

Out of Print and Ambushed by Adverbs

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Johan Gutenberg

Writing in 1620, Francis Bacon declared that three recent inventions had changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world, namely printing, gunpowder and the magnet. (The magnet because via the compass it had enabled seamen to navigate the oceans of the world.) (From *Novum Organum*. 1620.)

Two centuries later, Thomas Carlyle, defined the three great elements of modern civilisation as printing, gunpowder and the Protestant religion. By then the magnet was a bit old hat, while the Reformation had opened the way for an exploration of ideas comparable to that of oceans. Carlyle still put printing first, adding that ~~he~~ who invented the art of printing created a whole new democratic worldq (From *Sartor Resartus*,1831.)

Almost two centuries on from Carlyle, gunpowder also has become old hat, blown away by the invention of nuclear, chemical and who knows what appalling devices. Printing remains, but for how long?

He who invented the art of printing, to borrow the phrase from Carlyle, is generally agreed to be Johann Gutenberg. He was born in the city of Mainz, on the Rhine, *circa* 1395, where he trained as a metalworker and goldsmith. In about 1430 he moved much further up the Rhine to Strasbourg, where he diversified into mirrors for which there was, we are told, a lively market among pilgrims coming to view holy relics in the cathedral. The mirrors were thought to reflect the healing and other miraculous powers of holy relics back into the pilgrim holding them.

Gutenberg was also deeply immersed in the search for new methods of reproducing documents and especially books. The Renaissance of the previous century had greatly stimulated the thirst for knowledge across western Europe, and the written word was the

means of acquiring it. Literacy rates soared. But manuscript books were painfully slow to copy, and very expensive, hence the demand for some mechanical means to produce books quickly and at less cost. Printing itself, that is the reproduction of blocks of drawings, even text, had been practised for almost a century, but it meant that for each new page, an entire new block had to be engraved. Gutenberg's achievement was the invention of reusable type . individual letters of wood or metal which could be reassembled for repeated use.

Gutenberg invested time and money in his research and experimentation, and it took him almost 20 years before he was ready to put this investment to the test and actually produce a printed book. He had returned to Mainz in 1448, mainly, it seems, to find a backer ready to provide the millions of gulden needed to bring the process forward. Sometime in the early 1450s he printed six short books, while he was already working on the project that was to ensure his fame as the inventor of printing - his Great Latin Bible of 1455-56. This was a massive undertaking, running to more than twelve hundred pages, in two volumes.

The print run, fairly certainly, was about 180, of which 45 were on vellum, the rest on paper. It was a complete sell-out, and some 48 copies, or partial copies, still exist today, two in the British Library. Demand for printed books swept across Europe, and the craft spread rapidly from its cradle in Germany, to Strasbourg in France, Venice, Milan and Naples in Italy and to other German cities.

It reached England in 1476, when William Caxton set up his printing press at Westminster. Caxton had been born in Kent in the 1420s, to a family of mercers - dealers in fabric - and was apprenticed to a mercer in London. As a young man he moved to Flanders, settling in Bruges. There he became a successful merchant, and a leading figure among the English traders established there and belonging to what was termed and recognised as the English Nation in Bruges. He was appointed Governor of the English Nation in 1462.

As well as a major centre of the cloth trade, Bruges was also a city of culture and learning, with an established reputation for the production of books . that is manuscript books of great quality, reflecting a golden age of arts and literature in Flanders. It was one of the seats of the Dukes of Burgundy and was a city rich in libraries. By the late 1460s Caxton was both wealthy and well connected, able to conduct his business in French or Flemish, well read, and beginning to dabble in translation.

The convolutions of the War of the Roses in England reached Bruges when an alliance between the Yorkist Edward IV and the Duchy of Burgundy was cemented by the marriage in 1468 of Edward's daughter, Margaret, to the man who had just inherited the Dukedom as Charles the Bold.. It is possible that Caxton, as Governor of the English Nation in Bruges, may have had some part in the negotiations preceding the match. In 1470 Edward himself fled Britain and ended up in Bruges for a short period of exile.

By 1471, however, Caxton was no longer Governor, and no longer in Bruges. Instead he had migrated to Cologne, on foot of some misdemeanours for which he later was pardoned by Edward. Cologne, like Bruges, was a Hanseatic port, and Caxton would have had contacts in the cloth trade there. But Cologne had also joined the German cities with a growing printing industry. Mechanical printing was not just a new process for making books, it made their mass production an entirely new and profitable field of trade. So it needed not just new cutters of type, makers of ink and paper, and printers skilled in the new process - it needed

merchants to handle the merchandise. So merchants such as Caxton became *de facto* publishers by financing the printers and trading in books.

Caxton had an additional personal attachment to books . he was working at translation, finding he was rather good at it, and had a major project in hand. This was the translation into English of a piece of Burgundian propaganda, *Le Recueil des Histoires de Troies*, a re-working of the story of *Jason and the Golden Fleece*, in which undertaking he had the personal support of Margaret of York, now Duchess of Burgundy. So instead of just trading in books, his involvement became much more direct . he bought a printing press, ordered type and employed a printer. By the end of 1472 he had published three books . all in Latin - and had left Cologne to return to Flanders.

