

A Critical Appreciation of Fowlers' *Modern English Usage*

by Rex Reynolds

NOTE *Fowler has become an eponymous word and is here used of both the man and the book. For brevity, the First and Second Editions are designated F1 and F2 respectively. F1 is generally referred to in the past tense and F2 in the present. For the convenience of readers who might care to compare their opinions with those of the writer, the titles of articles are printed, as in Fowler, in small capitals.*

D.B. Wyndham Lewis, a master of literary and colloquial English — to say nothing of invective — once referred to 'the overbearing Fowler'. Towards the end of a controversial article on the SPLIT INFINITIVE in the first edition of 'A Dictionary of Modern English Usage', Henry Fowler wrote: 'After this inconclusive discussion, in which, however, the author's opinion has perhaps been allowed to appear with indecent plainness, readers may like to settle the following question for themselves...'. His proposition that LIKE as a prepositional adjective must be attached to the subject or object of the main verb, which is hardly disputable, was 'suggested with diffidence'. These are not the words of an overbearing man.

The appearance in 1906 of 'The King's English', according to *The Times*, 'took the world by storm' and established Henry and Frank Fowler as the leading authorities on the subject. Lexicographers, as readers of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary will be aware, are not necessarily, or perhaps even usually, modest men. Their occupation, if it does not make them pedantic or pompous, is at least apt to incline them to be authoritarian.

After the untimely death of his younger brother, Henry prepared the Dictionary and published it twenty years later. As might be expected, he had strong feelings, some hobby-horses and perhaps a few downright prejudices — they were, as Sir Ernest Gowers observed in his Preface to the Revised Edition, part of his

idiosyncrasy — but on balance he emerged as a modest and often deferential man, acknowledging freely that words and grammar are not the property of scholars, let alone pedagogues, but of the people who use them. The only right he allowed to scholars, and indeed the duty he laid upon them, was to use what influence they have for the preservation and enrichment of the English language.

In deprecating the current misuse that has debased PROTAGONIST, Fowler wrote: ‘We need perhaps not consider the Greek scholar’s feelings; he has many advantages over the rest of us, and cannot expect that in addition he shall be allowed to forbid us a word that we find useful. Is it useful? Or is it merely a pretentious blundering substitute for words that are useful?’

Clearly Fowler did not expect or intend that scholars should have everything their own way, and under DIDACTICISM he wrote: ‘Our learned persons and possessors of special information’ (it is interesting how he avoided the word *knowledge*) ‘should not, when they are writing for or speaking to the general public, presume to improve the accepted vocabulary or pronunciation. When they are addressing audiences of their own likes, they may naturally use, to their heart’s content, the forms that are most familiar to both parties...’.

Where Fowler did desert his usual urbane and tolerant style and show real impatience, it was rarely with the errors of ignorance or the venial sins of common speech, but far more often with the ‘superstitions’ and ‘fetishes’ invented and propounded by pedagogues.

His whole philosophy was perhaps best summed up in his essay on PEDANTRY AND PURISM: ‘The term (pedantry), then, is obviously a relative one; my pedantry is your scholarship, his reasonable accuracy, her irreducible minimum of education and someone else’s ignorance. It is therefore not very profitable to dogmatize here on the subject. An essay would establish not what pedantry is, but only the place in the scale occupied by the author. There are certainly many accuracies that are not pedantries, as well as some that are; there are certainly some pedantries that are not accuracies, as well as many that are; and no book that attempts, as this one does, to give hundreds of decisions on the matter will find many readers who will accept them all’.

Fowler’s attitude to people, as well as to his subject, was exemplified in SPELLING POINTS: ‘In this book some modest

attempts are made at cleaning up the more obtrusive untidinesses; certain inconsistencies have been regarded as no longer required of us in the present diffusion of literacy. The well known type theoretic — radical cum practical — conservative covers perhaps a majority of our population, and its influence is as sound and sane in the sphere of spelling as elsewhere’.

