

English Usage (Guides) Symposium

University of Cambridge

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(programme & abstracts)

Organisers

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10.00–10.45	Pam Peters	The lexicography of English usage
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16.30–17.15	Geoffrey Pullum	The usage game: Catering to perverts
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17.45–19.00	Reception at Cambridge University Press Bookshop	



Why does the BBC need a style guide?

John Allen, former Executive Editor of BBC Radio News & author of *The BBC News Styleguide*

For better or worse, Britain has no formal arbiter of language. There is no British equivalent of the Académie Française. Almost by default, responsibility in this area has fallen to the BBC. All over the world, audiences look to the Corporation to maintain high standards, and are quick to complain if they perceive any failure to meet their expectations. It is a responsibility the organisation has acknowledged since its inception. In 1926, Lord Reith set up the BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English to rule on what should be BBC style. It was a high-powered body whose members included the then Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, and the playwright George Bernard Shaw. Their brief was the spoken word, but as with speech, so with writing. The BBC expects its journalists to communicate clearly and effectively, to be understood without difficulty, and to offer an intelligent use of language which listeners, viewers and readers can enjoy. For a BBC journalist, good writing is not a luxury; it is an obligation. It is part of the BBC's contract with the licence fee payer.

John Mullan, Professor of English at University College London, wrote: 'BBC English is often spoken of in jest, as if it were some figment of the 50s. But the official parlance of the Corporation still does have its influence. The use of a word or phrase in, say, a news bulletin can signify its acceptance into standard English' (Thompson 2005: 12). The BBC finds itself treading a fine line between conservatism and radicalism, seeking to be neither a language pioneer nor a language dinosaur. The aim is to achieve a style of writing which is acceptable to the majority of its audience because it is clear and easily understood. The demands of accuracy, fairness and impartiality are not negotiable if the BBC is to be regarded as a reliable and trusted source of information. But the way it communicates is just as important, and for many people it equally reflects on its editorial professionalism and integrity.

The style guide was designed to remind journalists of their responsibilities and to offer advice and encouragement on how to address their audiences, whether it be on television, radio or across an ever increasing range of digital outlets. That diversity of output means the guide is not a list of do's and don'ts. It is rather an attempt to spare audiences from ungrammatical, inelegant or sloppy use of language. Lamentably, it is not always successful.

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'Familiarizing their ears with something better': the early BBC and conflicting ideologies of usage

Deborah Cameron, University of Oxford

Between 1926 and 1939, the BBC produced, for internal use, a series of spoken usage guides, focusing mainly on issues of pronunciation. In this paper I do not propose to examine the content of these texts, but rather the process through which they were compiled and the arguments that went on behind the scenes.

The process of codifying BBC usage was undertaken from 1926 with the assistance of a Spoken English Advisory Committee (SEAC), whose members included both literary figures (such as the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, the playwright George Bernard Shaw and the essayist Logan Pearsall Smith) and a smaller group of experts in the academic study of language (such as the phoneticians Daniel Jones and Arthur Lloyd-Jones, and the linguists Harold Orton and H.C.



Wyld). Materials preserved in the BBC's Written Documents Archive shed light on the differing ideologies of 'good usage' with which committee members approached their task.

In this presentation I will consider a conflict between the more descriptively-inclined linguists and the 'men of letters', many of them members of the Society for Pure English, who hoped to use their position to improve the nation's usage. The position taken by some representatives of the latter group tends to complicate the view found in earlier discussions (e.g Leitner 1983; Mugglestone 2003) that the SEAC and the BBC promoted RP uncritically. In practice, indisputably, RP was the norm; but some influential members of SEAC were critical of 'Oxford' or 'public school' English, and the ideal they put forward for broadcast speech diverged from the RP of the time. This was opposed by the linguists and phoneticians for both practical and ideological (descriptivist) reasons; and ultimately it was the expert minority who had more influence on the codifying process.

