

# EDUCATION AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE MASS MEDIA

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## 1. THE IMPACT OF THE ELECTRONIC REVOLUTION

The effect on the English language of the electronic revolution in the South African Press has been damaging, and will be ever more so if academics maintain their traditional distance. Scholarly attention to the impact of this revolution could do much to guide aspiring and despairing journalists. Academic consideration is especially warranted because, as teachers have complained for generations, mass media usages afflict the vernacular.

To take only one insidious example, the visual display terminal (VDT) revolution has modified the newspaper tradition of the inverted triangle in which data have been disclosed strictly in descending order of importance. The sting in the tail beloved of short-story writers has consequently been added lately to the large body of fiction technique that has been infiltrating journalism as well as other communication professions, including education, just as television fiction has conditioned the public. The connection between this linguistic development and VDT is a direct and clear one. In the 'hot metal' days now gone, a 'stone sub' (as the editorial's man in the printing works) did not always have time to read a story before cutting it when the allocated space proved to be exceeded by the actual length; he then cut from the bottom, paragraph by paragraph, and journalists have conventionally prepared their reports with this procedure in mind. Whatever survived cutting had at least in theory to be journalistically viable. Today the sub-editors always know exactly how long a story will be, and no stories need to be cut 'on the stone', because the machine gives exact measurements. The inverted triangle had many attractions for communications outside

journalism too, connecting for example with the age-old dilemma of whether to disclose your conclusion after or before your evidence (after if your audience is captive, before if it is not). But young journalists in particular have already begun relying on the sub-editors to leave intact a strong tagline and 'renewal of interest' elements, traditionally a magazine technique. That is to say, sequence, which may be the most important single aspect of expression, is fundamentally affected.

The central misfortune, however, for which only the concern of academics can ensure a cure, was that as the print Press revolution escalated in South Africa the shortage of sub-editors, always worrisome, became critical and on some newspapers desperate. With the transfer of the setting function from printers to editorial staff, and the improvements in productivity this facilitated, the demand for subs increased steeply. There never have been, in any country, capable subs 'walking the streets' and looking for a job. A layer of revise editors was consequently inserted in some staffs between inexperienced subs and the printing operation. In practice they subbed, because hardly any of the new personnel could be counted on confidently to get more of the total job right than the length - which the machines established. Every reader who can spell, punctuate and recall basics of cyclopaedic knowledge will have noticed that the utmost dedication of revise editors failed to save some South African newspapers from a standard of language that subs traditionally would not have tolerated. Those outside observers, however, are unlikely to have perceived as clearly as revise editors the low standard of such other journalistic criteria as avoidance of defamation, accommodation of laws bearing peculiarly upon the Press (of which this country has more than 100), and adherence to in-house style. Lay observers, in any case, would not have detected, in the third place, the neophyte sub's failures in respect of printing criteria that are now an editorial function.

Where did the new subs come from, and why were they not good, and how is it in any sense the academic's fault? Some 20 years ago I faced the fact that there was no proper training procedure for getting into the mass media the boy stamped 'Good at English, wants to write', just as there had not been when I first trained, and foreseeably never will be. I began teaching, whenever and wherever this was legal, the techniques of the thirteen mass media I had practised. When advertising my first sub-editing course I said, as I still believe, that people connected with teaching would be most welcome as prospective subs. Of more than forty students in my first intake about one-third evidently were or had been teachers or lecturers. None made it; so great is the gulf between academic English and the language skills required on the editorial staffs. Of the three major areas of subbing technique -

linguistic, journalistic, mechanical - the young subs who someday will dominate the mass media handled the last best, the second poorly and the first worst.

This is the academic's indaba: on the one hand he is worried by current and predictable standards of language, yet, on the other, it is he who is failing to equip these people to handle the language. There seems to me to be, for one thing, a vigorous, widespread and quite wrong-headed emphasis in academic English lessons upon imagination. I try in my craft-writing courses to shift the emphasis on to control, the optimum relationship between language and purpose. I have been teaching, for example, that newspaper material is to be amended by the sub only if it is untrue, unclear, unfair or unnecessary; but the new breed of sub has tended to accommodate his own opinion - 'That's how I feel about it,' said one Rhodes graduate (who soon moved to a better-paying alternative profession).

