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# Error, editing, and World Standard English

TOM McARTHUR

What can – or should – writers, editors, and usage critics do about actual and perceived errors in print?

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[A reply to Bryan A. Garner's article 'A Texas Fowler?' in *ET* 64 (Oct 00) that seeks to widen the issues.]

I HAVE long been intrigued by the occurrence of error in print, by the editing process, and by the compilation and review of language companions, style guides, and usage manuals. Such interests necessarily tie in with the question of whether there is such a thing as World Standard English (WSE), within whose framework much of the world's editing is done, and the extent to which editing in English can be managed (and harmonized?) on a planet-wide basis. Is everything still much as it always was, apart from having to deal 'officially' with greater scope and variation than in the past? Might the Fowlerian impetus towards correctness and good usage re-emerge strongly worldwide, or is a Chaucerian free-for-all more likely? Or could there be both, in a continuum from the consistent (and elitist) through the inconsistent (and demotic), to the 'illiterate', 'broken', and 'fractured'?

It is both the curse and glory of the arts, crafts, and sciences to seek perfection in the face of entropy. I have often been distracted over the last year or so: health issues in the family; major roof repairs; time abroad; deadlines; an irreducible backlog. This is, however, only one among many stories of being overstretched: a tale of the times ironically abetted by the e-gadgets through which one keeps in touch with all the other stretchees. (My word-checker warns me that *stretchee* isn't in the dictionary, but does that make it an error? I know

my word-checker lacks finesse and can be switched off, but it's still a judge sitting at my elbow.) Anyway, the issue is simple enough: Is life a mitigating factor, when we fail to achieve squeaky-clean texts?

The traditional answer is *No, it is not*: if you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen. Everyday life should not leak into texts, unless they're about everyday life. In traditional terms, events in the world can't constitute an excuse: print is privileged, having evolved from a concept of Holy Writ shared alike by Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims. We know that pressures mount and lead to errors, but ideally the final version of a text (whatever the genre) should be free of them, whereas in speech – even formal speech

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– there is leeway for stutters and stumbles. Indeed, some of our texts hardly allow us to appear in them. Consider the passive in technical writing: ‘The project was initiated in 1995.’ This is far more likely than ‘We began the project in 1995’. The writers of such texts are in effect responding to a pressure to edit themselves and others out of their reports. Very strange when you think about it.

### Descriptive and prescriptive

The *Langscape* questionnaires in *ETs* 53–58 were intended to provide solid data for use in an international English style guide (currently being compiled by Pam Peters: see p. 9 for her final report on the project), and such a guide has significant prescriptive implications for a WSE. In this project and others, *ET* has had a prescriptive dimension, in addition to which (regardless of its fairly relaxed editorial policy) the journal is itself a standardized product; all books, newspapers, and journals follow the conventions and constraints of print. Flexibility may be welcome, but anarchy is not, and it is an editor’s job to see that the one does not become the other. (But see *Post and (E)Mail*, for an exchange of notes between a reader and this editor. Sigh.)

There are of course many people, including language scholars of great probity, who are watchful about prescription and hostile to ‘prescriptivism’. But all the journals in which such scholars wish to publish follow the rules of print. Deviate from those rules and you may well not get published. Even the most anti-prescriptivist linguists therefore of necessity conform, and any token anti-establishmentisms they engage in will be queried by a copy-editor and may be disallowed by an editor (whose decision is final). *That is power*. There are few beings on earth more prescriptive and single-minded than copy-editors and proof-readers. They have to be. They work at the coal-face of standardization. And it is across-the-board failure on the part of many writers, editors, and proof-readers that draws Bryan Garner to note, in *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*: ‘In many ways writing today is better than ever.... But a great deal of mediocre writing appears in print nowadays.... There are good, clarifying forces at work on the language. There are also bad, obscuring forces at work’ (Preface, ix: 1998).

