

Advertising and Language

The War of Words Between Copywriters and Language Purists

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In the most widely accepted use of the word, evolution is usually associated with biology. A lower species evolves into a higher one-a single substance or group divides into several distinct and some-times more sophisticated patterns. Evolution is concerned with living things.

Language, too, may be considered a product of evolution. It is constantly changing, constantly developing. And although some of the changes might not necessarily be for the better, the pattern of change is clear. For one group or another, the changes mean improved understanding and communication. Certainly it can be said that languages - all languages- are living entities. As Harrison Salisbury states so very clearly, "The wonderful thing about language is that it is always changing and always growing."¹

In this paper, I would like to explain why and how some of these changes have taken place. And I would like to show that in today's society, there is no way to stop the changes. Taking a cue from Jack Rosenthal, editor of The York Times Magazine, I hope to demonstrate that formal written language as we knew it twenty or thirty years ago has given way to various forms of spoken English in all but academic and technical writing.² And the mass media, particularly advertising and TV, continue to stress colloquial speech as the base for the written word. Language, whether it is written or spoken should "sound" right.

My main concern in this paper is "changing English." However, the principal ideas could be applied to Japanese or almost any other language. The central theme of the whole paper is that language can never be static. No one can possibly predict what the state of language will be in the early decades of the next century.³

As I mentioned earlier, the influence of the mass media cannot be stated too strongly. In this age of communication, we hear and read every kind of language from the Queen's English to the slang and even worse of the streets. But all language is a form of communication, and who is to decide what is right and what is wrong? However, it does seem that there should be some fundamental standards.

STANDARD ENGLISH

"Respectable English...means the kind of English that is used by the most respected people, the sort of English that will make readers or listeners regard the speaker or writer as an educated person."

"(Grammarians) show us that standard English allows a certain amount of variation. That is, there is often more than one acceptable way of using the same word."⁴

It is impossible to give a clear definition of standard, or in some cases, even correct English. There are too many variables, Formal-informal, spoken-written, language of the highly educated-language of the streets. Language as it is used by any group can be said to be standard language for that group.

Overall, however, it is generally accepted that the standards for written language are much more demanding and rigid than the standards for the spoken word. The norms for written English evolve much more slowly than the standards for the more dynamic language used for conversation.

It is sometimes said that standard English is that used by contemporary writers. But in point of fact, some of the most talented and most beloved writers of the last three or four decades, Ring Lardner, Ernest Hemingway, Heywood Brown and a host of other

excellent writers brought an "earthiness and directness to the prose" that soon was accepted as suitable for all.⁵

In their well-researched and entertaining work, "Harper Dictionary of Contemporary English,"⁶ William and Mary Morris solicited the opinions of more than 165 renowned writers and scholars concerning the use of various words and phrases in contemporary written English. Although the consensus of the opinions tended to support the more conservative and traditional usages, opposite opinions were numerous and logical. If eminent writers cannot agree on what is, or what is not acceptable English, I think we can safely say that standard English is indefinable, to say the very least.

CHANGING ENGLISH

It is not my intention to make a detailed study of the many factors that lead to or have led to the changing of language usage. That would be a subject for another paper. But a short outline of some of the more important reasons might make it easier to appreciate the influence of the mass media, including advertising, on the use of English which we see and hear today.

Without a doubt, the mass media has played the most important role in the changing of the usage and forms of English in America. Until the end of World War I, written, and to a certain extent spoken English, were based on the formal and grammatically accepted rules of Victorian English.⁷ After the war, however, a sense of freedom and exuberance prevailed. The public began to reject many of the old restrictions and taboos. Individualism became the watchword of the academics and the people of the streets.

Writers began to explore new grounds, and then, suddenly, there was the advent of radio. The comfortable world of the language of the purists was shattered-it was never to be the same again.

By the 1930's, practically every home in America had at least one radio, and the influence of this medium of popular culture was immeasurable. In the beginning, the format and language of the programs were somewhat formal and stilted, but as the years went by, formality was replaced by friendliness, and the announcers and performers adopted different and less formal styles. And the public immediately followed the trend.

