

English as she is Spoke and Wrote

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1. ENGLISH AS SHE IS SPOKE

The story I am about to tell you is true, although one is naturally inclined to give it the trappings of fairy tale or myth. One thinks of Leda and her affair with that swan and the egg she laid, poor girl — except that in my story it is not an egg but a book, and a minor classic at that.

Once upon a time, about a hundred years ago, there lived in Portugal a gentleman called Pedro Carolina. Señor Carolina was both studious and enterprising and he decided to write a book for use by Portuguese students wishing to learn English: a common-or-garden phrasebook. There was, however, one slight problem. Pedro Carolina had no English. Lesser mortals would have abandoned the project there and then, but not Pedro. Undeterred, indeed — as we can imagine — spurred on by this lack, and like the true champion he was, he resorted to a dictionary: a Portuguese-French dictionary. He did have a bit of French, you see; and if you don't, never mind. Pedro knew what he was doing. He acquired a second dictionary, a French-English one, and thus armed he set to work. From the Portuguese to the French, from the French to the English. Let no one say this was not courageous and a lot of hard work as well. Not even Heracles in all his labours took on a task such as this.

We may imagine Pedro bent over his manuscript, a guttering candle at his left elbow, a neat pile of completed pages at his right, the two dictionaries open before him. He is murmuring to himself, in Portuguese of course, "Let me see, 'Buscar agutha em palheiro', that must be" And he pages through dictionary number one, from the Portuguese to the French, then through dictionary number two, from the French to the English. "Yes," he murmurs happily (now in English, of course), "it must be, it cannot but be" And he writes down yet another familiar English proverb, "'To look for a needle in a haybundle', that is it, and yes ... 'da nele á boca se perde a sopa' must be, yes, it is without a doubt that old English saying, 'of the hand to mouth, one lose often the soup'." His eyes are glittering, he is a man inspired, and other proverbs spill from his pen. "The walls have hearsay." "Take the moon with the teeth." "God give the cold according the dress." Finally, like a man who on honey-dew has fed and drunk the milk of paradise, "Craunch the marmoset".

This was how that remarkable work, *English as She is Spoke*, came into the world. It proved a success in Portugal where it ran to a second edition. The gratified author explained in a preface: "We were increasing this second edition with a phraseology, in the first part, and some familiar letters, anecdotes, idiotisms, proverbs, and to second a coin's index."

Inevitably — because great works cannot be kept down but must assert their genius far and wide — inevitably, *English as She is Spoke* found its way to England. Its journey there, to the land of Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde, and other manipulators of verbal moonshine, was made appropriately enough in the baggage of a party of touring Tibetan monks. In London, these Tibetan visitors were soon found to be compounding the musical mysteries of their native tongue with Pedro Carolina's English. Fame followed quickly on discovery. The book secured for itself a niche in the pantheon of English letters, in the corner reserved for oddities, and the title became a favoured "idiotism" in English phraseology.

We cannot leave Pedro without at least a short visit to the haunting neverland of his invention, so we follow him then as he guides us through the province of familiar phrases. There suddenly a somewhat peremptory fellow appears out of the tangle of verbiage and yells, "No budge you there!" We no budge, but stand frozen in our tracks, while this fellow, a hectoring, bullying chap, interrogates us. "Are you maryed, how many times have you been married?" "Speak me more fronkly!" when sheepishly we equivocate. "Your parents does exist yet?" Then fiercely, as someone, a mousy little old school-marm in our party twitters in fright, "You interompt me, you shall

be whipped! ... Dress your hairs," he says crushingly. The poor dear collapses. Our interrogator's mood changes. He assumes a role of Shakespearean majesty, surveying us more in sorrow than anger. "He will not hold one's tongue," he declares. "He laughs at my nose, he jest by me, he has spit in my coat, he has take out my hairs, he has scratch the face with hers nails, he sustains presumption ... he burns one's self the brains!" Finally, as he signals us to begone, the words of dire omen that somehow explain it all: "He do the devil at four."