The following year his *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy* printed in Ghent, became the first book . ever, anywhere - to be printed in English. It was printed in Ghent because Bruges expressly forbid anyone who was not a citizen of the city to engage in making books . manuscript or printed . and Caxton had apparently started his own printing business in Ghent, where the Duchess resided, doing so from scratch using his knowledge of the process gained during his ownership of the press in Cologne.

But his interest was now printing books in English, including particularly his own writings, and printing them in England. By 1475 he had decided to return to England, and set up the first printing business there. Shortly after that he rented a site from Westminster Abbey and established his works close to the Thames within the precincts of the Abbey. Among the earliest books produced by him was the first printed edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (1478). Chaucer's great work had been circulating in manuscript versions for more than 70 years, and was well known among the wealthy literate classes. Caxton's decision to print it was probably based as much on a commercial desire to create a market for printed books, as it was to make the masterpiece available to people of every estate and degree.

From that point until his death in 1492 Caxton was England's master printer, producing more than 100 books, including the first ever printing of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (1485). Significantly the majority of these were printed in English . most early printing on the continent had been in Latin, rather than German, French or Italian. Under Caxton England led the way in printing in the vernacular. This was of importance both in the spread of literacy, as it meant there was a great increase in the supply of English texts, but also in the standardisation of English as these texts were in London or official English, and did not reflect the wide range of regional dialect English.

More than half the books he printed were also written, or translated by himself. Caxton was not just the great pioneer of printing in these islands, he was also the first self-publisher.

What he did not print in English was the Bible, or any part of it. The first German version of the Bible had been printed in 1466, only eleven years after Gutenberg's Latin Bible, and by 1483 there were nine German translations in print. The Bible was already on its way to being the unchallenged world best-seller in printed books. But not in England, where, since the early 1400s it had been forbidden by decree to translate the Bible, or any part of it into English, or to circulate any such translations. These acts of censorship were mainly aimed at the reformer John Wycliffe and his Lollard supporters, and were to remain in force until

1529. Wycliffe's own translation of the Bible had been circulating, in *ms* form, since the 1380s and would, despite the ban, have been available to Caxton a century later.

But printing it would have been a defiance of the law, the church and the state, and would have brought extreme royal disfavour to a printer whose customers included both church and state. Besides, his landlord was Westminster Abbey.

Caxton died in 1492, by which time Richard III had come and gone, and the Tudor Henry VII was very much in charge. Things were changing in many ways in England, and had been for all of Caxton's lifetime. One of his last printing jobs was an indication of this: he received the commission to print the parliamentary statutes in 1491, which, at the direction of the King, were, for the first time, to be recorded in English, not French which had been the main official language since the Norman conquest.

The growing use of vernacular English as opposed to courtly French and Latin (still in Caxton's time the language of the church and of education) was one way in which England was changing, and printing was part of the change. The growing use of English meant a demand for printed books in English, and the availability of books in English speeded the spread of literacy.

The first printed version of an English translation of any part of the Bible was produced in Worms in 1526; this was Tyndale's New Testament. William Tyndale, scholar and reformer had worked at Oxford and Cambridge before being forced into exile for his radical views. Three thousand copies of the New Testament were printed, and many of them were smuggled into England, where there was an immediate demand for them.

The demand was such that the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, ordered the booksellers of the city not to stock or sell Tyndale's translation, organising a public burning of copies of it to emphasise his point. But further printings on the Continent ensured a continued clandestine supply into England. Bishop Tunstall, in 1529, on a visit to Antwerp, reportedly purchased a quantity of Tyndale's New Testament to bring home so that he could organise further book-burnings.

There is ample evidence from diaries and letters of the period of the great demand for the book in England, and also of the apparent ease with which people were able to obtain copies of it. The pace of events quickened with Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, and his subsequent break with Rome. By 1534, just one year after the divorce and Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn, the English bishops, far from burning English Bibles, were petitioning Henry to order that the Bible be translated into the English vulgar tongue..and should be delivered to the people for their instruction.

Henry himself was no ardent reformer, but Thomas Cranmer was and by this date he had become Archbishop of Canterbury, while Henry's closest advisor was the remarkable Thomas Cromwell, a strong advocate of an English bible, and shortly to become Vice-Regent to Henry on matters spiritual. In 1535 the first printed English Bible was published in Cologne; copies were imported into England without interference. This was the Coverdale Bible, the translation of which was organised by Miles Coverdale, and it seemed destined to be nominated as the authorised Bible which Cromwell and others were urging upon Henry, now head of the church as well as the state.

But it did not happen. Coverdale's Bible was not highly regarded, and was out of the running when Anne Boleyn, one of its leading supporters, was executed. Another translation surfaced in Antwerp in 1537, the work of John Rogers, but printed under the pseudonym Matthew, and known as Matthew's Bible. It was sufficiently acceptable to be granted a licence to be sold in England.

