

Dictatorial Brevities

'Dictatorial Brevities': Another look at E. Davis's
Introduction to 'Modern English Usage'

Amongst his considerable correspondence with Oxford University Press in Cape Town, is an article by the late Emeritus Professor Edward Davis (1), entitled, 'Preview of an Oxford Pamphlet'. The article, as far as can be established, was never published, but the 'Oxford Pamphlet' was. Shortly after its first publication in 1951, a review of the text appeared in the sub-leader of *The Cape Times* (17 March). Now, twenty-nine years and three editions later, this article is an 'afterview', a re-examination of what usefulness, if any, such a booklet may have for students.

In a time and society more concerned with data and technology than with the correction of creeping illiteracy, it is particularly apposite to re-examine *Introduction to 'Modern English Usage'*. This unpretentious text from Oxford University Press reached its third edition (second impression, revised) in 1972. The booklet was originally devised to give students of English - advanced learners, matriculation or first year university students in particular - a ready-reference guide to the language. The guide is a compression of the invaluable work that is Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. (2) As Davis acknowledges in the first edition, his booklet is merely a 'foretaste of Fowler', a collection of potted pen notes based on the comprehensive Fowler work. As a foretaste, Pro-

fessor Davis's text is intended to induce the less experienced student 'to study Fowler and to regard him as a constant companion'. The booklet retails at a modest 45c (at the time writing) so that it is possible for all students to own a desk copy. Not only should the price be inducement enough, but an hour or two spent reading the pamphlet will clarify and correct many a typical error, establish a sense of purpose in the student's written work and familiarise him with the essential Fowler in a cogent, pleasantly readable form. *Introduction to 'Modern English Usage'* is meant, therefore, to precede a detailed study of the longer *Modern English Usage*, but never to supplant it.

Notice must be taken of the title before the student or general reader approaches either Fowler's text or Davis's booklet. Neither text is an attempt to take issue with *current* language. This is catered for in many dictionaries. Instead, the attempt is made to rectify basic errors and weak or pretentious writing. 'Modern' does not mean 'current' in this instance, but the *established* and familiar language of the twentieth century. 'Usage' denotes *correct* practice and therefore excludes dialect forms, slang and colloquial flamboyance, as well as disregard of the more acceptable forms of English.

In almost all instances, Fowler's discussion or definition of terms and expressions is fairly comprehensive. Davis's approach has been to condense such discussion, sometimes to add his own comment, or even to replace Fowler's comment entirely with his own observations. What makes *Modern English Usage* the unique text it is, is precisely Fowler, and the condenser stands in danger of constructing either a travesty of the Fowlerian text or another dreary manual of grammar. Recognising the pitfall, Davis saw also that readers of his booklet might construe his 'dictatorial brevities' (*sic*), the many do's and don't's, as absolute if they did not realise 'that language is a dynamic thing'. (3) Furthermore, Davis pointed out:

There is certainly nothing stable about English, not even its spelling The dynamics of language do not come from dictionaries. (4)

Consequently, Davis's *Introduction to Modern English Usage* consists of a pragmatic selection '... from thousands of valuable articles written by the great Fowler. [It is] a selection which concerns errors of regular occurrence in examination scripts'. (5) In following his personal approach, Davis was being as much Davis as Fowler was

being Fowler. Perhaps it was Fowler himself who suggested an abbreviation or compression of his text, when he declared: 'I think of it as it should have been, with its prolixities docked ...'. (6) Perhaps it is from this that Davis took his cue.

The Cape Times reviewer, with certain reservations, describes Davis's 'potted Fowler' (*sic*) as 'a difficult piece of work remarkably well done'. Examination of the forty-page text easily demonstrates this fact; but scrutiny of random articles reveals, also, that Davis's entries, because so compressed, are either brilliant in their clarity or a trifle misleading because they are over-simplified. This could provide some difficulty for the inexperienced student; but any doubts may be speedily resolved by reference to the same article in Fowler's text.

