

DELIBERATE DEPARTURES FROM TRADITIONAL SYNTAX

by A.A.G. Anderton

We now approach a most serious aspect of grammatical usage, namely that of the deliberate flouting of rules for purposes of accentuation, mainly by the Press and by advertisers. It is our duty to record, whether it be painful or not, that nearly all these perversions (as we must ultimately call them) spring from America and are now adequately transplanted into our fecund soil. That the flouting of fundamental grammatical rules has been effected is not open to doubt, as will appear from the quoted examples; but that linguistic chaos will consequently materialize is also open to doubt, since it appears that current usage in speech and writing may not conform to the pattern set by these organizations, powerful though they may be. If this is true, as we believe it to be, we are then verging on the interesting new historical linguistic phenomenon, that usage by public opinion is yet strong enough to resist these blandishments, and also that these influences are also powerful enough to maintain a rift between themselves and common usage, which then establishes a linguistic diarchy (as, historically, the coming of the dictionary established the diarchy of spelling and pronunciation). The outcome of this struggle will be interesting as it will be vital: if usage triumphs, then the Press must seek an armistice; and if the Press should gain the ascendancy, then the language will revert to some such duality as obtained when the Normans ruled the Saxons.

HEADLINESE. This American invention has spread not only across the Atlantic but -- what is far worse -- into the body of the text which it introduces. And when headlineese combines with false asyndeton, the three-dots technique and colloquialism, it verges on the unintelligible, even to Americans. For the American does not write his letters like this, nor does he speak it -- except the radio commentator who is paid to do it and who, one suspects, probably lapses into

intelligible speech when he gets home. In this connexion it may be worth while to observe that the language is beginning to acquire the Arabic characteristic of being written in one way and spoken in another. This American characteristic warrants academic study and documentation to a far greater degree than we have yet come across. The writer, when he was at school in the United States,¹ well remembers discussing this curious language of headlines with his English master and receiving the sage *obiter dicta*: ‘Son, journalists and ad-men are a race apart, and they live in their own cloud-cuckoo land. Give them enough rope and they’ll hang themselves for sure.’

Partridge² quotes the pertinent remarks made by Frank Whitaker in an address given to journalists on December 13, 1938, and reported in *The Journal of the Institute of Journalists* of January, 1939:

‘In this headline language logical distinctions in the meaning of words are being ruthlessly flattened out. It is a counterfeit language within a language, in which nouns are habitually made to do the work of adjectives, commas the work of heaven knows what, and from which the possessive case has almost disappeared. “Beware of the possessive” I read in one Fleet Street style sheet which in many respects is admirable – “beware of the possessive; it shows up a headline”. What does that mean? ... But this anti-possessive craze should be carefully watched. For example, I read in the “Star” last week the headline, “Question on Earl de la Warr speech”, from which it was impossible to tell whether the speech was by Earl de la Warr or about Earl de la Warr. The distinction might be important, and it should be jealously preserved. Ambiguity is the enemy we have to watch, and our new headline language is full of it.’

We might add: not only ambiguity, but sheer nonsense and puzzlement. The English magazine *Picture Post* quoted (28.5.55, p. 60) an extract from its contemporary magazine *She*: ‘Animal attraction for the month is 34-year-old, hazel-eyed Manchester policeman’s daughter’s white poodle Mitze...’ *Picture Post* captioned it ‘PHEW, JUST MADE IT!’ This is, of course, sheer Timestyle which, if one examines it, is nothing more nor less than headlines creeping into the text, or

¹ St. James School, Maryland, by scholarship of the English-Speaking Union, 1933-34.

² Partridge, Eric: *Usage and Abusage: A Guide to Good English*. 6th edition. London, Hamish Hamilton, 1965, p. 31.

overflowing into the text. (Of 'Time' magazine itself, and of its idiosyncratic style, one can only admire its news 'coverage' and assume that, in appreciating this, its subscribers are alive to liveliness and dead to the slaughter of language; or at least that they condone it.)

For a ridicule of Headline we may read any of A.J. Liebling's articles in the magazine *The New Yorker*, and also in '*Language... Man...Society*'.³ For instance, of BRITISH PROBING HOLY LAND GUNFIRE, he merely comments: 'Interesting. How done?' That word *probe* is the darling standby of all headline-writers, since, like plasticine, it can be shaped to fit almost anything: e.g. HAYSTACK NEEDLE PROBE.