It is a relief after this to move on and drink in the beauties of Pedro's vision of nature. "Who the country is beautiful! Who the trees are thick! Take the bloom's perfume. The field has by me a thousand charms, I hear the birds gurgling, and see that the corn does push already." We can do no more than exclaim with Pedro, "Which pleasure, which charm!" as regretfully we leave him in his world of maybe-wouldbe sense, where the corn pushes and the birds gurgle forever.

A good deal, perhaps most, of one's delight in all this resides in its perfect innocence. Pedro simply did not *know* he was teaching students to talk nonsense. This, the not knowing, has proved a rich source of comedy for playwrights. Shakespeare's Dogberry, for example, has an uncertain instinct for the right word: "O villain! Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this!" We may be sure the pit enjoyed this kind of verbal clowning enormously. Similarly the stalls and boxes must have enjoyed Mrs Malaprop's verbal topsy-turveydom: "If I reprehend any thing in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs!" But here of course, as Sheridan knew, preposterous speech is used to expose a preposterous female. Satire comes into the picture, as it very often does, pointing a finger at pedantry, affectation, pomposity, or worse. Consider this exchange from *Love's Labour's Lost*, where an affected ass confronts a pedantic ass:

"Sir," says the affected ass, Armado, "it is the king's most sweet pleasure and affectation to congratulate the princess at her pavilion in the posterior of the day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon."

"The posterior of the day, most generous sir," the pedantic ass Holofernes says in reply, "is liable, congruent, and measurable for the afternoon: the word is well culled, chose; sweet and apt, I do assure you, sir; I do assure."

"Sir," Armado goes on, "the king is a noble gentleman, and my familiar, I do assure ye, very good friend ...; for I must tell

thee, it will please his grace, by the world, sometimes to lean upon my poor shoulder, and with his royal finger, thus, dally with my excrement, with my mustachio."

The posterior of the day, indeed, not to mention that excremental moustache.

This is entertaining and lighthearted and we might be forgiven for passing on with a smile, giving little if any thought to the satirical implications; but the crux of the matter is that we, no less than the grotesques of comedy, reveal ourselves by the way we speak. I am not concerned with accent, which is another matter altogether, nor with the mumbles, grunts and growls that pass for articulated speech, usually among teenagers, although one does wish that the mumblers, grunTERS and growlers among us would stop their noises and speak up loudly and clearly. No: I am concerned with the way the spoken word reveals the essential person, the mind that informs the person.

How on earth did we get from Mrs Malaprop to mind? It's quite simple. Speech is the audible communication of thought which resides in mind. Or it should be. I am reminded of that passage in *Alice in Wonderland*:

"Come, we shall have some fun now!" thought Alice. "I'm glad they have begun asking riddles — I believe I can answer that," she answered aloud.

"Do you mean that you think you can find the answer to it?" said the March Hare.

"Exactly so," said Alice.

"Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least I mean what I say — that's the same thing, you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter, "Why, you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!'"

"You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like!'"

"You might just as well say," added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, "that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe!'"

Now consider, if you can bear it, the public utterances of public figures. Consider, if you dare, the way your boss speaks to you

and other subordinates. Consider the way you speak to others. And ask yourself in all seriousness whether anyone, yourself included, says what he means all the time, half the time, one-tenth of the time, or never.

I am afraid I know the answer. English as she is spoke to-day is almost always only approximately true to meaning, almost always a slot machine of ready-made words and phrases, a kind of robot system of sounds programmed on to a microchip that does service as mind. Pavlov taught his dogs to salivate when they heard a bell. We have been similarly conditioned — to open our mouths and say the predictable, mindless things that the stimuli of a mass culture ordain.

How can we escape from this robot-like existence? In my next talk, 'English as She is Wrote', I shall have suggestions to offer. In the meantime, I shall leave it to Shakespeare's golden rule of speech:

"Russet yeas and honest kersey noes."

