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The Corruption of English

"WE ARE ALL in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars," wrote Oscar Wilde about life. The same applies to language: we all make mistakes (somebody just wrote me to point out a badly constructed sentence in one of my columns), but some of us at least try to maintain standards. It is not easy, and the best may stumble. Thus the worthy Irving Howe writes, on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* (April 9, 1978), about "main protagonists." Now, the protagonist is *the* main actor in something and has, since Greek times, always been in the singular. "Protagonists" is incorrect (unless you refer to the protagonists of two or more dramas), and "main protagonists" (main main actors) is redundant to boot. A double-barreled error, but even the ablest among us, harried by the exigencies of rapid-fire journalism, are not immune to lapses.

What worries me more is rock-bottom illiteracy: in the gutter and looking at the sewers. David Sheff of *New West* sent me a

I am indebted to the present editors of *Esquire* for allowing me to publish the columns "Pressure from Below" and "Pressure from Above" (*Esquire*, June 20 and July 18, 1978) for the first time in one piece, as originally written. This essay is part of a book on language to be published by Clarkson and Potter in early 1980.

good-size National Airlines poster the other day, depicting a charming flight attendant (formerly stewardess) and bearing this caption emblazoned in mighty letters: "Watch us shine with more flight's to Houston." Be honest: did your jaw drop when you read that "flight's"? I showed the poster to a couple of civilized friends, and it took them some time and quite a bit of prodding to notice the howler. So there you have it: half the population (I guess) thinks that any plural ending in *s* requires an apostrophe, and the other half stands idly by without squirming, if, in fact, it even notices.

Where does it all come from? Who is the chief culprit? Surely, the schools, both lower and higher, and the distemper of the times that influences them. Let me give you some horrible examples. Jim Deutsch of Greenville, Mississippi, has just sent me a Xerox of a letter published in *American Studies International* (Winter 1977), in which Toby Fulwiler protests what seems to be a fairly obvious plagiarism of a paper he wrote. But he twice misspells *plagiarize* as *plagerize*, which the editors duly note with a *sic*. If Mr. Fulwiler is that concerned with plagiarism, he might at least ascertain how it is spelled, especially since he is the Director of Freshman English at Michigan Technological University. It is clear, furthermore, that he knows neither Latin (*plagiarius*: a kidnapper) nor any major modern language in which the spelling of the word is made manifest by the pronunciation, e.g., French (*plagiat*) or German (*Plagiat*). But it may be asking too much of a contemporary director of freshman English that he know other languages: English, though, should still be part of his competency.

Or need it be? Two readers, no less (Hortense Berman and Thomas A. Long), have sent me identical clippings from *UC This Week*, a University of Cincinnati faculty and staff newspaper. The May 2 issue summarizes a talk by William Lasher, associate professor of English, chairman of the committee on linguistics, and director of undergraduate studies in English. Professor Lasher adduced two sentences—"we was at the ball game last night" and "Mary had five card"—calling them clear and logical attempts to simplify the language.

I quote: "In the first example, Lasher says, the speaker has decided that the distinction between 'was' and 'were' is insignificant and has chosen 'was,' no matter if the subject is singular or plural." Note the assumption that the speaker consciously "decided" to make a simplifying choice. How about the supposition that the speaker was an illiterate ignoramus who neither knew nor cared to know better? But to go on: "The second example is what Lasher

calls Black English, a social dialect of American English. In it the speaker drops the 's' from 'cards' because the five already indicates more than one." And Lasher proceeded, at least by strong implication, to belittle those who would consider the above speakers ungrammatical just because they violate what he patronizingly called "the experts' rule." For Lasher, "the people who say 'was' for 'were' or drop the 's' have a grammar that describes the relationship between sound and meaning in their cultures."

Why should we consider some, usually poorly educated, sub-culture's notion of the relationship between sound and meaning? And how could a grammar—any grammar—possibly describe that relationship? Grammar exists mainly to clarify meaning. *Five* does indeed indicate plurality, but the final *s* confirms it. After all, the speaker may have said "a fine card" or "a five card," and it is the final *s* that ensures that we have not misheard him. So, too, we may be uncertain whether we heard, say, *he* or *we* until the *were* dispels our doubt concerning who was at the ball game.

There is more to it, though. Maintaining these alleged niceties links our language to that of the giants of the English tongue who preceded us, all those great writers and speakers who were—not was—in the ball game that counts: the great struggle to use English as clearly and beautifully as possible. We do not wish to dissociate ourselves from them, lose familiarity with their mode of utterance on account of ignorant, misguided, or merely lazy creatures for whom making distinctions is an unnecessary effort. When Professor Lasher invokes the lofty principle of "making things easier," he serves up a typically disingenuous historical example: the shifting of *impossible* to *impossibile* from circa 1300 on. Yes, *inp* is harder to say than *imp*; but is *were* more of a strain on the tongue than *was*? Or, to put it differently: should we destroy a beautiful old building because it has decorative elements on its facade and replace it with a square box because that is a simpler structure? Of course, there are people who tear down architectural masterpieces for just such reasons; but whatever they call themselves, *we* should call them barbarians and fight their vandalism in every way we can.