The pressure for an authorised version of the Bible was based not on a radical reforming zeal in either church or monarch, but on what was seen as the urgent need to exclude unauthorised and much too radical versions flooding into England.

In 1538 a Royal injunction ordered the clergy to provide an English Bible in every church.

That ye shall provide....one book of the whole bible of the largest volume in English, and the same set up in some convenient place within the said church that ye have cure of, whereas your parishioners may most commodiously resort to the same and read it.

The injunction added that the cost of providing such a Bible was to fall on the parish . half on the incumbent, and half on the parishioners. (Largest may have given Matthew's folio advantage over Coverdale's quarto.)

Which particular Bible it should be was decided in the following year when, at Thomas Cromwell's behest, Coverdale reworked the Matthew Bible to make it more acceptable to the English church and the resulting text was printed in London in 1539, and soon became known as the *Great Bible*. Its title page showed, to one side, Archbishop Cranmer receiving the new Bible directly from Henry's hand, and passing it on to the clergy, while on the other side it was Thomas Cromwell receiving it and passing it down to the citizens at large.

A year later, in 1540, Cromwell had been beheaded and the title page was amended by the blanking out of his coat of arms which had identified him.

The *Great Bible* remained the authorised one until it was replaced in 1611 by the new translation ordered by James II, though its authority had been considerably undermined by the *Geneva Bible*, an English translation produced in Geneva in 1560, by English reformers in exile, many of them fleeing persecution in England during Mary Tudor's reign. The *Geneva Bible* was very popular in England, but not with the Church, and not with James II when he came to the throne. (Not only was it too reformist, it had been translated and printed in Geneva . a Republic, and a Protestant one.) Hence the new translation and the AV.

This is not a paper on the Bible in English, nor on the history of printing in England, nor even on the evolution of the English language. All I have said up to now has been by way of introduction, and might perhaps be summarised as follows: sometime in about the 15th century English began to supplant Norman French and Latin as the language of England. This process was greatly quickened and strengthened by the invention of printing and the availability of printed books in English. From the mid 16th century on the most available book by far was the Bible.

From the 1540s on the Bible was not just the universal text book for studying English, but the great force in the standardisation of written English. At the tail end of this introductory period comes England's greatest writer, Shakespeare (1564-1616).

The printed word over succeeding centuries circulated the works of essayists, diarists, poets, novelists and, from the late 17th century, journalists. Literacy rates grew rapidly and newspapers achieved mass circulations. Education for all generated a vast new field for the printed word. Remarkably the technique of printing changed slowly, and very little, over the period from Caxton to the 20th century. The late nineteenth century saw hot-metal printing, whereby individual letters, and later lines of type (linotype) could be formed instantly from moulds and molten lead in letterpress machines. The creation of flexible matrices and rotary presses allowed thousands of newsprint pages to be run off in minutes.

The English language has evolved over the centuries, but it is remarkable that we can all read the 17th century English of the AV with almost no difficulty . and it remains the preferred translation . and we can and do both read and watch Shakespeare's plays more than those of any other dramatist. If you look at a Dictionary of Quotations today, you will find that the most quoted sources are, by far, Shakespeare and the Bible. Some way behind, in my DoQ, comes John Milton, another 17th century man.

The extent to which the 1611 Bible has influenced the language can be seen in the many phrases still in common use today which originated in the *King James Bible* . *the land of the living...a sign of the times...the apple of his eye...the blind leading the blind...the writing on the wall...eat drink and be merry...the powers that be...feet of clay* .and these are only, to use another phrase of Biblical origin, *a drop in the bucket*' (Isaiah 40, 15.).

It was around the same period that the first efforts were made to standardise spelling, through word lists. The first dictionary, meaning a book of words with definitions, is generally thought to be Robert Cowdray's *A Table Alphabetical*, published in 1604, and containing barely 2,500 words. Dr Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* was completed in 1755 and had 43,000 words; the *Oxford English Dictionary* first appeared in 1928, and today has 750,000 words.

By 1928 the printed word had been joined by the spoken word, in the form of the wireless, and, just before WW2, by television. In our own lifetimes a revolution in communication far more dramatic and possibly with even greater consequences than the invention of printing has begun, and is still rampaging ahead. When I started as a journalist in the *Belfast Telegraph* in 1959 the paper, like all others, was set on linotype machines with keyboards which automatically created lines of type made by filling moulds with molten lead. These had to be fitted into a chase for each page, which in turn went through a mangle which produced a mat, or matrix, a *papier maché* mould from which the semi-circular metal plates that went onto the rotary printing machines were cast.

It was a remarkable industrial process that was repeated daily at high speed. Twenty one years later I was, by chance, the duty editor in charge of the *Irish Times* on Sunday January 7th 1980 . the last edition of the paper to be printed by the old hot metal process. The next day's paper was set by computer word processing, the printed word was pasted onto the page, which was transferred by photograph and chemical treatment to the plates that went on the rollers.