Americanisms provides an example of the reduction I mention. The Fowler entry is four columns in length - providing material of great use to the scholar or advanced student, but of a scope sufficient to deter the less experienced student. On the other hand, Davis's entry is presented in three brief points which highlight the differences between *Americanisms* and acceptable English, and advise against the use of *Americanisms* in academic English outside of the United States.

Subsequent entries under *And* and *Any* provide the first examples of that which might mislead. Point (iii) under *And* declares: 'In lists with *and* before the last item a comma should be put after *every* item'. This appears to be a somewhat simplistic direction. If he follows this advice, the student will not err (unless his examiner is of the school which teaches that there is *never* a comma before an 'and' joining the last two items of a series). Reference to Fowler's more substantial explanations, in this instance, will eliminate possible confusion. Fowler gives examples in which commas are omitted: 'He plays good cricket, likes golf and a rubber of bridge'.

Point (iv) under *And* notes that: 'Examiners dislike sentences beginning, "And ..."'. That the range of likes and dislikes among examiners is in any case misleading is a truism. That Davis points it out here was partly due to his own desire to help students avoid pitfalls in writing, but also possibly to a sense of the general inexactitude of examination systems. Apart from either of these motives, however, the current situation in schools and universities - locally and abroad - seems

one of amicable tolerance of the occasional use of the word *And* at the beginning of sentences and paragraphs. As far as local acceptance is concerned, this seems to be a far less serious matter than the consistently inaccurate punctuation which thrives in South African schools; and this is an extension of the creeping illiteracy mentioned earlier. If one compares point (iv) under *And* with the entry *But* in Davis's booklet, one finds a statement which endorses the point I make about tolerance of *and* at the beginning of a sentence, but which seems to contradict Davis's own ruling. He observes that: '*And* may begin a sentence with point and grace, and so may *but*'. The final word on the matter is best derived from Fowler:

AND beginning a sentence. That it is a solecism to begin a sentence with AND is a faintly lingering SUPERSTITION: The OED gives examples ranging from the 10th to the 19th c.; the Bible is full of them. (?)

Point (ii) under *Any* is also misleading. Davis states that 'any way' is correct, implying thus that 'anyway' spelt as one word is incorrect. Reference to Fowler dispels uncertainty here, as one learns that 'I can do it any way' is indeed correct; but when one means 'at all events' or 'at any rate', then 'anyway' is correct.

No. 34: *Cases*; this produces some confusion since a series of notes is indicated by the designation (a). However, no (b) or (c) follows, so one must presume the (a) is a misprint. There is no similar enumeration in Fowler, so the (a) does not suggest omissions.

In No. 39: *Compare*; the definition is Davis's, but the examples are Fowler's. This entry should be read in conjunction with Fowler for complete understanding of the subtle usage differences between 'compare with' and 'compare to'.

If there are accordingly a number of examples in Davis's text which are open to speculation, there are many more examples of Davis's inimitable clarity of thought and expression. The student is left in no doubt as to the correct uses of words and phrases such as '*Consist (of or in)*'; the differences between 'Effective, effectual, efficacious, efficient', or 'Farther, further', or how to treat the vexed question of number.

43. *consist (of or in)*. Use of when you imply a material, *in* when you are attempting a definition.

This medicine consists in coloured water, is wrong (use of).

Virtue consists in moderation, is right.

53. *effective, effectual, efficacious, efficient.* These words daily become more popular, and are wrongly used as exact synonyms.

Effective means, *having a strong effect.*

Effectual means, *able to achieve the intended result.*

Efficacious means, *likely to achieve the intended result.*

Efficient means, *competent.*

60. *farther, further.* *Further* is right, nowadays, in all contexts. It implies both distance and continuance. *Farther* implies only distance.

16. *are, is.* The verb must have the number of the subject, even when the subject comes after the verb. The number of the verb is NEVER influenced by the number of the object.

