forty years' experience of tidying other people's writing I cannot recall ever having seen 'literally' (or particularly 'quite literally') except where 'metaphorically' was intended, and I am sure I have never seen 'metaphorically' in such a context. The day before I wrote this note I processed a story about a professional woman hunter (note constructive absence of hyphen). The freelance contributor, the women's page editor, a layout sub (who is not responsible) and a down-table sub (who is) had all contentedly accepted the contention that the lady, facing difficulties in a traditionally male avocation, had literally stuck to her guns.

The schools and universities have been persuading youngsters, ineradicably, that *metaphor* (a word most of them forget) is employed to enliven communications where *literal* language (a word they retain, but not its meaning) lacks vivacity. Allied with this vague understanding is an apprehensiveness born of the suspicion that some people take metaphors literally. This suspicion is deliberately intensified by whatever training a journalist may get, rebarbative rather than intellectual as it may be. The writer or speaker forms the habit of drawing attention to metaphors that are not to be taken literally (which is not necessarily a bad idea in principle) but proceeds to draw attention by using the universally undetected wrong label. A modicum of sympathy is possible. The writer perhaps is opting for a common usage ('literally' meaning 'metaphorically') to avoid saying something like: 'Celia sticks to her guns, but do not take that literally'. After all, it is just not colloquial to write, 'Celia metaphorically sticks to her guns.'

The fact is that when metaphor is used for the masses, some people are indeed going to take it literally. In the public prints, libel or at least ambiguity and misunderstanding can result. The same goes for irony, which experienced writers in the mass media eschew and capable sub-editors will delete (making their contribution, in the name of safety, to the establishment of blandness as the ubiquitous literary quality.

ADJECTIVES

Avoidance of the word 'very' in favour of 'too' is another source of uncertainty, as in 'We do not have too many vacancies for

Indians.' Here the statement is cause for congratulation if it means the firm is well supplied with Indian staff, but cause for regret if it means - as is more likely because 'too' is more often misused than properly used - that it does not have very many vacancies for Indians, or even, as it quite possible, that it does not have any at all. (In South Africa, especially, 'too' has gone so far to take over the functions of 'very' that 'also' has tended to take over the proper meaning of 'too'.) Internationally, 'very' is extensively supplanted by 'really' and increasingly by 'real' as in 'The Osmonds are really gifted' or 'The Osmonds is real gifted' where the speaker, or even writer, considers the Osmonds very talented. None of the usages arising from avoidance of 'very' achieves the purpose of the primary-school English reachers who fear that 'very' might become the only intensifier in one's vocabulary. I have encountered more than one professional sub-editor who took out 'very' every time he saw it, and put nothing in its place, so that the original writer or speaker was deprived of the opportunity to intensify in any phrase where he used that word. These sub-editors told me in all sincerity that 'very' was the mark of bad writing.

The unfortunate misapprehension popularised in primary education by the attack on 'very' is intensified in secondary education by a similarly ill-judged attack, similarly incompletely explained and so producing a similarly superstitious effect, on the use of three adjectives. That is execrated as bad style. The typical pupil becomes convinced that two adjectives are better than three adjectives in all circumstances, and one better than two, and thus that the accumulation of adjectives in one's vocabulary is reprobated. (Sometimes I feel like paraphrasing the Jesuits: 'Give me a child until he is seven years old and I will make him essentially numerate for life.') Surely the use of three adjectives is perfectly sound when the writer or speaker wishes to draw attention to three qualities of the ensuing noun as distinct from one or two or more than three?

Perhaps the constructive superstition would be 'Never three adjectives twice in a row', so that people would be encouraged to avoid the habit of three adjectives every time, but would feel free to use three when appropriate. Perhaps the outcome would be that people felt a tic whenever three adjectives occurred to them, and did something or other about it - I have no idea what, and I do not much mind. The chief object of didactic superstitions should be to produce the tic, to make people aware of adjectives as they now are not. If some people alternated the number of adjectives they used, if some tended to use four where fewer would be better, and if some stuck to one at a time and very few in a lifetime, would we be any worse off than we are now?