The story of the SEAC and BBC usage is not just of historical interest, it also has a bearing on contemporary debates. Disagreement on whether the BBC should be a follower or a leader in matters of usage has continued to cause conflict between the Corporation and sections of its audience. Many people feel that 'established' or 'current usage' is not the same thing as 'good usage', and they expect the BBC to champion the latter rather than the former. As George Bernard Shaw once remarked, 'We are admirable in our endeavours to find out how people with £300 a year actually do pronounce; but as to seizing our tremendous opportunity of familiarizing their ears with something better, we funk it abjectly every time'.

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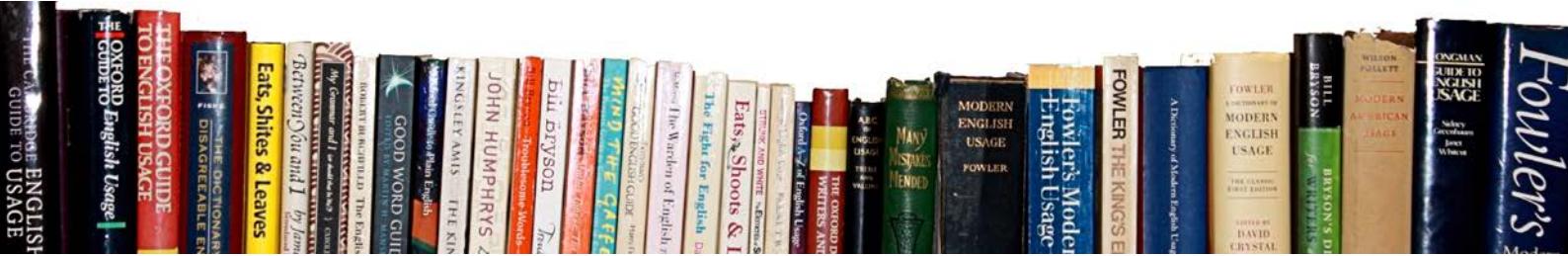
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The English language in *Punch*, 1841–1901

David Crystal, Bangor University

I have always used *Punch* magazine as my primary source for popular attitudes to language in the nineteenth century, but serendipitously, finding the occasional cartoon or quote in relation to something I happened to be writing. I say 'language' and not 'English', because *Punch* pilloried other languages too (such as French and Esperanto), but in this paper I shall deal only with what it had to say about English in the Victorian era.

My main sources used to be the selections made by the magazine itself during the early 1900s (in the *Punch Library*) and the occasional issues I had picked up in antiquarian bookshops over the years. I often wondered what might be hiding in the pages of the volumes I had never seen. Then last year I acquired a complete set, so I decided to read the lot in order to find out. Well, skim rather than read, as life is short, but with a careful eye open for anything to do with language. What language themes emerged? Which grammarian is most often mentioned? Which is the phoneme that fascinated the Victorians throughout the entire era, satirized in every volume? What unexpected topics emerged from the trawl? There is a remarkable amount of material, and my paper will report what I found.



Attitudes to English Usage revisited: a comparative investigation of attitudes towards British English usage problems

Carmen Ebner, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

In the late 1960s, W.H. Mittins et al.'s *Attitudes towards English Usage* (1970) provided an unprecedented insight into the issue of usage problems in British English. Attitudes towards disputed usage such as the split infinitive were investigated for the first time. Thus, the actual state of acceptability and what was then current usage could be identified. The purpose for the enquiry originated in the field of teaching, which Mittins et al. (1970: 1) describe as a 'battlefield' between descriptive and prescriptive language attitudes. This battle between prescriptivism and descriptivism has been an on-going issue, not only in the educational context. Yet, Mittins et al.'s survey was simply a snapshot of current usage and acceptability in the 1960s.

More than four decades later, it is not only society that has changed, but also the English language itself. New media such as the Internet have created new modes of communication. Language has been adapted to these new modes and the needs of its users. In fact, Netspeak, the language variety used on the Internet, has become the third language medium besides written and spoken language (Crystal, 2001: 47). In order to identify if attitudes towards usage problems have changed as well, a new survey of attitudes is necessary.

In this paper I will investigate how the attitudes of British English speakers have changed by comparing some of the findings of Mittins et al. (1970) with recently collected data on the same usage problems via an online questionnaire. In particular I will look at the split infinitive, *between you and I*, differently *than*, the dangling modifier, as in *pulling the trigger, the gun went off*, and *literally*. Thus, I will be able to compare two recordings of current usage and identify possible changes in attitudes towards disputed usage.