2. ENGLISH AS SHE IS WROTE

In my last talk I said that Shakespeare's "russet yeas and honest kersey noes" was as good a rule for speech as one could want. It is as good a rule for the written word, as well. Here is a story — it's almost true — to explain what I mean.

A do-it-yourself-plumber discovered that hydrochloric acid opened clogged drains and pipes effectively. Thinking he had made a breakthrough in plumbing, and wanting to share his knowledge with fellow plumbers, he wrote to the government department concerned with such matters (let us call it the Ministry of Plumbing) reporting his discovery. He had a reply in due course. It went something like this:

"Your communication of 21 ult. is to hand and I am directed to advise you that the application of hydrochloric acid to ferric compounds, which form the basic materials for most plumbing equipment, tends to act counter-productively and to promote the occurrence of oxidation with resultant corrosion and generally damaging effects on the conduits in question"

The do-it-yourself plumber puzzled over this for a while and wrote again, saying that the Ministry of Plumbing had apparently not understood his message and emphasizing the advantages of hydrochloric acid over anything else when blocked pipes were the

problem. The reply came. "Your communication of the 3rd inst. is to hand and I am directed to advise you that the application of hydrochloric acid to blah ... blah ... blah ...!"

None the wiser, our plumber wrote a third time and had this reply: "Don't use hydrochloric acid. It knocks hell out of pipes."

Which reminds one of the exchange in Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*: Cecily says: "This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade." To which Gwendolen replies: "I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade."

It is not likely that 'manners' influenced that scribe at the Ministry of Plumbing. Why, then, did he feel impelled to write such opaque stuff? Why are so many of us impelled whenever we clutch a pen, to summon up from the murky depths of our minds a literary style (I use the word for want of a better) of such laboured density that no one, least of all the author, really knows what the communication is about?

Why, for example, must a businessman always be in receipt of a communication, which may or may not be esteemed, when all he need say is 'thank you for your letter'? Why must that communication be inst. or ult. or of even date when a simple '10 October' will do the trick? And why must a response be 'in the negative' or 'the affirmative' when those Shakespearean noes and yeses are there to use?

I'll tell you why. It is because we are usually frightened of the simple statement. It seems too, well, simple. We think it necessary to doll up our language, to give it, as we think, a kind of 'air' or 'style', the better, as we imagine, to project the right 'image' of ourselves, and so perpetuate the ghastly tradition of commercial or other English, quite forgetting that the best thing to call a spade is 'spade'.

Then, I fear, we are all in the toils of science. In my last talk I suggested that a pervasive pop culture was turning our speech into robot language. Our written language is not entirely free of this, but being more considered and formed, if not necessarily more formal, it tends to move away from pop-ism, except in more than usually debased journalism, and to resort to the 'authority' of science. Everything is a science these days. In the groves of academe where I spend my days it is almost impossible not to find a maybe-wouldbe 'scientist' lurking under every bush. Social scientists, domestic scientists, nursing scientists, communications scientists, library scientists, theological — yes, believe it or

not, theological scientists ... the list seems endless. And if the word 'science' cannot be dragged in, why then, no problem, a good old fashioned discipline is given a new, portentous name, thus: teaching becomes pedagogics; music — you know, the stuff Beethoven composed — music becomes musicology; mission-work becomes missiology; a deacon's work becomes diaconiology. My own subject, heaven help us, has not been immune and to-day super-specialization in the theory and meaning of language has spawned phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, semiotics, grammatology and suchlike polysyllabic monsters.

One doesn't know where all this will end. I do know that the present situation makes the original tower of Babel seem like kiddie stuff. Here we all are, each one of us a 'scientist', in his own insular tower in a city of towers, furiously creating his own special scientific language — and no one as proud as he who creates a vocabulary and syntax intelligible only to himself and perhaps his peers.

