

# The New Fowler's Modern English Usage (3rd ed.) by R.W. Burchfield

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But it is acceptable to begin a sentence with a conjunction? May I be permitted to boldly split the infinitive (boldly to split or to split boldly)? Would I be guilty of an unpardonable solecism if, describing an hypothetical situation within my control, I were to use the subjunctive rather than indicative mood (was to use)? Is it valid to criticise an author failing to use the possessive case in respect or a gerund or "verbal noun" (an author's failing to use)? Is the temptation to place a preposition at the end of a sentence something which one should struggle against (against which one should struggle)?

For 70 years, *Modern English Usage*, first published by H.W. Fowler in 1926, has been the standard reference to which educated English-speaking people turn for guidance on these and similar questions. It was an unashamedly prescriptive book, which proceeded from the assumption that there is a single "correct" way to speak and write, and that all deviations from Fowler's orthodoxy are either "vulgar", "colloquial", "dialectal" (which included Scottish, Irish, American and Australian usage, as well as usage common in parts of England outside the Home Counties), "obsolete", or simply "wrong".

Fowler's work was the product of an age of certainty. On the occasion of his retirement on 13 April 1964, Sir Owen Dixon spoke of his predecessor, Sir Samuel Griffith, as having "a legal mind of the Austinian age, representing the thoughts and learning of a period which has gone, but is was dominant and decisive. His mind clearly was of that calibre: he did not hesitate, he just felt that he knew; and that what he knew was right."

Fowler was a contemporary of Griffith, and Dixon's description of Griffith's approach to the law may fairly be adapted to describe Fowler's approach to the use of the English language.

In his own words, Fowler intended his work to benefit "the half-educated Englishman of literary proclivities who wants to know Can I say so-&-so?". Instead, *Modern English Usage* became immensely popular amongst educated people who sought in it confirmation of their own prejudices - whether for their own benefit, or for the improvement of others. Thus it is reported that Sir Winston Churchill, writing to the Director of Military Intelligence concerning the plans for the "D-day" invasion of Normandy, said:

"Why must you write intensive here? Intense is the right word. You should read Fowler's *Modern English Usage* on the use of the two words".

When counsel appearing before His Honour Judge Skoien made the mistake of referring to a person's gender rather than the person's sex, his attention was drawn to Fowler's observation that gender is a "grammatical term only"; that -

"To talk of persons or creatures of the masculine or feminine gender, meaning of the male or female sex, is either a jocularity (permissible or not according to the context) or a blunder."

Very little of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* could today be regarded as "modern", if indeed it was "modern" in 1926. As Burchfield observes in his Preface to the new edition, Fowler's work -

"... is a fossil ..., and an enduring monument to all that was linguistically acceptable in the standard English of the southern counties of England in the first quarter of the twentieth century".

Burchfield's approach is very different. He avoids prescriptive statements of what is "correct", preferring merely to offer suggestions as to the usages which may be regarded as "standard". Erroneous spellings and pronunciations are sometimes expressly repudiated; but non-standard grammatical constructions are merely noted as such, without specific disapprobation.

Only the most extreme pedant could maintain Fowler's position on some issues. His objection to "curtailed

words" - such as bra for brassiere, bus for omnibus, mob for mobile vulgus, and taxi cab for taximetered cabriolet - is no longer sustainable. And Fowler's complaint that the ousting of eyeglass by monocle (the later being "a hybrid, a gallicism, and a word with no obvious meaning to the Englishman who hears it for the first time") is "a melancholy illustration of the popular taste in language", may have been valid at a time when eyeglass still stood some chance of survival, but is of no continuing relevance now that monocle has won the day, especially since the wearing of a single lens in one eye (whichever word may be used to describe it) has fallen from fashion.

In some instances, Burchfield mounts a solid argument for abandoning what was once the received wisdom on a number of contentious issues. Thus, for example, Burchfield persuasively defenestrates the "preposition at the end" and "split infinitive" shibboleths, by demonstrating that neither of these supposed rules is supported by logic, historical usage, or contemporary usage. And whilst acknowledging that "it is a sound rule that confines the use of comparative forms of an adjective to context in which two entities are being compared, and restricts superlative forms for comparison of three entities or more", Burchfield demonstrates that it is not uncommon for even the best writers to use superlatives when comparing only two items: not only did Shakespeare do so ("to prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine"); Burchfield is even able to cite (with, one might think, a certain degree of satisfaction) an example of Fowler's having used this supposed solecism: "dinghy, dingey. The first is best".

One undoubted improvement on Fowler is Burchfield's decision not to retain a number of the more idiosyncratic headings which appeared in the first edition, such as airs and graces, between two stools, unequal yokefellows, wens and hypertrophied members, battered ornaments, pairs and snares, and swapping horses.

