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## AUTHORS & CRITICS

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# On Using Words



I AM a devoted admirer of Jan Morris. She is one of the finest descriptive journalists of our generation, who has climbed the Everest from journalism to literature. I know nobody living who can capture so vividly the feel of a distant city or the mood of a vanished age. So, if

she asserts that she is a fan of Humpty Dumpty and his perverse, arsy-versy use of language [ENCOUNTER, April], I must pretend to believe her, and fall in behind her banner, but—

There was a long pause. "Is that all?" Alice timidly asked.

I too have invoked the Great Egg on occasion. But I must confess that, like Alice, I find him an unsatisfactory and intimidating (as well as a very funny) person, with a bullying manner. He was, of course, exactly the sort of nit-picking pedant whom Jan Morris professes to abhor.

"I see you don't", said Alice. "If you can see whether I'm singing or not, you've sharper eyes than most", Humpty Dumpty remarked severely.

His translation of "Jabberwocky", though ingenious, is clearly nonsense. When he says "impenetrability", what he means is that

"we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I suppose you don't mean to stop here all the rest of your life."

There's a nice knock-down meaning for you. But you could have knocked me down with a feather before I could have deduced his meaning without his helpful gloss.

Such verbal hijacking is all very well for bullies like Humpty and creative geniuses like James Joyce. There are spells of linguistic magic in *Finnegans Wake*: Suffoclose, Shikespower, Seudodante, Anonymoses; no birdy aviar soar any wing to eagle it; the flushpots of Euston and the hanging garments of Marylebone; unda her brella mid piddle med puddle she ninnygoes nannyygoes nancing by. But I have never yet been able to swallow the book in more than small doses, and I still have only a hazy idea of the plot.

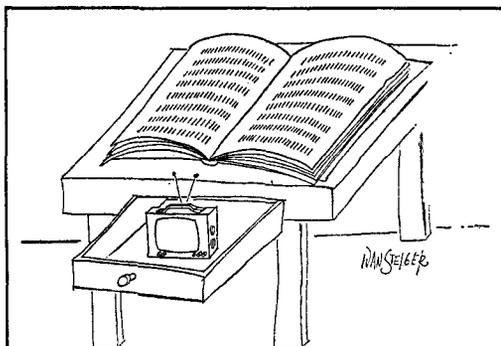
Those of us who are not truly creative writers use language for humbler purposes: to convey news, to cajole, to show off, to fill the gaping blank space on naked newsprint or the television screen with something, to make the best of a bad job, to convey meanings efficiently. The essence of communication is that words should mean roughly the same to the receiver as the sender. Of course, not many words have single, simple meanings like "gorse", which also is that rare word that has an exact synonym, "furze." Even an innocuous little word like "set" is given no less than 148 distinct main meanings by the Oxford English Dictionary. Such words as "truth" and "freedom" are so loaded with value judgments that they mean all things to all men. The wrestle with words and meanings is already intolerable in everyday, auld clathes and porridge contexts away from creative writing. If, in addition, Humpty Dumpty or James Joyce were to start writing articles for *The Times*, using words to mean whatever they wanted, few readers would penetrate beyond the impenetrability of their intros. There is not world enough or time for such reading on the Underground to work.

IF YOU ARE WRITING literature under your own name, you can afford to be a maverick with words. If you are good, like Jan Morris, you use words instinctively, as an artist, with no conscious need for rules or regulations. Those of us who work for corporate word-factories such as *The Times* or a Department of State cannot afford such licence. If all we everyday hacks used words and grammar to mean exactly what we chose them to mean, neither more or less, a Babel would issue from New Printing House Square, and we should lose all but our most patient readers: the ones who buy it not to read, but to carry under their arms to demonstrate that they can afford it. Anarchy in language is as nasty, brutish, and short-tempered as anarchy in society.