Headline now appears to have been embraced by the Press of the world and may account for the view that if one can read and understand a newspaper one knows the language.

OMISSION OF ARTICLE. It is unfortunately not necessary here to waste the reader's time by quotations: they can be found in any newspaper in any language. 'Early worm-catching bird caught train for Cup Final yesterday in nick of time...' – This kind of article-ellipsis is rife in short news items, which usually murder themselves further by using 'false asyndeton' and the 'three-dots technique' (q.v. infra).

RECIPE LANGUAGE. This specializes in omitting pronouns, with curious effects such as: 'Take a cabbage and boil head in oil.'

NEUTER POSSESSIVES. G.H.M. Bobbins,⁴ to whom most of the idiosyncrasies quoted here are anathema, says categorically 'Since no inanimate thing can possess anything else, it was, and still is, a mistake to say "my coat's buttons".' If the rule is held more in the breaking than in the observance, we are not surprised that it still exists in view of the following examples. 'Ballerina's Wise Decision: Miss Beryl Grey has a chill and will not be in Covent Garden's Swan Lake for

³ Briggs, Harold E., ed: *Language ... Man ... Society : Readings in communication*. New York, Rinehart, 1949, p. 459. (It will be noticed that even the title of a work on communication itself makes use of the three-dots technique.)

⁴ Bobbins, G.H.M: *The Twilight of English*. Cape Town, Maskew Miller, 1951, p. 31.

a few days.' – Daily Mail.⁵ Or, 'A great Italy battle.' Or, 'Africa missionary has difficult task.' (This latter example presents further difficulty: one cannot describe the missionary as African if he was not. We must say 'in Africa'.) We here see the headlines tendency to drop the 's.' One of the most charming place-names to come to us from the Orient is 'The Gate of Heavenly Peace', and it saddened us all the more to see it phrased in a certain American weekly as 'Heavenly Peace Gate'. Similarly with: 'Mafeking's Relief'. These are examples as good as we could find of a painfully needless descent from the sublime to the ridiculous.

QUESTION-TRICK. Ivor Brown, in a syndicated review upon its publication of *The A.B.C. of Plain Words*⁶ mentions 'the tiresome question-trick. ("A solid, bustling figure was seen among Christmas shoppers. His name? Winston Churchill.") Sports writers zestfully blend the two, the pin-stripe and the punch." Annoyance, as we know from Korzybski,⁷ can cause semantic disturbance. We may go further and postulate that annoyance can cause a complete break in communication, in that the reader will read no further.

LABELLING. In the same passage Ivor Brown also criticizes the fashion of 'the labelling of ladies with sums of money ("husband of £50 000 film-star Gloria Gloy").' He demands, 'Why always these round figures? I await news of a £78 534 6s. 9d. wife.' Labelling may take many forms: 'A London, England, chimney-sweep'; 'Jimmy Roberts, 4, can stand on his head'. And see ATTRIBUTIVE ADJECTIVES below.

NOUN-ADJECTIVES. The use of nouns as adjectives, especially in headlines, will often puzzle the reader, as in POLICEMAN EMBANKMENT DIVE.

⁵ To give its reference in similar vein: the above is from the January 28, 1953, *Punch*, p. 141.

⁶ Gowers, Sir Ernest: *The A.B.C. of Plain Words*, HMSO, 1951.

⁷ Korzybski, Alfred: *Science and Sanity – An Introduction to non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, 3rd edition, Lakeville, International non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, 1948.

INVERSION. Fowler⁸ says that the abuse of inversion ranks with Elegant Variation as one of the most repellant vices of modern writing. e.g. 'Carrying far more than can the steamdriven vessel.'

TIMESTYLE. This is Wolcott Gibbs' neat parodical name for the style of that unique publication. He quotes: 'French are some of the curious terms of square dancing' – a curious form of inversion which one would expect to find in the verse-drama of Christopher Fry and T.S. Eliot rather than in the columns of a newsmagazine. Most of the idiosyncrasies discussed here are readily to be found in 'Time' magazine,⁹ and many of them are attributable to it.

ATTRIBUTIVE ADJECTIVES. 'Attractive Miss Vavasour', quotes Bobbins.¹⁰ 'Since adjectives restrict or distinguish, the expression is always ambiguous. We cannot but infer that there is also a repulsive Miss Vavasour... Once the journalists found that this trick of simultaneous attribution and predication was not blue-pencilled by sub-editors, they stuffed the pattern...'

