

The Educated Illiterate

Dear Mr Kamm,

I think your remarks in *The Times* of 17th January [2015] require some critical comment. First of all, you are mistaken in one of your points: *Neither the columnist nor his colleagues had a clue* is not an example of a double negative; the structure consists of two clauses in apposition, *viz.*

The columnist hadn't a clue.

His colleagues hadn't a clue.

The negation is moved forward to the head of the clauses and the redundant repetition is deleted: *Neither . . . nor had a clue*. This device has to do with what is called textual cohesion and it is a mark of maturity in the production and comprehension of language. The uneducated—and the less intelligent—are likely to find this impossible to produce and likelier still to misinterpret upon hearing or reading. Mick Jagger's double negative is indeed readily comprehensible, not least as the remark of an illiterate. Social and educational standing are revealed in and judged by, amongst other things, one's grammar—which is not to say that the judgement so formed is necessarily correct. I, myself, construct sentences which I know to be formally correct but which I know my auditor(s) will be "shocked" by, for example the ending of a clause with a preposition, which many imagine to count as a grammatical, not to say social, black mark. On the other hand, when I see and hear, all too frequently nowadays, such a construction as *they drive like it was the motorway*, I mentally file the utterer in my category of the educated illiterate, which category now has a very sizeable and growing population.

You are right to say that grammar is not a branch of logic; what it is, though, is an essential component of conceptual thought and the imparting of that to others. What is happening to English at the present time is indicative of a reduction in the capacity for the kind of even mild conceptualisation that was, formerly, part of the small-change of everyday intercourse. This is especially apparent in the narrowing in the range of past tenses in common use, in the decreasing ability to cast utterances in the "recorded" mode (*oratio obliqua*), in the displacement of the third person by the first and second, by the contraction of the spectrum of prepositions to no more than three (*to, for, on*, the greatest obliteration being *of*^{*}) and by an atrophying of pronominal substitution to produce a succession of what the Americans call "citation sentences" where the topic common or proper noun is repeated and repeated from sentence to sentence. This

* In connexion with *of*, observe the following:

"oblivious *of*" now commonly "oblivious *to*"

"The Ministry *of* Transport" now "The Ministry *for* Transport" (Is the MoT now the MfT?)

"The Ministry *of* Defence" now "The Ministry *for* Defence"

"The Department *of* Education and Science" now "The Dep. *for* etc."

"love *of* one's country" now "love *for* your (*sic*) country"

"X has been convicted *of* a large number of offences" now "X was convicted *for* a lot of (*sic*) offences."

"The leaning tower *of* Pisa" now "Pisa's leaning tower"

Note also how book dedications are no longer *to* So-and-so but *for*, which has quite an other connotation. Again, eponymous appellations are now, increasingly, rendered as *for* instead of *after*, e.g. "Pennsylvania named *for* William Penn", which is, in any case, untrue; the state is named *after* him.

What one sees, here, and in much else in recent changes in the language, is the influence of foreign tongues, especially German, filtered through American English and picked up by the British in acknowledgement of their humble station where they crouch in submission before the marvel of all that is American—not excluding its brands of English.

last phenomenon is especially rife in scientific, PR and commercial writing, where it gives the impression that the writer (or speaker) is continually forgetting what the subject matter is and has, therefore, to repeat it.

The greatest damage to the language resides, perhaps above all, in the matter of the inability to situate matters in space-time. It has long been a characteristic of American English to be largely innocent of the past perfect and future perfect tenses, and this absence has now infected British English; indeed, the next phase, namely the elimination of the present perfect, is now well-established here so that it is impossible to tell from newspaper reports whether So-and-So, who *was* arrested, is still under arrest or has been released or has escaped. This reduction has (*sic*) happened within the last three years or so and it afflicted (*sic*) every one of the national newspapers simultaneously, which implies a collective collapse in the journalistic mind.

Note the characteristic American use of the past simple in such contexts as:

Family member or friend enters the house after an outing—

N [in the house] *Did you have a good time?*

This sentence is unanchored in space-time: where? when? British English has:

Have you had a good time?

implying just now, up to the present time; or

Did you have a good time yesterday / in Cornwall?

situating the matter in time and/or place.

Another mortal blow to the language is apparent (but not, of course, to those trapped in it) in the near elimination of the modal system: *may, might, will, would, shall, should, can, could, must, need to, ought to* and the negative form of these (when did you last hear or see *mayn't, mightn't, shan't, mustn't, needn't, oughtn't to?*) to the primitive residual *could*. It is an instructive exercise to count the occurrence of *could* in any one newspaper article or, indeed, in the programmes on the television and radio. Everything from public affairs to weather, from morality to sport, is now presented in a fog of *could*.

It is current dogma to dismiss all this as, in the words of the late Philip Howard, Neanderthal tosh and, possibly, an attack on the human right to freedom of speech.

yours sincerely

Michael Wallerstein