

English for Journalists

Reviews of previous editions:

'For those uncertain of their word power and those who know in their bones that they are struggling along on waffle, a couple of hours with this admirably written manual would be time well spent.'

Keith Waterhouse, *British Journalism Review*

'*English for Journalists* is a jolly useful book. It's short. It's accessible. It's cheap. And it tells you what you want to know.'

Humphrey Evans, *Journalist*

'It makes a simple-to-use guide that you could skim read on a train journey or use as a basic textbook that you can dip into to solve specific problems.'

Short Words

English for Journalists has established itself in newsrooms the world over as an invaluable guide to the basics of English and to those aspects of writing, such as reporting speech, house style and jargon, which are specific to the language of journalism.

Written in a highly accessible and engaging style, *English for Journalists* covers the fundamentals of grammar, spelling, punctuation and journalistic writing, with all points illustrated through a series of concise and illuminating examples. The book features practical, easy to follow advice with examples of common mistakes and problem words.

The twentieth anniversary edition features a new first chapter on the state of English today by author Wynford Hicks and includes updated examples to improve accessibility. This is an essential guide to written English for all practising journalists and students of journalism.

Wynford Hicks has worked as a reporter, subeditor, feature writer, editor and editorial consultant in magazines, newspapers and books, and as a teacher of journalism specialising in the use of English, subediting and writing styles. He is the author of *Writing for Journalists* and *Quite Literally*, and the co-author of *Subediting for Journalists*.

Media Skills

EDITED BY RICHARD KEEBLE, LINCOLN UNIVERSITY
SERIES ADVISERS: WYNFORD HICKS AND JENNY MCKAY

The *Media Skills* series provides a concise and thorough introduction to a rapidly changing media landscape. Each book is written by media and journalism lecturers or experienced professionals and is a key resource for a particular industry. Offering helpful advice and information and using practical examples from print, broadcast and digital media, as well as discussing ethical and regulatory issues, *Media Skills* books are essential guides for students and media professionals.

English for Journalists

Twentieth anniversary edition
Wynford Hicks

Writing for Journalists

2nd edition
*Wynford Hicks with Sally Adams,
Harriett Gilbert and Tim Holmes*

Ethics for Journalists

2nd edition
Richard Keeble

Interviewing for Journalists

2nd edition
Sally Adams with Wynford Hicks

Researching for Television and Radio

Adèle Emm

Reporting for Journalists

2nd edition
Chris Frost

Subediting for Journalists

Wynford Hicks and Tim Holmes

Writing for Broadcast Journalists

2nd edition
Rick Thompson

Freelancing For Television and Radio

Leslie Mitchell

Programme Making for Radio

Jim Beaman

Magazine Production

Jason Whittaker

Production Management for Television

Leslie Mitchell

Feature Writing for Journalists

Sharon Wheeler

Interviewing for Radio

2nd edition
Jim Beaman

Designing for Newspapers and Magazines

2nd edition
Chris Frost

English for Journalists

Twentieth Anniversary Edition

Wynford Hicks

First published 1993, second edition 1998, third edition 2007,
this edition published 2013
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1993, 1998, 2007, 2013 Wynford Hicks

The right of Wynford Hicks to be identified as author of this work has
been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or
reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical,
or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying
and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks
or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification
and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Hicks, Wynford, 1942–.

English for journalists/Wynford Hicks. – Twentieth Anniversary
edition.

pages cm. – (Media Skills)

Includes index.

1. English language – Grammar – Handbooks, manuals, etc.

2. Journalism – Style manuals. I. Title.

PE1112.H53 2013

428.2024'07 – dc23

2013000793

ISBN: 978-0-415-66171-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-66172-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-75093-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Goudy and Scala Sans

by Florence Production Ltd, Stoodleigh, Devon, UK

Contents

Introduction: how this book began	vi
1 What kind of English?	1
2 Grammar: the rules	16
3 Grammar: 10 common mistakes	30
4 Grammar: problems and confusions	41
5 Spelling	60
6 Punctuation	73
7 Reporting speech	93
8 Style	99
9 Words	108
10 Foreign words	135
11 Figures	158
Appendix: <i>Bulletin</i> style guide	162
Glossary of terms used in journalism	176
Further reading	189
Index	191

Introduction: how this book began

In the first edition of *English for Journalists* I thanked the *Wolverhampton Express and Star* for permission to use material from *A Journalist's Guide to the Use of English* by Ted Bottomley and Anthony Loftus. As I said then, this book 'owes much to theirs, now out of print'.

