

Michael Wallerstein, *Dear Mr Howard: the Changing of Modern English* (Edgeways, £4.80), *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome* (Edgeways, £4.80)

Describing changes in the English language isn't necessarily the same as complaining about them, but it often is. There is a long tradition of such complaint going back to at least the sixteenth century and developed particularly in the eighteenth century with the rise of a doctrine or doctrines of "correctness" (a much-contested category). A number of things might be meant by saying that the language is declining, and there are a number of motives that might inform the complaint. The concern might be with the loss of meaning of individual words, largely through ignorance of their etymology; or narrowing of the range of synonyms, leading to reduction of the ability to make fine distinctions; or reduction of possibilities of grammatical articulation, leading to a loss of clarity in relating of ideas to one another. Some uses of language may be regretted as evidence of poor thinking, insincere emotion, or deliberate obfuscation and misdirection; others as symptomatic of disliked social attitudes or characteristics of an emerging or growing class or sector of society. Possible motives for complaining include: a belief in a connection between grammatical and ethical and societal propriety; concern for clarity and integrity of thought; aesthetic preference for certain forms and usages; nostalgia; or even plain, if unacknowledged, snobbery. The root motive might be a sense that sublunary things have a built-in tendency to deteriorate without strenuous upkeep, or that the integrity of the language is threatened by foreign pollution. And there's the further question of what the complainer seeks to do by complaining: whether to raise awareness, to encourage and facilitate reform, or merely to let off steam (out of exasperation or for the sheer pleasure of complaining). Or even to display conscious superiority to certain persons.

I think it's fair to say that something of nearly all of this can be found in these two short books (81 and 66 pages respectively) by Michael Wallerstein. The first came out in 2003 and is still available; the second was published last year.

The considerable strength of *Dear Mr Howard* (a response to a 2002 piece by Philip Howard in *The Times*) is its insistence that the significant and worrying changes in contemporary English are not the misuses of individual words or other offences against "correctness" but changes in "the underlying, 'invisible', grammatical and semantic structures", "in the grammatical and semantic forms, covering not merely the sentence but the whole text, including dialogic structures", in "a great reduction of subordination, especially of non-finite phrases". He finds again and again what he takes to be evidence of "reduction of linguistic potential"—a growing inability to get certain kinds of distinctions and relations clearly stated. An early example is the use of *like* as subordinator, which "destroys the difference between comparison ('it looks like bad luck') and supposition ('It looks as though it were bad luck')". He discusses, *inter alia*, the use and misuse of particles and prepositions, the apparent "difficulty in maintaining a consistent time/tense perspective through a sentence which has any kind of subordination . . . especially . . . where the subordinate clause is conditional or concessive"; the failure to understand the subjunctive; the failure to distinguish between countable (*fewer*) and uncountable (*less*), between animate and inanimate in the use of relative pronouns, between *shall* and *will*, and between *this* and *that* in anaphoric constructions; the abandonment (in *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome* he says fear) of the passive; and the failure to topicalise sentences clearly. The lack of syntactical awareness he also finds informing certain patterns of intonation: "The highlighting of elements by means of voice tone has diminished enormously. . . . The tonic accent tends to be shifted always to the final word

in the clause, regardless of meaning.” (I think that is something that teachers who hear students reading older texts aloud will readily recognise.) All of this is very useful.

It’s late in *Dear Mister Howard* that Wallerstein makes his first reference to the Eliza Doolittle Syndrome (LDS), a notion which dominates the latter pamphlet (a series of twenty-nine pieces, some very short, under such very specific headings as “Failure of sequence with auxiliary verbs”, “Intrusive ‘to’”, and “Striving for gentility and status”). This “syndrome” relates to “the rise to positions of power and authority by lower-class” of whom he says:

They have modified their provincial and lower-class accents but have, very largely retained the grammar and, above all, attitudes to grammar and speech of their origins. They are perfectly satisfied that they have “arrived” and are smugly sure that their speech and grammar are correct; this they then impose on all others . . . .

I’m not convinced that the “syndrome” metaphor is particularly helpful, as it can have the effect of putting a number of disparate elements on an equal footing and attributing them all to the same cause. In both books Wallerstein has a great deal to say about pronunciation, especially as a register of class and attitude and as evidence of failure to grasp etymology (teachers might think of the widespread appearance of *past/oral*). Irritating as mispronunciation can be—and our irritation can too easily distract us from attending to what is being said—it does not limit communication in the same way or to the same extent that syntactic errors and inadequacies can, but it appears here on an equal footing. (Does the use of the glottal stop in any way detract from the cogency of what is being said? One of the most educated men I know consistently uses it.) The feeling that it is all of a piece is very tempting, but maybe it needs to be teased out a little more. More seriously, Wallerstein’s intense dislike of much of what he describes leads to expressions that make it too easy for readers, especially of *The Liza Doolittle Syndrome*, to take offence and so to disregard the thrust of his argument. He can at times sound too like the Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells whom he specifically disowns.

Unsurprisingly, it’s possible to question some of his specific judgments—whether, for instance, expressions such as “England’s Queen” and “London’s East End” are really to be regretted, or whether something that is strictly speaking ambiguous from a grammatical point of view (“The elephants are on the train”) is ambiguous in the actual situation in which it is used. And there’s the question of what is the appropriate method for dealing with these matters: it’s arguable that he relies too heavily on his own reading and impressions: when, for instance, he writes that “I have not studied the records [which records?] closely, but I suspect that there have been, and are still, some quite serious misunderstandings created by these differences in adverbial semantics and syntax,” it might be objected that such claims must be backed up by statistical investigation, not left to individual or even shared impressions. (This would be to take the argument out of judgment and into “science”: which has its own problems.)

And very occasionally, he is simply wrong (*iconic*, annoying as its current use might be to some of us, can’t be reduced to “eye-catching”).

But the books are certainly worth some attention, especially *Dear Mr Howard*. A better book might have been produced by a carefully ordered combination of the two—but not a better resource. The books have various advantages for classroom use: they are short and cheap; they offer a multitude of examples, incisively analysed; they draw attention to a wide range of kinds of change; and they are contentious, full of attitude. They could be an invaluable classroom resource for teachers who are not too tightly tied to their A level syllabuses. Examples could be extracted for discussion (the paired columns of expressions in American and British English, for instance); and various *ober*

*dicta* might be made the grounds of investigation. Students might consider whether there have been any *gains* in expressive force in recent changes (Wallerstein mentions, I think, only one).

The books are particularly useful in providing examples to discuss in relation to the often-heard “Oh, we know what they mean, so why are you making a fuss about it?” and under-examined notions of the primacy of usage, to which Daniel Defoe’s objection is still cogent: “’Tis true, Custom is allow’d to be our best Authority for Words, and ’tis fit it should be so; but Reason must be the Judge of Sense in Language, and Custom can never prevail over it.” Behind such reasoning and judgment must lie\* the belief that Wallerstein expresses in these words:

a person’s and a culture’s conceptual range—including their moral range—is, not exactly determined, but typified by their linguistic resources.

If we don’t believe something like this, why are we concerned with teaching English?

*John Haddon*

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\* My grammar-checker wants this to be *lay*. Wallerstein has some amusing and telling remarks about grammar-checkers.