CAUSALITY

Use of the word 'therefore' is characteristic of accountants, and it arises from their deep-rooted feeling that words lack the reliable consistency and essential meaningfulness of figures. It is a word pathetically symbolic of their desire to impose those qualities on language and they use it far more often than any comparable commercial or social group in similar circumstances. They evidently believe or feel that if they say 'therefore' often enough causality is caused between concepts that otherwise remain stubbornly discrete. (However, on becoming managers they escape the addiction, perhaps because they now see the effect of personnel upon statistical phenomena.)

A chief executive officer, equally characteristically, will subordinate laws of communication to his immediate personal requirements much as a witch or pagan high priest or so-called divine ruler traditionally suspended all laws inconsistent with his intentions, a suspension willingly connived at by the polity because such intentions were by definition going to benefit society. The single likeliest manifestation of this is the sentence changing sense and purpose in midstream. The *makulu baas*, the *bwana makubwa*, and nobody else in the conglomerate, is entitled to say something like 'On Tuesdays in future we will check stocks on Wednesdays' when he emends a decision while speaking. Anyone else is required to say in similar circumstances, 'I'm sorry, I mean Wednesdays not Tuesdays - there's the sales meeting on Tuesdays, isn't there, make it Wednesday. Has everybody got that?' This takes up more wording and time than the linguistically faulty announcement of the Chief Executive Officer whose meaning it is the proper concern of all subordinates to discover, whatever effort this might entail from them.

The Chief Executive Officer will not keep saying 'therefore', no doubt because he does not need to expose causal relationships. He is the cause of what he intends. (The accountant does not speak sentences that change course in midstream because nobody is expected to work out what an accountant means.) I have given here the rational explanation for these function-specific, linguistic phenomena but they are accepted throughout commerce without thought or explanation, that is to say ritualistically. Certainly rational explanations, expecially if they are novel and even dramatic, have their part to play in teaching communication skills, if only for these three reasons.

1. Some students and some aspects of all students are rational.

2. A rational explanation for one usage contrasts, perhaps

strikingly, with a string of superstitions, and the contrast can be didactic.

3. The superstitions developed on either side of the rational presentation can gain force by contrast with it.

This article does not seek to promote superstition because the writer is incapable of rational explanations but because they have complementary roles. The following explanation for the force of and addictions to the dash may illustrate this.

DASHES

Setting aside for a moment the dashes in pairs either end of parenthetical matter we shall find the dash on its own has three main effects. It draws attention to matter ending a sentence which might otherwise be seen as matter inferior to that which was ventilated first; it dissociates from the import of what follows the author of what precedes it; or it connects two sentences where a colon or semicolon or co-ordinating conjunction is not desired. 'Doctors back each other up - so much for ethics' not atypically serves all three of those purposes.

However, I am more concerned here with the dash abused, the dash irrationally inserted because the writer has seen writing including his own gain visible strength from dashes: the writing *looks* stronger even before the words are read.

The best medium to consider in this connection is radio drama where the dash is always freely used to signal to the actors to speak more dramatically than where orthodox punctuation appears. Actors hauling on a rope, say, will find their concurrent dialogue preceded by some such word in upper and lower case and between brackets as (Effort) and actors under an emotional strain instead, such as terror, lust, fury, shame, great sorrow or horror, will find their dialogue in ungrammatical short bursts linked or separated with dashes and will accordingly gasp. I tell script-writing students that the first dialogue element that goes when one is disturbed is grammar, and hence the right way to show aurally that characters are disturbed is to make them ungrammatical.

Novelists have long used dashes in dialogue similarly for the same purpose, so even people who have never seen a radio script have seen dashes used to connote a dramatic highlight. They are not used in calm narrative or in mere conversation except for the three purposes mentioned above, and the first of those three refers to emphasis. Is there a direct correlation between the number of dashes and the number of points meriting unusual

attention? The dash addict behaves as if he thought so, or as if he hoped the reader would think so. To an extent he is right; readers have to an extent been conditioned by fiction to pay closer attention to matter sprinkled with dashes. Beyond a certain point, though, he is wrong because readers finding that besprinkled matter is not worth the effort of examining it will soon turn to something else. Worse, he is contributing to their deconditioning so that metter with dashes, from his pen or someone else's, will not thereafter receive the extra attention that it might well merit: out upon him.

