

Coining

THE ROYAL MINT celebrates the Diamond Jubilee and turns an honest penny for the taxpayers by offering to “specially selected” households an “Official NEW” £5 coin. The flyer would do as a collection of standard sales dodges which without quite being dishonest are misleading or senseless. “Specially selected”: by postcode or what? Those who purchase, anyway, will become “one of a select group of people” although on the outside the title is “National Household Notification”; despite the selectivity “**demand for this official new coin is certain to be high**” and it is not suggested that there is any limit to the number of coins to be struck. In 28 words this cover includes, as well as “Important News” and “Please Open” both *official* and *officially*. Is the suggestion that there could be other *unofficial* £5 coins? Does the repeated NEW hint that other commemorative coins are reissues? “Best of all, if you reserve your coin today it can be yours for **just its face value – £5 for £5. POSTFREE.**” The Royal Mint, that is, will not make more profit than the £5 a coin less whatever it costs to design, make and deliver. The order form is of course a “Priority Reservation Form”. Priority over whom? *Official, priority, select group of people* and *news* are all without meaning.

Ought there not to be a certain dignity about the state? Should the state be flogging coins with exactly the same sales style as other downmarket mail-order concerns? This is a shabby way of celebrating a state occasion.

The reason for the present note, however, is the Royal Mint’s syntax. Quite soon we shall be publishing Michael Wallerstein’s NEW short book *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*, in which he analyses, by grammatical category, the principal failures of expression in the language of our ruling élites and “media”, failures often entailing loss of sense. The Royal Mint flyer turned up too late to furnish examples, but it could have done, of syntax as well as lexis. “Having only been one other Diamond Jubilee in the entire history of the British

monarchy, **demand for this official new coin is certain to be high.**” Failed absolute phrase: in English it needs a “there”: “There having been . . .” Any respectable schoolteacher would point this out, but would also probably recommend rewriting. “So to guarantee that YOUR name is added to the reservation list please do not delay. You can do this by . . .” In such formations the pronoun or pro-verb ordinarily represents the nearest preceding word or phrase that will serve, here *delay*, so the most likely sense is “You can delay . . .”

The Royal Mint’s communications ought to be in correct English. So ought speeches by leading politicians.

Also too late for use by Wallerstein was the Prime Minister’s speech about the Authorised Version of the English Bible (16 December 2011). “First, the King James Bible has bequeathed a body of language that permeates every aspect of our culture and heritage.” As well as misusing *aspect* this unluckily, with “bequeathed”, suggests that the body is a dead body. But can any sort of body permeate? Would anyone capable of reading the English Bible come out with that phrase? Perhaps the Prime Minister tries to mean well, but until he succeeds in saying what he means there is no knowing whether he means anything or not.

A Royal Mint circular may be thought insufficient cause for alarm about the English language. Wallerstein’s work consists almost wholly of examples worse than anything issued by the Royal Mint. Newspeak is so much all around us every day (and within us?) that we don’t notice it. But it should be noticed that the English clerisy is repeating the history of Caliban in reverse—as farce. Before Miranda takes Caliban in hand and he turns into a poet, “Thou didst not (savage) / Know thine own meaning.” Her gift is to endow his purposes “With words that made them known”. In the brave new world, the guidance is back towards Caliban’s first state when “thou . . . wouldst gabble, like / A thing most brutish.”