

A N E N G L I S H M A N R E V O L T S A B O U T T H E E N G L I S H L A N G U A G E

The following excellent article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald of October 22, 1966.

A 20th Century look at the "New English" of 1066

If we had our rights wrong would be 'rong."

by William Barkley

The Structure of the English language was created entirely by the illiterate, unschooled English working man of 800 to 900 years ago. For 100 years after that battle fought at Hastings on October 14, 1066, nothing is recorded as written in the English language and very little for another 150 years.

English is the only major language in the world which for centuries escaped the clutches of the dons, the pundits, the pedagogues, the grammarians, the literary gents and the writers. English was then a tongue, a speech, used exclusively in the fields and in the primitive forges and timber yards of the day.

It is for this reason, because it was fashioned by the plain, practical handymen of England, that English in its grammar attained a massive simplicity unmatched anywhere else, unimaginable, miraculous and awesome.

Alone the English speakers have escaped the toils of grammar which enslave all Europeans. A splendid writer on languages, Sir Douglas Busk, estimates that a foreigner can learn the whole of English grammar in the same time that he takes to master the four regular French verbs, which are merely the first step in the appalling complexity of French grammar.

Consider three of these vast simplicities.

1. The English adjective never changes. A book, a boy or 10 women are either good or they are not. What is the French for good? It is one of four words with six pronunciations - bon, bonne, bons, and bonnes, of which the s's in bons and bonnes and the e's of bonne and bonnes are sometimes silent and sometimes pronounced. Pre-Hastings English had 10 forms of good.
2. The past tense of the English verb never changes since we dropped "thou", I came, you came, he came, they came, we came. Try it out, the only exception is the verb "to be" with was in the singular and were in the plural. And this is a grammarians' rule because the phrases you was and they was up to 200 years ago were classic English.
3. Alone of all European languages English has abandoned gender. This by itself gives English a claim to be the only logical language in the Western world. This is what distinguishes the British from the Europeans.

The old pre-Hastings English of the Confessor's Court was fiendishly complicated. Every noun had its fixed gender, masculine, feminine or neuter, based, as in German today, on no principle that the mind can grasp. The sun was feminine, the moon was masculine, just the reverse of the Latin languages. The word "the" had 12 different forms to accomodate itself to the gender or case or number (singular or plural) of the noun - se, seo, thaet, being the Old English equivalent of German der, die, das - all plain the to us.

Almost overnight 900 years ago this week French became not only the language of the Royal Court but of the law courts, the Administration and the Church, along with Latin. The aristocrats and landed gentry, if they did not beat it for freedom to Scotland, learned French mightly quickly and had French taught to their children. There is evidence that English was not taught in England's schools for 280 years.

The Old English rapidly vanished. The working man, remote from all these toff activities, invented the New English. He found he got on very well by speaking only the root syllables of words, dropping all those finicky endings which distinguished for example the genders of nouns and adjectives. And thus he shot the pants off English grammar. Hooray!

What miracle then was it which finally conquered the Norman Conquest and restored English as the language of England? The language which was driven from cultivated use by conquest and massacre was resurrected by disease, by the plague, by the Black Death!

Writing was a monopoly of the Church in those days before printing. It is

significant that clerk and cleric are two forms of the same Latin word. The monasteries were, so to speak, the printing and publishing houses, of the fourteenth century. The French speaking monks were the scribes who copied manuscripts.

The plague was carried by rats and fleas. I conclude that cleanliness was not in those days next to godliness and that the close-packed monasteries were, in short, flea-ridden, and that this terrible Black Death of 1349 which killed half the population of England totally exterminated the French-speaking monks.

Nobody can tell exactly what happened in a convulsion as disastrous to life as the most sombre forecast made today for all-out nuclear war. Certainly within a generation of the Black Death English was again the language taught in schools and was used in law courts and in Parliament for the first time since Parliament was instituted.

Such were the slim chances by which our language survived, no one knowing that it was to become the most important in the world. (A few weeks ago a Belgian advised his fellow countrymen to cease their feud between French and Flemish because the language of Europe would soon be English.)

