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## Words, Meanings, and Styles.

## II.

THE first element of good style is clearness, and this may or may not be combined with literary elegance. It is usual to regard a split infinitive as a sign of indifference to pure English, yet this misplacement will be found in the works of some of our leading writers. The practice is discussed in an open-minded manner in Tract No. XV. recently published by the Clarendon Press for the Society for Pure English; and though no precise conclusions are reached whether it is permissible or no, the general view taken is that when a split infinitive is the best form of avoiding ambiguity it can be justified. It is admitted that the separation of *to* from its infinitive is not in itself desirable, but, on the other hand, obvious artificiality may be introduced when the practice is regarded as a fetish. "To see clearly" is certainly preferable to the split infinitive "To clearly see"; and "To be clearly seen" or "To be seen clearly" to the form "To clearly be seen," but it is difficult sometimes, without splitting the infinitive, to retain the meaning desired. Thus, the pamphlet referred to gives as an example the phrase "we must expect the Commission to at least neglect our interests." To place the words "at least" anywhere else in the sentence would not convey exactly the same idea, and instead of changing their position it would be better to recast the sentence. People who deliberately avoid split infinitives have often an objection to divide a compound verb by adverbs, so that they would write "earnestly may be hoped" instead of "may be earnestly hoped." There is, however, no grammatical reason against such splitting as there is in splitting an infinitive; indeed, the proper place for the adverb is between the auxiliary and the principal verb.

From the point of view of correct grammar, the conjunction "and" ought not to be used to begin a sentence, in spite of its common use in this place in the Authorised Version of the Bible. The function of the word is to add one word or clause to another in a sentence, and this rule is broken when the word opens a new sentence. The incorrect use of "and which" is very common. Generally, either the pronoun or the conjunction should be omitted, or the former is misplaced. When entirely different statements are expressed by two clauses of a sentence, or the cases are different, the relative may be repeated, but not otherwise. Thus it is correct to write, "The results, which support my earlier views, and which I will describe," or "His work on behalf of the scientific world, which he has served so well, and which esteems him so highly," but not "These phrases, which are irritating to read, and which are met every day," or "It is a principle

which is easily understood and which is also easily forgotten." The best way to avoid flagrant errors in regard to the use of "and which," "but which," "and who," and similar combinations, is to omit whatsoever word is intrusive or redundant. That is, indeed, the touchstone by which most questions of literary style may be tested.

As to particular words and phrases, some of these in common use are indefensible, while the use of others must be left to personal taste to decide. It is fatuous to write "to the foot of the letter" instead of "literally," and clumsy to use "it goes without saying" for "it need scarcely be said" or "needless to say." "In the circumstances" is obviously a more correct phrase than "under the circumstances," and "to direct attention" is preferable to the usual form "to call (or draw) attention." "Last," which denotes position, should not be used in the sense of "latest," which signifies time. To use the word "phenomenal" to describe remarkable things or events having nothing to do with phenomena is to adopt inept journalese of the same type as the use of the verb "to transpire" in the sense of "to happen." For the use of "over" in the sense of "more than" there is no justification; and "scarcely" is always the correct word to use instead of "hardly" in expressing quantity. "To try an experiment" for "to make an experiment" is, of course, wrong. "After" or "later" is usually preferable to "subsequently"; "total" or "whole" to "aggregate"; "viewpoint" or "point of view" to "standpoint"; "first" to "firstly"; "person" to "individual" except where a single or separate person is specified; "common" to "mutual"; "largely" to "materially"; and there are many other preferences of a like kind.

Purists object strongly to the word "reliable" because of its irregular formation, though the same objection can be made to the words "laughable" and "indispensable." Some authors make the distinction of applying the word "reliable" to things or statements, and "trustworthy" to persons, and that is the general practice followed in these pages. It would be pure pedantry to refer to an engine as "trustworthy" instead of "reliable," and stupidity to describe "reliability tests" as "trustworthiness tests." Mr. B. J. Hayes, writing from Burlington House, Cambridge, objects to the use of the word "humanoid" in NATURE of February 7 (p. 201, bottom of column 1), and suggests that "hyperanthropoid" would make the use of the hybrid word unnecessary. His word, however, though correctly formed, would signify that the type referred to as humanoid was in the same direct line of development as anthropoid, whereas it belongs to a separate line.

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Most of these distinctions are, however, relatively minor matters from an editorial point of view compared with diversities of paragraphing, punctuation, use of capitals, inaccuracy of quotation, and incorrect references, which come under consideration every day. It is, of course, undesirable to insist upon a uniform style of paragraphing or punctuation; and all that we would urge is that long paragraphs and long periods put too much strain on the powers of attention of the reader. There is little possibility, in scientific articles, of offending in the other direction by over-shortening paragraphs and periods until they reach the staccato style of the sprightly part of the daily press.

A quotation may be used as an apt illustration of a particular point, or as a statement of the nature of evidence on one side or the other bearing upon the case upon which judgment is being expressed. Of the former class, the authors of "The King's English" describe as trite: balm in Gilead, *e pur si muove*, a consummation devoutly to be wished, the irony of fate, the psychological moment, the pity of it, and many others; and they give the following among common misquotations, the corrections being in brackets: A *poor* thing, but mine own (an ill-favoured); *small* by degrees and beautifully less (fine); *the* last infirmity of noble *minds* (that, mind); make assurance *doubly* sure (double); a goodly apple rotten at the *core* (heart).

