

• DISCUSSION •

IS AMERICAN ENGLISH DETERIORATING?

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ALL OF US agree, I think, that American English is changing, but the question at issue is this: Are these changes for the worse? I think that they are NOT. Language is a sensitive instrument that moves along with the needs of its speakers, and what seems temporarily to be deterioration turns out in the long run to be necessary adjustment to new needs.

People who talk about "correct English" are usually oversimplifying the problem dangerously. There IS no single, monolithic "correct English." There is nothing inherent or intrinsic that makes language "correct." For instance, in America it is considered low-class or "backwoodsy" to say "He ET his dinner." In England, however, *et*, as the past tense of *eat*, has the highest prestige, and the best-spoken Englishmen will say "He et his dinner." It is simply a matter of differing usage, in one social group or another. Even good speakers have several styles at their command—not only the formal English of the purists, but an easy, informal English for conversational situations. Good English is that which is appropriate and effective, even when it goes against the pronouncements of purists.

Much of what happens in the field of usage is well ex-

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plained by the outlook of the sociologist Thorstein Veblen. He pointed out in his "theory of conspicuous waste" that people gain prestige by spending time in acquiring an archaic spelling system and a classic form of the language. They set themselves off as an *elite* by their linguistic habits. I feel that this is what the purists are attempting to do, without realizing it. They are saying to the world, "Just look at the high state of our culture!"

Some other purists are merely carrying on a trivial game. They have a little list of so-called mistakes, and they are overjoyed when they catch someone using a form that is on their list. It is like the children's game of "Beaver": the child that sees a man with a beard first is required to cry out "Beaver!" and he gets a point every time he says "Beaver." Dwight Macdonald, for instance, rings the changes on about a dozen words (*disinterested*, *infer* for *imply*, *complected*, and so on), and he cries "Beaver" whenever he finds one of them used. Such a negative approach trivializes the teaching of English.

THE EFFECT of the purist's outlook is to take away people's self-confidence. In order to use language well, people must feel at home in their language, not as if they are running a hurdle race to avoid mistakes. People often get the idea that the natural way of talking is low-class and wrong, and that the clumsy, odd way of saying things must be correct. Thus the attempt to be correct results in harm to the language.

The purists have attempted to give a bad odor to the word *permissive*. But what is the alternative to permissiveness? Is it not dictation or authoritarianism? Who has any right to dictate to free members of the English-speaking community? The self-appointed "guardian of the language" is likely to do more harm than good. He interferes with broad natural processes that govern language change in a satisfactory way.

The alleged need for "guardians of the language" can easily be confuted by a *reductio ad absurdum*. If guardians are really necessary, they should be official rather than unofficial. (The police must have legal status, or else their actions become "lynch law" or "kangaroo courts.") In that case we

must inevitably have a "Bureau of Language Control," presumably under the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Such a prospect is so unpalatable that surely Americans will shy away from it. The price in personal liberties is too high.

To take an example: the purists are continually crying that we must preserve the distinction between the verbs *lie* and *lay*. Most people pay lip service to this, but in actual usage ninety-nine people out of a hundred would say, "Yesterday I laid down for a nap," rather than "Yesterday I lay down for a nap." Since the ninety-nine people could hardly be carted off to jail, there would be grave danger that the one person out of a hundred who uses the form handed down in history, "Yesterday I lay down," might be the one to suffer. Oftentimes, ironically enough, the very people who are most vociferous about maintaining the distinction between *lie* and *lay* are unable to use them in the historical fashion themselves.

This brings us to the important point that standards are a personal matter, and any attempt to impose them on others is fraught with great danger. What an enlightening English teacher can do is to show how language works. He can develop in his students a sensitiveness to language processes; and this is far more effective in maintaining standards than the cut-and-dried rules of purists or their authoritarian pronouncements, "Don't say this" and "Don't say that."

THE TEACHING of usage should be done on the "if—then" principle: IF you wish to be regarded as an educated person, THEN you will do so and so. The student should take as a model the people whom he respects. It is desirable that there should be a variety of personalities—some breezy people, some precise people, each individual with his own style of English.

The linguistic scientist is simply doing his best to establish sound information about how language works. He is not deserving of attack any more than the meteorologist for studying weather or the speleologist for studying caves. If he comes to wrong conclusions, he is sure to be corrected by later workers, just as in any of the other sciences.

Anyone who tries to defend "the treasure of our tongue" should recognize that a valuable part of the treasure is the colloquial element, localisms, and slang. In them lies sturdy strength, and they are a constant source of enrichment. I agree with Carl Sandburg when he said, in a recent interview, "The English language hasn't got where it is by being pure." The give-and-take of communication, along with the necessity of being understood, establishes the boundaries that keep American English viable and healthy. If we nourish the general culture of the individual, the language will take care of itself and we need have no fears of deterioration.