At one misguided time I worked briefly in an advertising agency so dominated by 'artists' that it showed clients not merely art roughs but what were called copy roughs, the artists' copy which would be tidied up by a copywriter of the client accepted it. Some time before the opening of the Carlton Centre one advertisement included a string of aspects of the centre with dashes for punctuation because the 'artist' could not punctuate. The client, did not care much for the illustration but loved the copy and it went into print untouched by literate hand. Evidently he was responding, either rationally or superstitiously, to the impression that dashes lent an air of urgency and importance. However, the device was not retained in later advertising as it would have been if the impression had been enduring, and it was not copied to any notable extent by other agencies as it would have been if it had enjoyed the impact its admirers counted on.

QUOTATIONS

Problems with quotation marks were exacerbated when some publications chose to use single quotation marks where double quotation marks had been traditional, and vice versa, further confusing sufferers who had picked up the habit of using single quotation marks round matter they wished to quote although it was not dialogue. (We are not here concerned with people who put quotation marks around matter that would normally be underlined for emphasis.) Problems arose because teachers conveyed the impression that narrative was the linguistic norm and dialogue a treacherous deviation to be signposted with plenty of punctuation, or wholly eschewed. Kingsley Amis says that of every twenty people who can spell, only one can punctuate, and I would add that of every twenty who can punctuate for general purpose only one can punctuate dialogue. This problem has been exacerbated by the introduction of the colon just before a quotation, though I had been taught there was a comma there.

What has happened, I think, is connected with what I call the ENS, the essentially numerate student, a group with two divisions. First there are the students with a bent for figures. Early in

life and for ever after they fall out of step with language that is written, because it does not behave as consistently as figures do. Second there are the students with a bent for words and away from figures. They are in a tiny minority and under peer-pressure to prefer figures to words. This pressure is greatly amplified by formidable examinations in subjects where accuracy on an arithmetical scale is pre-eminent (the number of chromosomes is either right or wrong) and literary flair will not compensate for inaccuracy (as of course it does in real life).

WRITING LETTERS

As a result we have a *society* that is EN, essentially numerate. Some days before I wrote this sentence a public realtions officer asked what I would charge to teach letter-writing to bank executives. Her masters wanted someone who would pop in for a set number of hours, something like four or six, and pop out again leaving all the executives able to write letters as well as I can (although they had spent something between ten and fourteen years in the formal education machine developing misconceptions, more years in professional misguidance, and even more years in some cases practising the resultant nonsense). I realise that that kind of thing can be done in mathematical fields: if a clerk cannot multiply you can make him learn tables by heart and then he can multiply. But writing a letter is potentially far more complex an operation. The bankers' formal education had unfitted them for writing letters. How profoundly and extensively wrong it must have been; how inarticulate must people feel in avocations less genteel than banking when their written output elicits contempt, ribaldry, ambiguity, and costs their firms business? I once met a sales director who privately conceded that his real function was the correction of his chairman's English; how much of that goes on? Writing letters is the best-paid work in writing; at a time when I was being paid R6 for a quarter-hour radio play of five pages I was getting R50 a page for writing DM, direct mail letters. What literary giant's ouput is worth R50 a page of 250 words on the open market these days?

THE DM FORMULA

As it happens there is a superstition that covers the writing of letters. The professional DM writer cannot be expected to understand the business of any client who might require a letter from him. Consequently his letters follow a strict formula, as it were regardless of the goods or service provided by the client but superbly related to the known nature of the typical reader of the letter, a nature standardised by advertising agency research and unfailingly reinforced by all media artifacts. I

could have taught the bankers the formula, I have often taught it to executives, but the English in which they would couch it would frustrate the intention if it were no better than the English they normally used in letters.