A multiplicity of adjectival nouns produces verbal indigestion, e.g. 'Every possible material and labour saving device', or 'Under the conditions of Canadian wilderness travel' which means 'when travelling in the Canadian wilderness'.

CLUMSY AVOIDANCE OF PREDICATIVE CONSTRUCTION. (American. Germanic influence?) 'Acting Under-Secretary of State Averill W.' Or is it a printing error? This (probable headlines-disease) attributive construction is rife in American writing. One wonders why this is so, when two commas and a predicative construction will make the phrase clear, well-balanced and euphonious.

TITLES. e.g. 'Marquis Curzon'. The difficulty here for the writer and grammarian alike is to decide when the attributive is permissible and when not. 'King George the Fifth of England' is

⁸ Fowler, H.W.: *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961, p. 285.

⁹ Published by TIME Inc., Chicago.

¹⁰ Bobbins, loc. cit., p. 39.

correct but the American locution 'King of England George Fifth' is an utter solecism. We approach the dividing line however when we consider examples such as 'President Wilson meets Prime Minister Baldwin'. May 'Prime Minister' here remain attributive? If so, what about 'Foreign Secretary Eden'? Nor is it of any help to suggest that attributives are permissible only when they are titles, for we may say 'farmer Giles' and 'widow Twanky', yet not 'heir presumptive Elizabeth' (though we may say Crown Prince Olaf). In fact this is one of the most changeable of usages, and our only guides at the moment must be custom and euphony.

FALSE ASYNDETON. The main source of supply of this insidious habit is again America. True asyndeton has always been permissible, where commas may do the work of colons and semi-colons in very short sentences without compromise to the intended meaning: 'He ran off, I followed.' But consider the following:

'Within two months after Charles went on the glutamic acid regime (diet?), he showed a better disposition, became more alert and inquisitive... He made friends, and learned to get along with them.'¹¹ Which of these two sentences sounds better and reads better? Obviously the second. Yet it is no more pedantic than the first: it is better written: it is good English; and the other, solely because of the omission of the conjunction, is bad English.

Again: 'The basic nature and long-range goals of the enemy can usually be determined from public sources, e.g. *Mein Kampf*, *Das Kapital*, the writings of Stalin.'¹² This unfortunate error appears to ascribe the two books to Stalin, since the natural tendency is to supply the ellipsis 'which are' rather than 'and'.

Squaring the Circle. 'An efficient means of cutting round, rectangular holes in... sheet for prototype production.' — From an advertisement in the 'I wish I had' column of the *Industrial Equipment News*, (Peterborough).¹³

¹¹ From *The Readers Digest*, November, 1950.

¹² *TIME* magazine, August 3rd, 1953, p. 12.

¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, September 10th, 1960, p. 10 (Asyndeton, false).

To cross the Atlantic: an advertisement¹⁴ in a London magazine says: CHILBLAINS, CHAPS. This prompts the derisive continuation GUMBOILS, GIRLS!

‘Three-year-old Ronald Durkins hangs by feet from rubber-padded trapeze, cure for nervousness, shock.’ In quoting this G.H.M. Bobbins observes that asyndeton has debased our language as much as any other device of the Press during the past ten years; and he goes on to present what is probably the most significant remark that can be adduced from this chapter: ‘Our language is not changing; it is being changed.’

THREE-DOTS TECHNIQUE. A row of stops in punctuation can signify but one thing: a word or words omitted from a passage. Not so in America, and especially among advertisers (and the cult has now crossed the Atlantic); the three little dots are used to supplant almost every mark of punctuation. In the study we have given to this comparatively recent phenomenon we have reached the conclusion that these marks – and sometimes dashes instead – are employed to give an aura of breathlessness... importance... speed... to a pronouncement. Furthermore, American radio announcers are now evidently made to read this stuff, which they accomplish by fractionally pausing over the dots. If, instead, they were taught to give three loud croaks or ‘Bronx cheers’ whenever they saw these three dots, the cult would very soon be killed by ridicule. But if it is to remain in the written language it will have to be given some serious study in the near future.