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Theory meets practice: answering the public's questions about English

Mignon Fogarty, Grammar Girl

As the creator and host of the Grammar Girl website and podcast, I have answered the public's questions about grammar, usage, punctuation, and linguistics nearly every day for the last eight years. I interact with people individually by e-mail, on live radio with hosts and callers, in person at book signing events, and on social media where discussions can flourish in the comments. These public interactions along with my own personal development from researching, writing, and editing Grammar Girl content have shown me that the historically supported answer or the academic consensus answer is often not the same as the answer the public believes is true or wants to hear.

Angry rants about the poor state of language skills that reinforce outdated prescriptivist notions of usage are usually more popular than well-researched articles that talk about language change over time. Photos of signs with errors (usually punctuation errors) that are presented in a way that makes the viewer feel superior are usually more popular than articles that educate readers about how to properly use punctuation. The biggest challenge I face is how to explain to people



who want quick answers that sometimes the only reason to follow a 'rule' is not because it is real, but because too many people still believe it is real.

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Even More Complete Plain Words: the challenge of revising and updating a venerable usage guide

Rebecca Gowers, writer & journalist

Ernest Gowers (1880–1966), my great-grandfather, wrote *Plain Words: A Guide To The Use Of English* in 1948. It had been commissioned by the Treasury for the use of civil servants; many of them had a written style that seemed to be stuck in a pre-war rut. Yet despite the book's focus on the duties and writing habits of 'the official', when it was offered for general sale, it became an immediate bestseller. In 1951, Gowers was asked to rewrite the book with alphabetical entries as the *ABC of Plain Words*, but because this required cutting his more discursive notes on style, in 1954 he was asked to have yet another crack at the job, combining the previous two books and adding an index. The resulting work was published under what Gowers later admitted he thought was a 'ridiculous' title (Bainbridge 1965: 22), *The Complete Plain Words*. Nevertheless, like its predecessors, the *Complete* swiftly became a bestseller. In fact before long the three 'Plain Words' titles had between them sold over half a million copies. Furthermore, and one might think implausibly, through revisions in 1973 and 1986, the 1954 version has never yet gone out of print.

When he was seventy-six, Gowers accepted a commission from OUP to become the first editor of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*; he finished the job when he was eighty-five, then died. When I started to think about how to revise *The Complete Plain Words*, his explanatory preface to this revision of Fowler was naturally a helpful starting point. I never doubted that I would work directly from Gowers's own, 1954 edition of the *Complete*, ignoring the work of subsequent editors. It was also an easy decision to revert to the all-original, 1948 title (though for my own amusement, my working title was the one I have given to this talk). Beyond this, however, as I shall attempt to describe, my difficulties began.

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Prolegomena to a cross-linguistic comparison of usage problems

Robert F. Ilson, Hon. research fellow University College London

In this paper I will offer a comparison of usage problems in English, Dutch, and French to show some achievements, some attendant difficulties, and some perspectives for further investigation. Among the types of problem covered are cases, collocation (as with prepositions), and colligation/complementation (as by various syntactic structures). I will, moreover, attempt to define the notion 'usage problem', provide two contrasting analyses of the English sentence



adverb *hopefully* (one comparing English with other languages, one an in-depth account of *hopefully* within the context of English only), and the suggestion that the traditional English usage problem of the split infinitive turns out to be both more mysterious and more important than heretofore supposed when the English *to*-infinitive is compared with the German *zu*-infinitive and its counterparts or functional equivalents in other languages (such as Dutch and French). The paper concludes with a request for the help of our colleagues in advancing the cross-linguistic comparison of usage problems.

Between usage problems and linguistic variables

Viktorija Kostadinova, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

In the context of the traditional prescriptive-descriptive dichotomy, usage problems have generally been approached in two different ways. The prescriptivist perspective is that such items are errors of language use, with clearly defined correct and incorrect ways of being used; descriptivists, on the other hand, do not see such items as problematic at all, but rather as naturally developed linguistic variants that can often showcase complex processes of language variation and change (Cameron 1995). In addition to this, while prescriptivists continue to point out old and emerging problems in usage, descriptive studies tend to overlook such items as worthy of research interest. In the present talk, I will explore the ways in which both entrenched and emerging usage problems can be used as sociolinguistic variables in the context of an empirical study of prescriptive ideologies among native speakers of American English.