Consequently, teaching bankers or executives or any other prospective users of the DM formula about a small group of superstitions relating to their use of the written language for general purposes can be more productive than teaching them the DM formula. 'Keep the verbs apart, maximise punctuation, one page one thought' constitutes such a group.

Keep the verbs apart. Nouns and verbs being the most essential components of informative language (most conversation, most writing and most thought being concerned with people doing things) reason dictates that they should dominate a letter, and indeed I teach something of that sort in my writing courses as a whole. However, a DM shot by definition is not a letter really but only pretending to be a letter, so rules that would apply if it were a genuine letter ought, theoretically as well as in practice, to be eschewed and even reversed.

The chief intention of a genuine letter is to inform. The chief intention of DM letters differs: the shot fails if the recipient is changed only in being better informed. The shot has not succeeded unless the recipient takes action.

As a result of this great difference from genuine letters, the writer of DM isolates a single intention relating to the desired action (very often the recipient is to be motivated to invite a salesman to come and give advice) and as it were decorates a page of some seven paragraphs in which that single intention is embedded. The objective here is to give the recipient the impression that a letter has arrived though in fact an argument has. The intention is to be wrapped in verbiage that in itself is not to influence the recipient (it would be fatal if he were inclined to do many different things instead of the one). Almost all of the wording on the page is to be tangential, unproductive of action, not really even informative, so it ought to defy the linguistic conventions relating to relevance, productivity and informativeness. That is why what you probably call 'junk mail' goes rambling repetitively and ruminatively and frivolously and rhetorically round the subject - a very skilled master of the language, where good DM is being produced, is deliberately padding his hidden intent. Florid adjectival and adverbial components obviously are the likeliest aids.

Maximise punctuation. No writer earns his living from DM alone. In all his other paid writing, the author of the DM shot

minimises punctuation. But in DM which, to reiterate, does not conform to general rules because it is essentially bogus, pretending to be a letter when it is not a letter, various considerations make plentiful punctuation desirable. One consideration is the need, already mentioned, to delay the statement of verbs (and nouns too), though about seven paragraphs have to be devised. One way to help fill the space to be filled is a munificent display of punctuation.

One important element of punctuation in this context is space. The skilled DM writer puts twice the space after a comma or full stop that he uses in his other writing, puts spaces between the dots in an ellipsis and two spaces each side of it, puts a space or two each side of wording in parentheses, and uses several times more commas, ellipses, parentheses, dashes and double dashes than he would be found dead in a ditch having used in his other writing.

Without being able to prove it, I would guess that when a DM shot succeeds it conforms to the sort of DM convention revealed here, and when it fails it conforms more closely to the conventions obtaining in writing for general purposes. Conversely, where punctuation (among other factors) conforms in general writing to the conventions of DM, it is wrong. Slinging in handfuls of punctuation helps give the DM shot recipient an impression that the sender is relaxed, confident that his message will be perused because his message is so valuable (like his product or service), quite content to *waste* great proportions of the expensive paper he has bought (a trivial matter in a grandly successful business). There is none of the urgency of the huckster about. Clearly, this ambience of the DM shot differs greatly is from that of the usual letter, especially in business.

What occasionally happens, though, is that the recipient of some good DM shots will pick up, perhaps unconsciously, some communication style tips that he then applies in communications that are not DM and nothing like DM. Much more often, an advertising agency copywriter who is a clown, or a business executive or junior executive who is suddenly saddled with a communication task outside his experience, will get from DM some tips or a very substantial misconception which he then misapplies to an advertisement or other business communication.

One page one thought. This is the consideration compelling the DM writer to construct his unique jungle of procedures, so where a page is to contain more than one thought those procedures are not justified. As they permeate other forms of writing, how are they to be contended against? In my experience, by teaching DM writing. That is, students of mine who are never going to

write DM and may not even be called upon to evaluate DM shots are often encouraged to study DM more closely than it has been discussed here.

It is not difficult to show that what is right for DM is almost certain to be wrong by definition for whatever is not DM. That is the central didactic factor.