Each style manual has its own ideology, which in Garner’s case seems to be Manichean:

God and the Devil battle for our syntactic and stylistic souls. Garner, however, makes the cogent point that there is more to commenting on language than objectivist scholars suppose: ‘[R]hetoric and usage, in the view of most professional writers, aren’t scientific endeavors. You don’t want dispassionate descriptions; you want sound guidance. And that requires judgment’ (xiii). His judgements, however, include such statements as ‘the heights of inarticulacy’, ‘this blather’, language studies ‘hijacked by the descriptive linguists’, and ‘dreary gruel’ (the output of those linguists). Yet such pulpiteering is lightened by a broader humanity, where he notes that his book is the product of ‘a warped sense of fun’ and that ‘no usage critic is infallible’. To repeat what I said in my review of his dictionary in *ET*60 (Oct 99), I can live with my ambivalence about this book (and other usage guides), and as Garner put it in response: *he* can live with *my* ambivalence. I could live well with the next edition of the *DMAU* if the rhetoric were less combative and the guidance more dispassionate, but the book thoroughly justifies itself in its citations alone: a fine piece of descriptive corpus-building reaching well beyond the US.

Meanwhile, use of the language evolves. The format and conventions of *ET* have from the start been eclectic and inclusive, and CUP has been notably sympathetic in such matters, especially regarding an approach in which contributors choose the norm(s) they will follow: UK, US, mid-Atlantic, other. I was therefore intrigued when I read the following in the preface to *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (1999), edited by Douglas Biber, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad, and Edward Finegan:

One curious minor dilemma which the team faced, in trying to produce a book giving equal weight to American and British English, was the choice of spelling standard: should we adopt British or American spelling conventions? Either choice would appear to contravene the ideal of an objectively international view of the English language. In the end we resorted to a chapter-by-chapter solution to this dilemma: each chapter was printed in accordance with the spelling conventions adopted by its main author or authors.

There will no doubt be many occasions from now on for dynamic and fluid compromises of this kind, as a consequence of transnational

co-operation. If so, the approaches adopted in *ET* and *LGSWE* may prove to be straws in the world-English wind.

### Kinds of error

At least three kinds of error commonly occur in print: (1) Errors of form (in orthography, punctuation, grammar, style, usage, etc.); (2) errors of fact (in dates, names, detail, sequences, etc.); (3) errors of form *and* fact (the mis-spelling of names, the mis-keying of numbers, the transference to print of something mis-heard in speech, etc.). This taxonomy is descriptive, but it describes the outcome of centuries of prescription and proscription. 'Error' is a consequence of such ideas as 'correctness' and 'perfection', within a tradition that has evolved over thousands of years: from oral delivery (whose systems of 'storage speech' demand stylized accuracy in memorizing and recounting epics, genealogies, cosmogonies, and the like), on through the scribal and print traditions to two vast linked novelties: a world language and a planet-wide electronic 'nervous system'. In that nervous system, the tiniest error in an email address bounces the message back to its sender, while paradoxically within the email there is the utmost freedom to write what and how one likes (see *ET64*).

#### *Errors of form*

The differences in the print standards of the UK, the US, Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Africa, and elsewhere are modest, despite a range of distinctions in spelling and punctuation between the UK and the US. This means, in effect, that we already have a single print standard for world English, which consists of dual institutions for spelling and punctuation and a range of further actualities and possibilities such as: a mid-Atlantic hybrid in mainland Europe; territorial preferences such as in South Asia for the numbers *lakh* and *crore* (one hundred thousand and ten million respectively); and a range of practices in publishing houses and software companies worldwide. As the national standards of Australia, Canada and other countries grow more distinctive and assertive, further options are added for local and wider use – all within a federative whole.

Such a federation is not at all one of equals, alas; but that does not mean that it doesn't,

couldn't, or shouldn't exist. It is like the UN and NATO: a valid institution whose members are not necessarily equal or even particularly close, but nonetheless entirely capable of operating together, however uneven this may be at times.