If devotion to Fowler indicates of itself a certain tendency towards literary hubris, devotees are amply warned against any such indulgence. To take a single example, consider the number of schoolchildren whose knuckles have been rapped for using the phrase ‘Try and do’. Fowler acknowledges that it is colloquial ‘if that means appropriate to actual speech; but not if colloquial means below the proper standard of literary dignity. Though *try to do* can always be substituted for *try and do*, the latter has a shade of meaning that justifies its existence; in exhortations it implies encouragement — the effort will succeed —; in promises it implies assurance — the effort shall succeed. It is an idiom that should not be discountenanced, but used when it comes natural’. The last word of this quotation may well take readers straight to UNIDIOMATIC-LY, where they will find a further demonstration of Fowler’s tolerance and pragmatism.

Fowler treated words, like idioms, on their merits. He had no love for LATINISM, GALLICISM or any other imported -ism (to say nothing of SAXONISM) but he displayed something like a semantic philoxenia towards useful immigrants like NAIVE which ‘deserve a warm welcome as supplying a shade of meaning not provided by the nearest single English words’ and deplored the fact that due to their queer spelling and pronunciation such ‘potentially useful words will be very much wasted’.

As early as 1926, Fowler accepted LOCALE, which the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary in 1926 simply labelled ‘erron.f.Local’. Oddly enough, SOED accepts LITTORAL for the region lying along a coast: Fowler says it is ‘doubtless of value’ in reference to studies of marine life near the shore but rejects it as a ‘pretentious substitute’ for coast. F2 observes that SHORT SUPPLY was overworked after the Second World War and deprecates it as a periphrasis for *scarce* but maintains the generally tolerant attitude of F1 by adding: ‘It is a harmless enough phrase, scarcely deserving the rude things that have been said about it by purists or the apologetic inverted commas in which it is sometimes dressed’.

In his Preface to the Second Edition of *Modern English Usage*, Sir Ernest Gowers wrote: 'What is the secret of its success? It is not that Fowler's opinions are unchallengeable. Many have been challenged...'. I have enjoyed Fowler for some fifty years, not only for reference in moments of doubt but as a bedside book. This sounded very like an invitation and I decided in retirement to give myself the pleasure of annotating my copy of the Second Edition. I trust it will not sound presumptuous to say that I found much to comment on. I should mention that I have little pretension to scholarship, but as a journalist for most of my working life, consider myself as a craftsman with a proper regard for the tools of my trade.

In making such a study, it was not surprising that I frequently had occasion to compare entries in the two editions and eventually came to scanning them side by side. This was rewarding and very often amusing, particularly when it revealed the effective steps Gowers and his colleagues had taken to bring Fowler up to date and guard against obsolescence. Fowler, as a living part of the English heritage, must be preserved from the mustiness of the archives.

A delightful example is the reference in F1, appropriately under **IRRELEVANT ALLUSION**, to '1/6 for that cabfare'. In F2 it has risen to '4s.6d. for that cab fare'. This serves to illustrate the need for another edition in the not too distant future, in which it might appear as *75 new p.* or perhaps, to anticipate mounting inflation, *£1.*

In one example a jet bomber has replaced a battleship and in another a folding wing for NATO has made its appearance. Under **OPTIMISM**, a reference to Mr Balfour at the Foreign Office was replaced, perhaps not very happily, by the Monckton Commission on Rhodesia. In some future edition, the Geneva Conference may serve as an apt illustration for **PESSIMISM**.

Sometimes F2 finds itself betwixt and between. On **CONNEXION**, **-CTION**, F1 declared categorically that 'the first is the right spelling' and left it at that. F2 says, 'The first is the etymologically correct spelling; but the second is now more common, and standard U.S.' — and continues to use *connexion* in other contexts throughout the dictionary.