It was a historic night, particularly for the printing staff who were attending the burial of a centuries old craft, and for some, the burial of their jobs. As souvenirs of the night, we pulled a small number of spare mats of the front page, and I kept one.

When I had joined the *Belfast Telegraph* in 1959 it was approaching the peak of its popularity; daily circulation was soon logged at 200,000, on busy days topping 210,000 copies. Today the paper's circulation is 49,000, less than one quarter of what it was then, and it is still falling. *The Irish Times*, riding the back of the Celtic Tiger, reached a record 110,000 copies daily about five years ago. Today it has plummeted to 70,000.

Instead of reading newspapers, people are watching TV or video, listening to the radio, or surfing the net, or texting, or skyping or chatting on their mobiles. A recent survey of American life-styles showed that adults spent an average of four and a half hours per day watching TV or video, two and three quarter hours a day on the internet, one and a half listening to radio and more than an hour on their mobile phones. Total time spent reading newspapers and magazines was less than half an hour. The most recent figures for the UK showed that average daily time spent in front of the TV was just over four hours, while time spent listening to the radio was almost three hours.

Another set of statistics, from the same Ofcom report : 92% of people in the UK now have mobile phones. Together they text 175 billion messages per year. (2012 figures)

As against all that, about 150,000 books are published annually in the UK, though the figures may be distorted by the enormous sales of a small number of spectacularly successful titles. The figure for 2010 was 152,000, down 3.2% on the previous year. A decline, but not on the scale of the drop in newspaper sales. Book sales, on the other hand, have been increasing. In 2010 229 million books were sold in the UK, 42% more than in 2001. And now we also have digital books.

So the book is not just about to disappear, but who knows?

If the medium of communication has been changing so drastically and rapidly, what is happening to the language used to transmit it? What is happening to English? A main feature of the revolution that has seen the replacement of the printed word by the spoken word, or the texted or emailed word has been a transition from the formal to the informal.

When the BBC began transmitting almost a century ago, the spoken word was the written word read out in the most correct English, and by the poshest voices you could find. Correspondents read out their carefully prepared reports. Even discussion programmes were rehearsed.

When I did some broadcasting for the BBC World Service from Africa in the 1960s, I had to write a script, record a tape, spoken at the prescribed 120 words per minute, and air mail it to Bush House. Now nothing is rehearsed and almost all reporting is conversational. Fiona in London or Salford asks Orla in Gaza to tell her what is going on, even to talk us through recent events. Jeremy in Baghdad chats away to Natasha in the studio, and we are allowed to eavesdrop on their conversation.

All this is in the name of informality, of being listener, or viewer-friendly, of making news not just important or informative, but also easy listening. Particularly since TV has become all-important, broadcasting has become part of the entertainment industry. If you stray beyond BBC's Radio 4, you will be engulfed in a tide of casual chatter. The listeners and viewers presumably love it, so what is wrong with it, even if it is not to my taste or yours?

My question now is what is happening to English in this era of the spoken word, the chatted word, the texted word? (Another question outside the scope of this paper, is the impact this conversational approach has on the quality of the reporting, in terms of accuracy and responsibility. The whole affair in 2003 over the Government dossier on Iraq . mentioning the 45 minute warning . which led to the death of David Kelly and Lord Hutton's inquiry . all originated in an unscripted interview on BBC radio four with the correspondent Andrew Gilligan in which he referred to 'one of the senior offices in charge of drawing up the dossier' saying the Government probably knew that that figure was wrong even before they decided to put it in, and that 'our source' said Downing Street had ordered the dossier to be sexed up, to be made more exciting. A more considered choice of words might have avoided the easy identification of Dr Kelly as that source.)

For some time now I have been jotting down grammatical errors, clichés, ugly constructions, grossly overused words, redundant words, and people saying the direct opposite to what they intend, mostly on BBC Radios Four and Five.. My spasmodic vigil has extended to newspapers, books and even political manifestoes.

Top of my hit list is the adverb. Three in particular: hopefully, absolutely and only. If you listen to BBC Radio from 6 to 8 any morning, you will be bombarded by all three. Hopefully is much favoured by weather forecasters, economists, and sports reporters, and by the people who write the news bulletins. Absolutely is the favourite one word answer. Only is a wandering waif, misunderstood by almost everyone who comes across her.

Hopefully is an adverb, and an adverb's function is to qualify or modify a verb or an adjective. Take this sentence, from a BBC weather forecast,

Hopefully the showers will lessen in intensity...

The only verb or adjective in this sentence is to lessen. The showers may lessen gradually, or suddenly, but they are unlikely to lessen hopefully, not least because showers are not sentient beings and therefore cannot feel hope, or anything else. We know, roughly, what the forecaster meant, even if one could ask if (1) she was hopeful that the showers would lessen, that is she was full of hope implying that there was some basis for believing the showers would lessen; or (2) she could have meant that she was simply hoping that they would.