Whilst these headings had a certain charm, and even a humorous appeal in Fowler's own schoolmasterly way, they offered very little guidance to the subject-matter of the entries which they headed; and in a work arranged alphabetically, presumably for the convenience of the reader seeking quickly to locate an entry on a topic of particular interest, such headings were of very little assistance. Moreover, these headings tended to overlap, so that a reader seeking guidance on the question whether a particular turn of phrase should be regarded as *pass é* might have to consult, not only the entry on *battered ornaments*, but also those on *cliché*, *elegant variation*, *facetious formations*, hackneyed phrases, incongruous vocabulary, irrelevant allusion, out-herod (!), popularized technicalities, *soubriquets*, *stock pathos* (!), *vogue words*, *wardour street*, *working and stylish words*, and *worn-out humour* - and possible several others - as well as seeking the proposed expression in its proper alphabetical location, in order to be satisfied that it is not one of the many such expressions to which Fowler took exception. Burchfield has adopted the more sensible, although less endearing, approach of placing all words and phrases which are the subject of comment in their appropriate alphabetical location, and only using obvious headings where it is convenient to deal with an entire subject in one entry.

On any view, Burchfield's is a superior work of scholarship: it draws on a much wider range of original sources, both historic and contemporary. In particular, whereas Fowler (in his own words) had his "eyes not on the foreigner", Burchfield (a New Zealander) makes extensive reference to sources from the United States and Canada, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, and (to a lesser extent) other English-speaking countries.

Burchfield also had the advantage that "a great deal of this evidence could be obtained and classified by electronic means". There is some genuine updating in Burchfield's work: thus, for example, he has added to Fowler's list of common misquotations (such as "escaped with (not by) the skin of my teeth", and "to paint (not gild) the lily") some more recent examples, such as Margaret Mitchell's "My dear (not Frankly, my dear), I don't give a damn" and Humphrey Bogart's "Play it! (not Play it again, Sam!)". And, of course, Burchfield has entered upon subjects of contemporary relevance which had not arisen in Fowler's time, such as "political correctness", the modern use of the words *gay* and *queer*, and what Burchfield describes as the "sensitive, verging on explosive" issue of "feminine designations".

To indicate appropriate pronunciations, Fowler used a system of respelling, often aided by the suggestion that a particular word should be pronounced so as to rhyme with another word. Thus, his entry on "girl" reads -

"girl rhymes with curl, whirl, and pearl, with the first syllable of early, not of fairly. But a pronunciation gairl, not very easily distinguished from gal was at one time general in upper-class society and, though now dying, is still affected by some persons who aim at peculiar refinement. Novelist who write gurl as a representation of course speech are presumably of this refined class."

Burchfield uses the symbols of the "International Phonetic Alphabet" which are undoubtedly more precise and "scientific", although less immediately helpful to the general reader to whom these symbols are not entirely familiar.

On the whole, then, Burchfield's must be regarded as a better work of lexicography; but whether it is a better

work of philology - or a more useful book to own - depends very much upon one's point of view - in particular, whether one seeks a prescriptive statement of how the language should be used, or a descriptive statement of how the language is used.

My own view is that Burchfield's book, whilst undoubtedly a very valuable and scholarly contribution to lexicography, is disappointing because it is not what it claims to be - a new edition of Fowler. Mr Frank Devine, writing in *The Weekend Review* (15-16 May 1997), suggests that Burchfield "is unduly self-effacing when he permits his labours ... to be described as editing"; that he is "effectively, author of a new guide to English usage". To my mind, Mr Devine is closer to the mark when he suggests that the retention of Fowler's name is a matter only of "professional courtesy - and perhaps commercial acumen". In no sense is this a new edition of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*; through and through, it is Burchfield's *Modern English Usage*.

But for the borrowing of Fowler's name, this book undoubtedly rates as a valuable one to acquire and consult, as providing a contemporary alternative to the guidance offered by Fowler. But anyone who acquires this book, hoping that it will be a 1990s version of Fowler, will be disappointed.

Unfortunately, vigorous modern scholarship allows little room for idiosyncrasy, quixotism, and a humorous wit. Fowler exhibited all of these traits, and the undoubted popularity of his work is no doubt largely attributable to them. Today, it is doubtful whether any reputable publishing house would engage such an eccentric character as Fowler to produce a scholarly work on English usage; but, by the same token, it is unlikely that many of the better-known definitions from Dr Samuel Johnson's Dictionary - such as "Dull. To make dictionaries is dull work."; "Excise. A hateful tax levied upon commodities."; "Oats. Grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people."; and "Patron. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery." - would have survived rigorous modern editing standards. The English language would have been much poorer without the likes of Johnson and Fowler, even if they do not satisfy modern standards of academic scholarship.

In short, *Burchfield's Modern English Usage* - mistitled as *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* - is an excellent work; but it is not what it pretends to be.

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