

**R.W. Burchfield.** *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage*. 3rd edition 1996, xxiii + 864 pp. ISBN 0-19-869-126-2. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Price £16.99.

## 1. Introduction

R.W. Burchfield's revision (1996) of H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* is an important book by a distinguished scholar. It provides an opportunity to assess both a large and useful new text, and, in passing, the largely prescriptive Fowler tradition up to its transformation by Burchfield.

Burchfield's aim is "to guide readers to make sensible choices in linguistically controversial areas of words, meanings, grammatical constructions and pronunciations" (Burchfield 1996: xi). For this he is well qualified by his long service as Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionaries (1971-1984), his *magnum opus* the four-volume *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, his wide array of publications on the English language and the range of his human experience, common sense and humour.

Numerous entries in his new Fowler bear on such topics as *Estuary English*, *gobbledegook*, *officialese*, *political correctness*, *racialism* ("one of the key words of the 20th century") and *sexist language*. The problem term *Mid-Atlantic* would have been a useful addition here. His intended readers are clearly sophisticated speakers of English as L1, with a grasp of the language well above that of the "foreign students of English" addressed by Michael Swan (1980) in his *Practical English Usage* or John Sinclair (1992) and his team for the *Collins Cobuild English Usage* text, heavily dependent on "actual examples not invented ones" (Sinclair 1992: iv). On this point Sinclair and Burchfield agree, but there are obvious differences between usage texts for L1 and L2 readers.

## 2. Usage Texts for L1 Speakers

Usage problems arise, of course, in all the three main fields of language study: grammar, semantics and phonetics/phonology. Early grammars tended to deal in passing with usage problems. Thus Lowth (1762) remarks in the Preface to his *Short Introduction to English Grammar*:

Our best authors have committed gross mistakes

some of which he proceeds to correct.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many factors, but perhaps chiefly the early efforts in education of missionary societies in their schools culminating in the Education Acts of 1870-1921, brought many thousands of dialect speakers into contact with standard English. *Standard* here is taken to mean the more or less codified form of the written language, now

fairly uniform in major English-using communities. There is perhaps no standard accent across the Englishes of the world, though broadcasting, governmental and upper-class usages cohere in a variety of local standards.

The demand for English usage texts for speakers of English as L1 is thus likely to have risen steadily from about the mid-nineteenth century. By the time that the Clarendon Press at Oxford published *The King's English* (1906) by the brothers H.W. and F.G. Fowler a fairly large range of usage-related texts was available, and usage publication had emerged as a *genre* of its own.

### 3. H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*

H.W. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* appeared in 1926, eight years after the death of F.G. Fowler as a result of war service. It is a substantial book (viii and 742 pages) in its 1940 edition, basically a set of articles on words and phrases. The list of General Articles includes, however, such items as *Avoidance of the Obvious*, *Battered Ornaments*, *Swapping Horses* and *Word Patronage*. These suggest that a competent reader should ideally know the whole book when he consults it. Burchfield (1996) has no such list.

*Fowler*, as *Modern English Usage* came to be called, was widely read and cited. It was republished in 1965 in an edition lightly revised by Sir Ernest Gowers.

Despite the great popularity of the book, it was criticised by many linguists. Thus Hilda M. Murray (1926: 42) writes:

The plan and execution are alike admirable and the matter excellent reading, though the reader may sometimes fail to distinguish between the voice of authority and that of private opinion.

Kemp Malone (1927: 201) remarks:

In Mr Fowler's chosen field of activity, viz., linguistic science, sound and abiding work cannot be done by a man weak in phonetics and neglectful of the historical approach to the problems of which he writes.

The Gowers edition (1965) drew expressions of the traditional favourable view of "the unique Fowleresque quality which has made the book perennial" (*British Book News*, July 1965, 475) but also such condemnations as that of Barbara Strang (1966: 264):

Fowler's attitude is not a possible one for a good mind in the 1960s.

Burchfield (1991: 101-106) from whom the last four quotations have been taken, sees the conflict as primarily one between linguists and nonlinguists. It has perhaps another dimension, that of social class. Thus Fowler in a letter of 1911 to his publisher writes:

In point of fact we have our eyes not on the foreigner but on the half-educated Englishman of literary proclivities (Burchfield 1991: 96).

Fowler happens to have been educated at Rugby and Balliol College, Oxford, and to have taught English and Classics at Sedburgh School (1882-1899) where he was described as "a stickler for etiquette" (Burchfield in McArthur 1992: 414). It seems that his monument to the standard form of English attracted support in particular from the older members of society. Burchfield himself hints at this in his remark that "in the space of a few weeks a judge, a colonel, and a retired curator of Greek and Roman antiquities at the British Museum told me on separate social occasions that they have [Fowler] close at hand at all times" (Burchfield 1996: ix).

#### 4. Databases

Burchfield (1996: ix) remarks in his Preface:

From the start it was obvious to me that a standard work on English usage needs to be based on satisfactory modern evidence and that a great deal of the evidence could be obtained and classified by electronic means.

He proceeded to establish on a PC a database of ten independent fields with a numbering system within each, for example for gerunds:

3 = possessive with gerund

*I was proud of his being accepted at such a good school* — *New Yorker* 1986.

4 = gerund without possessive

*How could she think of a baby being born in the house* — A.S. Byatt 1985.

"In the end," he says, "my gerunds field contained examples of more than 100 types of gerundial constructions."

Materials were gathered "from a systematic reading of British and American newspapers, periodicals and fiction of the 1980s and 1990s in approximately equal proportions" (Burchfield 1996: x).

