

A PROPOS OF MODERN MANGLISH

A Letter to Mr Harold Scruby, author with Mr Neil James, of *Modern Manglish*, soon to be published.

Dear Harold,

Thank you for your piece on the mangling of the English Language in *The Australian*.¹ I look forward to reading your book. The list of 'idiotic idioms' is welcome as providing a synopsis of the more glaring errors with which daily we must cope. I note that you have omitted "Yes-No", "signed off on", and other American solecisms which have passed, alas, into common usage; and that you have omitted to mention the protocol which turns verbs into nouns, as in 'a good read', 'a good look', 'a commute', 'a build' or 'rebuild', 'a disconnect', and so forth. Perhaps, you cover these in the book.

A point of order: isn't the category 'idiotic idioms' a tautology? An idiot is one who has his own peculiar way of doing things: *idiom* is the peculiar way a culture has of saying things. Are you sure you didn't mean 'idiotic clichés'? The offence of the cliché, as Sydney solicitor, the late Ted O'Halloran, used to say, is that it removes the need for thought. Isn't this intellectual failure the root cause of 'manglish'?

And another thing: aren't you yourself guilty of indulging a cliché in asserting that Latin is a dead language. Why is it necessary for a language to change constantly if it is to live? Isn't your whole thesis that a language *ought not* to change, at least in essentials, if it is to serve its purpose. Latin is far from dead as you will discover if you attend any of the liturgical ceremonies conducted by *The Fraternity of St Peter* in the Catholic Church, or by *The Society of St Pius X*, and hear priests expounding (in English) the Latin texts proclaimed. Latin is not a dead, but a *fixed*, language: its fixity underlies, underwrites, in whole or part every European vernacular including our own. If Tony Jones had but a fragmentary grasp of his Latin heritage, he would have seen the folly of confusing *munera* and *numeri*. The Australian Prime Minister recently made a gaffe of similar moment when she mispronounced a common word of Greek derivation. So much for our vaunted modern education

Latin is dead, if you will excuse my own cliché, only for the brain dead. Their representatives may be found in any lounge room absorbing, like goldfish, from a screen that has much about it of the goldfish bowl, a daily diet of fatuities. These receive, as goldfish do, the same fare day in, day out. You may meet them at any dinner party parroting (to mix a metaphor) the opinions they have ingested at these séances as if they were holy writ. Hardly an original thought emerges from what they are pleased to call their minds.

¹ *The Australian*, Thursday, December 22nd, 2011, Commentary, p. 10. A copy is included in the Appendix.

Language follows thought; *ergo* the corruption of language follows the corruption of thought. For which reason I hope you lay blame, in your book, where it belongs. Fifty years of television scripts have produced such gems as the verbs 'to bug' ('that bugs me!') and 'to hassle', and the mindless exclamation 'whatever', and replaced the rational and the considered with the shallow and the glib, reducing the majority of human communications to bites of jargon and cliché. The computer industry has added its ha'penny worth with neologisms like 'uninstall' and 'app', but the rot was well and truly in place before computer programmers began flexing their muscles.

The contribution of sports commentators to the debacle is, with respect, secondary and derivative. Primary responsibility lies with the script writers mentioned, and with television, radio and newspaper sub-editors whose perverse by-lines are driven only by financial returns. We are witnessing now the murder not only of auxiliary verbs—ever a speciality with Americans and South Africans—but of principal verbs as in, "News today of a disaster etc..."

I trust, also, that you mention in your book the major offence of 'majorly' where a Latin comparative adjective meaning 'greater' (*magnus, maior, maximus*), applied to designate superior rank in the army, has been captured by neologist terrorists and turned as an adverb. When, some years ago, the writer upbraided a young lady over this linguistic abuse she responded with the vernacular defence, "language is something that develops", and was quite unmoved by my argument that development does not include torture and subornation.

Though we know what you are getting at, I don't think "garrulous goats" does much to assist your argument. The alliteration is memorable, the illustration clumsy. If they are to talk to excess, the garrulous must first be able to talk; and goats can only bleat. And your use, without comment, of 'stakeholder' is surprising. If ever a word has suffered a 'paradigm shift' it is 'stakeholder'. When the writer was practising at the NSW Bar some thirty years ago it meant one who held moneys in trust for parties to a contract, or to a dispute, or a wager; a third party who could be sued without cost to himself to enable a court to resolve the issue over the stake. Now the word is convertible with "any interested party" in any topic and its only relation to money is that the subject matter about which it is so promiscuously applied may resolve ultimately into something money can value.