Another weather forecaster, BBC last Christmas Eve, was more obviously wrong when he said, *a propos* the pretty awful forecast:

"Hopefully things will improve, but the outlook is bleak."

Grammar apart, if the outlook was bleak, he could not be hopeful. Another BBC correspondent covering the extended funeral of Nelson Mandela:

'Hundreds will hopefully be able to see the body of Nelson Mandela as he lies in his home place...'

He meant to say that he hoped hundreds would be able to do so, not that those hundreds would do so full of hope. Another BBC man, reporting on the crash of a helicopter en route to the Shetlands last year, told us that surviving crew members *'will hopefully hold vital views'*

as to what happened. Again we know roughly what he meant but the insertion of the word hopefully is so obviously awkward that, grammar or not, it sounds wrong and is bad English.

Today 'hopefully' is in constant use as a one word answer to a question. As in:

"Will you be there next Monday?" "Hopefully"

Strictly speaking, this does not answer the question asked. It indicates the mood you will be in when you get there. The intended answer is -"Yes, I hope to be there."

Again, we knew that all along, so what is wrong with 'hopefully'? It is not just that it is ungrammatical, it is so grossly overused that it has become what I call a garbage word, something that is tossed carelessly around and litters the literary landscape. (By the way it seems there is no adverb in French corresponding to 'hopefully'. You have to say 'avec espoir' or 'avec confiance')

A close relative to hopefully is *absolutely*, which on the BBC and elsewhere has replaced the simple answer 'yes'. On Melvin Bragg's erudite Radio 4 programme *In our Time* last November they were discussing the language of Shakespeare. One guest, a former professor of English Literature at Oxford, and a Shakespearean expert, managed, in a discussion lasting less than 20 minutes, to preface seven of her answers to questions posed by the host with the word 'absolutely'.

BBC correspondents much prefer it to 'yes'. One suspects that behind its use is the desire on the part of the professor or the reporter to indicate just how informed he is, and how sure of his knowledge. No hedging about for them. *Absolutely* not.

The result as far as the English language is concerned is the near total devaluation of a once strong word to the level of garbage. Very few questions can be answered with the total certainty implied by 'absolutely'. Some years ago someone indicated just how devalued the word had become by strengthening it with the addition of two extra syllables and coining the word 'abso-bloody-lutely'.

The plight of poor 'only' was well illustrated in the *Daily Telegraph's* reporting last summer on the fate of Susie Squire, an aide to the PM in Downing Street. She left her post suddenly, and the DT reported it thus; 'Susie Squire, who has only worked in No 10 since November last year, is moving to South Africa....'

Are we to take it that Miss Squire did nothing else in Downing Street only work, or that she worked nowhere else, only in Downing Street, or even that she, only, worked in Downing Street, and the rest were a bunch of shirkers? Putting the adverb where it rightly belongs, 'only since November' would have excluded such confusion, if indeed there was ever any confusion. But even though we know what is meant, the sentence as constructed is awkward, ugly; it is poor English.

Every style book warns against the use of clichés, even the current BBC style book. It gives some examples, but they do not include any of the following:

'This election is too close to call'. used, unfailingly, by BBC news bulletins and reporters for every closely contested election anywhere.

"This will go down to the wire" Ditto.

Those are not just clichés, they are American clichés. *too close to call* comes from baseball and the umpires task to *call a pitch*, and *down to the wire* from the American use of the term *wire* in horse racing, where we might say *finishing line* or *winning post*.

Why do almost all disasters or tragedies, in BBC-talk, hit *'close-knit communities'*, where *'everyone knows everyone else'*? Without fail the BBC tells us that people in such circumstances *'try to come to terms with their losses'*.

The endless repetition of such clichés is not confined to the BBC. even the so-called quality papers cannot resist them. But the BBC has ownership rights over some;

Interviewer to interviewee: *'What was going through your mind when it was deuce in the final set?'* That was a fatuous question the first time it was asked; now it is a fatuous cliché.

And how about

'Similar problems have been reported in 30 different towns around Britain....'

As distinct from what?, *'identical'* towns?

Or ; *'the display will go on show in 25 different countries around the world.'* All countries are different, that's why they have different names.

The BBC has also taken to the insertion of surplus words into its news bulletins. For instance *'The funeral of Aerial Sharon will take place later....'* or *'The Chancellor is to announce new measures to deal with unemployment later...'* *'Shares in Twitter will start trading on the NY Stock Exchange later...'*

The word *later* is not followed by anything, not today, or this week, or this year, just *later*. So why use it? The little word *will* tells us that we are dealing with the future, so *later* tells us nothing we don't already know. It just adds to the litter clogging up the sentence.

We in NI are familiar with the word *though* cropping up at the end of the sentence, as in *'It was a terrible week, but Sunday was lovely though,'* but we don't expect a reporter on BBC Radio Four to tell us, *apropos* the stormy weather, that *'The Severn Bridge is closed, but you can use the A4 though.'*

On the subject of words surplus to requirements in broadcasting we have, you know, to mention *know*. This contagion has spread throughout broadcasting and now decorates almost every interview, conversation, or panel discussion on radio or television.