Burchfield had also access to the electronic and paper-slip files of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. This is an extremely rich collection of basic materials, worked over as he tells us "for nine years", during which he undertook several other projects.

The Fowlers had a much smaller database. *The King's English* gives sources of examples, citing the *Times* leading with five hundred and fifty, followed by the *Daily Telegraph* with ninety-six and the *Spectator* ninety-four. The editors

drawn upon are mainly nineteenth century British: "Scores of important writers of the Victorian period remained unexamined, or, at any rate, uncited" (Burchfield 1991: 99), and only four American writers are cited. American materials, indeed, are largely excluded from both *The King's English* and *Modern English Usage*. "I know absolutely nothing about American," wrote Fowler in 1927 in reply to an enquiry by his publisher about a possible Americanised version of *Modern English Usage* (Burchfield 1991: 97). *Modern English Usage* gives no sources for its quotations.

## 5. Grammar

Fowler uses the terms of traditional grammar without hesitation. In 1926 they had few competitors. Sixty years later Burchfield (1996: xi) writes:

I judged it essential to retain the traditional terminology of English grammar: there are no tree-diagrams, no epistemic modality (except to explain what the term means), no generative grammar.

There is in fact one tree-diagram in his article on *clause*. Burchfield occasionally uses the term *determiner*, but does not define it.

I also miss *noun phrase*. Though neither *clause* nor *sentence* is a particularly good article, there are some good points in his article on *grammar*, notably the following plea:

Ideally every English-speaking person should begin to distinguish the several parts of speech at an early age and continue to study the subject in a graduated manner throughout his or her time at school.

Both Fowler and Burchfield, however, are careful not to build complete mini-grammars into their texts. Neither text, for instance, has a "defining" article on *adjective*, *adverb*, *noun* or *verb*, though both have *clause*, *grammar* and *sentence*. Burchfield, moreover, has a short article on *standard English*, which is not in Fowler, even in the 1965 edition. The OED dates the phrase back to a *Quarterly Review* of 1836.

## 6. Styles of Treatment

These differ widely.

For *constable* Fowler (1926) has simply:

*constable*. Pronounce kün-.

The brevity of this entry is not characteristic. Burchfield (1996: 175) has:

'*constable*. Pronounce /'kʌnstəbəl/, but don't be surprised if you hear some standard speakers saying /'kɒn-/.

Here Fowler's amateurish phonetic rendering without a stress mark contrasts with Burchfield's IPA with stresses, though his second schwa instead of a syllabic /ɹ/ is questionable. Burchfield also offers a possible variation and his style is characteristically relaxed.

Fowler condemns "our mutual friend", a favourite shibboleth of usage writers. Burchfield, however, points out that *mutual* has three long-established senses:

- (a) "Reciprocal", as in *Wilde and Yeats reviewed each other's work with mutual regard*.
- (b) "Common", as in *a mutual friend* in contexts in which *common* might imply vulgarity.
- (c) "Pertaining to both parties", e.g. *of mutual benefit to both the Scots and the English*.

In constructions of type (c) *common* or *in common* are preferable if they fit idiomatically.

He makes no concessions to the dreaded *like* with which he deals with true Burchfieldian crispness. He gives four uses of this particular *like* among several articles on its forms:

1. As a conjunction.
2. As a preposition.
3. A hated parenthetical use.
4. Idiomatic phrases.

Under 3 there is a wealth of examples and a comment of which part follows:

By the mid-20th century however, its use as an incoherent and prevalent filler had reached the proportions of an epidemic, and is now scorned by standard speakers as a vulgarity of the first order.

A pleasing example quoted is:

*Naa, I was all into that last year, but like I don't think it's so relevant now* —  
M. du Plessis 1983

## 7. Conclusion

The appearance of this book is very well-timed. Towards the end of the century, at a time when achievement in English is so poor for millions of its learn-

ers even in L1 communities, it is of great value to have such a readable and far-reaching text on the standard English of England which takes regular cognisance of that of the United States.

Burchfield in fact inhabits a much more extensive world than did Fowler. Fowler died in 1933 having seen only a third of the twentieth century. Burchfield has seen far more and has rewritten a major text which will be an important guide to speakers and writers in the new millennium and an important auxiliary reference text for lexicographers of English.

## References

- Burchfield, R.W. 1991. *The Fowler Brothers and the Tradition of Usage Handbooks*. Leitner, G. (Ed.). 1991. *English Traditional Grammars*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Burchfield, R.W. 1996. *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fowler, H.W. 1926. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Oxford: Clarendon Press / London: Humphrey Milford.
- Fowler, H.W. and Francis G. Fowler. 1906. *The King's English*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lowth, Robert. 1762. *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*. Edited by M.V. Aldridge. 1973. Grahamstown: Institute for the Study of English in Africa.
- Malone, Kemp. 1927. Review of Fowler *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. *Modern Language Notes* 42(3): 201-202.
- McArthur, Tom (Ed.). 1992. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murray, Hilda M.R. 1926. Review of Fowler *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. *The Year's Work in English Studies* 1926 7: 42-43.
- Sinclair, John (Ed.). 1992. *Collins Cobuild English Usage*. London: HarperCollins.
- Strang, Barbara M.H. 1966. Review of Fowler *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, second edition. *Modern Language Review* 61(2): 264-265.
- Swan, Michael. 1980. *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bill Branford  
Emeritus Professor  
Rhodes University  
Grahamstown  
South Africa