

Ill Literacy

The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, aims to “end illiteracy within a generation.” Gove is not given to making damn fool remarks, so why is he promising something which he can’t possibly provide? (You didn’t think I was going to say “deliver”, did you?)

And where will he choose to begin? It had better be with the teachers—and, while he’s at it, a great number of our “leading” commentators who write in the papers and talk on radio and TV. You know, people who say “begs the question” when they don’t mean *ignoratio elenchi* or *petitio principii* but only “asking the question”. They say “deteriate” and “mitigate against”, “refute” when all they can justly claim is “deny”. Medical reports announce that the patient is “critical but stable”—when the meaning of “critical” is precisely that something is unstable.

Then there are the adherents of the pleonastic adverb, as in “actively seeking”, “communicate effectively”. Or the adverb can be avoided altogether, “on a regular basis”. Phrases that sound more “positive” than ordinary English are *de rigueur*, like “going forward” for “in future”. What about “positive” itself as having no sense except to try to cheer us up?

The word “iconic” is used to describe a punk rocker or a television cook. “Crescendo” to mean “pinnacle of sound” when that word means a gradual increase in volume. They can’t pronounce “law and order” but have to put in an extra “r”—“lawr ’n’ order”, inviting a confusion with “lore”. They start any sentence with “So . . .”—so forgetting that *nihil ex nihilo fit* also has its grammatical context. And “centred around”, “pressurised” for “pressured”. “Disinterested” when they mean “uninterested”. “Run-down council estate” for “council estate”. “Miniscule” for “minuscule”. “Burgalry”. “Decision-making process” for “deciding”. “Impact on” for “affect”.

“Infamous” means that a thing is notoriously vile, abominable etc. Now it’s used in such phrases as “the Liverpool striker’s infamous penalty miss”. “Trained marksman”—in contrast to untrained marksmen? “Damage” (verb) becomes “negatively impact upon”. “Murals on walls . . .”

Even when language is used as many linguists think it should be, to convey information, the radio weather forecasters can never say simply “during the afternoon”: it has to be made personal and positive: “as we head through the course of the afternoon”.

Gove might like to start with the in-house journal of his profession, *The Times Educational Supplement*, in which I saw an advertisement for someone to teach English in a “grammer school”.

Peter Mullen
with editorial additions

§ The next Brynmill publication, now at press, will be the third booklet in Michael Wallerstein’s series on subjects related to this column, entitled *Spell*.

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