

THE STATE OF ENGLISH

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We used to say that England and America were two countries separated by the same language. That's no longer true. They are now two countries culturally united by the same gobbledegook. If some outlandish goblin in New York perpetrates some uncouth assault on the English language to-day, then all Britain and Australia and South Africa will be aping him tomorrow. 'Hopefully', as a foreigner's translation of the German 'hoffentlich', was never heard in Britain - or here - ten years ago. Now no trendy ass can open his mouth without prefixing his inarticulacies with Hopefully; or (of course) 'basically'; or 'regretfully', or 'arguably'. Americans are not taught French as a matter of course, so to them it seemed natural and obvious to suppose that the adjective from the French 'prestige' should be 'prestigious'; in which they were no less mistaken than when they took the French 'expertise' to mean the same as the English 'expertness'.

By now American has become totally unEnglish even in its constructions, largely through the enormously disproportionate influence of advertisers; so that now we have *easy-to-read books* for children and *ready-to-bake food* for their mothers. This agglutination of words into compound adjectives is a purely German thing, completely at variance with the genius of English, which naturally expressed it as *books easy to read*, or *food ready to bake*. Until recently such hyphenated adjective phrases were very limited: would-be, all-embracing, long-drawn-out; but now there's no limit to them. 'Transparent' has now become 'see-through', 'resembling' becomes 'look-alike', sheets or shirts

that don't need ironing become 'no-iron' sheets, a man of action becomes 'action-orientated', an accident isn't caused by bad weather, it's 'weather-related'. Even people who might be expected to know better have adopted the fashion without even noticing that it's barbarous. The publishers of an encyclopaedia offer you 4 000 *hard-to-find biographies*, and a dictionary draws your attention to its concern for *hard-to-say words*. In *strife-stricken* Belfast, the Provos or whatever they are declare *no-go areas*; and 'situations' of all sorts arise, like *on-going situations*, *no-growth* or even *negative-growth situations*. We can no longer do anything weekly, or monthly, or regularly, but on a *weekly basis*, on a *regular basis*. No event, great or small, is ever simply *first*: it's got to be the *first-ever*, or the *biggest-ever*. And it can't just *never* happen, it *never-ever* happens.

Of course the popular press is mainly to blame for both the invention and the dissemination of all this barbarous stuff. Within America itself the fashion spread right from the time of the slick, smarty-boots tabloids; and when it had established itself as the accepted way to write English there, the two weekly news magazines exported it all over the rest of the world; so that it came to be accepted as the proper way to write English everywhere else. And it wasn't long before the radio, and even more the television, were doing it too; so that by now practically all publicly-disseminated English has become synonymous with journalistic; which is to say, by definition, bad, illiterate, alien English. Who can wonder that English is in its present state when the only form of it ever heard is in the hands and mouths of ill-educated journalists with no other models of prose than each other's? Evelyn Waugh once described his feelings on reading Stephen Spender's works, both poetic and prose, as similar to those of one watching the antics of a chimpanzee with a priceless Ming or Sèvres vase in its grasp. A fortiori, the vessel of our flexible and noble English language has got into the hands of monkeys all over the world. Nobody reads the older, decent English any more; nothing but ephemeral journalistic trash; so that less and less has the present generation any means of judging how far their language has deteriorated in this century. You can, if you are interested enough - and old enough - see it happening literally overnight; they usually manifest themselves first in the TV commercials. For example, the totally phoney past participle of the verb to prove, 'proven'. Of course, in Scotch law we've always had the non-committal verdict of 'not proven'; but that comes from an old Scotch verb 'to prieve'. There never was such a form as 'proven' in English. But now no car can be advertised without claims for its 'proven' reliability or economy or what-ever. And before you know what's happened

your own children are saying it. The Americans (and we are *all* Americans now) have a jackdaw's fascination with verbal bits of shiny glass or tin; unfortunately they don't conceal them in some crevice, but spread them about; so that nowadays we don't mark the passage of time in plain years, but in *decades*. Prices don't merely go on rising, they *spiral*, or *escalate*, or they undergo a *price-hike*. An accident no longer causes the deaths of so many people, it 'claims the lives of' such a number. The ambassador no longer gets shot in the old-fashioned way, he is dramatically 'gunned down'. And a pistol is no longer a pistol but a 'handgun', and weapons are no longer weapons but 'weaponry', and usually 'sophisticated' to boot. One used to be able to recognize the inability to distinguish 'convince' and 'persuade' as a purely American characteristic; but now you hear Englishmen and South Africans saying, 'I convinced him to do something or other'. People under forty quite happily utter americanisms like *meet up with* or *miss out on* or *lose out on* or *face up to* or *check up on* without even suspecting that that sort of proliferation of adverbs and prepositions is unnecessary as well as unEnglish. We used to be content to talk about things like 'income per head' of population; now it's always 'per capita' income; which is not only bad English but bad Latin; for it should be income *per caput*, if you must sound learned. Then there's that marvellous word pilfered from biology, 'viable': to a biologist it means an organism capable of survival in this hostile world; but to a journalist or any other user of gobbledegook it's a novel substitute for 'possible' or 'feasible' or 'practicable' or 'suitable' or 'profitable' or even simply 'useful'. We love these novelties not merely for their novelty, but also for their vagueness, their labour-saving ability to serve for a whole range of more precise words. So 'major' will save you the trouble of deciding whether to use principal, chief, main, large, important, serious, significant and so on and so on. Thus you have a major accident on a major road on your way to a major city (which is what Americans and South Africans call a big town) and a major spokesman for a major industry will make a major statement about it on a major occasion. You could write whole columns and pages in a modern publication using no more than about a dozen such adjectives and nobody would notice. Again, you never carry out a plan or a project, or put it into effect, or realize an ambition, or fulfil an obligation, or discharge a duty, or put a theory into practice, or proceed with a programme, or perform an action: one verb now satisfies all those functions: to implement. You can implement anything you please, and never miss the old words that make such *major* demands on your vocabulary. And this contribution to the debate is probably 'simplistic' while yours is 'meaningful'. Then there's never such a thing as a mere *meeting*, these days; it's always

a 'summit'. A few weeks ago some genius on the local airwaves talked about a 'mini-summit'; which might perhaps be translated into English as a meeting of molehills.

Well, anybody who has to write a lot for some deadline or other can be forgiven much of this sort of thing; but we are not *all* clapped-out, stale, weary reporters with more alcohol and tobacco tar in our systems than is good for anybody. We who speak the tongue that Shakespeare spake can if we try come to the job a bit fresher than that if we choose to. Sloppy, tired jargon full of clichés is a sure sign of bad and sloppy thinking; and when you find yourself trotting out these verbal tokens you should stop short and ask yourself what's wrong with your thinking. Jargon is the outward sign of slipshod or non-existent reasoning. As Dr Samuel Johnson said: Clear your mind of cant.