It is in speech, accent, and vocal rhythm that the principle of universal standardness falters, although in newscasting and formal lecturing kinds of standardness are fully evident, being closely linked with handwritten notes, typed scripts, teleprompters, and an appropriate rhetorical formalism. For this reason, there is a shared potential for error in print, writing, and formal speech, the key areas in which the principle of standardness emerges. The subject is large and there is no shortage of books about it, especially self-help books centring on the Fowler tradition (cf. *ET64*, Oct 00). I will limit myself here to some less-discussed issues that exhibit a kind of double jeopardy in print. My aim in this is to show that there is more to error than making mistakes. We can start with:

1 UK 'The world holds bates its breath.' – Peter Millar, 'A deadly Balkans game of Diplomacy.' In *The Sunday Times*, 5 Jan 92.

Here, the writer presumably first adapted the phrase *with bated breath*, then opted for the safer verb *holds*, then forgot to delete *bates* – and nobody editorial noticed. Despite the odd effect of the juxtaposed verbs, no harm has been done to the message, and (usefully) the survival of the two forms gives us an objective insight into contemporary text creation. In word-processing, the act of revision is likely to put the replacement item in front of the one being replaced, which is then deleted (thus, *holds* is keyed in ahead of *bates*). See also No. 11, below.

2 UK '[T]he strongest Azerbaijani criticism is directed against international proposals for a United Nations peacekeeping forces in the enclave.' — Anatol Lieven, 'Death toll adds to pressure on Azerbaijani president', *The Times*, 8 Feb 92.

Here, the writer has also explored two options, apparently trying the plural first, before opting for the singular and adding the indefinite article, but he then failed to delete the *s*. Again, nobody editorial noticed, and again the message was not impaired. So Nos. 1 and 2 are both rather venial errors.

3 US 'The Badder They Come' – the title of an article on the African-American pop star Michael Jackson's 1987 album *Bad*, in *Time*, 14 Sep 87.

4 UK 'It implies that a minority can be morally righter than a majority, by the majority's own professed values.' – Neal Ascherson, 'Holocaust doubts are feats of faith.' In *The Observer*, 20 Sep 87.

These violations of the grammar of the standard language are deliberate. While they remain errors in commonsense terms (that being the point of the exercise), in socio-stylistic terms they are challenges. For copy-editors to correct them would be to defeat the writers' purposes. But what about the following? –

5 CAN 'It would be regrettable indeed if an irresponsible article... would be used as a vehicle for misunderstanding through the media.' – Henry Srebernik, quoted in the unattributed article 'Alien Jews article dismays congress.' In *The Montreal Gazette*, 18 Feb 82.

6 US 'If the American public would know the tangible facts... I do not think they would accept Israeli policy.' – Farouk al-Sharaa, Syrian Foreign Minister, quoted by Joyce Starr in 'Syria's Peculiarly Ambivalent Attitude to the US.' In *The International Herald Tribune*, 23 Jul 84.

7 US '[W]hen a calf would scream, several adult females would move toward it...' – Bayard Webster, 'Low-Frequency Elephant Signals Detected', New York Times Service. In *The International Herald Tribune*, 13 Feb 86.

8 UK 'If I would have had a second of fear, I would have been dead.' – The Countess Maria von Maltzan, quoted by Janet Watts in 'Prisoner of love.' In *The Observer*, 16 Feb 86.

9 US "If I'd have sat there and heard George Schultz and Cap express it strongly,' he said, 'maybe I would have had a stronger view.'" – George Bush, quoted in David S. Broder, 'On Sidelines, Bush Says Hearings Acquitted Him'. The Washington Post Service, in *The International Herald Tribune*, 7 Aug 87.

10 UK 'If that would be true... this Jew wouldn't have been able to tell you anything. If Hitler would have liked to kill the Jewish nation, there would not be any Jew who could tell you about any Auschwitz.' — Denis Tuohy, quoted in John Naughton, 'M. Harty's holiday', in *The Observer*, 3 April 88.

The 'double *would*' construction, now widespread in North America, is essentially an import from German and Yiddish (but we can note the quotee with the Arabic background).

We can also note that all the double-*would* citations are quotations of other people's speech, which 'exonerates' the media services,

which have virtuously reported the usage verbatim. Any error, then, is in speech, not something misprinted after the event.

