

articles so that they are finished at the bottom of a page and removed humorous examples that they considered too frivolous. I think of editors as dour, dark-suited Presbyterians, unwilling to let any humour into the serious business of imparting knowledge. I, on the other hand, agree with W. S. Gilbert that "he who'd make his fellow creatures wise, should always gild the philosophic pill", but my quotations from Lewis Carroll, my mathematical treatment of belt and braces to show how the reliability of two protective systems is calculated, have often been blue-pencilled.

Editors favour brevity; it is cheaper. But repeating a statement in different words often helps to get the point across. If the author of psalm 114 had been writing for a geological journal he would not have got away with "The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs".

In emphasizing form rather than language Day almost treats scientific papers as art rather than a means of communication. Perhaps he is right to do so. Information scientists tell us that many papers are never read by anyone (except writer, editor and referee) and that at least 25% are never cited, even by the author. Just as medieval sculptors took great pains over the carving of cathedral roofbosses, that no one would ever see, so editors take great pains over the presentation of papers that no one will ever read. Depending on your point of view, both are a waste of time or art for art's sake: pride in a job done well, whether or not it is ever seen.

In a hard, commercial world is it really cost-effective to spend so much effort perfecting a paper to Day's satisfaction? Recently I spent many hours looking up the references to a longish review paper because the editor wanted more details than usual. It is sloppy, I agree, not to follow a journal's style, but how far do you go when life is limited? Do we aim for a perfect job or an adequate job?

The coming years may make much of what Day wants out-of-date. Already some publishers, as he points out, are setting type directly from the author's word-processor discs. This makes it harder for them to edit the text. The next step will be to cut out the typesetting altogether and feed the author's disc into a computer data base which readers can access, taking a hard copy if they want. Farewell, Mr Day.

In the meantime, his book should be widely available wherever scientific papers are written and all authors, particularly first-time ones, should be encouraged to read it. It will not solve all their problems; it will not solve their biggest problem, learning to write well, but it will smooth the path to publication and that is worth doing. Day has set himself a modest task and done it superbly. □

T.A. Kletz has retired from the chemical industry, and is now a professor in the Department of Chemical Engineering at Loughborough University.

Usage and abuse

Walter Gratzer

Fowler's Modern English Usage, 2nd edn.

Revised by Sir Ernest Gowers, 1965.

Oxford University Press: 1983.

Pbk with corrections. Pp. 725.

£3.25, \$8.95.

THE redoubtable Dr Burchfield is said to be embarking on a new edition of Fowler. Meanwhile Gowers' revision, available for the first time in sturdy paperback and a snip at the price, will do very well; no laboratory should be without it, if for no better reason than that a ramble through the scientific literature with Fowler as guide affords no end of macabre entertainment.

There is, as I understand, one scientific paper published every second. If Balzac could describe Georges Sand as a great cow full of ink, what are we to say about some of our *capi mafiosi*, who – I judge by some recent obituaries – are capable of putting out two thousand papers in a working life? (Who would have thought the old man had so much ink in him?). We live in a slop of overflowing neologisms, pleonasm, malapropisms, clichés and unattached participles.

Scientists, even more than journalists, batten onto each new distortion of language with an uncritical eagerness that they would never think to apply to the substance of their papers. Examples of current vogue words that come quickly to mind are 'probe', to mean any vehicle of observation, 'propose' to mean suggest, as in 'we propose that the core of the earth consists of molten Camembert', and 'abolish' to mean expunge, not a law or statute, but something on the lines of enzymic activity.

Even more striking is the way in which words with a precise technical meaning escape into the outside world, are mangled by journalists and politicians, and are then received back in their new and perverted sense. 'Parameter' for example is now widely used in the scientific literature, as in newspapers, to mean any measured quantity or constant (or, for that matter, variable), and 'extrapolate' and 'exponential' appear to be undergoing a similar malignant transformation. And how has 'multimer' suddenly surfaced, to signify apparently something that is smaller (or perhaps bigger) than an oligomer? (The proponents of this idiotic usage might not be aware of the old don's comment on television, when that medium began to assert itself: no good, he said, would come of an invention, the name of which was half in Latin and half in Greek).

Fowler is excellent on vogue words and admirably cool and dispassionate about such emotional issues as split infinitives and terminal prepositions. He concludes

his dissertation on the latter with the comment that not even Dryden, who denounced the practice, would have changed "which I will not put up with" to "up with which I will not put". (As a counter-example I would offer the child's question: "what have you brought me that book to be read to out of for?").

Fowler is splendid on ambiguities. Here are two of his illustrations (presumably genuine) from the several categories that he considers: "to ask the Minister of Agriculture if he will require eggs to be stamped with the date on which they were laid by the farmer", and "Miss Pickhill grasped the pince-nez, which hung from a sort of button on her spare bosom". My own choices in this *genre* would be the exhortation on London Transport escalators that "dogs must be carried" (why should such an encumbrance be thought necessary?), the notice at one time displayed in the windows of a chain of chemists' shops, proclaiming "we dispense with accuracy", and the legend on the sides of removal vans, which used to be seen plying about London: "Removers of Distinction" it proudly asserted.

Fowler is a marvel of easy erudition and yields much diversion and instruction. I recommend it for browsing, for improving one's papers and resolving arguments and for confounding subeditors. I hope it finds its way across the Atlantic, whence the following, as an example of scientific prose to make your knees buckle: "Remarks as to the handiness of germane magnetic facts strongly parallel those made in antecedent paragraphs concerned with spectroscopic conduct. Generally speaking, magnetic demeanor is more greatly influenced by environmental vagaries than optical deportment, as the former is dependent upon the detailed visitatorial schedules of the transient electrons." Perhaps the computers are taking over. As that legendary master of the modern malapropism, Sam Goldwyn, nearly said, if Fowler were alive he'd be turning in his grave. □

Walter Gratzer is in the Medical Research Council Cell Biophysics Unit, King's College, London.

Gripes or wrath?

Our reviewer has given some examples of uncouth English usage, commonly found in the scientific literature. We propose to consider correspondence, in which readers can (briefly) air their prejudices, reflections and hates on scientific prose, its content, style and vocabulary. Contributions to our correspondence column on these matters are invited.