Of course, there are a few sciences — the genuine ones that occur in the field of physics, say, where expanding knowledge has led to the creation of a new language of technology. I am naive enough to believe that this is a necessary evil to a certain extent, but not to the extent that, for example, the new far-reaching technology of computer 'science' (here we go again) should present itself to the world in terms of baffling unintelligibility.

So, then, science has been reducing English as She is Wrote to gibberish, which we in our credulous vanity try our utmost to copy. This would not have been allowed to happen in days gone by. I enjoy telling the story of the show-off government officer who irritated his superior by his misuse of language. "Sir," his superior wrote to him, "the Commission on perusal of your Diary observe that you make use of many affected phrases and incongruous words ... all of which you use in a sense that the words do not bear. I am ordered to acquaint you that if you hereafter continue in that affected and schoolboy way of writing, and to murder the language in such a manner, you will be discharged for a fool." I do not think it likely that this kind of threat will be issued to-day. A pity.

Wrongheaded ideas about 'style' compound the cult of scientism. A lot of people feel that the rule of simplicity and clarity sounds the knell of style. They are wrong. Simplicity and clarity are the cornerstones of style. Pay attention to meaning and manner will look after itself. An incident in Bernard Shaw's career illustrates this. Shaw's prose style is of course superlative, trenchant, swift, readable, and a young critic, carried away by Shaw's rhetoric, attempted an analysis of the 'style', praising it

inordinately. At least, this was Shaw's opinion. "It was very much as if I had told him the house was on fire," complained Shaw, "and he had said, 'how admirably monosyllabic!' and left the nursery stairs burning unheeded. My impulse was to exclaim, 'Do you suppose, you conceited young whelp, that I have taken all that trouble and developed all that literary craft to gratify your appetite for style? Get up at once and fetch a bucket of water'"

Do most of us — as writers of letters and reports — really have to bother about 'style'? I don't think so. Bother rather about those buckets of water.

Simplicity and clarity — the creed of simple words, of the language of the common man — have always been the hallmark of great writing. I do not mean the writing of only poets, novelists and dramatists in the English tradition. I mean that of the philosophers and scientists, as well. Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Swift, Darwin, Russell: these men made their mark largely because their ideas — and these ideas were often difficult and complex — were couched in language that was accessible to all educated people. I am prepared to bet that you and I would read and understand Bacon more easily, for all his distance in time and mode, than the latest annual report of the Amalgamated Association of Indigent Boilerworkers, for all its unworthy contemporaneity!

Churchill comes to mind. Here was a man who did not avoid the grandly Romanesque when he thought the occasion called for it. Yet read his letters, recall his speeches, and, yes, those periods that still thrill the blood are rooted in the English tradition of simple words. It was Churchill, incidentally, who angrily corrected an aide who had dared remove a preposition from the end of one of his — Churchill's — sentences. The great man growled: "Such arrant pedantry is something up with which I shall not put!" So be warned.

In this and in my previous talk I have preached the gospel of simple words because they are the best means of capturing thoughts precisely and conveying these thoughts to listeners and readers. Here is an abstract of advice on the subject, culled in part from Ernest Gowers's *Complete Plain Words*, a book we could all profitably have as bedside and desktide reading:

Express yourself economically; avoid superfluous adverbs and adjectives.

Use familiar rather than unfamiliar words.

Prefer concrete words to abstract words.

Prefer active verbs to passive verbs.

Avoid jargon, pedantry, affectation.

Always be true to your own intelligence, from which it must follow, as the night the day, you cannot then be false to any man.

MIND BENDERS

1. Can you think of an acceptable sentence in which the word 'and' can be used five times consecutively?

ANSWER

Imagine that a wedding invitation has been printed but that more space is required between the partners' names, 'John and Mary'. One could say:

The space between 'John' and 'and' and 'and' and Mary needs to be increased.

2. Can you think of a sentence that can be said but not written?

ANSWER

'In English there are three [tu:s].' (to, too, two)