An American magazine¹⁵ was taken at random and it was found that only 52 of the 212 pages lacked three-dots. Advertisers were the chief culprits; of the above-mentioned 52 pages, 12 carried no advertisements and 29 consisted mostly of large pictures, so that, in the realm of reasonable chance, the proportion of three-dot addiction to normal writing was 171 to 11, or more than 15 to 1. We noted that in an access of modesty one advertiser used two dots instead of three. To this cult one can but remark that it is easy enough to get spots before one’s eyes without having them put there. Illustrative examples are now

¹⁴ *Everybody’s Weekly* (London), January 10th, 1953, p. 6.

¹⁵ *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, November 1952.

appended, all taken from advertisements in *The Saturday Evening Post* (N.Y.) of 8.7.50.

Replacing a dash: 'In a car engine...as in a tennis game...loss of control means poor performance.'

Replacing a comma: 'G-E Fans as low as \$12.95...for home...office...and factory.'

Replacing 'and': 'It's always fresh and flavorful...good to the last juicy tidbit.'

Replacing a colon: 'One of the best ways is this...switch from iced tea or coffee to delicious, flavorful Iced POSTUM.'

Replacing a semi-colon: 'There was no metal that would hold its strength, hour after hour, despite white hot blasts...despite terrific stresses.'

Replacing a full stop: 'Get the smart, white pack of CAVALIERS...try them.'

Replacing an ellipsis: 'Iron linen damask along the length on the right side...brings out the pattern of the weave.'

Replacing nothing: 'As yet ten-year-old Tod has never been far from home...on his own.'

WORD ORDER. Here is a piece of sly ridicule from G.K. Chesterton's pamphlet 'The Crimes of England':¹⁶

'Napoleon was not French Emperor, but only Emperor of the French. (The Victorian) would have been even more indignant if he had been asked to be satisfied with an Art Master, when he had advertised for a Master of Arts. His irritation would have been increased if the Art Master had promised him a sea-piece and had brought him a piece of the sea: or if, during the decoration of his house, the same aesthetic humorist had undertaken to procure some Indian Red and had produced a Red Indian'.

In similar vein one might jocularly surmise that the American Bachelor of Arts terms himself an A.B. (as indeed he does) because he is an Arts Bachelor.

The ugly American usage such as 'The London, England, branch of our bank...' appears now to be accepted usage on the highest

¹⁶ Quoted in *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 1, No 5, p. 117, Published by the British Council and Longmans Green.

language level in the United States and Canada, and it is spreading in current English abroad. It is easily ridiculed: 'He was wearing a Norfolk, England, jacket while carrying a Gladstone, Tory, bag when boarding the Capetown, Republic of South Africa, Castle,' etc. etc. It will be interesting to observe in the future whether this trend will prove to be ephemeral, or transient, or established.

A.G. Kennedy in *Current English* (Ginn & CO., NY, p. 35) quotes GIRL EYE REMOVAL DECISION TODAY, which is a good example of the growing practice of converting a word from one part of speech to another, and, in the process, verging towards pidgin English. 'The prominence given day by day', says Kennedy, 'to such pidgin-English constructions can hardly fail to influence the speech and writing of unthinking readers of the daily papers, and have its permanent effect upon the grammar and vocabulary of the English language, unless a serious endeavour is made to counteract it.' A melancholy statement!

In *Usage and Abusage*, Eric Partridge¹⁷ quotes the summary of William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* on this subject: 'Of the increasing vagueness, compactness, and lack of logical distinctions in English, the most obvious example is the newspaper headline. I remember a very fine one that went ITALIAN ASSASSIN BOMB PLOT DISASTER.' He notes that the assassin was not an Italian and that therefore *Italian* must qualify the rest of the headline; that the dominant noun is *disaster*; hints that the adjective qualifying *disaster* is *bomb-plot*, that *assassin* should be *assassin's* and that *Italian* should be *in Italy*; and concludes that 'the main rhythm conveys: 'This is a particularly exciting sort of disaster, the assassin-bomb-plot type they have in Italy''.' I suggest that the following rearrangement explains the headline: ITALIAN DISASTER ASSASSIN'S BOMB-PLOT, which means, 'There has been in Italy a disaster caused by a bomb in an assassin's plot'.