In fact there would have been little incentive to write *EfJ* if the *Guide* had remained in print. It covered the basics pretty well, giving clear advice and putting such things as grammar and punctuation into a journalistic context. It also had useful things to say about style. For several years, when I was teaching periodical journalism at (what was then) the London College of Printing, I ordered bulk copies of the *Guide* direct from the publishers and sold them on to students.

But with the *Guide* no longer available, and encouraged by various people, including Philip Marsh, the founder of PMA Training, I put together the first edition of this book in 1993. Now in this latest edition I would like to thank all those friends and colleagues who have over the years made constructive comments and provided useful examples of usage to be followed or avoided – even if some of them remain unaware of how useful they have been.

Wynford Hicks
March 2013

What kind of English?

The first edition of this book gave some simple advice: ‘Write for your reader; use a clear form of English, avoiding jargon, slang, pomposity, academic complexity, obscurity . . .’

It pointed out that modern English has a rich and varied history and it noted: ‘The strongest influence on the way we speak and write is undoubtedly American. In the global village of satellites and computers it is in American rather than English that nation speaks unto nation.’ Twenty years later, in a media world where the technology changes every five minutes, that looks like an understatement.

But something else is obviously going on as well.

‘OMG!’

Under the headline ‘OMG, Cupid – this is the written word’s golden age’ Mark Forsyth reassured *Sunday Times* readers who thought that social media were undermining literacy. Not at all, he said – in fact the opposite was true. And a few weeks later the *Daily Mail* had a similar message:

OMG! Txts make u gd at writing? Srsly?

How “text speak” can help pupils write essays

A study for the Department of Education had ‘found no evidence that a child’s development in written language was disrupted by using text abbreviations’. On the contrary, there seemed to be a positive relationship between texting and the ability to read and spell. This could be because texters needed to understand sound structures and syllables in words.

As background the *Mail* added that the number of fixed-line phone calls continued to fall and that mobile phone calls were now falling as well, while the number of texts was way up (150 billion in 2011, compared with 50 billion five years before).

In his more personal piece Forsyth described growing up in the 1980s when his generation ‘communicated by phone and watched television. I never wrote a single word to anybody of my own age, except perhaps to pass notes in class.’ But nowadays young people were exposed to a torrent of the written word – text messages, internet chatrooms, Facebook updates, tweets . . .

This, he said, was having a big impact on all sorts of things – particularly online dating. The OkCupid site had reported that misspellings reduce your chances of a date more than anything else. People agonise over their profiles and are irritated when others don’t. One of Forsyth’s friends objected to the greeting ‘Hi Hun’ because, as she put it, she wasn’t German.

Forsyth made the point that while the internet provides all sorts of examples of dreadful English it also features corrections from people (popularly known as ‘grammar Nazis’) who insist on pointing out the mistakes. In some cases professional – that is, paid – journalists have been criticised by non-professionals posting comments which ridicule not only their views but their grammar and punctuation. The Twitter account @YourinAmerica set up in November 2012 offering ‘concise lessons in the use of your versus you’re’ gained 12,000 followers in less than a week.

Forsyth claimed that there’s ‘probably never been a time in history when writing was so universal and so important’. Certainly, the ‘decay of language’, which we have been warned about all our lives, no longer seems to be a threat. But the fact that more people want to write well and spend more time writing – particularly in English – doesn’t of itself solve all our problems.

‘Britishisms’

Some say the American-British exchange is a two-way process. Indeed there have been complaints from academic linguists in the United States that British idioms are becoming too popular over there. Geoffrey Nunberg of the University of California at Berkeley has been quoted

as saying: ‘*Spot on* – it’s just ludicrous. You are just impersonating an Englishman when you say *spot on*. *Will do* – I hear that from Americans. That should be put into quarantine.’