We are, however, more concerned with material than with formal quotations, and our experience is that very many writers fail to realise the necessity of reproducing with literal accuracy the extracts they quote, whether for approval or criticism. The number of variations which writers make, deliberately or inadvertently, from the original text is really astonishing to any one who goes to the trouble of verifying what is quoted. It cannot be too strongly insisted upon in a scientific journal that not merely the sense but the actual words and form should be reproduced exactly in a quotation, and that punctilious care should be taken in this respect when the quotation is from a book under review, or from a contribution upon which comments are being made. No wiser advice could be given than that of "verify your references," whether these signify volumes, dates, and pages, or actual quotations.

While an editor can scarcely be held responsible for the accuracy of all the quotations made by his contributors, it is his duty to secure reasonable uniformity in various elements of grammatical and typographical style. For example, certain collective nouns, such as Ministry, Government, Council, Board, Commission, Committee, are used by some writers with a singular verb and by others with a plural. In official practice the plural is commonly used, as "The

Ministry have decided"; here the noun signifies the members of the Ministry and its sense is, therefore, plural. When, however, plurality is not intended, and reference is to a single body, it would seem to be equally correct to use a singular verb. We prefer the verb and the pronoun to be singular, as with a "nation" or "people," where they are always used rightly. On the other hand, nouns like the United States, Physics, and Mathematics, though plural in form are singular in meaning and a singular verb is, therefore, used with them. Here it is not a matter of preference or consistency but of accurate diction.

This brings us to the use of capitals, and there does not seem to be any general rule for capitalisation other than that of the initial letter of the word beginning a sentence. Some authors tend towards the German style of writing every noun with an initial capital, but few follow a definite plan, and it is left to editors or printers to secure reasonable uniformity in this respect. Our custom is to use capitals in Latin scientific names of orders, genera, and so on, but not in corresponding English words. Thus, we should print *Coniferæ*, but without the capital letter in conifers, and similarly, *Amphibia* or amphibians, *Crinoidea* or crinoids. Every week, however, brings difficulties in the application of any general rule to contributions of different authors, and we have to exercise the editorial prerogative in deciding whether initial capitals should be used or no in such words and terms as Radium-D, Department, Faculty, State, Parliament, Superintendent, Director, Report, Tertiary age and Stone Age, Neolithic Man, Miocene Period and Celtic period, London Clay (or clay), Ångströms, Theory of Relativity, Quantum Theory, Correspondence Principle, names of elements and minerals, and a host of other examples of a similar kind.

In general, our rule is to use initial capitals only when specific institutions, bodies, divisions, and so on, are referred to, and not when these are described in a generic sense. Thus, we should print, the University of Cambridge, but British universities; the British Scientific Instrument Research Association, but industrial research associations; the House of Commons, but the state legislature; the Middlesex Education Committee, but local education authorities; the State of New York, but the northern states; the Galaxy, but the stellar universe. It may be said, therefore, that initial capitals are used only when they are positively necessary for precise description, and are avoided unless there is an essential reason for them. We realise that our decisions are sometimes purely arbitrary, but in the absence of established principles they cannot be otherwise.

There is only one other matter to which we wish to refer in concluding this discursive article: it is that of the common belief that writers on scientific subjects compare unfavourably with workers in other intellectual fields in the capacity to express themselves in suitable words, or in their appreciation of good English. We cannot accept this view for a moment, and we resent strongly the supercilious attitude which literary people often present towards scientific works. It seems to be taken for granted by some writers who survey published literature from week to week, that no work of science can possibly be classed as literature. We do not hesitate to say, however, that, judged by literary standards alone, scientific books are published every week more worthy of comment than many of those selected to represent the week's literature. Though classical scholars and men of letters may not think it derogatory to be without a knowledge of science, most men of science are familiar with one or two languages in addition to their own, and they have, at any rate, a certain acquaintance with the art of literary expression and often the desire to perfect themselves in it. The vocabulary of a man of science is probably more extensive than that of a man of letters of equal authority, but it includes many technical words which are understood only by workers in particular fields and cannot be used effectively, therefore, when addressing a wider circle.

That is the chief distinction which need be made between scientific articles and books and those of a purely literary kind. It is not necessary for a chemist who is writing for chemists to describe the scientific words and phrases he uses any more than it is for the literary man to explain his allusions, or the historian the significance of his periods and characters. When, however, a chemist is addressing the world of science as a whole, he must avoid the special language of his branch of science if he is to be intelligible, and if he is writing for the general public he has to do so in everyday words and phrases. The standard of suitability of contributions to *Chemistry and Industry* differs, therefore, from that of a general scientific periodical such as *NATURE*, and this differs again from that of a daily newspaper or of a parish magazine. It ought not, however, to be too much to expect in these days that educated men and women should be acquainted with words and phrases which are part of the common vocabulary of science; and if that desideratum be granted, we may safely claim that the writings of many men of science are truly literary in style as well as scientific in substance, while as regards originality of fact and idea, they are far in advance of all other published works.