In 1985, the British ELT writer Michael Swan wrote: 'Conditional sentences may come to be regularly constructed with "parallel" verb forms, as already happens quite often in speech: If I'd have known, *I'd have told you*' ('Where is the language going?', *ET3*, Jul 85). It looks as though, with a considerable push from other languages, Swan's prediction is coming true – in which case we are not dealing here with error at all. Yet many people would still class the usage as a *gross* error.

#### *Errors of fact*

These, alas, are straightforward and common enough: I am not, for example, the editor of the journal *World English*, as a recent conference flier announced. To my knowledge, there is no journal of that name, but someone might just be forgiven for confusing *English Today* and *World Englishes*, because of comparable subject matter. It is sufficient to show here that errors of fact can at times arise from the same processes as errors of form, as with this further example of double jeopardy:

11 US 'Now they have risen to 82 percent to 83 percent.' – Reginald Dale, 'Spain, Happy to Be in EC Club, Is Feeling Pinch of the Bill.' In *The International Herald Tribune*, 9 Jan 92.

Here, although the pattern is the same as for citation No. 1, the outcome in terms of meaning is different. The reader cannot know which amount is the right one. The only consolation is that the figures are so close as to make little difference. We might not always be so lucky.

#### *Errors of form and fact*

When *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* came out in 1992, the entry for South Africa briefly described the language situation there as: 'Languages: Afrikaans, English (both official); others include (black African) Zulu, Xhosa, South Ndebele, Sotho, Tswana, Siswati/Swazi, Tsonga, Venda, Shangaan (South African) Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu.' I wrote this entry, combining information from several sources. My only regret about it now is that it is not consistent in one respect: while the two official and the four Indian languages are in A–Z order, the African languages are not in any motivated order. Afrikaans in fact came

first because it was the primary South African language at the time of writing.

In the *Abridged Companion* (1996), the text changed to: 'Languages: eleven official since 1994 (English, Afrikaans, and the black African languages Ndebele, Pedi, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu), together with other African languages and the Indian languages Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu.' English is now first because it is dominant, and the African languages are in A-Z order. Things had changed in South Africa, and I reckoned I'd got the changes right, so when I needed a comparable list in *The English Languages* (1998) I adapted the *Abridged* list for use there. In September 1998, however, a few months after the new book came out, I went to South Africa. There I met Henk Kroes and Mary Hazelton, separately, at a conference in Johannesburg run by the English Academy of Southern Africa. Both raised with me the issue of the list in *The English Languages* and each later wrote to me about it, at my invitation. Excerpts from their letters:

**12 Henk Kroes:** You do mention, quite correctly, 'ten other languages' [in addition to English], which are then listed. Pedi and Northern Sotho refer to the same language, however. The missing language then will be Setswana (cf. your paragraph 3 on the same page [of *The English Languages*, relating to Botswana]). Setswana is the language used in the former Bophuthatswana, now part of South Africa under the new dispensation. Although there are several major dialects, they are all regarded as the same language. The other members of the Sotho group are Pedi (or Sepedi or Northern Sotho), and Southern Sotho. Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele and Setswati (or Swazi) belong to the Nguni group of languages. Venda and Tsonga are usually classified separately.

**13 Mary Hazelton:** Pedi is actually the same as North Sotho, and Swati doesn't exist — it's either Swazi or siSwati (you have it correctly listed under Swaziland although not with the same use of lower case prefix and capitalized root). What you have as South Sotho should be Sesotho. The names North and South Sotho were apartheid government names, not what the people themselves call their languages. The missing one is Tsonga (which is basically the same as Shangaan from Mozambique). The full list as... in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, is: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu. This orthography

of the Nguni languages capitalises the root not the prefix; I've seen it done for sePedi and seSotho as well but that is not how they are spelt in the list in the Constitution. (The prefix story works something like this; one Sotho or many Basotho live in Lesotho and speak Sesotho.) When I first noticed this error in your book I was not going to presume to point it out as I assumed someone would have noticed it by now, but then I saw that this data is reproduced exactly from the 1996 *Oxford Companion*, which means no-one picked it up between 1996 and 1998. Hence this letter.