Other ‘Britishisms’ that have been recorded recently are: *sell-by date*, *go missing* and *chat up*. Just as James Bond and the Beatles invaded the United States in the 1960s, Harry Potter has been waving his magic wand there since 1998 so *ginger* has now become a fashionable American word to describe red hair. It slipped through the ruthless American editing process of the Harry Potter books that made every *dustbin* a *trashcan*, every *jumper* a *sweater* and every *torch* a *flashlight*. Even the title of the first one, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, was considered too difficult for young American readers, who had to have *philosopher* changed to *sorcerer*.

Now she has the clout J. K. Rowling has had the original title restored. But the American editions of the books as a whole still include extensive translations of ‘Britishisms’ (the lists are easily found on the internet).

American spelling . . .

The trend on the internet is clear: American spellings are becoming more common as software defaults to the American form and often fails to recognise the British one. As one poster replied after having his *furor* corrected to *furore*: ‘I know! I originally had *furore* but the American spell check built into Chrome suggested *furor*, which appears to be their term for the same thing.’

British journalists working for media in general rather than employed by a single outlet used to call themselves freelances; now they tend to be ‘freelancers’.

Except among extra-careful writers the British distinction between *licence/practice* as nouns and *license/practise* as verbs is getting lost (the Americans prefer *license* with an *s* for both noun and verb and *practice* with a *c* for both noun and verb). Election information for the Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society produced by the (British) Electoral Reform Services Ltd in December 2012 had *license* with an *s* used as a noun in the small print. Many British people follow American practice when they write informally.

On -ise/-ize there is no clear pattern. American practice favours -ize while in Britain the trend has been away from it. The *Times*, which used to be the only national newspaper loyal to -ize, abandoned it in 1992 while in the same year the Geneva-based International Labour Organisation went the other way and adopted -ize, thus changing the spelling of its own name. The European Union prefers -ise.

Several American variants, such as airplane (for aeroplane), program (for programme) and fetus (for foetus), are increasingly common in British English – see p70.

Another increasingly common variant – dwarves for dwarfs – which may or may not look American certainly isn't. The famous Walt Disney film (1937) was called *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. It's J. R. R. Tolkien, whose first fantasy book, *The Hobbit*, also came out in 1937, who's responsible for the popularisation of 'dwarves' (which he called 'a piece of private bad grammar'); he adopted it to distance his fantasy from the real world. So 'dwarves' should be restricted to fantasy, keeping elves company.

. . . and grammar

The most noticeable difference between British and American grammar is in the use of prepositions. For example, American kids get to be on the team if selected whereas the British are in it. They usually play on weekends whereas the British play at weekends. If there's no football/soccer field available they have to play on the street whereas the British play in the street . . .

Here American usage is increasingly dominant. Google the phrase 'word on the street' and what do you get? *Word on the Street* is an exciting new English language teaching programme co-produced by the BBC and the British Council.' Over on ITV the script for that posh historical soap about the upper classes and their underlings *Downton Abbey* was said to include a London jazz club 'on' as opposed to 'in' Greek Street, Soho.

But elsewhere in grammar there isn't much difference between the two versions of English – at least as far as recommendations are concerned. In *That or Which, and Why* (Routledge, 2007) Evan Jenkins, a columnist on language for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, made a number of points familiar to British readers. He acknowledged that the British are more

relaxed than the Americans about the traditional that/which rule (see pp28–9) and concluded:

The that/which rule is arbitrary and overly subtle and ought to be done away with. It is without intrinsic sense, but as long as large numbers of teachers and editors insist on it, we do well to understand it.

Fragments

On the subject of grammar . . . as writing in general – and journalism in particular – has become increasingly informal and colloquial, there is confusion about the most fundamental point of all. What's a sentence – and does it matter?

The first edition of *English for Journalists* followed *A Journalist's Guide* and said: 'A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought.' The second edition (1998) added a dictionary definition – 'a piece of writing or speech between two full stops or equivalent pauses' – and stressed that a single word could be a sentence.

The *Guide's* original discussion of sentences advised that incomplete ones (fragments) should be used 'very sparingly and in the right place'; journalists should avoid writing like 'the chatty columnist'.

But good columnists have always had a big influence on the way newcomers aspired to write. For 30 years or so from 1935 the *Daily Mirror's* Bill Connor (Cassandra) broke many of the 'rules' of writing that were being drummed into the heads of schoolchildren, certainly the silly ban on 'and' to start sentences – but above all the one about sentences needing a subject and a verb:

I suppose I was mortally afraid of Mr Beulah for the best part of five years.