What this is, masquerading under the euphemism "descriptive linguistics" (and Lasher is far from being an isolated promulgator of it—in fact, he is part of a growing majority), is a benighted and despicable catering to mass ignorance under the supposed aegis of democracy, of being fair to underprivileged minorities, and similar irruptions of politics where it has no business being.

Black English, for example, has a perfect right to exist; it just

hasn't the right to change Standard English. The Lashers of this world are being illogical. Either Black English is something different from Standard English, in which case it is no more entitled to interfere with it than Portuguese is, or it is—or means to be—part of Standard English, in which case it has to espouse the latter's rules. And it will not do for the Lashers to say that they do not pass judgment, that they merely record changes in the language that may actually make the language "better" as it "adapts to cultural needs." What kind of cultural need is it that demands *we* was for *we were*? An uncultured, indeed anticultural, need, for the supporting of which Lasher deserves five kick in the pant.

There is, I believe, a morality of language: an obligation to preserve and nurture the niceties, the fine distinctions, that have been handed down to us. And the Lashers cannot wash their dainty hands and pretend that anyone who uses the term *language deterioration* displays "ignorance of the facts of language change." Well, there may actually be some ignorance at work in that, though not as Lasher perceives it: "deterioration of language" would be better than "language deterioration."

The pressure on language to deteriorate does not, however, come merely from below, from the "democratic" levelers. It comes also from above, from the fancy jargonmongers, idle game players, fashionable coteries for second-rate intellectuals.

So far, I have discussed corrupting pressures on language from below—from misguidedly democratizing sources. Now, let me consider the attack on language from above: obfuscation in the name of some supposedly higher philosophy, academicism, linguistic or literary arcanum being foisted on language by allegedly exalted authorities. Here I do not mean simply mistakes—as when William Safire, in his commencement address at Syracuse University ("The Decline of the Written Word," May 13, 1978), declares: "We need not degenerate further from written English to verbal signals to sign language." Safire means *oral*, i.e. spoken signals; *verbal* means anything pertaining to words, written or spoken—hence "written English" is also a series of "verbal signals."

No, I refer to the so-called superior wisdom destructively inflicted on language in an effort to rise above what "lesser" people consider correct, straightforward, and self-evident. A typical and highly offensive example of this was submitted to me by Philippe Perebinosoff of Plattsburgh, New York. It is a prospectus for a summer seminar being given at Brown University under the sponsorship of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

These seminars, as my correspondent quotes, are "for college teachers . . . who are concerned primarily with increasing their knowledge of the subjects they teach."

The case in point is a seminar entitled "Theories of Reading: Fiction and Film," offered by Robert Scholes and Michael Silverman, both members of the Brown faculty. Scholes instructs "in the semiotics of fiction, in semiotic theory [etc.]—all for undergraduate students." Silverman teaches courses in "visual theory and film." The bibliography for the seminar, replete with texts by structuralists and semiologists, also features movies by Robert Altman, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Nick Ray. Lacking space for the whole prospectus, I quote its essence:

The engagement of reader, text, and culture in the act of reading points to the constant play of two elements over the face of the third; and this play of movement we would see as semiotic activity.

We intend the seminar members to read a number of examples of current theory, to read some prose passages and to see some films. . . . We do not want them to come up with "readings" of stories and films in the traditional sense; the substantive notion of "a reading" is opposed to our more participial sense of reading. . . . We will at all times read a "primary" text *through* a theoretical text. We hope in this to avoid the notion that the theory of reading and the practice of reading can be divorced. [Surely, what professors Scholes and Silverman have joined together, no man would be rash enough to put asunder!] Those not conversant with recent theory of reading will not acquire it in isolation from texts, but will at the very least be led to posit a dialectical relationship between texts. Thus a Lawrence story will be read through Todorov's *Poetics of Prose*, Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution* will be read ["Read any good movies lately?" "No, but I've seen the books."] through Althusser on Brecht.

Now, it may be that this playing of two elements over the face of the third comes down to not much more than viewing films, reading fiction, and also consulting some critical works. But note the horrible obfuscation of this "reading through other readings," these "positings of dialectical relationships between texts." Amid all that "semiotic activity" and the embargo on "readings in the traditional sense" will anyone see *through* to the books and movies? But, to go on:

The aim is not to make the theoretical text a transparent gloss or aid [no danger of that, I daresay] to the understanding of the "pri-

mary" text (thus inevitably producing new "readings" of the primary text), but to help us situate the text (both theoretical and "primary") within the area of something that can be read, while simultaneously undertaking to question the relationship between texts and our relation to them. Ideally, we would like at the end of eight weeks to have reached the point in our work in which a seminar member might undertake to read Todorov through Lawrence, or to theorize his own position as a reader through an examination of *Before the Revolution*.