Partridge (loc. cit.) goes on to quote Mr Frank Whitaker: 'Headlines are a good starting point, not only because they offer the greatest temptation to the debaser owing to the stress under which they

¹⁷ Partridge, Eric: *Usage and Abusage: A Guide to Good English*, 6th edition, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1965, p. 30.

are often written, but also because they have created an important problem of another kind. They remind us every day, particularly in our more popular newspapers, that the grammatical sentence is no longer the only way of expressing a thought in modern English. We are, indeed, rapidly evolving a distinct headline language which bears little relation to everyday speech. That cannot be a good thing, because it means that we are approaching a stage, if we have not already reached it, at which a word will mean one thing when it is written and another when it is spoken.'

We may remind ourselves here that such a situation has already obtained for centuries in such languages as Chinese, Japanese, Persian and Arabic – to name but a few; the point being that what is written in the classic and accepted script in those lands which use such scripts and ideograms is given different interpretations and different pronunciations in their far-flung provinces. In Arabic, Kemal Ataturk cut the Gordian knot by substituting the Latin alphabet in Turkey. It would be an interesting subject of research to know whether, since 1929, such influences as are discussed here have taken place between that date and the present, in the Turkish language.

We must then, take issue with G.H. Vallins when he says¹⁸ 'The conjunctionless, elliptical style of the "Daily Express" is – however much we may dislike it – more in keeping with the modern trend of language than the ponderous and literary style of the "Manchester Guardian" and "The Times".' Is it? Certainly it may be in keeping with the modern trend of journalism, but journalism is not necessarily language. To give one example, it drifts away from colloquial speech (which is certainly language): who ever says 'I was cold, shivering'? And because they write good and correct English, must some newspapers be labelled ponderous and literary? The truth is that the 'Daily Express' chases its own tail of modernity as a puppet style of American journalese and headlines. It is following a jejune vogue which will probably die, as fashions die.

¹⁸ Vallins, G.H.: *Good English*, Deutch, 1951.

Here is a masterpiece taken from a picture caption from 'Time' magazine:¹⁹ 'Sheep's-eye close-up of Comic Strip Artist Ken (*Mary Worth*) Allen's bespectacled ex-Career Girl Brick.'

It will have become obvious to the reader by now that nearly all of the perversions discussed arise from attempts to pursue that will-o'-the-wisp, brevity. But, beyond conciseness there is no real short cut in language. 'Such brevity', writes Professor Potter,²⁰ 'so far from being the soul of wit, is even the death of meaning; and certainly the death of logic.'

Now, what may we say of the deliberate perversions discussed in this chapter? It is true that grammatical rebellions have always existed, but these perversions now seem to us to amount not so much to a rebellion as to a 'cold war'. They possess weapons today which did not previously exist in linguistic history, namely advertising propaganda, the radio, and newspaper headlines. They embrace shocking solecisms, quite at variance with public usage, yet they are calmly countenanced by the reading and listening public. But their locutions are hardly ever used by the public. Nobody ever says, and nobody ever ascribes to a locutor: 'Frantic, I was miserable, lonely.' We can only conclude that the present-day speaker and writer, though probably agreeing with the remarks of the American schoolmaster quoted in this chapter, also now unthinkingly accepts a duality in communication, that is, his own spoken and written language, and that of the Press and advertisers. If this be so, then we have a new phenomenon to examine, side by side with spoken v. written, grammatical v. ungrammatical, cultured v. illiterate; and the new phenomenon is usage v. deliberate misusage. It is important that we should here define the word 'deliberate': we mean it to be 'well knowing that the locution is a solecism in present-day usage, or unhesitatingly copying the style of those who countenance the solecism.' The whole subject of these remarks has not yet been adequately treated scholastically, and must form the nucleus of serious further academic investigation. That the investigation must be serious is evident from the very nature of the misusages; for instance, false

¹⁹ Issue of September 22nd, 1952, p. 38.

²⁰ Potter, S: *Our Language*, Penguin, 1950, p. 175.

asyndeton itself breaks down the very structure of accepted grammatical principles. This study appears to us to be the chief necessary concern of the grammarian of the future.

In this chapter we have generally sought to show by example and deduction that the grammarian, as with the linguistic historian and the philologist, must remain the interpreter in his field, though he may be an intelligent guide; that his task among the disputables is difficult and sometimes impossible; but that nevertheless the strong framework of correct grammatical and syntactical usage is a firm essential for building in a style that is free from haziness and interpretative error leading to semantic distress – and more especially so in view of the current formidable attacks on the grammatical structure accepted by usage. Good writing demands something more than grammatical accuracy and clarity of expression.