Dead scared.

And especially so at this, the third week in September . . .

Other iconoclastic columnists celebrated for their style were Connor's successor at the *Mirror*, Keith Waterhouse (who later moved to the *Daily Mail*), and Bernard Levin who was famous for his long and complex (but

beautifully constructed) sentences. Levin once returned to his berth at the *Times* after a few years away with a ‘sentence’ of three words: ‘And another thing.’

So the fragment is nothing new. But now it’s everywhere – for example in a feature on ‘our paedophile culture’ in the *London Review of Books*: ‘At the BBC these people became like gods. Even the weird ones. Even the ones who everybody could tell were deranged . . .’

So is there a problem? Not in principle, not any more. But there are still some points worth making – see pp48–9.

Meaning

It may irritate some people to hear British politicians describe themselves as ‘stepping up to the plate in the upcoming elections’ where once they might have gone out to bat in the forthcoming ones but the meaning of most Americanisms is clear. Most but not all: what does ‘you’re batting zero for two’ mean, for example? And why is the phrase ‘a red-headed stepchild’ used as an insult?*

Meaning is key here. The ground floor in Britain is the first floor in the US; to bathe in the US is to have a bath in Britain (traditional Britons bathe in the sea in bathing suits); homely means friendly or kindly in Britain, plain or even ugly in the US. ‘I’m not on the homely side’ could mean ‘I’m pretty hot really’. So it’s not something to be confused about when writing or reading an online dating profile.

Nowadays even the best educated and most sophisticated people are under extreme pressure to keep up. In December 2012 Mary Beard (Cambridge classics professor, *Times Literary Supplement* columnist and TV historian) ended her blog on a carol concert by asking: ‘What actually does “no crib for a bed” mean?’ The replies she got were generally scornful. One of the more polite ones was: ‘I remember thinking about this when I was about five and working it out for myself.’**

* 1. You’ve had two goes at something and failed twice (like stepping up to the plate it’s from baseball). 2. According to the most convincing account, this is the child of a (male) Irish immigrant labourer in New York and a woman who goes on to marry someone else.

'You're welcome'

Another way of looking at British versus American is through the eyes of foreigners. What do the French or the Chinese make of these two versions of English? Do they spot the differences?

Books and leaflets aimed at French speakers learning English have traditionally used visual clichés like the union jack, rain and Big Ben to make the British connection explicit. A recent booklet (*L'anglais correct*, First Editions, Paris, 2012) has a front cover showing a bowler-hatted Briton offering his umbrella to a rather wet woman who, quite correctly, says: 'Thank you!'

Bowler hat then seems to spoil the whole thing by replying: '*You're welcome.*' This is an imported American expression. Traditionally there wasn't a stock British response to 'Thank you'. In the old days you could say any one of several friendly things – don't mention it, it's my pleasure, you've earned it, I hope you enjoy it (or, as one of my relatives used to say when he'd given me, aged eight or so, a half-crown, 'Don't spend it all on beer'). Or you could just smile and say nothing at all. It wasn't considered rude then – and among older people it isn't rude now.

But '*You're welcome*' has become a standard response to 'Thank you' worldwide, the equivalent of *de nada* or *de rien*, and it surely makes sense for people learning English to use it (though they may well hear Londoners say all sorts of other things instead from 'No worries' or 'No probs' to 'Cheers').

So the French authors of *L'anglais correct* have not made a *faux pas* here: instead they have usefully demonstrated how widespread the Americanisation of British English has become. In fact, they have done this throughout their booklet without trying to sound American, using all sorts of expressions that originated on the other side of the Atlantic: you're *kidding* (joking); invited her *for* (to) dinner; be *mad at* (angry with); the last *cookie* (biscuit); be *right back* (back soon) . . .

** The carol referred to, 'Away in a Manger' (1885), is from the US where a crib was already a child's bed rather than another word for manger (animal feeding trough).

Incidentally, 'You're welcome' as a routine expression may have come to Britain from the US but its origins are certainly English. The (American) language expert Barry Popik has even found an example in Shakespeare:

LODORICO: Madam, good night; I humbly thank your ladyship.

DESDEMONA: Your honour is most welcome.

