

Balderdash

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By Robert M.J. Morris

I was going to do an article on procrastination, but somehow I really couldn't be bothered. To be fair it was a bit of a stab in the dark decision anyway, only attempted because I had to submit *something* to Simon's mighty organ. And I was bad: I kept putting it off and doing other things, which - whilst strangely appropriate - wasn't productive. So in the end I capitalised on my procrastinatory streak: I started on it when I should have been working on something else.

Writing is easy, good writing is slightly harder. The first paragraph went down in seconds, but it read like a brick. The second attempt wasn't much better – although the bit about Simon's mighty organ might stand re-using one day – so I nuked that too, sending it to paragraph hell for reincarnation in a Martin Amis novel.

It may not be apparent from what you've seen so far, but I have been limiting my caffeine intake of late. My brain is no less bizarre as a result – largely since I just swapped one drug for another – but I do pass through more hyper-aware states than I used to. Which explains why, when pausing after my third attempt, I decided "I got off my arse and pulled my finger out" wasn't one of my finest moments on paper.

At this point I realised I'd been largely writing without thinking and that, being in the business of communication, this wasn't on. But did I have cause to be unduly worried? Even those who write professionally are prone to ill-thought through sentences: twice in two days, for example, I have been informed that the ex-chairman of Northern Foods was jettisoned due to poor performance, an image I find surprisingly hard to believe. (Mind you, it may prove an effective warning to his successors.)

The lazy hacks who wrote these articles – myself included – are more guilty of attention grabbing than any major linguistic crime, but it does seem a very modern tendency. Everywhere it seems that in the rush to translate thoughts into words we've stopped thinking about what we're actually saying.

These days it's message not medium that counts, an attitude with two tangible results. One is that impact can be sought through inappropriate use of words; the other is that construction is ignored as long as the writer feels the point is made. In either case, greater emphasis is placed on the reader to decode and decipher the message as they see fit, and in both cases the technique and effect can be undesirable.

Take the first, impact over content: I admit it's not really a problem in my own construction, nor that of the flying former chairman. The chances are most people aren't Captain Literal or the Amazing Context-less Man, so they will see them as stylistic affectations not accurate reportage. But the same rule applies to the Iraq dossier: whether the central claims prove true or not, words were undoubtedly chosen to increase the document's impact, mild sensationalism merging seamlessly with misinformation. Of course, it can be difficult to know when you're crossing the line (which is why we have editors) but any responsible writer should strive to be aware of this even if they still go ahead.

However, we should be grateful that thought goes into that process. The more worrying tendency is a result of not caring *how* things are said. Impact isn't an issue; it's just a case of getting the words out any old way. On the Internet this is the prevailing attitude, but it is heading into real life – albeit mainly in personal rather than factual communication.

Personally I'm quite forgiving: I can cope with misspelled words, badly placed capitals, or someone being unaware of the true meaning of a word. But there are people out there who refuse to try; everything is written in lower case, not a trace of punctuation (even ill applied) text-speak and so on. This shifts the effort from writer to reader, which seems more than a little arrogant.

To be fair, text-speak is becoming a language in its own right. It has a limited vocabulary and syntax, true, but it is functional and gets its message across to those who understand it. Its place, however, is the limited screen of the mobile phone. It can be galling to find that someone who shares a language with you opens up communication in this particular bastard variant. It helps to speak the same language, and I find we seldom are.

It is unfashionable to talk of declining standards, but I rarely shy from a conservative point of view. I should probably take this moment to air two obvious counter-arguments, relating to this issue. The first is that language lives, breathes and evolves over time. It's a damn good truism, and one with the unusual distinction of actually being true: usage is a deciding factor. Most scholars agree that a language survives by adapting to suit its users.

But there exists a whole world of difference between adapting language and getting it wrong. "Infer" and "Imply," for example, are often used interchangeably, but since they have explicitly different

meanings, they simply shouldn't. On one of the sites where I spend many twilight hours, there is a frequent confusion between "loose" and "lose" - one that for the personal safety of all concerned I feel should be corrected, not accepted. Essentially, it could be argued that any shift in usage based on misunderstanding rather than intent should be quickly put out of our misery. Nothing good ever came of random change, aside from the occasional blackjack, obviously.

The other common argument is that to criticise loose writing discriminates against those who suffer from dyslexia. And I'd be willing to concede this point if it weren't that most sufferers care enough about being understood to give it a try. Besides which it seems a cruel argument that uses a genuine condition to mask the indolence of its proponent.

Interestingly, a study of dubious credentials has recently been widely reported which suggests a word's spelling is unimportant if all the correct letters are present and the first and last characters are in their original places. Even if the study itself is fictitious - and no research on the part of this journal has found the original source - in practice it holds true (as Inog as popele slepl rghit in the frsit pcale, and the wrdos are not plectlaurary pmbeilartoc).¹

Whilst some may feel this strikes a blow for more flexible standards in writing, it is a false perspective. If anything the results are a testament to the power of human pattern recognition, but you must remember that this recognition only works if the constructions have internal rules. You need to place all the right letters, just not necessarily in the right order; increasingly we find that people can't even manage that.

But all is not lost: shifts like this can be resisted, questioned. When I completed that draft of paragraph one, I stopped and thought about what I had written. Not much, to be honest - just a gentle pause and quick glance while I knocked back some cheap Riesling, but I did it anyway. With that thought you would, had this article not sprung from that moment's grace, been spared a most unsavoury image.

Let's face it, we have a great language. It's rich, it's flexible, it's subtle and it's funny. So please, push at its boundaries, play with it, learn it, read into it, and examine it. But above all don't think that what you say is more important than how you say it. Frankly, if builders built houses the way we tend to

build sentences we'd have a higher mortality rate than a French summer.

Fight both the creeping sensationalism and lackadaisical approaches to language; take time to consider not just what you've said, but how you've said it. After all, if you don't care about how and what you communicate, why should the reader?

Don't procrastinate when it comes to enforcing stronger standards in the use of language. After all, in the words of Florence R. Kennedy, "the biggest sin is sitting on your ass".

¹ A note from the editor: this study has been cited also by Jonathan Sloman in conversation and Ian McMillan on Radio 3's *The Verb* following its appearance in a variety of newspapers. For further rumination on this subject, take a peek at <http://www.kith.org/logos/words/upper3/VVViolent.html> wherein Howard Ye, who has hunted high, low and in vain for the original paper, gives a strong argument towards its fakery and some problems with its conceit.