In many instances, however, the Second Edition has bowed to changing usage. **SHAKSPERE**, recommended in F1, has given

way to SHAKESPEARE in F2. With perhaps a tinge of regret, F2 records that *wē'skut*, 'once regarded as correct' and recommended in F1, has been deposed by the speak-as-you-spell movement to make *wās(t)kōt* the ordinary pronunciation. F1 doubtless felt that its readers required no definition of literature; F2 admits that 'however much we may regret that so reputable a word should be put to so menial a duty', its meaning has been extended to include written matter of any sort, especially that issued by commercial or industrial firms to commend or explain their goods and services.

The subtle change in Fowler's attitude to SCHOLAR, which strays into the realm of U and non-U, is interesting. F1 said: 'There is not apparent reason why s. and ss. should not mean pupil(s) at a school, schoolboy, schoolgirl, school-children, etc., but it is not used by those who are at or have been at the great schools'. Perhaps to avoid any impression of snobbery, F2 substitutes for the last phrase, 'it is something of a solecism to use them in these senses'. One is reminded of the misplaced enthusiasm with which one Combination Room is said to have greeted a newspaper heading: 'Reduced Railway Fares for Scholars'. SOED, giving 'one who is taught in a school' as its first meaning, goes on to say, 'In illiterate use, one whom the speaker regards as exceptionally learned'. Thus may the illiterate escape solecism.

It is noteworthy that most of the opinions in F2 that one ventures to question are taken more or less direct from F1 and probably reflect Gowers's avowed intention to retain a Fowleresque flavour wherever possible. This is not to suggest that he and his colleagues have failed to emend where emendation was required, but sometimes where they have given F1 the benefit of the doubt, one may feel today that a further ten years of hindsight might have swung the balance against it.

I cannot accept the dictum, common to both editions, that 'raising and removing one's hat are FORMAL WORDS for taking it off'. One raises one's hat to a woman in the street, but takes it off indoors or when a funeral is passing. The two actions are different and a notice, PLEASE RAISE YOUR HAT BEFORE ENTERING THE CHURCH would be absurd.

Sometimes one may dissent from new material in F2 which, for example, attributes the use of BARRAGE for a rapid and noisy discharge of questions or other interjections at a meeting to

NOVELTY HUNTING and says 'the old metaphor *volley* is more apt'. Not really: a *volley* is fired all at once; a *barrage* maintains a succession of shots. Following a definition of *mechanization*, F2 describes AUTOMATION as 'enabling machines to do work formerly done by the human brain'. Surely *automation* is merely an extension of *mechanization* whereby machines are designed to carry out and repeat automatically a series of processes producing articles virtually without human intervention. Insofar as one accepts that machines can do work formerly done by the human brain, *computerization* must surely be the more appropriate word.

If it is hazardous to dissent from Fowler on questions of fact (or what one supposes to be fact), disagreeing on matters of taste or opinion is not without its dangers, for one is just as likely to be wrong. Nevertheless I venture the opinion that Fowler sometimes does less than justice to serviceable words and expressions.

Fowler's condemnation of OPTIMISM and PESSIMISM 'in their modern popular triviality' seems to me unduly harsh. He wrote that 'they owe their vogue to the ignorant in catching up a word that has puzzled them when they first heard it, and exhibiting their acquaintance with it as often as possible...'. It was perhaps more reasonable in 1926 to describe them as VOGUE WORDS, but there is a strong presumption that when words have been in vogue for some 40 years they are useful and the sense in which reasonably literate people choose to use them must be accepted.

Another instance in which Fowler may be fighting not only a lost but an unreasonable battle on behalf of the scholars is the essay on PLATONIC LOVE. It starts with an OED definition, 'Applied to love or affection for one of the opposite sex, of a purely spiritual character, and free from sensual desire', and continues with a number of more scholarly and abstract definitions based on the *Symposium*. But to end with the statement that it 'has been debased to the expression of maudlin sentiment between the sexes' seems to me as near as Fowler ever came to sheer bigotry.

