

Kingsley Amis, *The King's English: a Guide to Modern Usage*. pp. xv, 270.
London, HarperCollins, 1998.

[I have no recollection or record of where this review was published.]

The title of this book has a double reference, neither aspect of which relates to the present British monarch, who happens to be female. Firstly, it alludes to the work of Amis's role model and hero, H.W. Fowler, co-author (with his brother F.G.) of *The King's English*, published in 1906. Secondly, and more archly, it seems to be a self-referential tribute: say 'Kingsley Amis' and 'King's English' out loud and you get the picture. Amis gives a 90s gloss on many of Fowler's entries, but the tone is itself often quite dated: Amis's linguistic world is inhabited by 'berks' and by 'chaps' called 'Bloggs', while his frequent references to the 'half-educated' presupposes a good, old-fashioned 'fully educated' ideal to which he himself is evidently the most likely pretender. Amis lays about himself in a manner which the blurb describes as 'by turns reflective, acerbic, combative and controversial', and some entries suggest that the list could be extended into less flattering territory: 'misogynistic' ('women are always getting set phrases wrong'; and he doesn't approve of 'womanese'), 'Luddite' (...or of computers), 'opinionated' (he revels in a crusty old-fogeyism, clearly fancying himself as a bit of an old devil) and 'patronising'.

Whereas the book's subtitle implies an attempted comprehensiveness in the manner of Fowler, Partridge, or their Hindi equivalent V.R. Jagannathan, its contents seem rather to be the variously fascinating, acute and infuriating jottings of a brilliant and idiosyncratic observer of the use and abuse of English. In castigating wrong usage, he takes no prisoners. When pronouncing 'casual' we must note that 'only a wanker makes three syllables of this word'; and 'woe betide anybody I catch pronouncing the name *Beethoven* with a separable H'. Woe also betides another category of the human race - those 'parlour grammarians', 'grammatical martinets', 'ignorant snobs' and 'petty linguistic tyrants' who like to impose simplistic

rules on the English language, and for whom the split infinitive is never out of season.

Help is offered on many a syntactic or semantic crux, and guidance on pronunciation is on hand through a wacky system of impressionistic phonetics: 'macabre' is represented as 'MuhKAHbruh', with the advice 'Imagine yourself addressing a Scot called Macarbrough'; the first syllable of 'direct' can be either long or short, to rhyme with either 'eye' or 'pin'. A section on howlers takes a side-swipe at Bernard Levin before picking off a few usages that have got Amis's goat over the years (a pity he didn't include 'to beg the question', so frequently misused as if meaning 'to *raise* the question'). Discussion of popular etymology provides both the light of understanding and the warmth of basking in the errors of the ignorant. Amis demolishes the popular explanation of 'posh' as referring to the 'port outward starboard home' cabin preferences of passengers on sea voyages. That reference is on page 141; but you wouldn't find it through the hopelessly feeble index, nor for that matter through the system of headwords, which is idiosyncratic in the extreme - an article on gerunds, for example, is headed 'Excuse me butting in' and therefore falls into the 'E' sequence.

To read Amis is to sacrifice any vestiges of self-confidence in one's own use of English. Nobody is secure: Shakespeare has his wrist slapped more than once, Orwell was 'an outstandingly silly as well as a very intelligent and observant man', Forster's dictum 'only connect' is perhaps 'just a phrase that comes in handy for those who want to seem profound but have nothing very definite to say'. One can never quite tell which way an Amis judgement will go. He tolerates the qualification of an absolute in the solecistic formation 'rather unique', and also admits the new sense of the word 'gay'; but in less acquiescent mood he regards the one-word form 'alright' as 'gross, crass, coarse and to be avoided', in other words not 'all right' at all, while the habit of crossing the figure 7 in handwriting 'should not be tolerated in any person over the age of twelve'. Excessive compounding of nouns is frowned upon as a barbarism to be laid at the door of headline-writers; Amis would have enjoyed lampooning a current roadworks sign near London that reads 'flood water relief bridge works', and one suspects that only loyalty to his own

publisher allows the bizarre one-word formulation 'HarperCollins' to escape comment. The 'affected, chummy docking of Christian names' – Chris, Ken, Dave or Jim – in public contexts is severely frowned upon (unlucky James!); but sentences may, after all, have a preposition to end with.

Like many users of English, Amis admires the flexibility of the language and its ability to mutate in new contexts, but is simultaneously overwhelmed by a nostalgia for the 'correctness' and aesthetic superiority of older forms and conventions. Sometimes the latter feeling swamps the former, leading to some dubious judgements: the adjectival coining 'in-depth' (as in 'in-depth analysis'), however ugly, is *not* fully synonymous with 'deep', and Amis is mischievous to pretend that it is. Our fully-educated guide admits that many of his judgements are the subjective results of early training, and he may at times indulgently advise the reader to forgive a solecism 'if you like the people'. In adjudicating on linguistic matters, 'argument by etymology only serves the purpose of intimidating ignorant antagonists'; but Amis's own lament over misuse of the word 'major' is based fairly and squarely on its Latin meaning as a comparative. Well, as Amis himself points out, consistency is over-rated.

This book is not a latter-day Fowler; but it contains multiple and varied delights, much wisdom, and a good many excellent jokes. Its almost equally frequent irritations can be overlooked, or even forgiven – if you like the author.

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