Basing myself on data obtained from the HUGE database developed by Robin Straaijer as part of the project Bridging the Unbridgeable, as well as present-day language corpora, and in line with current critical discussions of prescriptivism (Curzan forthc. 2014), I will discuss possible ways of delimiting the scope of usage problems that lend themselves more readily to sociolinguistic research. I will then present the results from my analysis of interview data obtained in 2013 from native speakers of American English, in which usage problems, such as *whom*, *literally*, and the double negative, were used as linguistic stimuli for investigating speakers' attitudes. Specifically, I will show that some usage problems are not only problematic from a prescriptivist's point of view, but also that most speakers tend to be acutely aware of their 'incorrectness', and consequently have certain attitudes about this. Other usage problems, however, appear to have changed their status over time, from being considered problematic to being entirely acceptable. Finally, I will discuss the attitudes associated with these variables as well as the changes they appear to have undergone, and attempt to unearth possible reasons for such changes.

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Discussing English usage on Wikipedia

Morana Lukač, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

The general public's discussions about the questions of the 'correct' use of the English language have been traditionally reflected in the letters-to-the-editor sections of newspapers. Such public complaints about 'misused' apostrophes, double negatives, and preposition stranding constitute



well-kept records of the public's attitudes on linguistic matters (McManus 2008: 1). In the last two decades such debates have also appeared on numerous web platforms, and in comment sections of weblogs. Until now there have been only a small number of studies on the discourse of linguistic prescriptivism in the traditional media (McManus 2008, Percy 2009), while the number of studies on such discourse online has been even scarcer (Schaffer 2010).

In this paper I present an analysis of the Wikipedia talk pages that are secondary to the Wikipedia articles which focus on English usage items, such as *Disputes in English grammar*, *Serial comma*, *Split infinitive*, etc., as an as yet unexplored medium in the analysis of prescriptivism. Wikipedia talk pages separate the Wikipedia entries from discussions on what information should or should not be included on the main pages (Viégas et al. 2004: 576). They serve a number of functions in managing articles: strategic planning of editing, enforcement of Wikipedia policies, and conducting guidelines (Viégas et al. 2007). Furthermore, talk pages have a central role in obtaining the quality of Wikipedia articles. They differ greatly from print sources on the subject, as they enable wide participation and as there are no editorial restrictions on who contributes to the discussion. What differentiates the talk pages from other types of online discussion boards are their participants' orientation toward a common goal of creating a Wikipedia article on the one hand, and the social norms governing the Wikipedia community on the other (Emigh & Herring 2005). This paper explores the processes of negotiation among Wikipedians and the use of argumentation strategies involved in finding solutions to the perceived linguistic problems.

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The Alphabet of Errors: A mini-usage guide?

Inge Otto, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

A

A is for *and*,
Overused till 'tis faint.
The letter stands, also,
You must see, for *ain't*.

B

B is for *bring*,
The converse of *take*;
Unless you are careful,
An exchange you will make.



Around the year 1921, a lady called Elizabeth M. Richardson sent a letter to *The English Journal*. It included twenty-six little rhymes, one for each letter of the alphabet. As the verses for A and B illustrate, the topic of the brief texts concerns English usage.

The rhymes were composed by senior pupils from a Girls' High School in Boston, Massachusetts. To *The English Journal*, they must have been interesting enough for publication, and in its 1921 issue, all 26 verses which Richardson had sent were published under the title 'Alphabet of Errors'.

By classifying the verses according to whether they deal with phonological, syntactic, lexical, or orthographic usage features, I hope to provide a general description of which of these linguistic levels received most overt attention at this school in Boston at the time. An article by Weiner (1988) will serve as a basis for this classification, as will that by Tieken-Boon van Oostade (2013) which classified the entries of an early American English usage guide with the help of Weiner's criteria.