(*Othello*, act 4, scene 3)

The 'baby boom' myth

The most striking example of the Americanisation of Britain and our local dialect is the prevalence of the 'baby boom' cliché on this side of the Atlantic. A baby boomer, according to the US census bureau, is a person – that is to say, an American – who was born between 1946 and 1964. And there was in fact a huge increase in the birth rate in the US after the second world war. But in Britain there wasn't.

Collectively the British media are in no doubt that there was a postwar baby boom: newspapers, magazines, books, TV and radio all take it for granted. The most remarkable example of this phenomenon is a book by the Tory politician David Willetts (who somehow acquired the nickname Two Brains) called *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future – and Why They Should Give it Back* (Atlantic, 2010).

One or two British journalists have broken ranks and insisted on quoting the facts. Ian Jack, for example, writing in the *Guardian* (21 January 2011), said that baby boomer was 'a term borrowed from America and quite wrongly applied to the postwar pattern of British birth rates'. He pointed out: 'Not until 1975 were as few babies born as in 1945; more British babies were born between 1956 and 1966 than in the so-called boomer decade of 1945 to 1955.'

But nobody was paying attention, even in Jack's own office. The *Guardian* sub responsible for his column gave it the headline 'We baby boomers blame ourselves for this mess . . .'

Two months later another journalist, Gavin Weightman, was able to headline his own piece 'The myth of the baby boomers' because he published it himself online as a blog. He wrote:

Born in 1945 I am, according to the popular accounts currently in circulation, a “baby boomer”. My contention is that I am not. The year I was born was not a bumper year for babies. Nor was 1948, or 49, or 50, or 51, or 52, or 53, or 54, or 55, or 56 . . .

Whatever else the “baby boomer” debate is about it is predicated on the notion that there was, after the end of the last war, a sustained rise in births which produced a population bulge. This is certainly what happened in North America between 1945 and 1964. But it did not happen here.

Homegrown clichés

The British don’t need to import clichés – we’ve got plenty of our own. And the most irritating ones are irritating because they’re either routine misuse or simple nonsense. King Canute and the curate’s egg (see p126) are old faithfuls mentioned in previous editions of this book whereas Philip Larkin’s ‘Sexual intercourse began in 1963 . . .’ is a relative newcomer. (Has anybody recently written a piece about the 1960s and the so-called sexual revolution *without* quoting this particular piece of verse?)

In case you’d forgotten, sex is supposed to have started (in 1963) between the end of the ban on D. H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and the Beatles first LP, *Please Please Me*. I suppose it’s technically possible since the LP, recorded in February, was released on 22 March 1963. But the ban on the book was effectively over before the 1960s even began, because the liberalising law (the Obscene Publications Act) came into force in August 1959.

So the dates – unlike the rhymes – don’t really work: ‘nineteen sixty-three’ (rather than, say, 1961) is there because it rhymes with ‘late for me’ and ‘first LP’.

It’s worth remembering that Larkin, when he wrote ‘Annus Mirabilis’ in 1967, was a middle-aged man (and jazz enthusiast) for whom sexual intercourse had in fact begun way back in 1945. And his intention in the poem was certainly not to provide a facile intro for a generation of lazy journalists.

The 'English baccalaureate'

Michael Gove, who is as I write education minister, enjoys controversy and has a colourful turn of phrase, as befits a one-time political journalist. 'Every child can benefit from the values of a military ethos' is one of his gems. Not too much soppy pacifist nonsense about peace on earth then.

But he will be remembered principally for his bizarre decision, when imposing yet another revision of secondary education, to call a broadly based qualification for 16-year-olds 'the English baccalaureate (Ebacc)'. From someone who parades his learning this was a gaffe, as was confirmed by the House of Commons education committee report in July 2011. 'We do not believe,' they said with extreme moderation, 'that the Ebacc is appropriately labelled; the name can be misleading.'

The word has its roots in the Latin word *baccalaureus* meaning advanced student and is used internationally to describe the qualification students need to enter higher education. In Britain numerous schools already offer the international baccalaureate as an alternative to A-levels. As one head teacher pointed out, using the term baccalaureate for a lower-level qualification is 'confusing, as it is associated with sixth-form study'.

