

REVIEWS

Fritz Spiegl. *Keep Taking the Tabloids*. London: Pan Books, 1983. 181 pp. R4,95.

This book, as its blurb neatly puts it, takes us to a place 'where everyone is HITTING OUT, SLAMMING or TONGUE-LASHING, where prices SOAR as standards of English PLUMMET; where every ambulance is making a MERCY DASH, every over-heated chip pan a FIRE DRAMA – and where they never eat or drink but MUNCH and QUAFF'.

The basis of the book is a collection of cuttings to which the author has devoted more than 20 years. Seen full-frontal, as the journalists say, it is an astonishing array – on the one hand disturbing, not to say alarming; on the other (mainly by inadvertence) exceedingly funny.

Mostly, I imagine (how Mr Spiegl would despise that 'adverbial opener!'), the book will be read for its entertainment value, which is great. But, despite the wit that sugars the pill, the author is a deadly serious devotee of English, which he began to learn as a child refugee from the Nazis.

On the analogy of the convert who is usually more fanatical than anyone reared in the faith, perhaps this is why he sometimes sails close to the perilous shores of pedantry. Perhaps, too, it explains why his judgment on matters of usage is not always beyond query.

Nevertheless, he makes several points often overlooked by both those who excoriate and those who defend the slam-bang style of the popular press.

The first is that, so far as headlines are concerned, this style is largely confined to British newspapers and those developed (as in South Africa) under British influence. 'Most serious foreign newspapers,' says Mr Spiegl, 'have retained the factual, non-sensational multi-decker headline which English ones appear to have all but abandoned: French, German, Dutch and Scandinavian papers (even American ones, and they invented sensational journalism) give their readers informative headlines of moderate size that reflect the content of the text they surmount (sic).'

Two further developments cause concern. The British 'quality' newspapers are more and more adopting the headline style of the tabloids; and — a more insidious process — idioms that could conceivably be justified in headlines because of the need for brevity drift inexcusably into the body copy.

A prime example of the latter, in South African newspapers, is the persistent use of 'Info' for 'Information' in references to the scandal of that name.

There are few tabloid newspapers in South Africa. Most are of the broadsheet format and, in British terms, hover uneasily between the 'quality' and the 'popular' categories. Yet, in both headlines and body copy, most are sadly infected with the stylistic horrors that Mr Spiegl associates with the tabloids.

Among the worst characteristics of this style is undoubtedly the piling up of words behind a name or designation: 'Dingo mother's baby...'; 'Oven ready chicken producer John Williams...'; 'Whooping cough vaccine victim Kevin Capper...'; 'Bone marrow boy's funeral...'; 'Avon husband will riddle'.

Do I hear the angels weeping?

Then there is the 'knee-jerk pun', often lavatorial or feebly salacious: 'Flush of success'; 'Bottoms up'; 'The bare facts'. Yet not all punning headlines are dreary: what about 'Sir Adrian bolted' or 'Dr Spahler will maintain Swiss role'?

Mr Spiegl does in fact acknowledge and reproduce some witty headlines. Of these the most famous is probably the Guardian's, over a report of a bad performance of *Antony and Cleopatra*: 'The biggest asp disaster in the world'.

A special genre is the headline that could be funny either by accident or design. Of these my personal favourite is 'Peer's historic seat burnt: ancient pile destroyed', which I culled from the Daily Telegraph many years ago and carried with me in my wallet, with others of the same kind, until the paper crumbled.

The author launches a one-man war (you see how infectious the lingo is?) against the acronym. There are, of course, too many of them and some border on the absurd: 'WWOOF (Working week-ends on organic farms)'; 'CALM (Custody action for Lesbian mothers)'.

But in itself the acronym is a useful device, and all Mr Spiegl's withering scorn will not make it go away.

It is true that acronyms are much favoured by trendy movements. Perhaps this is really why Mr Spiegl, who gives evidence of strong Right-wing views, detests them so inordinately.

Worthier of support is his aversion to 'critical' for 'critically ill', the abominable 'overly' for 'over' (as in 'overly impressed') and the use of 'over' in headlines like 'Councillors walk out over typists'.

I had thought that the last-mentioned phenomenon, often found in South African newspapers, was a case of Afrikaans influence ('Oor ek arm is, verag hulle my'). Not so, it appears from this book; but that does not make it any more acceptable.

Clichés are an obvious target for the author. In the tabloids, he points out, every battle is 'pitched', banknotes are always 'crisp', cigars are always 'puffed'. 'Not a pair of ordinary, or even weak, binoculars are to be had; they are never less than "powerful".' He might have added that every suburb in which a sensational murder takes place is either 'exclusive' or 'sleazy'.

But he surely goes too far in rejecting such phrases as 'committed Christian', 'lapsed Catholic', 'practising homosexual' and 'confirmed bachelor'. These, properly used, embody significant distinctions.

His objection to 'copycat' on the grounds that cats are independent creatures that don't slavishly imitate the actions of others seems to show an unfamiliarity with English idiom. He dismisses as 'archaisms' such phrases as 'petticoat government', because few women now wear petticoats; 'red light district', because brothels no longer display red lights; and 'estranged wife' with the mysterious argument that the word 'estranged' is 'hardly ever encountered in everyday speech'.

Much of the English language would be discarded if Mr Spiegl had his way with it and tossed out all the 'archaisms'. It amuses me that children, most of whom have never seen a lavatory with an overhead cistern, talk about 'pulling the chain'; but should they be bullied into talking about 'depressing the lever'?

It is odd that the author, who can be so witty, can also be so humourless. To me, and probably to many other simple souls on my intellectual level, 'granny-power' as a headline term for militant old ladies is harmless and mildly amusing. But not to Mr Spiegl. Perhaps it is the Teuton in him.

JAMES McCLURG

Braj B. Kachru (ed.) *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*, Pergamon, 1983. 358pp. Paperback.

In his Introduction, the editor of this collection of essays claims that 'this is the first attempt to integrate and address provocative issues relevant to a deeper understanding of the forms and functions of English.' The statement is questionable. Nonetheless, the book is a useful reminder of the language problems we have been living with in South Africa since the 19th century.

Much of the terminology in these essays is heavily linguistic. For instance, Jack C. Richards surveys the code-switch of indigenization in the lect shifting of English in Singapore English. Nativization results in a continuum of verbal mechanisms that can be employed for the same communicative/functional effect among Singaporeans. A morpheme addition sees the introduction of a final sentence-particle *la*, which probably is of Hokkien origin, into constructs such as the following:

That depend on you *la*, if you want to take off one day, or your office give you, that up to you *la*.

(p. 163)

Peter Strevens discusses lectal choice, where such choice is made between acrolect, mesolect, and basilect, as resulting in a global fiction of English and pleads for a unitary fiction of the idiolect in order to isolate INTER and INTRA types of IFE usage in a more localized form. His discussion of discorsal rules would, perhaps, have been given more immediacy with *exempla*. Tacit fossilization is not restricted to the non-English speaker, after all.

In general, the essays can be divided into studies of English as a second language or as a restructuring element in Eastern and African countries. The influence of English on Japanese, which is discussed by James Stanlaw, is food for thought. The intermingling of the two languages began some 300 years ago and was accelerated