Is it a friendly, even flattering, invitation from the interviewee to the interviewer to agree with the point just made, or about to be made, or is it there really to give the interviewee a precious second or two to think of what on earth he will say next.

What else? The sudden, or even expected, presentation of a microphone can do peculiar things to the language of someone thus confronted. For instance, how about the police officer who recently conveyed his views on a particularly nasty case involving child abuse;

'This is not just a crime; it is morally reprehensible.'

Or another by-stander asked to comment on the same case, who declared:-

'You can't underestimate the impact these kind of things have on children.' Which, if you pause to think of it, can mean only that they have little or no impact at all.

Even more annoying is the warm embrace given by broadcasters and newspaper journalists to cheap imports from abroad. A recent headline in the DT on the issue of new postage stamps declared: *'Stamp of distinction: 'Britain showcased'*, a transgression compounded by the statement further down the story that the Buckingham Palace series *'showcases one of the most famous buildings in the world.'*

How should we respond to the appearance of old familiar words in an entirely new sense? We used to smile when someone said it was literally raining cats and dogs but now an alternative use of *literally* to add emphasis, as one might say in *it really was raining cats and dogs*, has appeared in the OED. Fair enough we know that language changes with use. Latin scholars know that to decimate an army means killing one soldier in ten, but the word is more widely used today as meaning to inflict severe losses, usually many more than one in ten. But that is a transition from a particular meaning, to a more general, but closely related one. The change in *'literally'* is from one meaning to a different one.

Barter, we learned at school, was the earliest form of trade in goods and services, with the specific meaning that it was an exchange **not** involving money. Now barter is often used to mean to bargain, or to haggle over the money involved. No doubt haggling was part of the bartering of goods and services, but as today's haggling is always over price, to use it in that sense is to offend against its original meaning.

In both written and conversational English today anarchy reigns on words such as none, neither, either, each, as to whether these singular subject words take a singular or plural verb, or entirely as you please. Here a few examples:

A BBC report of the Nigella Lawson case and the two Italian ladies;

Neither of the two sisters were in court at the time +

Tim Wannacot, on Bargain Hunt:

Each of the glazing bars are made in birch +

Presenter of BBC2 TV series Great Interior Design Challenge:

Each of our three projects are up and running +

The next appeared as a strapline across a full page of the DT:-

'The de-selection of two MPs this week are leading some to suggest that grassroots members have had enough.'

And another variation: Fintan O'Toole in IT, Jan 4, 2014, reviewing a new production of Dion Boucicault's *the Coleen Bawn*.

*'Boucicault is much more knowing than **anyone** who thinks **they** can patronise him.'*

This last one is interesting because I rather suspect it is not, as the others are, a result of either carelessness or a belief that anything goes. The singular subject ~~anyone~~ and the plural pronoun ~~they~~ clearly jar, and are ungrammatical, the correct alternative would have been ~~than anyone who thinks~~ **he** can patronise him.

However, in the politically correct world that some writers inhabit that would be sexist, and ~~he~~ or ~~she~~ clumsy, and ~~she~~ or ~~he~~ even clumsier. So the solution is to use the genderless plural. I am glad to say that the *Economist* style book takes the view that gender concerns cannot overrule grammar.

And one more from Fintan O'Toole, this time in the New York Times,

*'After five years of austerity, it is shocking but hardly surprising that **one in four** Irish children **are** growing up in households in which **no one** at all **is** in paid employment.'*

A last one; it is the opening sentence of a letter to the editor of the *Irish Times* from Dr Schreibman of the School of English, Trinity College Dublin.

***This letter**, along with hundreds of others, **are** available at letters1916.ie ...'*

But is it always wrong, or ever wrong, to follow ~~none~~ with a plural verb? The journalist, Tom Chivers, thinks not. Writing in the DT last year he warned his readers against what he called *The Tribe of Grammar People*, people who, in his words, hold passionate (but incorrect) beliefs about grammar, such as that it is wrong to split infinitives, use ~~none~~ in a plural form, or end sentences on prepositions. All these strange shibboleths, he went on, have nothing to do with how English is actually used, but are intended to mark out their users as members of that tribe. The motives of the tribe, according to Mr C. are self-aggrandization and a snobbish doing down of people who use a different kind of English. I am afraid he would categorize much of my paper as a combination of nit-picking, snobbery and pedantry.

Nor would he be alone in so doing. There is an influential cohort of writers and academics who argue that English is a constantly changing language, now spoken around the world, and is much too dynamic to be hidebound by a minority of grammarians telling the vast majority of English speakers they must adhere to grammatical rules and niceties that are ignored daily by most English speakers.

They have a point. English grammar is not a set of hard and fast rules. The argument against a split infinitive is more a matter of style than grammar. And there are differing views on whether or not the word none must always be regarded as singular, just as there are examples from literature where it is not.