If Gove had to have a fancy foreign word, he could have used *brevet* (diploma), which French secondary school students take at 16 and need to pass in order to start studying for their *bac* (which, abbreviated, has one c incidentally). But why not use an English word in the first place?

Political correctness, gender and race

The term 'political correctness' is often used by linguistic conservatives to rubbish attempts by radicals to sanitise language. But it didn't start out that way: it was originally an ironic expression used by the American new left in the 1960s and 1970s, as in 'We could stop at McDonald's down the road if you're hungry . . . but it wouldn't be *politically correct*'. This example is quoted by the academic linguist Deborah Cameron in her book *Verbal Hygiene* (Routledge, 1995); she emphasises that the expression was understood by insiders as a joke at their own expense.

Another term that has shifted totally in meaning is 'gender', which for most English speakers has become a polite synonym for sex. As Cameron says: 'You hear people inquiring about the gender of animals.' She says that for the feminists who 'did most to put the word into circulation, gender was a technical term which took its meaning from a contrast with sex'. The intended contrast was between the biological (sex) and the social (gender), which was related to the feminist claim that many traditional differences between men and women were social rather than biological in origin. But that distinction has gone with the wind.

Feminism is responsible for numerous attempts to sanitise the language. Obvious examples are avoiding male nouns like chairman and male pronouns (eg he, him) where both sexes are involved. In the first case 'chair' is now generally accepted; in the second a knowledge of English grammar helps avoid awkward alternatives such as the repeated use of 'he or she'. As the lexicographer Robert Burchfield has pointed out: 'Over the centuries writers of standing have used they, their and them with reference to a singular pronoun or noun . . .'

More controversial are new terms like 'sex worker' for prostitute which are intended to take away the slur automatically attached to the original word. But value judgment is inherent in language: some people think prostitution is a sin or should be a crime or whatever, whereas some people don't: your prostitute is my sex worker.

So with 'misogyny', which traditionally meant hatred of women but which now means what? What feminists disapprove of/disagree with, as in a reader's letter about the Church of England's decision not to adopt women bishops: 'Anglican misogyny' was the phrase used.

In Australia after a row in parliament where the words 'sexism' and 'misogyny' were bandied about Sue Butler, the editor of the *Macquarie Dictionary*, said its definition of 'misogyny' would be expanded since it 'has come to be used as a synonym for sexism, a synonym with bite, but nevertheless with the meaning of entrenched prejudice against women rather than pathological hatred'.

But why do some people think that sexism needs a synonym? What's the point?

I think the answer is very simple: long, complex words, particularly from Latin and Greek, sound impressive and can be given a twist or a spin. Then they work better as propaganda than plain words. So 'holocaust'

and ‘homophobe’ can be pushed beyond their original, literal meaning. ‘Paedophilia’, which originally meant sex with children, is now used to cover sex with young people above the age of puberty but below the legal age of consent.

Black Americans should now be called African-Americans. That is the current convention – but nothing in life is simple, particularly not in racial politics. In December 2012 Tim Scott, a right-wing Republican from Charleston, South Carolina, became the first ‘African-American’ in more than a century to be appointed to the US Senate. But because of his conservative views there was controversy about what to call him.

The (London) *Times* reported the Rev. Joseph Darby, a prominent black local leader, as saying: ‘I would acknowledge the fact that he was the first senator of colour. I would not really consider him to be the first African-American senator.’ This was because ‘his mindset does not really reflect the African-Americans in South Carolina’. So ‘African-American’ can’t be a simple synonym for ‘black’ after all.

The African-American example illustrates a fundamental truth about language: the meaning of a word is its use. In itself a word means neither one thing nor the other, so different people who use a word can mean different things by it. This makes it difficult to insist that a particular usage or interpretation is the only one: context and intention matter.

Insults reclaimed

In politics there is a long history of the reclaimed insult, as with the ‘Whigs’ and ‘Tories’ of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British politics. The original ‘Whigs’ were Scottish cattle rustlers and horse thieves while the original ‘Tories’ were Irish Catholic outlaws and bandits. In both cases members of the insulted party adopted the label they were given. Similarly, in the 1960s when a Tory MP called German demonstrators in Grosvenor Square ‘foreign scum’, the response from British protesters was: ‘We are all foreign scum’, which became a celebrated poster.