Of course, the Queen's English belongs to all of us, certainly not to the Queen, few of whose forbears have used the language with distinction or even assurance. Indeed, indeed the language evolves like a tide in the way that the mass of us decide to use it, majestically regardless of the prescriptions of the purists, even those of the great wordFowler himself (who was, *pace* Jan, quite as funny a person as Humpty Dumpty, and a great deal less arrogant). Nobody has any right to tell others how to use English, though language teachers are paid to do it to foreign students all the time. If you decide to call bread a stone, that is entirely your affair; but do not blame anybody else when you are hungry and break your teeth.

ENGLISH IS NOT threatened, but greatly enriched by the new words that are continually coming into it. The law of the market applies to words as well as to fish and other commodities. There are

eventually no buyers for the stale and the rotten, and they disappear. The ineffectual prescriptions of at any rate this pedant are directed not *de haut en bas* at outsiders. They are forged in the crude heat of a newspaper office, primarily to bring some little order into the verbal chaos of this particular commonplace user of words. I cannot see that the language has been enriched by Humpty's recent decision to say "legendary" when he means "famous"; "disinterested" when he means "uninterested"; Canute when he means a deluded reactionary; and "decimate" when he means "destroy." Contrariwise, he seems to have decimated or scotched, as he would say, the usefulness of the first in each pair of words for the rest of us.



## The Jernalists

London

**R**EPORTERS cannot spell, according to the long-standing opinion of their newspaper colleagues—and sub-editors have to correct their literary lapses. It looks as if things are not going to improve. When the National Council for the Training of Journalists tried to raise professional standards, it discovered that even students taking A-level English were often unable to spell and had little grasp of correct English.

Sixty-three of the 240 places on the council's current courses have been left unfilled. Most of the candidates were sixth-formers who had passed the English language O-level and many of them were studying for A-level English, yet they still flunked punctuation, spelling and vocabulary. The examiners were staggered by some of the howlers.

Asked to produce a sentence illustrating the meaning of "diffident," one candidate, perhaps with ambitions to become a Moscow correspondent, wrote:

"Mr Marx, the leading Soviet diffident, was arrested today."

Another wrote:

"The shareholders are angry that the diffident is so low."

"Innuendo" proved another difficult word. "There was a rising innuendo amongst the crowd", wrote one aspiring scribe. There were more problems with "inept." One candidate, with unconscious accuracy, said he had "an inept feeling about the situation." Another candidate had small boys "waiving" from trains to their mothers.

Even a sixth-former who had passed eight O-levels (including English language) and was sitting A-levels in history, English and Geography, showed that he did not understand such words as "supplant," "vacuous," "equitable" and "tacit."

A journalist who cannot understand words is like a bricklayer who cannot mix cement.

SUNDAY TIMES

**T**HANKFULLY, GRATEFULLY, hopefully, the language survives and grows, despite the idiosyncrasies of Humpty and the screams of anguish of the King Canutes. Poor old Canute, that great Sea King, knew all about the tides. He staged his wet demonstration to put down his sycophantic courtiers. English always has survived. Its best servants are its creative writers, whose coat-tails the rest of us cling to. But, up to our elbows in the greasy sink down in the kitchens, we scullions manufacture what rude rules we can for practical purposes, to make our job and the life of our readers easier. Our rules are roughly based on what comes naturally to writers like Jan Morris. Humpty Dumpty rules, OK? But we cannot all be Humpties. In his private sense of the word, IMPENETRABILITY.

Philip Howard

## The Dictionary of Diseased English

"Oats: A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people"

**D**R JOHNSON had no great opinion of the Scots or of Scotland and this particular entry in his *Dictionary* no doubt met with smiles and perhaps even the occasional laugh south of the Border and with rage and shaken fists north of it. Such a remark nowadays would lay its author open to the damning charge of racialism, and as we well know there is no greater breach of morality or etiquette. Similarly, "a man is generally better pleased when he has a good dinner upon his table than when his wife talks Greek", would have brought Johnson into serious