

REVIEWS

Anthony Burgess. *Language Made Plain*. London: Flamingo (Fontana), 1984. Paperback R7,95.

The 1984 impression of Anthony Burgess's *Language Made Plain* (Flamingo) labours under inescapable limitations in that it was first published in 1964 and last revised in 1975. In consequence, it cannot reflect recent changes, either in English itself or in linguistic thought and fashion. There is a superficial chapter on de Saussure and on Chomsky, but no reference to the waning of Chomsky's star and the emergence of new morphological and syntactic approaches. While fortified with traditional staples, the bibliography, too, is somewhat out-of-date.

Nevertheless, the book, as a whole, does deal with the fundamentals of linguistic study, and, in so doing, provides a respectable, yet lively approach for the beginner, and, more especially, the layman prepared tentatively to explore strange territory.

Burgess says so himself. In his first preface he writes: 'I address myself also, as a former teacher (both in England and abroad), to teachers of languages who feel that every pupil, in whatever kind of post-primary school, should have some basic awareness of the total linguistic process and not just a knowledge of particular languages. ... In many ways, this book is a primer for amateurs by an amateur. It does not dig deep, and it is far from scholarly. But it does contain the essentials, the irreducible minimum of information about language

which any person who writes, reads, listens to the radio, or watches television needs to possess.'

In his 1975 preface, Burgess adds: 'My chief aim is unchanged - to persuade the ordinary reader to be interested in those aspects of language which are closest to his own needs, especially the need of finding a painless way into the learning of foreign tongues'.

The book falls into two parts: 'Language in General', and 'Languages in Particular'. The first part is devoted mainly to English and includes comment on phonetics, speech, the alphabet, spelling and its reform, words, sentences, and the science of linguistics.

In his section on phonetics, Burgess has chosen the traditional path, and has decided not to deviate in terms of a more modern approach: that of phonemic opposition. In this he is justified. For the lay reader rather than the scholar, traditional explanations are as valuable, and, if untainted by the intrusion of jargon, somewhat easier than what has since developed. On the other hand, the comment on intonation and on dialects is too thin, while the references to pronunciation can, in part, be misleading because of a failure to allow sufficiently for recent sound changes.

Ending his chapter on sentences, Burgess rightly if routinely remarks: 'There is a satisfactory *boniness* about grammar which the flesh of sheer vocabulary requires before it can become vertebrate and walk the earth. But to study it for its own sake, without relating it to function, is utter madness.'

To that we can well cry: 'Amen!'. But this expostulation can be extended by adding: 'And to try to assess literature without an adequate knowledge of language is lunacy!'. As a novelist, Burgess is, after all, a representative of this conviction.

In the second section of his book, Burgess includes two very sensible chapters on the learning of foreign languages. He also turns to the history of English and to the descendants of Latin; he includes brief chapters on Russian and Malay (dictated more by his interests and career than by the needs of the book; and he ends with some comment on international languages and on the future of English.

It can be argued that, in approach, Burgess is too bright and breezy; that, in catering for popular taste, he capers about too much. Certainly his 'The Russian language is mad about

palatalisation' is a sentence that rivals A.L. Rowse's unfortunate remark in his *Bosworth Field*: 'At once, humans being what they are - miracles began to be worked at his tomb like mad ...'.

In some of his examples, Burgess tries too hard. Illustrating the aspiration of unvoiced plosives in English, he says: 'One of my Lancashire friends, who talked of going to a pub to drink some pale ale with his pal Percy, expended a lot of breath in the process'. On the other hand, we should remember Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* and Philip Quarles at Port Said before we denounce the statement: '... a Port Said dragoon will know at least ten languages (I met one who knew fifteen, as well as three English dialects)'.

More important, Burgess is no docile swallower of linguistic pronouncements. Spearing the definitions of traditional grammar is easy; to challenge Bloomfield demands far more. But Burgess is able successfully to point out the limitations of Bloomfield's contentions that a word is 'a minimum free form', and that 'a free form could be recognised by its ability to stand as a complete utterance - granted, of course, a context of other words or of pure situation which would make the meaning of the isolated free form quite clear'. But Burgess is too ready to assume that contexts necessarily clarify the meaning of words, Edith Sitwell's 'Martha-coloured scabious' being a robust refutation of this daydream.

Then, discussing the separation of words into autosemantic and synsemantic, Burgess asks and answers the questions: 'But can a word really possess meaning outside a context? Are not perhaps all words synsemantic?'.

If Burgess enjoys his romp with words, he is as good when relating language to literature. It can be argued that, because of its oddities, a recent novel of his, *Enderby's Dark Lady or No End to Enderby*, could mean the literary end of Burgess. But, as an author of some repute, he usually knows what he is about when he refers to fellow writers, even if he is both wrong and right when he says: 'One feels strongly that practitioners of literature should at least show an interest in the raw material of their art. Very few do. That awareness of the nature of sound which opens Nabokov's *Lolita* is something rare in modern fiction ... It is no accident that this analytic acuteness of ear should be found in one of the most subtle and musical prose-writers of our time.'

Despite its limitations, *Language Made Plain* is a stimulating introduction which, if suitable for the layman, could be a light auxiliary book for the university student who is not digging too deeply into language.

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J. Alswang and A. van Rensburg. *An English Usage Dictionary for South African Schools*. Johannesburg: Perskor, 1984. R25,00.

Although many fine dictionaries are available, there is always room for another, provided that it makes a positive contribution to the language competence of the community at which it is directed. At first glance this new compilation seems an interesting possibility, at least as a supplement to the standard works usually prescribed in schools.

Close examination reveals, however, not only a lack of the meticulous accuracy so essential in any work of reference, but also an underlying invalidity that can only be detrimental to the development of linguistic and intellectual sensitivity in the pupils for whose use the dictionary is intended. The introductory 'Guide to Users' claims that 'This dictionary enables you to find, in an easy three-column layout, the correct spelling, pronunciation, meaning and usage of words in good, contemporary South African English.' It may seem petty to point out that the layout is, in fact, in two columns and that 'clear' or 'convenient' would have been a more appropriate adjective than 'easy' in this context. This imprecision however sets the tone for much that is to come.

The following is a sample of the content, taken from the first page of the actual dictionary section:

abacus (pl = abacuses)
a frame with beads for calculating
or for teaching counting

Chinese businessmen
use the abacus {n}
(a-bə-kis);