The word ‘Yid’, which in Yiddish has no derogatory meaning, has often been used as a term of abuse by anti-semites. In Britain it has for decades been directed at supporters of Tottenham Hotspur, many of whom were Jewish. The Spurs fans’ response has been to reclaim the insult and

declare themselves ‘Yiddos’ – guilty as charged – in spite of supercilious criticism from outside.

Swearing and taboo

A cliché we owe to the late Richard Nixon is the -gate (from Watergate) suffix routinely added to the name of a political scandal particularly if it involves conspiracy and/or cover-up. In ‘plebgate’ Andrew Mitchell, a British government minister, was (falsely) accused of abusing police officers by calling them ‘fucking plebs’; he didn’t deny swearing but he did deny the P word. Plebs (short for plebeians) is dated English public-school slang for ‘the lower classes’ – and obviously the last word a modern politician wants to be accused of using to refer to the electorate.

In this case Mitchell apologised for swearing but neither he nor anyone else thought swearing was as bad as the P word. Similarly, from cases of alleged racist abuse it’s clear that in certain contexts swearing is routine and accepted by the participants while racist words are not. Giving evidence in court a black British footballer (Anton Ferdinand of Queens Park Rangers) said that being called ‘a cunt’ was fine. ‘But when someone brings your colour into it, it takes it to another level and it’s very hurtful.’

In Australia the cricketer Darren Lehmann received a five-match ban in 2003 for calling the Sri Lankans ‘black cunts’. His offence was not the abusive and sexist C word but the use of the word ‘black’ as an insult.

Of course, most newspapers don’t print these swear words but semi-hide them with asterisks. The paradox is that the swear words are acceptable to some people whereas plebs and black (used abusively), which *can* be printed, are taboo.

Proven (and other pomposities)

In their leader on ‘plebgate’ the *Guardian* discussed reports of malpractice by the police concluding that if the official account ‘comes unstuck, Mr Mitchell will be proven to have suffered a serious injustice’. Nothing wrong with the sentiment but there is a big problem with the word ‘proven’. As their own style guide warns: ‘Beware the creeping “proven”, featuring (mispronounced) in every other TV ad; proven is not the

normal past tense of prove but a term in Scottish law (“not proven”) and in certain English idioms, eg “proven record.”

But ‘proven’ creeps in everywhere: a *Guardian* Saturday book review section included this example from the Australian writer Thomas Keneally: ‘. . . the book might have proven to be highly accessible . . .’. And on the same day the columnist Jonathan Freedland wrote: ‘Any new idea or policy proposal . . . must be proven compatible with what those long-dead politicians of the late 18th century set down . . .’.

With proven used as part of a verb go (or should go) all sorts of other pomposities, such as ‘suffice it to say’ (often reduced to complete illiteracy by the omission of ‘it’); ‘beg the question’ (when used to mean raise the question); ‘whilst’ and ‘amongst’ as literary variants on while and among; ‘anticipate’ to mean expect; ‘address’ to mean answer; ‘accrue’ to mean ‘acquire’; ‘critique’ to mean criticise; ‘decimate’ to mean kill or destroy; ‘demise’ to mean death; ‘dilemma’ to mean problem (on a posh problem page like the *Observer*’s); ‘infer’ to mean imply; ‘reference’ to mean ‘refer to’ . . .

House style

House style includes everything from policy on important issues like ‘political correctness’, gender and race to detail – whether to use single or double quotes, when to use italics and whether to prefer ‘spelt’ or ‘spelled’. Published and internet style guides also provide a useful commentary on changing English usage.

For example, both the *Times* and the *Economist* disagree with the *Guardian* on accents. They both say we should keep accents, eg on café, cliché and communiqué, when they make a crucial difference to pronunciation. The *Times* is pretty prescriptive about none, which ‘almost always takes the singular verb’, while the *Economist* is more relaxed: none ‘usually takes a singular verb’. But the *Guardian*, which once insisted on it, says: ‘It is a (very persistent) myth that “none” has to take a singular verb.’

By contrast, on ‘like’ and ‘such as’, it is the *Economist* that takes the liberal position. Whereas the *Guardian* and the *Times* still disapprove, the *Economist* bites the bullet: ‘Authorities like Fowler and Gowers is an acceptable alternative to authorities such as Fowler and Gowers.’