Another word that irritated Fowler is UNTHINKABLE, also described as a VOGUE WORD in both editions. One might agree that its use to describe matters that many people think of or even a state of affairs that actually exists is incongruous and pointless. But among the senses in which -ABLE as a living suffix may be appended to any transitive verb, he included *worthy to be -----ed*,

which would appear to supply adequate justification for *unthinkable*.

SOMEWHAT, wrote Fowler, ‘has for the inferior journalist what he would be likely to describe as “a somewhat fatal fascination” which derives partly from ‘the notion that an air of studious understatement is superior and impressive...’. This is undeniable, but I submit that it can occasionally serve as a mild and not unacceptable form of ironic comment: my own regard for this playful litotes derives perhaps from a long-standing affection for Damon Runyon’s remarkable study in the use of the *historic present*, ‘More than Somewhat’.

Of the use of FOREBEARS by English writers, Fowler wrote in almost Johnsonian vein: ‘Its recommendation is that, being Scottish and not English, it appeals to the usually misguided instinct of NOVELTY-HUNTING’. In spite of this, some quite conservative writers might prefer it to two of the alternatives suggested — *progenitors* or, where the tie is not of blood, *predecessors*. Fowler is also scathing about FOREWORD as a SAXONISM and a VOGUE WORD, and concludes with the somewhat astringent comment that ‘a decent retirement might be found for f. by confining it to the particular kind of preface that is supplied by some distinguished person for a book written by someone else who feels the need of a sponsor’.

Fowler was liberal in his attitude to stops and allowed a good deal of altitude for personal tastes. I personally would deprecate his depreciation of the *colon*, which he virtually relegates to the Prayer Book version of the Psalms, for I see — or perhaps imagine — a useful distinction between it and the *semi-colon*. He allowed that a comma after parentheses, a second dash or bracket, might be considered fussy, but said it is messy to pile two jobs on the parenthesis. I agree that one should try to avoid either but would give priority to the first objection; Fowler uses a comma or even a semi-colon after parentheses. There are few writers who could not benefit by studying Fowler on questions of order between inverted commas and stops, considerably amended in F2. This holds a fair balance between what it calls the conventional and logical systems and allows full weight to a writer’s personal preference.

To seek out minor faults or transgressions in Fowler may lay one open to a charge of ‘nit-picking’ (I use the ‘deprecatory inverted

commas' for this expressive modern vulgarism in spite of their being deplored under SUPERIORITY) but it is undeniable that he occasionally appeared guilty of practices that he himself condemned. If these are faults, they are very small ones, sops perhaps to 'that pestilent fellow the critical reader'. But it is only human to enjoy catching Homer nodding, if only to show that we are for the moment awake.

He described DEFINITE and DEFINITELY as 'over-worked words that have a habit of intruding where they are not wanted' but he sometimes used them unnecessarily. Among other instances, 'a definite backsliding' and 'a definite compound notion' both appear on p. 247 of F2, and 'a definite literary cast' on p. 340. These may be justifiable, though *d.* adds little to the sense, but hardly, on p. 425, 'a definite outrage on grammatical principles'.

The widespread use of a *low PERCENTAGE* for a *small part* is rightly condemned; one is entitled to question its use in just that sense on p. 561. And surely it is a thumping PLEONASM, on p. 509, to describe *dead reckoning* as a method of calculating a ship's position that can only give 'a not wholly reliable approximation'. It is hard to find any dictionary authority for Fowler's use of *to comma* or *to comma off* as a verb, or any great advantage, even as a *nonce word* for MEU's special purposes, over *enclose by commas*. The past participle *comma'd off* might well be considered ugly.