In addition to the influence of the mass media, geographical differences contributed greatly to changing language usage. People from almost every state in the Union began to move westward. New Englanders mingled with New Mexicans, People from the East began to live with citizens from the South and West. All these migrants from different cultural backgrounds brought their language patterns with them, and, as they met others from different backgrounds, their words and expressions were inevitably mixed. New language patterns developed rapidly.

Other factors, too, can be considered. Advances in education and technological terminology-increased immigration from Asia and other areas-the beginnings of "Black English"-all of these factors played a part.

One often overlooked source of change in English is "teenage language." In every generation, teenagers invent their own somewhat esoteric "lingo." Generally, their words are more a fad than an existing reality, but occasionally, some words and phrases carry on into the next generation. And eventually they end up in dictionaries. In this rather indirect way, teenage English becomes a part of acceptable English.

Many other sources of change could be noted. But now I would like to narrow the scope of this paper and concentrate on the influence advertising has had on language usage in all countries where English is a first or second language.

WAR OF WORDS

Among the various professional groups, the "war between language purists and advertising writers seems of words" special intensity. Purists are making every effort to "preserve" the language-to set a kind of standard as to what is right and what is wrong.⁸

Copywriters, on the other hand, say that today's writers "dare to be different".⁹ They must find new ideas and fresh ways to say writers must express them. "Never hesitate to inject colorful thoughts and expressions into your copy. The different-and better way of saying something is usually interesting. This is what distinguishes Shakespeare from Spillane, what transforms a prosaic monolog into copy that is light and lively.¹⁰

Of course, in some areas, both sides are right. And in others, both sides may be wrong. At any rate, in the next I will try to explain the reasoning of the copywriters. And later I'll make an attempt to justify the stand of the purists.

COPYWRITERS

Copywriters consider themselves as word mechanics-skilled professionals with a fondness for words.¹¹ They must be imaginative, and still, their writing must be succinct and eye-catching. They are good writers, even though some of their vocabulary and structures may be somewhat unconventional. After all, their job is to attract the reader. If their copy is grammatically perfect but lacks fire and vitality, readers will not be interested. And the product will not sell.

One legend in the advertising world, Claude Hopkins, summed it up this way. "Copy writing is salesmanship in print. ¹² The consumer must find something attractive in the ad.

Another way of saying the same thing is that copy is communication. It should attract the reader, inform the reader, interest the reader and persuade the reader to think about the product. Advertising copy is not intended to educate the reader in the general sense of the term. It is not intended for language purists.

PURISTS

To the horror of the purists, some copywriters say that it is permissible to forget about some of the generally accepted rules of writing, if the copy attracts the attention of the reader. Readership-not grammar-is the heart of the situation.

Another problem for the purists is that copywriters must use the vernacular of the day. "Use of stilted style, literary illusions, or pretentious phrases assures next to no readership.¹³ If an ad seems to lecture the reader or to show a sense of superiority over the reader, it will do more harm than good. Simple words, short sentences, catchy phrases, apt comparisons-these are the tools of the copywriter.

But the purists consider this kind of language as an abomination. They believe that they must be guardians of correct English. Even though they understand that change is inevitable, they hope to limit the changes as far as possible. Particularly, they want to guard against what they consider to be mistakes. Their objective is grammatically correct writing, using words and phrases generally accepted as standards by the so-called educated elite. One panelist writing for "Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage" expressed his opinion as follows. "The spoken language is supposed to be a testing ground for new words to enrich the language. But I find that Madison Avenue (the Advertising World), TV, and too many of the high school crowd don't even know the old words. How can they give us new and better ones?"¹⁴

Another panelist remarked that commercial, bureaucratic and technological writers are making a mess of our language. But what right do these purists have to judge what is accepted and generally appreciated language as it is used today?

Paul Horgan, also responding as a panelist, suggests that "advertising and its most powerful arm, TV, have made language the servant of commercial interests,"¹⁵

Columnist Rex Stout made one of the strongest comments. "Changes made by the genius and wit of the people are often desirable and useful. Those imposed by ignorant clowns such as advertising copywriters and broadcasters are abominable and should be condemned by all lovers of language."¹⁶

It would be possible to quote any number of conservative writers, but I think we have enough to make our point clear. Many distinguished writers and scholars are definitely concerned about the changes that are taking place in language.