But oh! alas and alack! The Gods were jealous. When English became official it was taken over by the clerks, the scholars, and later the printers. No model existed for it. Chaos ruled. Caxton, our first printer, for example, consistently spelled "Englissche" and "Fremnsche", which have since been cleaned up a bit. Where the working men had made difficult things simple in speech the scholars made simple things complicated in writing.

Yet in the early centuries you find a striking amount of simplicity which has now been lost. Here are the spellings used by Caxton in his *Morte D'Arthur* roughly 500 years ago.

Hors, Horsbak, heven, redy, frend, wil, shal, wel, peny, gard, els, ar, klok, blak, trak, rok, sak, Temse, (Thames), deth. The very title-page shows "The Lyfe and Deth of King Arthur".

Spenser and many other fine writers wrote: tung, yung, neibor, fesant, licoris, forein, Shakespeare has hart-ake in Hamlet. Marlowe and Milton wrote num and lim. Donne wrote "No man is an iland to himself". Milton wrote sovran.

A pelican book of Elizabethan prose at a random glance shows, syth (now scythe) fel, skreeke, ment, minsing, brest, peercing, neece, witnes, orfan, mistres, darknes, and from Robert Greene in 1589 "having supt il last night".

Any working man's child entering school this year would learn supt il much quicker than "supted ill".

Who desimplified these simplicities? Who spread chaos and error in our books and newspapers? I blame the class-conscious scholars of the Age of Ornament to whom (as in hats and dress) anything simple was crude and barbarous. And I blame their successors in Oxford today who have discarded their ancestors' hats but who perpetuate their folly in print.

I have a feeling that the Oxford don has never forgiven the working man for robbing him of an empire in grammar and is quite happy to see him floundering when he comes to read and write. If the working man understood the fraud that is perpetrated on him we should soon see a change.

I give him one example. Beleeve is historic and correct. Believe is a seventeenth century blunder. Every Oxford don knows this fact. Stand by while I show you why.

The original Authorised Bible of 1611 spells beleeve, beleeveth, unbeleefe, beleever, unbeleever. Today's copy, printed by the Oxford University Press, spells believe, believeth, unbelief, believer, unbeliever. Now this magnificent press prints another immortal book, the Oxford English Dictionary. Look up believe in this dictionary and you will read "the spelling is erroneous."

So here are the directors or as they call themselves the delegates of the Oxford University Press who in one of their publications tell us that believe is a blunder and in another of their publications, the Bible itself, carefully insert this blunder a thousand times.

I wrote to one of these delegates, a brilliant scholar, and inquired: "How can you sleep at night when you are in part responsible for teaching errors to children?" For I could fill pages with an account of the plain blunders of our compulsory spelling. The reply was "I can quite believe(!) that there is a great case for the change of English spelling, but somehow I do not find myself engaged by the matter."

Money I predict will ensure that this matter engages us pretty soon. In Britain we spend over £1,500 million a year on education, of which the primary schools take 26 per cent or say £400 million a year, three times the cost of 10 years ago, with the rates and taxes mounting everlastingly to pay it. How much do we spend on instructing the young in the blatant falsehood of our spelling? If a quarter of a primary school child's time is absorbed in reading and writing it would mean £100 million a year.

If our scholars and printers would combine to correct our spelling we would turn out a race of children far better educated at 15 than they will ever be at 16 or 17 while we maintain the present chaos.

The reform need not cost the taxpayer one penny on one condition - that we employ only the existing Roman alphabet. No alteration would then need to be made to our vast printing equipment or to our millions of typewriters. It would not cost a penny more to print a book or a newspaper on the lines of believe instead of believe. Anyone who has mastered the present chaos could read the existing books for the rest of his life. Anyone who had learned only the new style could read the existing books although he could not write in that style.

The British publishers alone produce 30,000 new titles each year - that is to say books never printed before - some of which may sell thousands and some of them millions and it would not cost a penny more to print them in new spelling than it does now. All that is needed is study by experts and decision. All the materials are at hand in the Oxford English Dictionary which took 45 years to compile, which was conceived not in Oxford but in London, and was conceived as few people remember, with an eye to spelling reform. That is why it gives every recorded spelling for every word - 70 spellings of the word cushion!