Fowler, at least in the 1968 edition, states bluntly that it is a mistake to suppose that the pronoun ~~none~~ is singular only, and must at all costs be followed by a singular verb. *The Oxford Guide to the English Language* is with Fowler, and cites a sentence such as ~~None~~ of the fountains ever play. Similarly with ~~neither~~ where it can quote Shakespeare, in *Troilus and Cressida*, writing

'The site's body is as good as Ajax's, where neither are alive'.

And Winston Churchill long ago dealt with the preposition at the end of the sentence.

One of the most influential of this anti-prescription school of thought is David Crystal, specialist in Linguistic Science with a long career in the University of Wales at Bangor, and at the University of Reading. His 2004 book, *The Stories of English*, was extolled by critics, and is indeed a very good account of the origins of English, its standardisation in England and its diversification as it was adopted around the world. One of his main points is that there is no longer any real standard English, governed by a common lexicon of words, agreed rules of grammar, sentence construction or pronunciation. He is not talking here of dialects, but of the varieties of written English.

Prof. Crystal has no time for prescriptive grammar or indeed for what he calls the prescriptive tradition towards language. This he also labels the complaint tradition dating back to the 18th century and manifested mainly through irate letters to the newspapers, usually about split infinitives. We must, he says, escape from this tradition, and do that by maintaining the momentum of recent times towards accepting much of the prevailing non-standard English, and developing a fresh conception of a Standard English which gets away from prescriptive preoccupations.

(The opposite of prescriptive according to this school is descriptive. A correct view of standard English should, it argues, indeed must, come from *describing* how most people speak English, not *prescribing* how they should speak it.)

In what seems a rather abrupt change of gear, Prof Crystal then tells us that the issues which so worried, and still worry, the prescriptive grammarians are few in number, reckoning that out of a typical reference grammar of 1,500 pages only a dozen or so will deal with such issues. That seems to leave something of a credibility gap between the problem thus indicated and the remedy of an entirely new conception of standard English.

For our guidance he ends with a ten-point list of principles central to this new climate; these include the need for a standard variety of English to facilitate communication nationally and internationally.

Another academic linguist out to wage war on the prescriptive grammarians is Ronald Wardhaugh, late of the University of Toronto. Writing in 1999 in *Proper English: Myths and Misunderstandings about Language*, he portrayed the debate on the state of English as between conservative and liberal, traditionalist and progressivist, authoritarian and permissivist, and non-scientist and scientist, with all the first-named categories still controlling public thinking on the subject.

His book ends with a rallying cry to linguists to counter the prescriptivists, who up to then had succeeded in trivialising questions of language in the public mind.

He devotes a page and a half to one sub-section dealing with the word *hopefully* headed '*Hopefully I'll get it right*', and defending its use in all the ways of which I was disapproving earlier. As I understand it, his defence is that *hopefully* can be used as a sentence adverb, as in '*Hopefully, he will not do it again*' where the *hopefully* modifies the entire sentence. I presume that where *hopefully* is the one word answer to the question '*Will you be there next week*', it is not just a sentence adverb, but a sentence in itself, with the clear meaning that *I hope to be there*.

He also, throughout, dismisses the ambiguity argument which I have used to illustrate misuse of *hopefully*, *absolutely* and *only*. No matter how twisted the sentence and inappropriate the dictionary definition of the offending word may be, we all know what is meant. Same could be said for *none*, *neither*, *either*, *each* and so forth whether they are followed by singular or plural verb. We always know what is meant.

But the same, of course, could also be said of football managers being interviewed on air. Whatever string of clichés, mangled context or broken English they use, it is, mostly, possible to grasp what they mean to say. But no one could accuse them of speaking standard English.

A third leading light in the fight against the grammar Nazis as he has termed them, is Professor Geoffrey Pullum, of Edinburgh University, now much more widely known, it would seem, for his blog on the worldwideweb called the *Language Log*, described as probably the most viewed linguistic website in the world. He too is much exercised about myths which say it is wrong to split an infinitive or insist that none takes a singular verb. He dates the use of none with a plural verb back at least to 1640 and claims that the plural version has been the more common one for 300 years.

Prof Pullum says that he and his fellow descriptivists are not flaming liberals who think anything goes and everything should be allowed. Instead he claims the middle ground where you decide what the rules of standard English are on the basis of close study of the way that native speakers use the language.

From the context the you who decide in that quotation are the academic linguists, but there is no indication as to who the native speakers might be, or which native speakers you take into consideration. It all sounds just a bit prescriptivist, even if the medicine prescribed is milder in content and dosage than that favoured by the Grammar Nazis.

Prof Pullum, like Crystal and Wardhaugh, believes that children should be taught the rules of standard English 'not least because children who master it are likely to do better than children who can't.' All three write as though English is still firmly in the grip of the prescriptive traditionalists, and a great effort is needed to wrest it from their grasp. I tend to think that their Prescriptivists are Paper Tigers, almost irrelevant to the present situation, where the threat is not of prescription, but rather of anarchy.