Furthermore, to find out whether the 'Alphabet of Errors' can be regarded as a mini-usage guide, I will compare the set of rhymes to the characteristics of a typical usage guide as described by Weiner (1988).

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The lexicography of English usage

Pam Peters, Macquarie University, Sydney

This paper examines the range of English usage guides published since WWII, especially their sources of evidence, which reflect their positioning and their capacity to contribute to the evolution of the language.

The archetypal usage guide, as defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* (online), presents 'conventionally accepted use of (esp. formal written) language', rather than discussing 'the way in which an item of vocabulary, syntax, or grammar is normally used', i.e. common usage. The *Dictionary's* definition foregrounds the prescriptive usage guide, many of which were published during the last few decades of the twentieth century. They are typically conservative in relation to changing usage (Peters & Young, 1997), and tend to base their advice on received opinion rather than seeking primary sources of evidence (Algeo, 1991). If authentic examples are included, they often serve (as in the *Dictionary of Diseased English*, 1977) as demonstrations of reprehensible usage, items to be stigmatized and banned from the 'standard' language. The prescriptive usage guide probably contributes to public anxiety and insecurity about language usage – a diffuse 'moral panic' as Cameron (1995) calls it. Yet research focusing on specific usage prescriptions and proscriptions shows that they do not necessarily prevail in the course of language history. Evidence-based studies from that of Fries (1925) on the relationship between *will* and *shall*, to Anderwald's (2013) research on the use of irregular verb forms, show the resilience of nonprescribed alternatives in common usage.



The less frequently published type of usage guide is descriptive rather than prescriptive. It uses primary sources of evidence inductively, as in a historical dictionary or grammar, and its examples/citations serve to document usage inclusively, to represent the spoken, written and digitized styles used in the reference speech community. It describes variation and change without making *a priori* judgements about what is 'standard English' (Milroy 2001). Its projection of variation across registers and styles can be checked and updated by reference to very large, categorized corpora, as in Dant (2012), as well as judicious use of fresh evidence from the internet, and data from sociolectal research. Usage guides in the twenty-first century can be fully evidence-based, attentive to common usage, and able to ensure their own immediate and longer-term relevance.

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The usage game: catering to perverts

Geoffrey K. Pullum, University of Edinburgh

I am sure most educated users of works on grammar and usage believe that they seek a sensible relationship in which they are treated like grownups and provided with authoritative information about Standard English. There is a great deal of evidence, however, that what many of them really want is to be dominated, humiliated, and punished. They yearn, they positively lust, to be forced to use their language in certain ways and to be disciplined for any transgressions. One sign of this is that *The Elements of Style*, with its 105 pages of century-old maxims from Strunk and opinionated stylistic nonsense from White, far outsells Merriam-Webster's *Dictionary of English Usage*, with its 978 pages of brilliant and clearly explained objective scholarship, about a century newer (and costing very little more). This poses a dilemma for usage guide authors. The advice of economics is of course to supply what the customer wants; but ethics may differ: usage guide authors find themselves in the role of pornographers serving a community of masochistic perverts. Worse, if they dare to provide evidence refuting myths about grammatical correctness in English they are attacked for lowering standards and promoting anarchy. I will review this problematic situation, and make some modest proposals about how the users of Standard English might be drawn out of their dark fantasy world into the daylight of mature and healthy linguistic behaviour.

The HUGE database

Robin Straaijer, Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

When does a certain usage come to be (perceived as) problematic? When does it end being so? Which problems persist? Are there any differences between the different varieties of English? What is the role of usage guides in society or the history of English?

There has to date been no overview of English usage guides and usage problems to answer these kinds of questions that historical sociolinguists have when they study the topic of usage. The project Bridging the Unbridgeable: linguists, prescriptivists and the general public has decided to fill that gap, which led to the development of the Hyper Usage Guide of English database, or **HUGE** for short.

HUGE is an online database of English usage guides and usage problems. It spans nearly 250 years of usage guides and focuses on usage problems of the – broadly – grammatical kind. During the symposium, I will present the database for an international audience for the first time. I will describe its conception, building and content, and give a demonstration of its many search functions.

I will also share some of the insights concerning usage problems and usage guides as a genre which I acquired while plowing through usage guides in the past years for the database project. I will show how usage guides relate to other normative genres and discuss its various sub-genres.