I accept you might properly object to these latter points as cavilling and respond, *de minimis non curat lex aut prudentia*: I don't insist on them. Any book which calls for a halt to the emasculation of the English language is welcome.

Regards,

Michael Baker

29th December 2011 — *St Thomas a'Becket, Bishop and Martyr*

APPENDIX

DON'T LET THE LANGUAGE MANGLERS GET AWAY WITH IT

Speak your mind when you come across anyone wrecking the English tongue

Harold Scruby

A MONTH ago, Tony Jones, one of Australia's most articulate broadcasters, contradicted one of the panel ([which included] the editor of this commentary page) on Q&A when she commented on an executive's remuneration. "Remuneration", he corrected her. Three times she (Rebecca Weisser) correctly used the word. Three times he corrected her. With extraordinary grace, she let it pass.

From that moment, Jones was catapulted into the Manglish Hall of Fame with a nomination for the 2011 Mortal Mangle (for wrongly correcting another).

Everyone mangles the English language. Some more than others. Modern Manglish is about chronicling the use and abuse of English, but with yuma. It's not about perfection or purity. English must change or, like Latin, it will die. But it must change for good reason, not because our leaders try to mesmerise us with suitspeak and pollie-waffle, or because many of our monosyllabic sporting heroes grunt and mumble.

Or because teenagers believe that "like" should occur at least once every sentence, if not phrase. Or because Americans have ceased using adverbs, mangle tenses and turn nouns into verbs without blinking.

Sports commentators are probably the worst manglers. On three consecutive days recently, a leading ABC presenter stated: "Tina Arena sung the national anthem for Cadel Evans". "Ian Thorpe swum better than what he swum in the 2000 Olympics", and "Rafael Nadal sunk below the desk".

Danger lies in staying schtum. George "Dubya" Bush could never pronounce nuclear. As a result, more than half of his administration started saying "nucular", so as not to expose the emperor's new clothes. It must surely follow that staff at our nation's first airline will soon be saying Quarnterz.

Most businesses are the same. As soon as the corporate leaders latch on to the latest lingo, their employees follows like garrulous goats. In the early 1990s, a veritable army of consultants descended on business and government. Their task: to teach us all about mission statements and vision statements. Almost immediately, aims, goals and objectives were dumbed down (tautology?) and replaced by missions and visions, and results by outcomes. Today the conversion is almost universal and meaningless mission statements and vacuous vision statements must rank among the worst tautologies of the 20th century. Overpaid suits and waffling pollies try to impress us by robotically regurgitating idiotic idioms such as: paradigm shift, low-hanging fruit, level playing field, going forward, moving forward, empowerment, evidence based, bottom line, synergy, having said that, at the end of the day, at this point in time, on the same page, singing from the same hymn sheet, step up to the plate (rarely the crease), the wider community, pushing the envelope, to be honest, join up the dots, 24/7, blue-sky thinking, from the get-go, win-win situation, outside the square, touch base, on-sell, up-sell and down-sell.

Bureaucrats use the tautological term "rural and regional" without any idea what a region is or where it might be. Meanwhile, those ubiquitous key stakeholders sound like self-important people at a barbecue clutching T-bones. And have you noticed that we no longer have debates, discussions or even arguments? We have conversations instead. Or worse, stakeholder dialogue processes.

So, why are we generally so mute when we hear gobbledegook? Why don't we say something like: "Excuse me, but what do you mean?" Or better still, "You're talking nonsense!"

Perhaps because it has been two generations since spelling and syntax were taken off the syllabus, so many of us no longer know the difference. If, as promised, grammar is reintroduced in schools, who will train the teachers, most of whom were taught that grammar was irrelevant and interfered with their students' creative ability to write and speak how they feel?

Where were the teachers when they released *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* or *Can't Hardly Wait*? With all his brilliance, how could anyone with an ounce of English have permitted Steve Jobs to urge us to "Think Different"? Clearly, no one was thinking different because no one spoke up.

Quality English does matter. It improves our ability to communicate. And it's often best when it's plain and simple. Our language will improve only if we openly say something when we hear and see people mindlessly wrecking it, especially if we add a dose of yuma.

Australians love cutting down tall poppies. It's probably what helps make us the most egalitarian nation in the world.

We wrote *Modern Manglish* to encourage everyone to speak up. Shortly, anyone will be able to upload the most very bestest Manglish from TV, radio, print or online at manglish.com.au.

Like the stocks in days of old, the manglers will be exposed for the global village to see. I'm sure to feature.

Harold "Haitch" Scruby is co-author, with Neil James, of Modern Manglish, illustrated by Alan Moir.
www.manglish.com.au