

OPENING A CAN OF WORDS

DON HAUPTMAN

New York, New York

donhauptman@nyc.rr.com

Although my *Word Ways* articles are usually light, involving puns and other forms of wordplay, in this issue I'm focusing on a weightier topic: the state of the language. So let's get serious.

Standards of English grammar, usage and style have declined perilously. And yes, it matters. Literacy, civilized discourse, communication and clarity are affected by the way we use language.

A prominent public official recently proclaimed, "I haven't been reticent to say what I believe" The title of a new book about Michael Jackson, taken from a lyric in one of his songs, is *Be Careful Who You Love*. A newspaper article asserted that TV commercials reach "as many disinterested people as desired ones. . . ." I have highly educated acquaintances who confuse *effect* and *affect*, *anxious* and *eager*, *tact* and *tack*, *lectern* and *podium*.

Following is a selective compilation of my pet peeves, *bêtes noires* and curmudgeonly complaints.

As You Like It

This is not the usual gripe about the repeated and meaningless slang use of *like*. Nor is it the "*like* versus *as*" issue. So what's the problem? Consider the following examples, drawn from recent newspaper articles:

The employees are often from places like Trinidad and Tobago, Nigeria, Senegal, Grenada, Guyana and the Ivory Coast.

[Judy Woodruff] joined CNN in 1993, and was frequently the anchor on breaking news like the 1996 Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Greg Garrison, a pioneering television director who worked with stars like Dean Martin, Jack Benny, George Burns and Lucille Ball in a 40-year career, died on March 25. . . .

These sentences imply, or a reader might infer, that the instances cited may not be genuine. Did he really work with those celebrities—or with people "like" them?

Of course, most readers understand that the references are intended to be literal. Nevertheless, I find this common usage grating. Moreover, it's ambiguous and invites deception. Suppose a merchant were to claim, "The jewelry we sell is made of metals like gold and silver."

Alternatives? It would be preferable to write, ". . . a pioneering television director who worked with stars, including. . . ." In some contexts, "such as" works better. Or a writer could omit the preposition and conclude the itemized list with ". . . and others." These solutions would clarify matters and eliminate ambiguity.

Is This Word Actually Needed?

The word *actually* is routinely misused. The motivation of the writer or speaker, presumably, is to emphasize the reality of his or her words and convey the message, “I’m not exaggerating; this is the truth!” Examples:

Portable home video cameras were actually introduced in the early 1980’s. . . .

Blaming society actually absolves everybody.

It sounds simple but it was actually difficult and expensive to fix.

In each case, the word is intended as an intensifier but is, er, actually superfluous and can be deleted without any loss of meaning. With rare exceptions, *actually* is unnecessary, redundant and an annoying “filler” in writing and conversation.

Literal Illiteracy

This next misuse parallels the *actually* case just discussed. But the results are often more amusing.

A newspaper article about the closing of a beloved neighborhood bakery quotes the owner, lamenting, “My heart is literally broken over it.” Other examples:

“This is literally one of those cases where people keep crawling out of the woodwork,” with new information, Ms. Seibel said. . . .

“We had a composer and a style of music that would literally break down the walls for audiences. . . .”

The ball literally explodes off the [golf club].

Again, the intensifier is a misguided attempt at emphasis. But in an ironic twist, the meaning is reversed. The writer or speaker uses an expression metaphorically or figuratively—that is, *not* literally. But the use of *literally* transforms the metaphor into something ostensibly real, yet impossible and absurd.

“That’s Very Different!”

Let’s examine still another error attributable to the quest for emphasis: the abuse of the word *different*.

The review of [the building] has been conducted under the stewardship of three different chairmen. . . .

These universal and convertible systems [play music] in a number of exciting and different formats.

In the first example, the three chairmen are clearly not all the same person, so the use of *different* is gratuitous. If we delete the word, the meaning of the sentence is unchanged. In fact, it is improved. As Strunk and White command: “Omit needless words!” In the second example, “a number of” makes it evident that the formats differ. Thus, *different* is equally unnecessary in this case.

Unfortunately, some writers seem compelled to underscore excessively, perhaps fearing that directness and simplicity cannot adequately communicate their thoughts.

Expletive Deleted

Once again, we encounter the emphatic fallacy—as well as stylistic laziness. Consider these examples:

There is a war on for your mind.

Obviously, there are pressing issues evoked by “family values”

A word that serves no grammatical function, but simply fills space or supplies emphasis, is called an *expletive*. (The more familiar meaning of the word, a profane or obscene exclamation, also meets this definition.) Linguists tell us that *there is*, among other expletives, serves as a “dummy subject” or “anticipatory subject” that precedes the appearance of the real subject.

Of course, there are—oops, strike that! I meant to say: In some situations, the construction is unavoidable, or at least sounds more natural. One commentator suggests that the urgency of “There’s no time to lose!” would be lost if the sentence were reframed.

But that’s an exception. In most cases, the locution is anemic. Fortunately, it’s easily circumvented. “There’s a salesman at the front desk” is better rephrased as, “A salesman is at the front desk.”

According to Bergen Evans, a popular authority on language in the mid-20th century, “The *there* construction detaches the statement from the speaker and makes it impersonal. If such a sentence is recast it does not lose emphasis but becomes more immediate, more concrete and more vivid.”

Full House

The following gaffe has long been noted by language watchers, but its prevalence is undiminished, as these examples demonstrate:

Fully half of the businessman’s profits went to bribes. . . .

A repeat episode still drew 24.34 million viewers—a full 7.67 million more than. . . .

The majority of 30A real estate buyers—a full 40 percent—hail from Atlanta.

Er. . .majority?

Although “The gas tank is half full” is correct usage, “fully half” sounds contradictory, oxymoronic and unintentionally amusing. Logically, only 100% can be characterized as full. Yet today, just about any figure seems to qualify as “full” or “fully.”

The practice can lead to ludicrous consequences. An article in a trade publication, within the space of a few paragraphs, gives us “a full 36 percent,” “a full 40 percent,” and even, finally, “a full 17 percent.”

Once again, the motivation is emphasis. The writer is trying to say, “Wow! This is a really large number in this context.” But that point can be made in other, clearer ways. Most of the time, *full* can be fully expunged.

Choosers Can't Be Beggars

Our final solecism has reached epidemic proportions. In addition to frequent misuses in the print media—including major newspapers whose editors should know better—TV personalities commit it, as does the voiceover in a recent, endlessly repeated automobile commercial. A few specimens:

This national obsession with food begs the question, are the Chinese concerned with eating healthily?

Ask yourself if you were happy. . .before coming here. If your answer is yes, this begs the question what is so wrong with the Netherlands?

The article also begs an equally rhetorical but slightly more disturbing question: How many new cures are we losing. . . ?

All of these examples presume that “This begs the question” is equivalent to “This raises the question.” It is not. “Begging the question” is the logical fallacy of *circular reasoning*: assuming as fact what needs to be proven. Its use can be an innocent mistake or a deliberate attempt to deceive. The expression is used correctly in this sentence: “Jim says he’s certain it’s true because it’s in the Bible, but that argument begs the question of whether the Bible is true.”

To Conclude. . . .

Some take the position that when a wrong usage becomes sufficiently widespread, it *ipso facto* becomes right. I hope not. Yes, language evolves and changes. But words have precise meanings, which are worth respecting and preserving. Let’s not abandon that noble goal.