Lest this be seen as mere petulance, I hasten to add that it must be gratifying to journalists, who owe — or should owe — more to Fowler than any other class of writers, to see that the attitude of F2 to them and their works is considerably milder than that of F1. Under OTHERWISE, F1 wrote: 'Before asking the journalist to give up a favourite habit, one should convince him that it is his habit'. For *journalist*, F2 substitutes *writers and speakers*. Commenting on HECTIC as a VOGUE WORD, F1 said it had 'had the luck to capture the journalists'; F2 spread the responsibility to 'a wider area'. Where examples in F1 of the misuse of HYPHENS were 'all taken from newspapers', in the Second Edition they were culled from 'contemporary writing'.

But under SUPERSTITION, journalists in general and editors in particular are pilloried for the 'unintelligent application of an unintelligent dogma' in prohibiting SPLIT INFINITIVES. SENSATIONAL mentions 'modern popular journalese' — the

only time, as far as I am aware, that this pejorative and often misused word appears in *Modern English Usage*.

Until a few decades ago, 'journalese' could be clearly defined as a baroque, flamboyant style of writing affected by most journals — not to mention many reputable writers — and in particular the popular Press. It is fair to say that it has almost disappeared. In view of the millions of words poured out under pressure of deadlines every day errors and solecisms; vague, emotive, sensational and misused words; illiteracies, clichés and other faults in grammar and style persist.

But with the spread of literacy, most newspaper readers expect reasonable English and most journalists try to provide them with it. Many reporters and sub-editors, and more editors, have respectable degrees in English and some have even a nodding acquaintance with the *litterae humaniores*. The training of young journalists — in which Fowler plays a substantial part — and the policy laid down by most newspapers are aimed at clear, concise and reasonably literate English.

The debt owed by the Press to Fowler is not entirely one-sided, for it continues to supply a liberal stream of horrible examples that must be of some help in keeping Fowler up to date. It also provides a useful yardstick to gauge the transition of slang, idiom and newcomers into acceptable English. Fowler acknowledges this in several articles on questionable words or expressions, as in the comment that GIMMICK has 'appeared in The Times without inverted commas'.

Sir Ernest Gowers wrote in his Preface that illustrative quotations had been pruned in several articles and one may feel that in some instances they could have been pruned more heavily. In many articles, like the one on THAT (relative pronoun), numerous examples are used to illustrate different types of misuse and varying degrees of culpability. In some, like MALAPROPISM and METAPHOR, the examples are amusing enough to stand on their own merits and one is delighted that F2 has added a few choice specimens of its own.

But in some instances Henry Fowler admitted that he multiplied examples 'in order that the reader may leave this disquisition sick to death, as he should be, of the FUSED PARTICIPLE'. F2 omitted some illustrations and shortened others, but it is still heavy going, and questionable whether this heavy-handed ploy will

achieve its purpose. Under ELEGANT VARIATION, Fowler avowed that his intention was ‘to nauseate by accumulation of instances, as sweet-shop assistants are said to be cured of larceny by cloying... . The reader’s... gorge will surely rise before the feast is finished’. It does.

It is obvious that one of the principal problems facing Sir Ernest Gowers and his colleagues, and perhaps the most difficult one, in revising the work of the master after an unchallenged reign of forty years, was what to omit, what to add and what to change. They recognised Fowler’s faults — as he himself did — but very rightly decided that they would not interfere with him unnecessarily and would — which will bear repeating — retain the Fowlersque flavour. In these aims they have succeeded admirably, and anyone who supposes he could have done the task better must have a good conceit of himself. Old Fowlerites can have little cause for complaint but newcomers, regarding MEU as an up-to-date reference book rather than a field for literary browsing, may find that the compromise with the past detracts to some extent from its value. In my view there is only one solution — to keep both editions and any further ones that may appear, and to savour them against one another as lovers of claret will savour one vintage of a *grand premier cru* against another.