One of the most influential factors in this is the impression that DM is fun. As a general rule the good DM writer will try to make his letter, apart from the single intention, *pleasant to read* and that is all. All other considerations have been tried: argument, demonstration, reason ... now we do not want any of them, we want something else. We also want something that is as far as possible from despair, gloom, terror; and the factor furthest from those emotions is fun. A firm that is having fun is not heading for the sluices - or so the public assumes.

Indeed, I invite anyone to save DM shots over a few months (throwing away Mail Order material which is quite different) and sort them into two piles, the fun ones and the serious ones. Then consider which pile is more likely to be read, in the first place, and acted upon in the second. The fun ones will always turn out to be the professionally written ones, the more readable and the likelier to produce action; the serious ones will be written by businessmen rather than professional DM writers, and hence they will not be DM shots at all but genuine letters! (Their intention will be to inform, that is to say, whether or not action follows).

The fun often begins with some enclosure or attachment to the letter; I have seen a one cent coin, a metric measuring tape and an oversized paperclip used to compel the recipient to look at the letter with his facial muscles prepared to smile. But the language of the letter is the main fun element. An expert DM writer once told me, 'Think American', one of his contentions being that wherever the English language was used the only important comedians had American accents so readers were conditioned to believe things were funny if they were couched in American terms.

AMERICANISMS

In practice it will be found that if you cannot easily make jokes, you can get a jocular tone into language by deliberately recalling how an American would say what you need to say and putting that down: much of the time you will not be able to deceive an American into thinking you are American, but if your readers are not American who cares? You are likely to give them the idea

that you are writing lightly; it is fun. (Put it this way: do you ever write like an American *except* for fun?)

Naturally I am going on to submit that if a teacher intends to drive students away from Americanisms, away from redundancy, slang, imprecision (reason having failed) it can pay to give the students practice in consciously importing American or near-American into DM shots as exercises, and thus associating Americanisms with an extraordinary verbal phenomenon which by definition is different from their actual communication artifacts. It can be called the fox-flea principle. (When a fox has fleas, I have been told, it gets a bunch of sheep fleece in its jaws and backs slowly into a stream, tail-first. The fleas run up the fox's body to avoid drowning, and when they are all milling about on the fleece the fox lets it go floating away.) If writers can be induced to associate undesirable linguistic habits with a writing practice foreign to their likely requirements they can be helped to exclude those habits from their requirements.

Anymore, underway, alright should be among the usages the teacher gets the students to sprinkle throughout the DM exercise shot. If students can only be lured into associating these terms with DM, with the bogusness of affected Americanism, and with a letter that is not a letter, there may be hope that they will drop them from their real writing.

INTRODUCTIONS OF REPORTS

I could get out a memo saying: 'All trial stories are to start with the name of the court.' Some reporters would comply straight away, the sort who see memos and respond because obedience is habitual. Other staff would continue opening trial stories as they always had. In time, given insistence, almost all the staff would comply, and it would be interesting to see that almost none asked why the rule was made.

The rationale for the rule is that it will always prevent court reporters perpetrating the common solecism producing such untruths as 'Solomon Ngombo was fined R2 for riding a bicycle without lights in the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court today 'and' A retired busdriver was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in the Natal Supreme Court today' although neither the riding nor the jail service would occur in the places indicated. For years, for generations no doubt, sub-editors have been explaining this to court reporters, evidently without avail.

SUPERSTITIOUS PRACTICES

I have never heard why an adverb should not be followed by a hyphen, so far as I know, and I have no idea why split infinitives are deplored: but I never tolerate a hyphen after a word ending in 'ly', which means among other things that I take hyphens out of adjectival clauses containing adverbs though I do not know whether that is good or bad (or neither), and I have been known to offer students R20 if they catch me splitting an infinitive in twenty hours' lecturing - it shows them split infinitives are unnecessary and they believe what they are shown though they may not all always believe what they are told. More to my point, neither they nor I can traffic in explanations of something whose explanation I do not know. Doing things whose reason one does not know is superstition.