In a children's book designed to extend vocabulary I saw a picture of an airport. A passenger had just descended to the tarmac. 'Why do you think he has come here?' asked the book, in a formulation I suspect is common. 'I think he has come here because I can see him here,' is the right answer. The right QUESTION should be perhaps, 'Why, do you think, has he come here?' and I should like children to be taught to respond, 'I cannot answer without more information.' This would be even more desirable outside the mass-media jobs. Employers penalise imagination that is poorly related to inexorable contexts. 'Communication is the deployment of data, good writing the skilled deployment of data, and the creation of data is mere poetry.' In social contexts, too, the sort of imagination the present emphasis seems calculated to encourage will unfit youngsters and adults for the sort of intercourse the mass media and the pop culture foster. It is no good saying they ought to foster something else; they do not respond to 'ought to' but to demonstrable popular requirements. If those are contemptible, who inculcated or permitted them? In this respect, as in many others, the inability of teachers of English and other subjects to relate their lessons to the didactic effects of the mass media must help to handicap their charges and discredit education in the youngsters' eyes. The gap became more manifest when the massive technological advance of VDT enabled substantively inarticulate youngsters to present their solecisms to larger sectors of society, swamping on some newspapers the ability of more capable editorial staff to cope in the shortened time available.

It is more important than it ever was, though far less important than it will become, for teachers of every sort and particularly of English to understand mass-media language practices. Existing

courses in communication, standard text-books, and academic procedures based on incomplete understanding of everyday usage are seen by media practitioners as inappropriate. There would be no demand for my own courses otherwise. A case in point: how is it possible that, after all these years, this is the first South African article you have seen treating intimately even a fraction of the impact of electronic editing on the language of the mass media?

## 2. THE MOBILITY OF MASS-MEDIA USAGES

I have found that a convenient way of making students more aware of the language used in the media (particularly if the students are essentially numerate) is by encouraging them to award marks out of nine for the following three factors: 1) the extent to which usages have entered the media; 2) their durability there; and 3) the extent to which they have penetrated the vernacular (as represented by people interviewed on 'Radio Today'). Thus, 'hopefully' in the sense of 'it is hoped' might score 748, as it has been very widespread in the media (7), is less widespread now (4) because the brighter operatives campaign against it, but is almost universal in the vernacular (8) and recognised by recent dictionaries. 'Hit at' in the sense of 'hit out at' would score 880 because it is almost universal for headline use in this country's Press (8), has been so for a long time (8), and is never found in the vernacular (0). If a large number of words, perhaps including those that follow in this discussion, are revaluated by a class in this numerical way at six-monthly intervals for some years, students will become aware that some usages are irresistible. Awareness itself is the objective.

Here are some current usages worth watching:

AS FAR AS ... IS CONCERNED. Some civil servants and businessmen interviewed on 'Radio Today' use this essentially meaningless term six times in their three minutes. There is a growing tendency to use the first part of the phrase without the second part, particularly among people who have not noticed that anyone ever does that. Score - 218 (Little used by the media, declining there, almost universal in the vernacular.)

ABOUT TO. Replacing 'prepared to' with no surviving implication of imminence, as in 'I'm not about to give up my guitar.'<sup>127</sup>

APPEARS AS IF. Replacing 'appears that'. 426

AIMED AT. Replacing 'intended to'. 656

AT ALL. Redundant as in 'Did you want to speak to him, at all?' (universal in the negative, 'He has no hair at all'). 117

BACK AND FORTH. Replacing 'to and fro'. 999

COMPRISING OF. Replacing 'comprising'. 658

CONVINCE. Replacing 'persuade'. 968

DAMAGE OF R50 000. Pure journalese (as against 'Damage costing R50 000 to make good'). 994

DECIMATE. Replacing 'devastate'. 888

ENORMITY. Replacing 'immensity' even where evil is not involved. 666

FAMILY MEMBERS. Replacing 'relatives'. 777

HAD TO. Replacing 'were to' as in 'If you had to come home and find you'd been burgled...'. 116

HIKE. Replacing 'rise' though it is the same size as 'rise' in English (but one character shorter than the American equivalent, 'raise'). Banned by at least one paper. 858

IMPORTANTLY. Replacing 'important' as in 'The curate, and more importantly the vicar, must attend.' 777