And, on the other hand, many of the leading lights in advertising and other forms of the mass media believe that changes in the language breathe new life and freshness into language and communication.

What are we ordinary mortals supposed to think? Can we say which side is right and which side is wrong? I don't think so. For most of us, it is probably best not to take any stand. I believe we should be free to use the language we want to use, as long as it serves to communicate our thoughts clearly.

Of course, the language we speak or write must be within the bounds of respectable language. We should not stoop to vulgarity, profanity or other forms which might seriously offend ordinary people. (I am not including the obviously offensive and even obscene language found in so many novels and TV dramas. That is a different subject.)

Now, I'd like to note just a few concrete examples of the points of disagreement between the purists and the copywriters.

PROBLEM WORDS AND PHRASES

Most of the difficulties could be listed under five general categories.

1. Grammar
2. Using nouns as verbs
3. Incorrect use of words
4. Adding the suffix...wise
5. Vogue words

It is impossible to give a detailed list of examples in all the categories. But a short explanation might be in order.

1. Grammar : "Winston Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should." This catchphrase has been a thorn in the side of purists for years. In this phrase, "like" should be replaced by the conjunction "as." However, Jack Rosenthal, editor of The New York Times Magazine, quotes a friend in the advertising business. "No one cares about fussy things like "like" anymore.¹⁷ And some other authorities are quick to agree. This, of course, is just one example.
2. The use of nouns as verbs has been expanding rapidly. Verbs formed from nouns such as contact, impact, author, craft and gift now are commonplace. Some are acceptable and even useful, but others such as "He authored the book" seem somewhat forced. It seems to be a question of feeling and style.
3. Hopefully, thankfully, meaningful and other words are gradually gaining acceptance, other common words such as presently and momentarily are perfectly correct, but their usage is often incorrect. "Presently" means "soon," not "at present," and "momentarily" has the idea of "for a moment," or "briefly," not "in a moment." But I have a feeling that some of these secondary usages may be acceptable at some time.

"Wise" as a suffix has had a long history in English. Some words are considered legitimate by both conservatives and liberals. "Clockwise" is one word that comes to mind. But the more modern usage in the sense of "with reference to," or "concerning" is a bane to purists, especially when used in writing. It must be admitted, however, "... wise" is often more convenient than the more proper words such as "with reference to."

Finally, the so-called "vogue" words play a big part in contemporary English. They are words or expressions that suddenly become popular and are widely used in both spoken and written English. And then, just as suddenly, most of them just fade away.

"Charisma, thrust, credit crunch, zap and rap" all attained a certain popularity in recent years. But they have lost much of their glamour, and now "word polishers" have created a more recent set of terms such as "input, output, flap, camp and watershed," to note just a few.

The only sure thing that can be said about vogue words is that they come and go. Very few survive the test of time.

To sum up this section, I think that we could say that writers for the mass media are constantly creating new words and phrases to catch the eye and ear of the listeners. When something is new or different, it usually attracts the ordinary listeners and writers. And quite often, the newly created words express the idea more clearly and more succinctly than the traditional expressions.

Unfortunately, however, purists, for the most part, reject change. They believe it is their sacred duty to preserve the language. They spare no effort to rid the language of what they consider to be unacceptable.

CONCLUSION

So where does that leave us who profess to be trained English teachers? Where should we stand?

I think three points can be made.

First, we must be careful about saying that this or that word or phrase should not be used. When I have doubts, I usually tell the students that I would not say it that way, but I will not say it is wrong.

Next, we should not insist on one correct pronunciation. There are too many variables today. If a pronunciation is accepted anywhere, we cannot reject it.

And finally, we should use extra care in correcting articles, prepositions and even verb tenses in some situations. Occasionally, what is grammatically suspect might express the speaker's real meaning more clearly.

I realize, of course, we need some standards. And we should encourage our students to write and speak English that is clear, correct according to accepted standards, and "meaningful." But we should not stifle communication and creativity by overburdening our students with too many "do's" and "don'ts."

References

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6. *Ibid.*, pp. xv xviii.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. xx-xxv.
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9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 355.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 444.
13. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. xxl.
14. *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.
15. Rosenthal, *op. cit.*

In addition to the titles listed, I consulted many other dictionaries and advertising manuals. But the ones noted above were the principal sources of the article.

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