Someone who deliberately walks under a ladder that might more easily be walked round is particularly superstitious. I know a newspaper editor who ends a sentence with a preposition when it would be easier not to do this. The rest of us eschew such a solecism without knowing why it is a solecism. Most of us employ the cumbersome 'A bell, the clapper of which had fallen off...' rather than 'A bell whose clapper ...' because there is a superstition that 'whose' refers to the animate only. These are not mere solecisms; there is behind each of them a vague memory that the writer or speaker is obeying a rule which cannot be stated but to which attaches a penalty (which again is not to be recalled) - a fair definition of superstition outside the linguistic area too. Similarly one origin of verbal superstitions is deep-rooted confusion between grammar and good manners, between what shows one is stupid or ignorant or vicious on the one hand, and what shows we are non-U, lower class, dear Brutus, underlings. If this is so, the use of superstition as a teaching tool becomes clearer.

When I was young the word 'were' was pronounced 'ware' by the pretentious much as 'off' was pronounced 'orf' by them. I believe the reason for both affectations to have been related to military practice, and their decline to the decline in popular esteem of the military. That is, it used to be socially desirable to be known to consort with army officers or, down the social scale, those soldiers who gave other soldiers orders. On the parade-ground 'As you were' meaning 'Resume the stance you had before my last order' was more likely to be heard if the operative word, the word on which action was taken, the last word, contained an 'air' sound which carries better than an 'err' sound. Similarly 'orf' carries better than 'off' as in the

order 'March off' where the latter syllable is the executive one that has to be heard if the order is to be obeyed with soldierly uniformity.

It was not superstitious to say 'ware' and 'orf' if you were a soldier, nor if you wanted people to think you were or to think you associated with soldiers: superstition enters the picture when people with neither of those considerations in mind emulate the poeple who do have them in mind.

The greatest single cause of businessmen's failures to communicate is a superstition. They try to make their communications look or sound like those of lawyers as if they thought lawyers' language, lawyers' terminology, is what makes lawyers' letters safe from the risk of civil or criminal procedure. Any lawyer will confirm that when a civil or criminal case does arise from some written or spoken matter, the business-man's earnest attempt at legal language is often absurd, more dangerous or harmful than conversational language, quite apart from being less clear and even, where a friendly businesslike relationship actually existed, destructive of profitable warm sentiments.

SIX COMMON SOLECISMS

The six commonest solecisms are the omission of the comma after a parenthetical clause, mixed metaphors, detached participles, misplaced 'only' the otiose 'both' and 'who, which that' for 'whom' if we disregard bad spelling for the moment. If they alone were eliminated, the over-all quality of language usage would improve between 60 and 80 per cent.

Comma after parenthetical clause. The problem here is that the careless writer does not recognise parenthetical clauses and there is no point in trying to teach him enough grammar to ensure that he will do so. He does know what a comma is, however, and he knows the difference between two and one, so it is likely that a superstition related to those three factors will have more effect than a superstition that is not: 'Two commas save a bracket' might work. The conditioned writer might be induced in time to realise that a comma is required both sides of matter that might belong in a pair of brackets - he knows what brackets are and, strangely, what they are for. (There is no point at this stage in considering how many people omit the second bracket from a pair.)

Mixed metaphors. Here the main difficulty is that the faulty writers have demonstrated repeatedly that the word 'metaphor' is anathema for some reason, so our superstition must be devised

without mentioning it. On the face of it we should be able to cite a mixed metaphor so absurd that it, and all mixed metaphors, will thereafter be laughed out of existence. Unfortunately, this is the rational procedure. People who never mix metaphors have the sort of mind that responds well to that approach. Our problems is with the people who, by definition, do not so respond, so our approach must be different. We must campaign against mixed metaphors without naming them. 'Check colourful language in black and white' would not help sophisticated writers and speakers who know and use an array of verbal devices lending colour to their communications, but here we are dealing with people who by and large know and use only one in any volume, the metaphor. In the great majority of cases their use of a single metaphor is logical (if only because it is a cliché) so when they check its literal truth they will be pleased that the test is passed; they will pass the test often and they will therefore come to like the test. They use two or more metaphors more rarely, but the rest - Does it work out literally? - will usually expose the fault, and we may hope that they will get some self-satisfaction out of making the correction and consciously improving their communications.

