

## WHAT IS BAD LANGUAGE?



GRAMMAR," says Ben Jonson, "is the art of true and well speaking a language." According to modern rule, the grammarian himself is here ungrammatical; for *true*, the same as *well*, is doing duty as an adverb, and the precision of the present day would write *truly*.

But what is *truly* if not a compound adjective, *true-like*, as *very like* in pronunciation is changed into *verily*? Rules grow from examples, or patterns, and we fall

into a grave though common error of logic when we attempt to deduce example from rule, as is done by Victorian critics who censure Elizabethan grammar, founding their objections on mistaken instances, picked from the poets, historians, and dramatists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Let us take a case in point. Ben Jonson would scarcely have used *its* as a possessive pronoun. The word was an innovation in his time, and not established as grammar. Throughout the Authorised Version of the Scriptures there is no such word as *its*. *His* and *her*, as in genuine rustic speech of to-day, would have been the possessive case of *it* down to a period almost as late as Milton, who only once admitted *its* into "Paradise Lost." So rapidly, however, in the days of the Restoration, did *its* come into favour, that we find no less an authority than Dryden objecting to *his* for *its*, as "ill syntax" in Ben Jonson, Dryden unaccountably forgetting that such was the only syntax known till a period then recent. In turn we may now say that *ill*, in our generation, is not idiomatic English, when placed as an adjective before a noun, though we sometimes say that So-and-So is *ill*, meaning *sick*. The word *ill* has otherwise come to be used almost exclusively as an adverb. It would be as reasonable in critics now living to take Dryden to task for his *ill syntax*—that phrase having for us a prank and conceited sound—as it was in Dryden to censure Ben Jonson for not writing in accordance with a grammatical code which had not come into existence.

Grammar makes itself; or, at any rate, is not made by grammarians. Their "operant powers" extend only to schemes of theory and analysis; and if there be any real grammar-makers, they are the makers of language as the grammarians find it. What they (the acceptable writers) give, and we in time receive, as on authority, is grammar. The changes involved in the making or growth of this same grammar, from time to time, should be heedfully and jealously watched by all who love and respect their mother-tongue. It was in Shakespeare's time—and, for aught I know to the contrary, it may have been by Shakespeare himself, though he did not repeat the peculiarity more than twice, or at the utmost thrice, in all his writings—that the innovation already mentioned, trivial, but

not on that account more defensible, was first introduced. And when Shakespeare had used this newly-coined form of pronoun as many as (say) three times, it became fixed as grammatical English forthwith; for, as some one pertinently said, by way of answering all questions as to the learning of Shakespeare, Shakespeare *is* learning, and his grammar was the best grammar of his day. Milton, as we have seen, turned his back upon the genitive *its*, preferring the more dignified *his* and *her*, which, though they were beginning to be old-fashioned, were not on that account the less stately. The comparative modernism, *its*, was adduced by some cunning word-fancier—I think it was Jacob Bryant's critical adversary, Morritt, the friend of Sir Walter Scott—as proof positive against the validity of the poems ascribed by Chatterton to his supposititious Bristol monk, who, if he wrote at all, wrote in the fifteenth century. It was certainly curious that this crushing argument should have escaped the controversialists who swooped down upon the "marvellous boy" soon after the publication of his pretended discoveries. Such lines as

Life and all *its* goods I scorn,

should, as Dr. Trench remarks, have been at once decisive of the question.

The importance, in our language, of little words cannot be over-rated. No parts of speech are better worth studying than particles. Only by the foolish and the wilfully ignorant are they slighted as matters beneath serious notice. Scarce one of our prepositions, conjunctions, adverbs, but has a pedigree which, if traced to its source, would clearly establish its right to be respected as a noun or a verb whose family has seen better days. Having parted, bit by bit, with their syntactical belongings, and lost the habit of inflection, the impoverished progenitors of the unfortunate particle have left it with no more than it stands upright in. The history of *to*, as the sign of the infinitive mood in English, is instructive. This same mood formed itself, whilom, with a terminal inflection; and I take it that the same formation is common to most, if not all, grown-up languages all the world over. How came this dative prefix to be the peculiar property of the English infinitive mood? By a strange process of evolution, seemingly. It began by denoting the future infinitive, not the simple, and may be recognised in such phrases as "hard to bear," "sad to say," "good to eat," "easy to learn," "we are to go," "you are to blame," &c., as likewise in the announcement one so frequently reads, in white letters, on large black-boards, just before quarter-day, "This house to let." In these extra-grammatical times, over-educated, but scarcely *well*-educated builders and house-agents are accustomed to improve that form into "This house *to be* let," though lodging-house keepers, for the most part, stand on the ancient ways, and put forth the notice, "Apartments to let," as before. The lodging-house

keepers, not caring much about it, are right; the house-agents, thinking to be a cut above them in grammar, happen to be wrong. There was once, in the time of people not yet elderly, a familiar street cry, much in the mouths of hawkers carrying little trays before them, "Young lambs to sell!" It would be no credit to the School Board if these vendors of nursery nick-nacks should now go about crying, "Young lambs to be sold!"