‘Elegant English’ – is there any such thing?

Caroline Taggart, writer

Some years ago I wrote a book for the National Trust called *Her Ladyship's Guide to the Queen's English*. In an attempt to make it more interesting than 'this is right, this is wrong', I invented the character of Her Ladyship and a concept I called Elegant English. But the book was in many ways tongue in cheek, a modern take on the linguistic class distinctions best known from Nancy Mitford's *Noblesse Oblige* in the 1950s. Does it have any validity in the twenty-first century?

The book is full of my own prejudices about usage. Some people will read it and accuse me of sloppiness; others will think I am extraordinarily pedantic. In this paper I will argue (in a light-hearted way) that although there are many things that are 'right' or 'just plain wrong', a lot of 'correct' usage is a matter of personal preference, opinion and environment. Doesn't what is considered correct or acceptable (if not necessarily Elegant) English depend on where you live and, to an extent, how old you are?

I was brought up in New Zealand by Scottish parents and have lived all my adult life in London. I'll draw on my own experiences of the mixed vocabulary this gave me to discuss how language varies from place to place and generation to generation. I'm not going to say there is no such thing as correct usage, but I am going to say that today it is changing more rapidly than ever before and that not only are those who take an inflexible attitude to 'correctness' battling against an overwhelming tide, they are also missing out on a lot of the fun of speaking and writing a living language.

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The King's English by Kingsley Amis: a publisher's project

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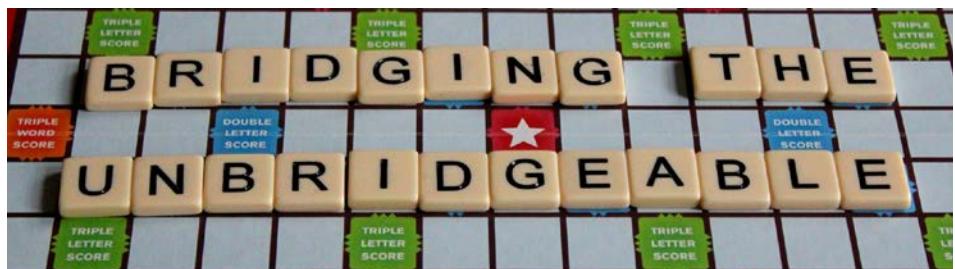
Kingsley Amis (1922–1995), in addition to publishing 24 novels, also wrote a usage guide, called *The King's English*. The book was published posthumously in 1997 by HarperCollins. Its title bears an unmistakable reference to the work of Amis's illustrious predecessors Henry and Francis Fowler published in 1906, but despite Martin Amis's assertion in the preface to Penguin's reissue of the book in 2011 that "the King' ... was a nickname [his father] tolerated", *The King's English* was not Amis's own title but that of the publishers (Leader 2006: 818–820). The preface reads that Amis wrote the book with Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1926) lying 'open beside the typewriter' (1997:xiv), and the book includes many references to Fowler. Fowler has even been given an entry of his own (1997:75–77), in which Amis argues that '*Modern English Usage* is better than a worthy memorial to its author', concluding with the words that Fowler 'and his work have never received the honour they deserve'.

Amis's *The King's English* is not a typical usage guide. Though it does offer language advice, and though it does include quite a few of what are referred to as 'old chestnuts' as far as usage is concerned, most of the entries read like brief linguistic – often humorous – narratives rather than typical usage items. Particular usage advice, as on the use of the once controversial *hopefully*, can, moreover, be found in other writings by Amis. The Preface, attributed by Leader (2006: 818–820) to Amis himself, reads that '[t]he most that can be offered is some guidance for those who may want it' (1997: ix), but, as I will argue in this paper, the main purpose behind the book was for Amis to offer a tribute to Fowler, whose language advice, Amis rightly or wrongly believed, 'has aged remarkably little over the years' (1997:75).

References

Amis, Kingsley. 1997. *The King's English. A Guide to Modern Usage*. London: Harper Collins.
 Leader, Zachary. 2006. *The Life of Kingsley Amis*. New York: Pantheon Books.





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