Detached participles (danglers). Again there is no point in a superstition that names a part of speech. (Luckily the phrases that will give trouble here contain 'ing' and we may decide to tie the slogan to that. "Ing in, look out' might be effective. On the whole it is not found that formulations flawed in this way are typically flawed in another way, so if the sufferer is given plenty of practice with detached participles the desirable connection may be made.

Misplaced 'only'. Here is a useful phrase: 'Only is only too early'. It is designed to accommodate, if anything can, the tendency to insert 'only' into a sentence where it precedes and therefore affects terms it is not intended to affect. (The intended term appearing later in the sentence.) Obviously my phrase depends upon 'only' never appearing in a sentence too late, and within the parameters characteristic of superstitions of all sorts this is the case. 'Only is only too early' depends for its force upon a usage I detest. I once bought an old tape recorder very cheaply for R50 and a sympathetic colleague, seeking to express admiration for my shrewd purchase, commented: 'It can only be worth R50', meaning not that it could be worth no more but that is was worth every cent of that and even rather more. It is in this abused sense that my second 'only' appears, or in the sense of a formulation almost universal among the less competent female magazine writers: 'I shall be only too happy', which at the literal level is simple nonsense; it is impossible to be too happy.

The otiose 'both'. In theory the term is unobjectionable, but in practice it would be better classed as useless. 'Both the ministers and the congregations were present,' said a typical example and it was several paragraphs before the reader discovered there were three ministers and not two; this was very important in this instance and the mistaken impression in the reader's mind was created wholly by 'both' which, as is almost always the case, could have been omitted. That is to say, 'both' does not often create ambiguity, but on the other hand it almost never amplifies information usefully. If speakers and writers get into the habit of never using it, they will lose nothing worth having but will eliminate a prospective cause of trouble. Superstition, then: 'Never say 'both'.' I have been following this precept for twenty-five years, writing professionally every day of it, and never felt the lack. Of course I can use it if I wish to. ('Do you take milk or sugar?' - 'Both.') But I have been whipping it out of other people's copy all that time, and never had to put it back.

Substitutes for 'whom'. Determined not to recognise that they do not know 'who' from 'whom', the majority of writers these days have ditched the distinction! We get 'Two of the convicts that escaped have been recaptured.' It is not that people cannot use 'who' correctly almost all the time, it is that they have no confidence in being able to use 'whom'. So if we resurrect 'whom 'whom' alone we may look to find 'who' sneaking back into its proper role or roles. 'Who did it to whom?' embodies the key consideration, in that 'who' is seen there as active and 'whom' as passive, the entity to which something was done. In my own experience ambiguity does not arise if writers simply regard 'who' as active and 'whom' as passive and pay no further attention.

HEADLINES

There are plenty of headline writers who, lacking any rational procedure for composing headlines, superstitiously persist in trying to make every story accept one of the headlines that has been acceptable in the past, or some part or parts of such a headline, without conscious reference to why such headlines were appropriate or to the evidence that appropriateness is a factor. I have known an otherwise perfectly able sub-editor obliged to leave a newspaper because he always wrote posters, even where there was space for a headline more colourful and discursive and the story called for a colourful and discursive headline. I have known another sub-editor reduced to laying out pages because he always looked into a story for some current headline cliche, and was unable to write a headline if such a factor did not appear. For example any story mentioning Dr Andries Treurnicht would lead him to compose a headline including the usage 'Dr No' even

where Treurnicht should not have been referred to in the headline and even when he was working for a newspaper that did not employ the term 'Dr No'. He was similarly addicted to the term 'Iron Lady' if a story mentioned Mrs Thatcher, regardless of whether her noted rigidity was relevant to the main datum of the story and even regardless of whether someone other than Mrs Thatcher was chiefly connected with the main datum.