Crystal states that every schoolchild needs to learn to read and write Standard English, and to understand its spoken use.' That is point 8 in his list of central principles. Earlier he has told us that Standard English and nonstandard English are mainly differentiated by grammar. This implies that the teaching of grammar is central to teaching Standard English.

Some years ago the Government decided that in the GSCE exam 12% of marks should relate to spelling, punctuation and the correct use of grammar in the grading of papers for the subjects of English and English Language. Last year OFqual, the independent advisory body to Government on qualifications, announced that 5% of marks in four more subjects - English Literature, History, Geography and RE would be awarded, or not, on spelling, punctuation and grammar.

In Dublin a report by the State Examinations Commission earlier this year expressed concern at school leavers' ability to get to grips with spelling, grammar and punctuation, and

urged greater attention be paid in the teaching of English to the basics of language structures and syntax.

It would be interesting to see what guidance is offered to teachers and examiners in the UK and Ireland on what rules of standard English might be in these days.

From my limited reading of the descriptivists, some points strike me.

- They seem to rely much too heavily on current usage, both written and spoken, for guidance as to what is standard English; if enough people get it wrong over a long enough period, does it become right?;
- They underestimate the vastly increased rate of change in usage; Pullum argues that changes over even a century are trivial checked by the great number of users, and also by the long heritage of literature. But the circumstances that stabilised the language over centuries have changed dramatically in our own lifetime;
- They seem fixated on a very limited number of rules insisted upon by the Grammar Tribe, which they regard as either wrong, or trivial or long out of date, and tend to ignore the general decline in literacy among recent generations;

I have also, so far, not come across any efforts at formulating a rational defence for some of the new usages that annoy the grammarians. It could be argued that in the case of a singular noun taking a plural verb . as in the examples I used earlier, *neither of the two sisters were*, *each of the bars are*, *each of our three projects are* . that the plural noun immediately preceding the verb is the effective subject of the verb. The reality is that the two sisters were not in court, all the bars are made in birch, and all three projects are up and running. So as well as sounding right, the sense is also right.

You can have more fun along those lines with Fintan O'Toole's *'one in four Irish children are growing up in households in which no one at all is in paid employment.'* You could argue that the **one in four** is a generalisation covering many thousands of Irish children, not just one, and is therefore in essence plural, while the **no one at all** is emphatically singular, and for the sake of emphasis takes a singular verb.

When you say *'None of my friends were there'* you are conveying the news that a number of people did not turn up. In all these examples a plural word immediately precedes the verb, making the use of the plural form sound correct.

But the handling today of this issue shows no sign of any attempt to relate the choice of a singular or plural verb to any rule or principle. One book that prompted this paper was a beautifully produced volume published by the British Library in 2010, *William Caxton and early printing in England*, written a former Deputy Keeper at the BL. Three short quotations from the first 40 pages illustrate my point. Can anyone make a case for *'none'* suddenly become plural in the third example?

P2 'Other printers began to operate in Oxford etc....but, unlike Caxton, none of them **were** Englishmen.'

p.31 '(The book) is preserved in many copies, none of which **were** in England at an early date.'

p 40 'None of the seven books...**includes** a statement of where **it was** printed.'

And what rule would cover the following report in the *Daily Telegraph* on a sinkhole that had suddenly appeared in Staffordshire -

'Hundreds of tons of rubble was used to patch up the hole in Oakamoor'.

Should we agree that the noun immediately preceding the verb, even if it is not the subject of the sentence, determines whether the verb is plural or singular? Thereby ignoring or decommissioning one of the basic rules of grammar?

But already we are beginning to sound prescriptive. Which brings me to the final point that strikes me about the ~~descriptivists~~ the contradiction between their suspicion of, if not distaste for, strict observance of rules of grammar, and their support for the teaching of a standard English, which, even they admit, must be grammar-based.

In my own defence I should protest that most of my criticisms, and the examples illustrating them, relate less to grammatical correctness, than to the growing prevalence of sloppy, awkward English, with junk words cropping up *ad nauseam*, where clichés proliferate and where there is little accuracy or elegance in spoken or even written English

In this I find myself in total agreement with Prof Crystal, at least where he writes in his book referring to the current crisis in English, that ~~it~~ is time to focus on topics ~~closely bound up with questions of intelligibility, clarity, precision and elegance of expression.~~

Which prompts the question . is it not one of the main functions of grammar to promote just those qualities?

Many of the examples I have quoted have come from the BBC, which is a public broadcasting service, charged under its charter with promoting education and learning and stimulating creativity and cultural excellence. But other quotes have come from quality newspapers, and from serious books by serious writers. Instead of the printed word setting the acceptable standard, the printed word is now so influenced by the informal, conversational, colloquial and sometimes sloppy English of broadcasting and of the new media that there is, or soon will be, a new Standard English which will be no standard at all.