



New book explains language's constant state of flux

reviewed by Matthew Crowley

Brace yourselves, copy editors. The list of language peeves I'm about to present may induce teeth grinding.

Impact as a noun. *Literally* used figuratively. *Unique* or *perfect* modified by adjectives. *Disinterested* to mean uninterested.

In his new book, *Bad English: A History of Linguistic Aggravation*, author Ammon Shea argues that these usages are common and increasingly cemented in our vocabulary—even if we hate them.

Copy editors and prescriptivist peevers have hashed over the dilemma of language misuse ad nauseam. “Weird Al” Yankovic listed some of his pet peeves in “Word Crimes,” his recent parody. (Yankovic’s penalties for language violations were notably harsh. A *literally-figuratively* transgression, he suggested, merited a crowbar dope slap.)

Shea, a consulting editor of dictionaries at Oxford University Press, suggests that this ardor (or animus) is pointless. English has always changed, he argues, even as large numbers of English speakers wished it wouldn’t.

And, he says, English speakers have always badgered one another about what’s “right.”

“The abuse of language and the abuse of people who do so are both part of the human condition,” he writes.

In *Bad English*, Shea covers categories of supposed breaches: verbed nouns, grammatical sins, deteriorating language. He illustrates examples with dueling quotes: one insisting a usage is wrong, the other arguing the opposite. Sometimes the scolds are familiar media: *The New York Times*; the *Santa Fe New Mexican*; the South Florida *Sun Sentinel*. Sometimes they’re revered writers: Shakespeare, Twain, Oates, Nabokov.

Some readers may bristle at the book’s abandonment of “wrongs” and “rights” and label Shea as a miscreant, or worse. But Shea says he’s not an anti-rules nihilist.

“I’m not an absolute nihilist as far as ... language is concerned,” Shea told Robert Siegel on NPR’s “All Things Considered.” “I don’t think you should throw out all the rules. I operate from the position that I think many of the rules we hold onto are capricious and arbitrary and do more to stunt the language than to foster change and innovation.”

Bad English shows how far change has come, and how far English has bent. A delight of the book are onetime no-nos that now seem comical.

To wit:

- Belittle: Once outlawed as a coarse back-formation of *little*.
- Fun: Once thought allowable only as a noun—not an adjective.

- Flummox: Once deemed a vulgarism poorly standing in for *perplex*.
- Dress: Once deemed an unacceptable synonym for *gown*.

Shea’s explanations of language developments win with cogent logic and keen detail. He explains, for example, that the same process that gave us reviled words like *incentivize* and *monetize* also gave us the useful and universally accepted *memorize*.

And, before we dismiss something like *OMG* as inane text-speak, he asks us to consider that the expression dates back to 1917, when an admiral leading the British navy included it in a letter to Winston Churchill.

In an interview, Shea has said that copy editors represent a reasoned middle ground between anything-goes linguists and peeve-clinging educated laypeople. He adds that people who copy edit for newspapers in particular struggle with the paradox of being held to higher standards amid generally lowered language expectations.

“People for at least 100 years have thought newspapers were in league with the devil in plotting to destroy the English language,” he said.

Style guides, notably *AP Stylebook*, have ruled on whether certain peever phrases can stand. With *unique*, for example, AP sticks with absolutism. “Do not describe something as rather unique, most unique or very unique,” the 2014 *Stylebook* says.

However, Shea says, AP was once just as hard and fast about *hopefully* not standing in for *it is to be hoped that*. But that position changed. Similarly, this year, AP erased the line between *over* and *more than*, but not without torrents of Twitter *sturm und drang*.

Ultimately, Shea argues for a measured approach to copy editing: understanding that language change is inevitable and drawing editorial lines in the sand thoughtfully, rather than dogmatically.

Rather than clinging to rules absolutely, he suggests, we should consider clarity. Ponder rhythm. Even embrace new terms. *Incentivize* in place of *encourage* just might make sense if a writer is emphasizing the financial reward of taking a certain action, for example.

“Leave room for eloquence,” he says. ●

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