This sort of thing is very extensive. There are subs who believe the major datum ought always to be rejected when writing a headline, as they have heard that readers do not care to encounter the same data in head, introduction, strap and as it may be caption. They reject the major datum even when there is no strap or caption. There are subs who always write an allusive, tangential, provocative headline. There are occasions when the reader will relish such a headline after reading the story. These occasions are extremely rare so the use of this headline device should be equally rare, but the addiction persists because these subs do not know that the effect of the device depends on the head being read after the story is read. There are advertising agencies which on principle refrain from dealing with the product's main selling quality. Their staffs know that many effective sales campaigns have been based on just such a risky decision, notably when a product was having major problems, but they do not appreciate that, in principle, the main selling quality should be emphasised and that the eccentric proceeding is for exceptional cases. Precisely that attitude - facts are dull, words can be fun - ruins many journalistic presentations too and, worse, contributes to the development of a public that, respecting facts, consequently despises newspapers and the allied media.

FASHIONS

It is possible to reach many people by persuading them that what you want them to do will make them more fashionable, that what you want them to stop doing is making them unfashionable. I once advised a fiction student to use the first person singular for an array of good reasons which she accepted and then did not act upon, explaining eventually that she felt embarrassed writing 'I' often. Of course it was very common in the past for children to be taught that saying 'I' very often was bad manners. It might or might not have been added that if one avoids saying 'I' (as I have just done by writing 'one') one is forced to get the conversation off one's own doings and thoughts and on to those of the other person or people in the conversation and that, certainly, is good manners, good morals, good for business too. Evidently, today's British upper classes are enabled to talk about themselves much of the time, without feeling uncomfortable as

'I,I,I...' would make them feel, by saying 'one' instead but meaning 'I'. And my fiction student did not feel awkward about writing 'I' because it was bad manners, or immoral or bad for business, but because it was non-U.

COMMAS

One of the most damaging commas is the one after the introductory, probably adverbial, clause. Although the incompetent writer lacks the most important element in short-sentence writing, the capacity to plan each sentence and each sequence so that no sentence gets out of hand and keeps picking up supplements, he (it is slightly commoner among men than among women writers) tries to give the reader the impression that short sentences are being offered and so slips in a comma as soon as possible as if a comma ended a sentence. The fact that it does not, a full stop does, has no effect on this kind of comma addict who, I believe, is demonstrating with sprinklings of otiose commas a more profound malaise, a complete lack of understanding of punctuation.

This is made more evident when, as usually happens, the plethora of commas compels the sufferer to decide, where commas are necessary as around parenthetical matter, that they would be too numerous and the reader would mind this. He then uses dashes or, more rarely, brackets. Much of the trouble with dashes is that their occasional use - say among journalists who write brief reports of fewer than ten paragraphs most of the time - certainly does lend an air of urgency, of drama, of drive and pace. Getting this impression from his own otherwise pallid copy, as well as from other sources such as advertising from agencies where copywriters are poorly regarded and hence grammar and punctuation as well as syntax are disregarded or deliberately abused for the sake of urgency's appearance, the comma addict may well become the dash addict. He now inserts dashes where commas used to be, as well as dropping in commas gratuitously, and acquires a conviction that his output has become more forceful.

CAPTIONS

Yet another journalistic superstition has survived forty years of intemperate condemnation to my personal knowledge. In stickups (headlines over pictures) or in captions or in headlines over captions for pictures featuring a monkey, a dog or a snake, the superstition compels the hurried, stupid and/or wholly superstitious reporter or sub-editor to begin with the thoughts, respectively, 'Monkey business...Doggone it...Snakes alive' on the principle, as he would submit if interrogated, that phrases from the vernacular have sure and quick appeal in these typographical circumstances - which is perfectly true. Questioned a

little further he would never have any useful reaction to the reminder that none of those three phrases is part of the vernacular. They are never heard, never seen apart from the newspaper applications. Long ago, perhaps generations ago, and far away, perhaps half a world distant, and restrictedly, perhaps in small and wholly American sub-groups, no doubt they enjoyed a brief and soon socially unacceptable currency, but the modern user's weirdly inappropriate justification for their continued appearance is illogical, superstitious - like all the other instances discussed in this paper.