Much might be said, though not in a paper so slight as this, concerning *to*, and its gradual transference to the simple infinitive mood, where it might rest quietly enough if untroubled by adverbs. We are now in the midst of a change which, fifty or sixty years ago, was reproved as a vain conceit. "Some writers of the present day," said Richard Taylor, in his "Additional Notes" to Horne Tooke, "have a disagreeable affectation of putting an adverb between *to* and the infinitive." Here was another change in the fortunes of *to*. After a long wedded life, *to* was compulsorily divorced by a meddlesome, mischief-making adverb. The name of Byron honours this corruption, the noble bard's line, commencing "To slowly draw," having first countenanced an abominable practice. The corruption—for as such, despite the extraordinary and inexplicable sanction it has received from Browning, in some of his noblest poetry, I cannot but regard this now common habit of maiming the infinitive mood—is shunned by all other writers of authority. In the lower grades of authorship, indeed, we continually find such dislocations as "to at once recognise," "to skilfully operate," "to forcibly argue;" "to considerably improve," "to highly appreciate," and so on.

It is since the time of Cowley and Milton that the word *numerous* has completely altered its sense. With those men it was never used in the place of *many*, as it has come to be used now. Its most frequent employment throughout the seventeenth century, and during great part of the eighteenth, was in a poetical significance, relating to metre or rhythm, as when Waller wrote "my numerous moan," intending by this expression to signify a plaint in numbers: that is to say, in verse. The word was altogether new in Shakespeare's time, and as a matter of fact, though it might seem to be a notably Shakespearean word, it is wholly absent from Shakespeare's gigantic thesaurus. When it began to be used prosaically, it was applied only to nouns of multitude, as "a numerous concourse," "a numerous retinue," "a numerous flock." Days of laxity in speech had come about, when the world began to hear of numerous occasions, numerous instances, numerous horses, and numerous men.

I have asked myself the question, "What is bad language?" and I will offer in reply my humble opinion that language is bad in proportion to the number of unnecessary changes it has passed through. All persons of sense will allow that needful and natural changes in a language are inseparable from its true growth; but at every stage of that growth it is best to let well alone. The worst language, in short, is that which has been most doctored. Some lines

back I took into service a good, strong, healthy, old adverb, who has been out of employment so long that I have incurred, I dare say, a few gibes for putting one so antiquated to work at the present day. He is the grand old adverb *whilom*. He had escaped doctoring, only to be shelved in his hearty prime. Regard him well, and see if he deserves to be treated as a fossil. True, he has come down to us—or, rather, he had come down to our grandfathers—with all the original characteristics of his race unobliterated. Such a race, too, as it is! *Whiles*, *whilom's* brother adverb, is also unjustly superannuated; and the parent noun, *while*, whose nounship is denied by some grammarians (alas, the while!), can only get employment as an adverb, having in this capacity survived his children. We must not say "a while ago," says one grammarian, who forbids us also, on peril of being deemed vulgar, to say "a many." But we may, he adds, say "a great many"; and I suppose he would have no objection to the phrase, "a long while." *Whilst*, I grant, is ungraceful, but not more so than *amongst*. It is not good breeding, we are informed, to say either *a while since* or *between whiles*. Vulgarity is always taking fright at itself.

Be it ever borne in mind by all who would safely shun vulgarity that the true vulgar is not always the most vulgar. On the contrary, it is often the least so, in an obnoxious sense. I once heard counsel in a wreck-inquiry ask a rough diver who had gone down to examine the hull and cargo of a sunken vessel, "Did you assume an erect attitude?" meaning, "Did you stand upright?" I could not catch the reply, but it must have been a poor one not to have bettered the question. It is bad language that goes about for big words, and more than enough of them, as when a man says, instead of "Somebody told me so," "A certain person informed me that such was the case." There might have been no case; perhaps the person was not really certain, nor even a person; and it is open to doubt whether he either did or could inform.

Those who look down upon prepositions as the very "small potatoes" of speech, are pleased to consider it an inelegance that any sentence or member of a sentence should be closed with one of them. Landor, on the other hand, contended that this manner of closing a sentence in English is not only as elegant as the alternative form of speech, but much more so. It is, says he, strictly idiomatic; it avoids an unnecessary word; and it is countenanced by the purest writers of Greece. "I would rather," Landor declares, "close a sentence like this, 'there is nobody to contend with,' than 'there is nobody with whom to contend;,' rather with 'there is nobody to fight against,' than 'there is nobody against whom to fight.'" It is a very bleak region of prose that would not suffer by this inverted form of sentence, which employs "with whom" and "on which" to shirk the natural mode of ending, only because it is natural; and the effect on poetry would be withering in a degree far more disastrous. I think we may conclude, then, that bad language is language whose characteristics are opposed to naturalness and sincerity.

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