

Is Correct Language Politically Incorrect?

Following on from Column 17, about stress in English¹: Encountered twice on the same day, *beg a question* used to mean *ask a question*, that is, the opposite of its ordinary sense.² “The further west . . .”: English idiom requires another comparative to complete the syntax: “. . . the wetter it will be” or suchlike. On the Radio 4 weather forecasts this quite frequently does not happen, so we hear “The further west, it will be very wet” and the like. This is just not English, though perhaps it does convey information in a sort of way. Should one object?

A reprint, with new Introduction, of Mark Halpern’s *Language & Human Nature* arrived, though it is not yet listed on Amazon (978 1 42128 0825 5, Transaction Publishers). This book is worth attention as a defence of the duty of ordinarily literate people to object to incorrect uses of language. The linguists, by and large, think that correctness is not their province, which is just to describe actual usage. The distinction can perhaps not be made at a very basic level. For instance if you try to use a Latin accusative as the subject of a sentence the grammarian would say that the sentence is not well-formed, which is much the same as saying both that it is incorrect and that it has not conveyed your meaning. So if you translate “man bites dog” as “canis virum mordet” (or “mordet canis virum” etc.) you will not succeed in conveying your meaning, because if our Latin is correct you will have produced a well-formed sentence but not the one you intended: to convey the sense “man bites dog” the sentence is not well-formed. But generally, the grammarians of the Quirk school will say that if a large number of people use *aspect* to mean *part* or *reticent* to mean *reluctant* (one of Halpern’s examples we have not come across yet) the words just do mean these things and should go into dictionaries accordingly. If the possibilities of sense are limited as a result that’s no concern of the linguist.

It does not follow that linguistics forbids any defence of correctness. For a grammarian to say so would itself be “prescriptive”. If correct use is successfully defended, linguistics will describe accordingly. Linguistics of the kind mentioned is neutral on the matter, as on all other matters. There is no reason why descriptive linguistics should influence judgement in ordinary life or carry over into any sort of general prohibition on corrections, and in fact one of the functions of the sub-editing of newspapers and books is still to ensure at least some degree of correctness, for instance in the use of the possessive apostrophe. But the neutrality of the linguists does vaguely influence ordinary people including the A-level examining boards, who instruct markers to ignore ungrammaticality. (If taken literally this would prevent them from understanding the scripts, which perhaps explains some strange A-level achievements.)

Sometimes a change in language is a straightforward loss of what Wallerstein (*Dear Mr Howard*, which we publish) calls “linguistic resource”. If *reticent* is absorbed into *reluctant*, the idea of reticence will be expressed only with difficulty and by the use of a whole phrase. If *to beg a question* means *to raise a question* how will anyone express the sense of the former phrase? The nation would survive without its green belts and its wildlife, which every thoughtful person hopes to preserve. The language is a necessary as well as priceless communal possession, for without it there is no common sense. Language should be treasured! Concepts are worth many frogs.

Is this worth offering as a thought for the week? Bear in mind that if the process of loss of ordinary sense in language goes far enough there won’t be any thoughts at all.

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1 By the way why do the weather forecasters frequently stress conjunctions when no particular emphasis is required? “And I’ll tell you another thing” is all right but why “Turning to England AND Wales . . .”?

2 Once in the *Financial Times*, once Radio 4 but exact refs. unavailable. Were these sports or is the misuse common?