Just as there are some people from whom I would not buy a used car, there are certain professors from whom I refuse to buy this secondhand semiology—not that it would be much better new. Even without being able to make sense out of all this tautologizing, highfalutin jargon, obnubilation, and deadwood, I am dead certain that I have nothing to gain from reading Todorov through Todorov, much less through D. H. Lawrence. And whereas I would be happy to assess the artistic value of Bertolucci's second film (in my opinion, minimal), I would not, while in the possession of a shred of sanity, wish to theorize my own position to it as a reader through Althusser. Rather than that, I would even watch the movie through a bunch of women refusing to take off their hats.

Now for a few further caveats from our pundits: "We must stress that we do intend, in any case, to stress the differences between fiction and film. . . . there is a clear difference, for example, in [*sic*] reading a novel in one's study and viewing a film in a public place." O profundity! Could one have arrived at this wisdom without viewing it through Todorov and Althusser? I seriously doubt it. But onward with Scholes and Silverman: "Since one of us is a specialist in prose narrative, the other a specialist in film, our approach to the material will not be fully congruent (this would seem to us a distinct advantage)." Perish the thought of anything so unstructuralist as congruence, so unsemiotic as clarity! Rather, the students will be expected to read Scholes through Silverman, and ideally, if one dare hope it after a mere eight weeks, even Silverman through Scholes. Note also that wonderful "We must stress that we do intend . . . to stress. . . ." I wonder: do two stresses equal one distress?

And here at last, as stressed by Scholes and Silverman, is the promised end: "(1) To establish that the reader of fiction must himself be activated in dramatistic terms, set into motion and

theorized; (2) that the cinematic viewer must give over his passivity, undertake the more strenuous activity of reading, while analyzing what this does to his relation to the text; (3) that the use of a by now widespread body of semiotic material on the place [*sic*] of the reader-viewer will facilitate a re-thinking of old critical positions." So in order to view—I mean, read—an Altman movie or Hemingway story—pardon me, "primary" text—I must be dramatistically activated, set into motion, and theorized; I must read while analyzing my relationship to the text (a bit onerous for someone already spinning like a top from all that activation); and I must use a widespread body of semiotic material while dramatistically whirling about in one place—the place allotted to the reader-viewer. All this will immeasurably facilitate my rethinking (with or without a hyphen) and is sure to jolt me out of any old position as a sitter-reader or sitter-viewer that I might have eased myself into in my outmoded and benighted, dramatistically unactivated state.

If I consecrate all this space to Scholes and Silverman, it is because the woods are full of them, various endowments sponsor them, and your tax dollars and the English language have to pay for them. In the place of the three R's, the new education has posited the three S's: structuralism, semiotics, stultification.

Look now at a more obvious disaster wrought by the new higher philosophizing. Mrs. M. C. (I am deeply sorry that legal reasons forbid my naming names), of a Dade County, Florida, college, has sent me a Xerox of the memo from her division director that lists his reasons for denying her tenure as an instructor of freshman composition. I quote:

She holds some tenets regarding her role as an English teacher which . . . does [*sic*] not lend itself to freedom of thought and exchange [of what?] for students because students are too busy looking for the right answers, i.e. the truth. For example: "Language (English) is precise. . . . I want my students to be precise when they write. They should not use one word when there is a better (more precise) word to say what they mean." This principle ignores two basic considerations: A. Denotative definitions of English words can vary from one to ten (10) or more definitions. Very few English words, usually nouns, have less [correctly: *fewer*] than two meanings. [Actually, quite a few leap to mind; for example, nincompoop, numskull, ignoramus, cretin, division director.] B. Connotative definitions are as many as there are people. They are

functions of our perceptual field, our view of the world, and are based on our experiences and our psychological imprinting. Hardly precise. This belief is a major guiding principle for Mrs. C.

When you get into the higher reaches of semantics, epistemology, textual explication, and semiology, seven or more types of ambiguity doubtless creep into almost every statement. But while you are writing a simple freshman English composition in Dade County, there is no reason for not hitting your simple point Dade center. A teacher must be propaedeutic before turning heuristic; a student must learn precise, unambiguous expression before he can start contemplating the relativity of the universe and all its components. Or, as they used to say in my school days, you must know the rules before you can learn to break them. Breaking them, in any case, is for shrewd and sophisticated writers, usually of fiction. Otherwise, the rules are still the most practical solution.

So, you see, the language is being attacked from above by the relativists and overcomplicators, from below by the democratic levelers. And, of course, there is overlapping: demotic ignorance plays into the hands of pseudoscientific mumbo jumbo, and structural linguistics rushes to the defense of every popular distortion or misconception. Can the beleaguered middle survive? Perhaps, if you will reject the trends, and yield neither to ignorance nor to obfuscation.