These things are a scandal, is right.

What proof are these facts of your theory? is right.

What he wants to see is several books, is right.

The pages which describe this is good, is wrong.

What we want are more soldiers, is wrong.

The number of pages is, is right.

Important features in Davis's booklet - as in Fowler's text - are the useful cross-references. However, in Davis's text these are sometimes overlooked. For example, No. 72: 'I' should cross-refer to No. 26: 'Between', for illustration of 'between you and me' (as opposed to 'between you and I' which is incorrect).

Finding the right word for a particular context is not always easy in English. Davis's recommendation in his booklet - as in his decades of lecturing to university students in many parts of the world - is always to strive for a style which, while never slovenly or slipshod, is always simple, unpretentious and clear. Thus one is not surprised by the entry under No. 61: 'Formal words'. The entry reads: 'formal words should not be used except on extraordinarily formal occasions'. For example:

Use *room* not *accommodation*, *stop* not *cease*,
meal not *collation*, *food* not *comestibles*,
begin not *commence*, *finish* not *complete*,
hide not *conceal*, *gift* not *donation*,
pay not *emoluments*, *try* not *endeavour*,
show not *evince*, *hurry* not *expedite*,
read not *peruse*, *go* not *proceed*, *buy* not *purchase*

On the face of it this is entirely acceptable, but some of Davis's examples appear rather rigid, and thus by that very rigidity militate against the simplicity he aimed to inculcate. Simply to use 'room' instead of 'accommodation', for example, is an over-simplification which can be most misleading. One may seek a room in a boarding house; but to seek accommodation in a city may imply that one wishes to rent furnished rooms, or an apartment. Similarly, one may finish a meal but complete years of research. Since the nuances of the words 'finish' and 'complete' are so different in this context, it is inadequate merely to recommend that somebody use the word 'finish' instead of 'complete'. I would see such alternative terms, therefore, as being of another class to alternatives like 'food' or 'comestibles', or 'pay' versus 'emoluments'. Strangely enough, in this entry Davis appears to have neglected to take into consideration a usually key consideration of his, namely that of context (and the nuances within it).

Despite the few weaknesses of Davis's booklet, the student who uses it not as a substitute for Fowler, but indeed as an 'Introduction' to Fowler, will benefit. If the student is occasionally dissatisfied with the 'dictatorial brevities' of the booklet, he knows where substantial comment or definition may be found. Indeed, perhaps the greatest value of the booklet lies precisely in such comparison, for then, in Davis's own words, the student 'will learn, more thoroughly and more swiftly than any words of mine can teach him, the folly of citing linguistic "authorities" He will learn when to make a stand, if he himself is determined to, in resisting the encroach [*sic*] of the slipshod and banal; and he will learn, if he has not already learnt the difference between the small things that are worth endless struggle and the trifles no-one should fuss over'. (8)

For all those concerned about standards of literacy, Davis's booklet may be recommended. Its strengths outweigh its weaknesses; while its weaknesses point merely to the complexities of the English language, 'the least official of tongues'. (9)

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NOTES

- (1) Professor Davis was formerly Head of the De-

- partment of English at the Universities of South Africa, Tel-Aviv and Port Elizabeth; and visiting lecturer at the University of British Columbia, Canada, in 1957. He died in 1974.
- (2) Fowler, H.W., *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1978 (1st ed. 1926).
 - (3) Unpublished article by E. Davis: copy of MS kindly supplied by Oxford University Press, Cape Town. I wish to acknowledge the exceptional courtesy and assistance of Mr N.C. Gracie and Helen Grant of Oxford University Press, Cape Town, during my research into the background of this booklet.
 - (4) Unpublished article by E. Davis.
 - (5) *Ibid.*
 - (6) Fowler, p. ix.
 - (7) *Ibid.*, column 2, no. 5, p. 29.
 - (8) Unpublished MS.
 - (9) *Ibid.*