Nineteen years work was done by the Philological Society on the dictionary, and two tons of material for it were collected in London and in the garden of James Murray's house at Mill Hill School where he taught before Oxford was associated at all with the project and then mainly as the printers.

James Murray, at the outset of his 35 years' editorship, protested in 1880 -

"Amended spelling has become a practical matter in connection with education and the waste of national resources incurred in the attempt to make child after child commit to memory the 20,000 contradictory facts of our present spelling".

And 86 years ago Murray and his colleagues in London published a first list of 500 spelling corrections of which not one has been adopted to this day.

We are lucky to have this slack to take up in these competitive times. Give our workmanlike speech a workmanlike printed form and we shall be the best educated race which the world ever saw. And we'll educate the rest of the world too!

End of Article.

I wrote to the author.
Mr. William Barkley
Author of the Article,
"If we had our rights, etc."
Sydney Morning Herald of October 22
c/- The Editor of the Saturday Magazine.
Dear Mr. Barkley,

Sydney 22 Oct 66

I couldn't believe my eyes seeing your article printed in the Herald. At last a man who stood up against the professional keepers of our language. I am asking with the same letter (of which the editor receives a copy) for the right to reprint your article in my publications, though the General Manager of the Sydney Morning Herald has granted me that right years ago for any article and report which fosters my cause: the improvement of mankind's most important invention, articulate language. If you retain the copyright, then please allow me to reprint it, as my publications are collected by a number of university libraries abroad.

I am more savage, and not only against the keepers of English. I enclose the dustcover of my latest book and refer you to my scathing remarks on the page which shows the dead children at the top, and to the next page which shows Hitler and Mussolini, Stalin and Mao at the bottom. I could send you excerpts from my book "In Search of a Logical God" where I count some of the crimes of our language teachers. Here is but one of which I am sure you are aware.

I am a research chemist, and was fascinated by the "laws of nature" already as a schoolboy. I was dismayed however by the "laws of language" with their countless idiotic exceptions from the laws of language. When I remonstrated with my teachers they had a marvellous excuse, the adage:

"The Exception Proves the Rule".

That made no sense to me, because in physics and chemistry any exception to the rule is a test for the rule to see if the rule is false, and then it must be abandoned. Only in my later years did I discover the immense fraud which the language teachers of mankind have perpetrated upon millions of boys and girls. I found the original Latin proverb which goes:

"Exception probat regulam".

Probe not prove, and probe is not ambiguous, whereas prove is. Even prove means probe as for instance in missile proving ground. But the language teachers use the ambiguous prove and insisted that it means confirm, not probe. Imagine now that my mother tongue is German, and that my German grammar teachers told me

"Die Ausnahme bestaetigt die Regel."

"The Exception confirms the Rule."

Hoping to hear from you I am,

Yours sincerely,
C.K. Bliss, B.Sc.

and asked the Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald to pass my letter on to Mr. Barkley.

The Editor,
of the Saturday Magazine,
Sydney Morning Herald
Sydney

22 Oct 66

Dear Sir,

Congratulations for bringing the article "If we had our rights, etc." by William Barkley. Please forward the attached envelope to him which contains a letter and a dustcover, which I duplicate for your perusal.

I ask you for permission to reprint the article with the customary "Reprinted by kind permission of the Editor of the Saturday Magazine of the Sydney Morning Herald."

Thanking you in anticipation, I am.

Yours sincerely,
C.K. Bliss, B.Sc.

Alas, Mr. Barkley didn't answer.

The dustcover sent to Mr. Barkley is the one for my large book "Semantography" which dustcover forms S.S.No.238. It shows on top of the backcover, the photograph of 3 Turkish children murdered with their mother and thrown into a tub, and the caption says:

The End.

LOOK AT OUR WORLD OF WORDS

and underneath I lash out at our language teachers who have made language a tool for dissension and destruction.