INCLUDING. Replacing 'comprising'. 768

INFER. Replacing 'imply'. 768

LIKE. Replacing 'as' even where the ensuing entities are included. 326

LOSE OUT. Replacing 'lose' (and 'win out' for 'win'). 999

MEANT TO. Replacing 'supposed to'. 548

MEDIA. Replacing 'medium'. 888

ON. Replacing almost all other prepositions. 885

OVERLY. Replacing 'over-'. 226

SET TO. Replacing 'probably will'. 881

TEND TO. Replacing 'attend to'. 226

WHICH. Replacing 'who' or 'whom' as in 'Four of the convicts which escaped were recaptured' (occasionally 'that'). 446

Jornalese is unique among avocational jargons in seeking to promote the understanding of the general public. When it does this it is unexceptionable in print, and in other mass media. But it often appears, sadly, in the vernacular because members of the masses extensively conditioned by the media fear that more orthodox formulations would delay or even prevent understanding.

Teachers therefore have reason to complain, but there is much to be said for journalese in the right places, and they need to know

about these if misuse is to be systematically reduced: the price of literacy is informed vigilance.

Cablese provides a case in point. Because cable companies have long enjoyed a large income from the Press, they have tolerated contractions and neologisms which the sub-editor receiving the messages was expected to convert to clear English before the readers saw them. 'Racedriver reportedly Durbanwards presently hopefully speedliest' would cost the newspaper the price of six words, and the sub's pencil was expected to make that 'The racing driver is reported to be going now to Durban and it is hoped he will be the fastest' (20 words). However, a hasty, careless or inexperienced sub-editor tends to leave some of the cablese intact so that it inadvertently gets into print. That is how 'hopefully' began its rise to become the standard alternative to 'I hope' or 'It is hoped' (soon popular among academics, with civil servants close behind); and now 'presently' and 'currently' have succeeded 'now' in the vernacular among speakers and writers who run no risk, as cables frequently did, of a single corruption changing 'now' or 'not' and reversing the sense of a message.

Journalists do not deal in journalese among themselves - there is another jargon for that, and here again leakages into the vernacular can occur. Traditionally, an editor or a manager ordering that a story had to appear regardless of its intrinsic news value wrote 'Must' at the top. When the story was mentioned by the operatives you would get 'Where's that editor's must?' so that a new noun was created for this specialised internal application. Then a careless, inexperienced or rushed columnist, casting around for a superlative less hackneyed than his others, called a 'resort' or a 'record' or a 'revue' a must; public relations personnel eagerly embraced it, and the usage gradually penetrated the vernacular so that it appeared in print and speech even where the user was not careless or rushed or inexperienced.

Of course, there are other ways journalistic usages escape into the vernacular, but there is, on the other hand, a journalistic procedure whereby usages can be restricted and even killed. There was a time when 'That's strictly for the birds' was heard or read daily, but now its use is limited. About 18 years ago the then editor of *The Star* called a halt to headlines, captions and body matter using that expression. Although it had once enlivened many a dull passage, it had become over-used, and lost its erstwhile impact. The editor simply added 'strictly for birds' to the paper's list of banned usages: it was not just relegated to occasional pointed appearances, but disappeared as if it had never been - not only from one newspaper, or from a newspaper group, but from everyday speech and writing.

In an ideal world there would be regular intercourse between academics and the mass media so that deplored usages would go on to the banned lists. Teachers should understand media practice to the extent of realising, for example, that certain headline words do not get into body copy, and certain body copy words do not get into the vernacular. Because it contains two 'thin' letters, the word 'hit' is popular in headlines and has come to replace not only 'hits out at' but even that term's successor 'hit at', although neither 'hit at' nor 'hit' in the exclusive headline sense has leaked into either body copy or the vernacular. As it is an unusually illuminating example it is worth considering further. 'Martin Luther Hits Out at Pope' might be the headline matter; 'Martin Luther Hits At Pope' has long been acceptable headline style though never appearing elsewhere in print, and never being heard; and 'Martin Luther Hits Pope' is conceivable despite its ambiguity, in an ill-conducted paper's headline, and still will never get into the body copy or, of course, the vernacular.

A celebrated commentator on the language has suggested that one-third of the words we use are redundant, adding, 'and if I had my way it would be a half'. Earlier G.K. Chesterton pointed out that Americanisms from the hurried land of the go-getter tended to be lengthier than the English usage (e.g. 'elevator' is longer than 'lift', and 'apartment' than 'flat'). Ostensibly redundant matter may well attract the attention of a public conditioned to associate brevity with unimportance, but academics will have to become more actively involved if media operatives are to disabuse readers, listeners, and viewers while they themselves are still trying to learn.