

TELLING IT AS IT SHOULD BE TOLD

by Purist (of *The Star's* Language Clinic)

'Let us not be guilty of a headline reading "When the cold creeps in, try hot broth like grandmother made it".'

That exhortation forms part of a manuscript on 'How to write correctly', written last year, and now under consideration by a publisher. It has relevance, but no reference to the recent discussion in the columns of *The Star's* about this newspaper's new slogan, 'The Star tells it like it is'.

Further extracts from that manuscript read:

B.L.K. Henderson, D.Lit (Lond.), in *The English Way*, a text-book on the art of writing, says that *like* may be used as a noun, an adjective, a preposition or a verb, but never, in any circumstances, as a conjunction. Yet this vulgar error occurs frequently in common speech: 'He does it like I do', instead of 'He does it as I do'.

Fowler, in *The King's English Abridged*, appears to leave the door ajar when he says that the word *like* is not yet recognised as a conjunction. The development of the correct 'He does not walk like me' into 'He does not walk like I do' has analogies in the dropping of 'as' and 'that' at older stages of the language after they have been appended to mark the conunctional use of words...

Like as a conjunction, though it grows daily more common in conversation, is avoided by careful speakers as a vulgarism and seldom appears in print.

Examples of its use quoted by Fowler are all, he says, 'from an illiterate correspondence to a London newspaper'.

Like is wrongly used in the following sentences: 'He said the films are not going to stand still like they have for 25 years' 'She walked to the altar like she said she would' and 'There is no moral force in existence which enlarges our outlook like suffering does'.

Like is correctly used only to introduce words or phrases: 'She trembled like a leaf' and 'He ate like a beast'. It should not precede a verb. The same principle applies to 'like' for 'as if'. 'The Kremlin has been making noises like (as if) it wants a summit meeting'.

An easy rule to follow is: if *as*, *as if* and *as though* make sense in a sentence, *like* is incorrect.

In the first part of an article on 'Undercurrent Affairs' in *The Star*, the Editor, Harvey Tyson, wrote: 'The Reverend Sithole tells it as he sees it in Rhodesia', not 'like he sees it in Rhodesia', before going on to try to justify *The Star's* new slogan.

The second edition of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, dealing with 'like in questionable constructions', says it will be best to dispose first of what is, if it is a misuse at all, the most flagrant and easily recognisable misuse of 'like'. A sentence from Darwin quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains it in a short and unmistakable form: 'Unfortunately few have observed like you have done'.

Fowler continues: 'Most people use this construction daily in conversation. It is the established way of putting the thing among all who have not been taught to avoid it; the substitution of *as* for *like* in their sentences would seem to them artificial. But in good writing this particular *like* is rare, and even those writers with whom sound English is a matter of care and study rather than instinct and to whom *like* was once the natural word, usually weed it out.'

The *Oxford English Dictionary's* judgement is as follows: 'Used as conjunction, *like* equals *like as*, *as*. Now generally condemned as vulgar or slovenly, though examples may be found in many recent writers of standing'. [The names of some of these were given in Mr. Tyson's article in *The Star*.]

Fowler has much more to say on this subject but I will mention only his reference to the American practice in this regard: 'In the United States the colloquial use of *like* as a conjunction has been carried a step further by treating it as equivalent not only to *as* but also to *as if*, a practice that still grates on English ears'.

Sir Ernest Gowers, in *The Complete Plain Words*, says of *like*: 'Colloquial English admits *like* as a conjunction and would not be

shocked at such a sentence as “nothing succeeds like success does”. In America they even go further and say that “It looks like he was going to succeed”.

But in English prose neither of these will do.

Like must not be treated as a conjunction. So we may say “nothing succeeds like success” but it must be “nothing succeeds as success does” and “it looks as if he were going to succeed”.

Readers of *The Star’s* Language Clinic in the past ten years know that I have often quoted Sir Ernest with approval, preferring his rulings in many instances to those of Fowler and Partridge.

Michael West and P.F. Kimber, in *Deskbook of Correct English* says of *like* in place of *as*: “Try to speak like I do” is becoming allowable, but it is avoided by careful speakers and writers. *Like* in place of *as if* is not correct: “It looks like its going to rain” should be “as if it is going to rain”.

Tremble and Vallins, for whose judgment I have a great regard, say in *ABC of English Usage*: ‘*Like* is an adjective ... not a preposition (though it may be regarded as governing an accusative) ... Sentences like “I cannot work like you do”, where *like* is acting as a conjunction, are grammatical solecisms. The conjunction corresponding to *like* as *as*.’

In a letter to the Editor of *The Star* I complained that *The Star’s* new slogan was an Americanism. I was, however, happy to see that William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White were not afraid to swim against the current in their book, *The Elements of Style*. They wrote: ‘*Like* is not to be used for *as*. *Like* governs nouns and pronouns; before phrases and clauses the equivalent word is *as*.’

These American lovers of the English language continued: ‘The use of *like* for *as* has its defenders; they argue that any usage that achieves currency becomes valid automatically. This, they say, is the way the language is formed. It is and it isn’t.

An expression sometimes merely enjoys a vogue, much as an article of apparel does. *Like* has always been widely misused by the illiterate; lately it has been taken up by the knowing and the well-informed, who find it catchy or liberating, and who use it as though they were slumming.

If every word or device that achieved currency were immediately authenticated simply on the grounds of popularity, the language would be as chaotic as a ball game with no foul lines. For the student, perhaps

the most useful thing to know about *like* is that most carefully edited publications regard its use before phrases and clauses as simple error.'

Walter D. Wright's *A First English Companion* says: 'It is correct to say "like mother" but incorrect to say "like mother does". The word *like* is not a conjunction and should not be followed by a verb.'

So far I have dealt with overseas authorities. Before giving the rulings of South African pundits I recall that in volume one of *Purist's Language Clinic* (now out of print) I wrote: '*As* – not *like* – is correct, for *like* is not a conjunction. One may say "He is like his brother" but when the verb is expressed then *as* must be used. Write "He did not behave as I did".'

And now for the final, and, I hope, conclusive ruling: Vol. 2, No 1 of *English Usage in Southern Africa* issued by the editors of *A Dictionary of English Usage in Southern Africa* on behalf of the University of South Africa, with financial support from the Human Sciences Research Council, makes this pronouncement: '*Like* is acceptable as an adjective and as an adverb. For example, "He is like his father" (*like* here qualifies *he*): and as an adverb, in "she sings like a nightingale" but not as a conjunction, e.g. "I cannot work like you do" This should be "as you do".'

'Usage', however, accepts *like* as a conjunction for *as if* or *as though*, as in, 'It looks like it is going to rain' for 'it looks as if it is going to rain'.

In the issue of *The Star* in which Mr. Tyson's article on 'Undercurrent Affairs' appears there was a house advertisement under the heading 'Good Copy'. The first sentence read: 'A tale worth telling is worth telling well'.

Quite so.

With this lengthy and, I hope, convincing statement, the prosecution rests, except to add, in mitigation of the offence that the editorial style book published by the Argus Printing and Publishing Company, Ltd., does not give any ruling on the correct and incorrect use of the word *like*.

The wordsmiths who forged *The Star's* new slogan – '*The Star* tells it as it is' – have therefore at least not broken any of the group's language rules.

As an epilogue, I concur with the contents of a letter received from a master of the English language in the week in which this

controversy broke. He wrote: ‘... I think *The Star* is a damn good newspaper – quite the best in the country and one of the best in the world’.