The letters came too late to prevent the perpetuation of error in the *Concise Companion* (1998). In that book, there was no entry for South Africa as such, but the relevant part of the opening to the entry *South African English* runs: 'Until 1994, with AFRIKAANS, it [English] was one of the two official languages; in that year, nine indigenous languages became official: Ndebele, Pedi, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu.' No one to date has written to me about this. We can, however, compare all of the above with the following list by N. M. Kamwangamalu in 1998, as quoted by Pearl Ntlhakana in 'People's English: Language policy in South Africa and its impact on English in education', in *ET62* (Apr 00):

The [South African language] policy accords official recognition to eleven languages including the two former official languages of the state, English and Afrikaans, and nine African languages: Zulu, Venda, Swati, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Xhosa, Tswana, and Tsonga.

Here, in 2000, neither a black South African nor the Lesothan who quotes him has a problem with either 'Northern Sotho' and 'Southern Sotho' (despite any apartheid associations) or lack of prefixes on language names, nor indeed with the form 'Swati' that Hazelton says doesn't exist. And they do it, like Kroes and my 1992 *Companion*, without the neutrality of A-Z order.

But how did I get into this quagmire in the first place? The information used in the 1996 *Companion* came from an article, 'South Africa's eleven official languages', in the translators' journal *Language International* (1994, 6.6), written by its editor Geoffrey Kingscott and accompanied by the sidenote: 'This article is based on information supplied by official sources and by South African correspondents, in particular Dr Alet Kruger.' The combination

of journal, writer/editor, and note were enough for me to reckon I need look no farther; it was a rock-solid source. The relevant part of that article runs:

The reference to languages comes in Section 3 of the new constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Section 3.1 designates Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Pedi, Northern and Southern Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa (Xhosa) [sic] and Zulu (Zulu) [sic] as South Africa's official languages at the national level.

We should also note that the Kroes and Hazelton letters are not in harmony. Kroes correctly sees my missing language as Setswana, but Hazelton sees it as Tsonga, which is listed; Hazelton refers to North Sotho and South Sotho, while Kroes (with Kingscott and Kamwangamalu) calls them Northern Sotho and Southern Sotho; and Kroes has *Setswati* while Hazelton has *siSwati* (significant differences). My Kingscott source provides what worries them both: Pedi and Northern Sotho (the same language), the form *Swati*, and the absence of Setswana. What I did was draw on a usually reliable source, spread its error far and wide, and carry the can. There is no defence against error, yet in situations like this it is hard to escape from it. What would I do next time? Probably include every variant form I can find for each of the nine languages.

### Edited English

To my regret, few scholars and teachers of languages discuss print as a medium in its own right, or in its distinctive relationship with writing and editing. But some do. Thus, in the February 1993 issue of the *Council Chronicle* (the monthly newspaper of the National Council of Teachers of English in the US), there was an interview with the 'African American Educator' Lisa Delpit, entitled *Teachers, Culture, and Power*. Two of the question/answer sections in that interview run as follows:

**Q** You refer in your writings to standard English versus what you call dialect English. What do you mean, and why is the distinction important?

'Edited English is the language of power,'  
Lisa Delpit, 1993.

**A** I don't use the term standard English. What I talk about is edited English, which essentially is the English you see in books – English that has been taken through an editing process. Some people's home language is more closely related to edited English than other people's, but nobody exactly speaks edited English. It's important to make the distinction because edited English is the language of power. If you don't have access to edited English, you don't have access to the power institutions in this country. If I didn't have access to edited English, I wouldn't be asked to do an interview, I wouldn't be successful in graduate school, I wouldn't be able to work at creating change in the way that I am hoping to do so.

**Q** How do you teach edited English while still preserving a student's home language, if it differs from edited English?

**A** There are all kinds of ways. In writing, you can compare the home language and edited English and directly teach the differences. You can teach the rules of edited English and students can apply that knowledge to their own writing.

Delpit's approach (which focuses on finding avenues through which minorities can enter the US mainstream) implies that a key role in English teaching is to help young people edit themselves (and in due course edit others). Such an approach might well energize children with otherwise low expectations, and the effort to become usefully literate might begin to make more sense to them. Delpit may be right in wider terms still: a world English print standard is her 'edited English' writ very large indeed. ■

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