One must acknowledge the explanation on the dust-cover and in the Preface that much of the material in F1 may now be found in other Oxford works of reference, which is all very well if one possesses them and has not come to regard MEU as a vade-mecum. I personally regret the excision of TECHNICAL TERMS, which I found extremely useful for the revision of prosody and other technical subjects and for reference when one knew the subject or definition but had forgotten the word — an occurrence that unhappily becomes more frequent with senescence. I agree wholeheartedly, however, with the deletion of eight pages giving the pronunciation of French words, which is readily available from a standard French dictionary.

There is a lesson to be learned here. If MEU is to be kept within reasonable compass as a reference book, and is to take cognizance of all the modern developments considered worthy of notice, it is apparent that a good deal must be deleted from each preceding edition. For a start, I suggest that all questions of meaning and pronunciation that are not strictly matters of contemporary usage,

and which can readily be found in the various Oxford Dictionaries, should be ruthlessly excised from MEU.

Articles like those on FACETIOUS FORMATIONS, POLYSYLLABIC HUMOUR, NEEDLESS VARIATIONS and SUPERFLUOUS WORDS may be of interest to the lover or student of English literature, but people who want to look them up in Fowler should have little difficulty in locating them and the numerous cross-references are surely a waste of valuable space. Words like CIRCUMBENDIBUS, SUCCEDANAEUM, SACERDOTAGE, JOBATION AND JAWBATION, SPINDRIFT and SPOONDRIFT, STICKLEBACK and TITTLEBATX, SPINDLEAGE or SPINDLAGE — ‘these little used words’ might well be lumped together in a couple of pages of CURIOSITIES with a footnote — ‘See Shorter Oxford Dictionary for further information’. Some of the facetious formations and polysyllabic humour beloved of our fore-fathers — which did no great credit either to the English language or the wit of their creators — might well be allowed to sink into decent obscurity, for Fowler is almost alone in keeping them alive. Those who love them may still find them in Dickens, Surtees, Smollett and other authors.

The understanding and correct employment of words in more or less popular use, like HEDONIST and EPICURE, are obviously a matter of English usage. From them to a brief account of the principal schools of Greek philosophy is a short and useful step. But to go on to an essay on the distinction between JANSENISM and *Erastianism* opens up a very wide field. One may well feel that people who use these words should know what they mean, should study suitable theological works or should at least be prepared to look them up in the dictionary.

The problem obtrudes in other spheres. Even in these days when readers of Fowler can hardly be expected to stick to Consols, one is mildly surprised to find in F2 half a column devoted to BOND WASHING AND DIVIDEND STRIPPING. One might rather expect a more general article on, say, Stock Exchange English, embracing bulls, bears, stags and the other esoteric fauna of that modern jungle.

F2 has already explored several modern by-ways with admirable articles on OFFICIALESE, LEGALESE and SOCIOLOGESE. It has also taken cognizance, in a detached sort

of way of U & NON-U English, a modern codification which, whether one approves it or not, is difficult to ignore or deny. In an eminently reasonable and objective essay entitled RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION (and that unprovocative title must have required considerable thought) the Second Edition has grasped this dangerous nettle, perhaps an easier and less hazardous venture than it would have been for Henry Fowler in Pre-B.B.C. days.

Indeed, the Second Edition is full of rich new veins for prospectors. Some of them, like PHRASAL VERBS, result largely from comparatively recent developments in language. Some, like RAT RACE, TRIPE and SATIRE, are redolent of Fowler's dry and astringent wit. There is a tongue-in-cheek warning that it has become dangerous to apply the 'apparently innocent adjective' QUEER to a person: no doubt the next edition will contain a similar warning about *gay*.

Reviewing *Modern English Usage* must be a continuing process and no doubt a Third Edition is under consideration. How dearly one would love to participate, in a modest way, in post-prandial discussions with Henry and Frank Fowler and Sir Ernest Gowers. I doubt whether they would invite Doctor Johnson — now there was an overbearing man for you — but they might ask Professor Saintsbury to contribute his share of erudition — and supply the Port.