**Parsing the Weightiness of Words**

*The first edition of Henry Watson Fowler’s* A Dictionary of Modern English Usage *offers advice on useful distinctions and so much more.*

After completing the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Henry Watson Fowler suggested to Oxford University Press doing a dictionary that would leave out the obvious words and instead concentrate (2) on those that were confusing and inexact as well as on troubling idioms and obsolete rules. An editor at Oxford referred to it as a “Utopian dictionary,” one “that would sell very well—in (3) Utopia.” The book, published in 1926 under the title *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, was in fact a modest bestseller, and subsequently went through several editions and two revisions.

The book’s success was owing entirely to its author, H.W. Fowler, a former English public-school teacher, a failed literary journalist, and a lexicographer extraordinaire. (4) Fowler was magisterial and commonsensical, immensely knowledgeable and understatedly witty, a grammatical moralist whose hatred of humbug made him a moralist on the side of good sense.

A radical in his day, Fowler held that it was no crime to (5) end a sentence with a preposition, that it was better (6) to split an infinitive than to write an awkward sentence attempting to avoid doing so, that common words were to be preferred over foreign and polysyllabic ones. Fowler, as Ernest Gowers, author of *The Complete Plain Words*, wrote, “was an emancipator from the fetters of the grammatical pedants that had bound us for so long.”

*A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is suffused with the personality and idiosyncrasies of its author, more so perhaps than even Samuel Johnson’s famous *Dictionary*. Fowler had a taste for risky but amusing generalizations. In his entry on “Didacticism,” for example, he remarks that “men are as much possessed by the didactic impulse as women by the maternal instinct.” By way of usage, he also taught good manners. His entry “French Words” begins: “Display of superior knowledge is as great a vulgarity as display of superior wealth—greater, indeed, inasmuch as knowledge should tend more definitely than wealth towards discretion and good manners.”

One frequently turns to Fowler for advice on useful distinctions: between (7) “forceful” and “forcible,” or “intense” and “intensive,” or among “finical,” “finicking,” “finicky” and “finikin.” He was excellent at stripping a euphemism or genteelism down to its essential meaning: “‘Not to put too fine a point upon it’ is an apology for a downright expression, and means ‘to put it bluntly.’” On occasion he supplies a brief entry on language change, as in the entry “hair-do”: “This now compound noun has reached the dictionaries, and deserves to supersede the alien coiffure and to be written hairdo.”

The great gems in *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* are the lengthier entries sometimes buried under titles that have now themselves become the names for good sense in composition. “Elegant Variation,” for example, denoting that habit of “second-rate writers, those more intent on expressing themselves prettily than on conveying their meaning clearly. . .” Elegant variation is the sin in composition of calling the same thing, or naming the same act, by as many different words as possible. The dialogue of amateur writers of fiction, suckers for elegant variation, tends to have their characters not merely “say,” but “opine,” “allow,” “retort,” “riposte,” and so on into the night. (8)

Other such entries include “Love of the Long Word,” “Split Infinitive,” “Superiority,” “Novelese,” “Hybrids and Malformations,” “Novelty-Hunting,” “Vogue Words,” “Slipshod Extensions,” and others. One gets a strong sense of Fowler’s general tone, wit and point of view from the opening of his article “Sturdy Indefensibles”:

“Many idioms are seen, if they are tested by grammar or logic, not to say what they are nevertheless well understood to mean. (9) Fastidious people point out the sin, and easy-going people, who are more numerous, take little notice and go on committing it. Then the fastidious people, if they are foolish, talk of ignorance and solecism, and are laughed at as pedants; or if they are wise, say no more about it and wait. The indefensibles, however sturdy, may not prove to be immortal, and anyway there are much more profitable ways of spending time than baiting them.”

Of the two revisions of *Modern English Usage*, Gowers’s, published in 1965, 32 years after Fowler’s death, is in every way a pleasing supplement to the book, eliminating some overly technical material, adding such new entries as “Worsened Words” and “Abstractitus,” but, as Gowers (10) allowed,” chary of making any substantial alterations except for the purpose of bringing [Fowler] up to date.” The book was revised a second time in 1996 by R.W. Burchfield, himself earlier the editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. “Fowler’s name remains on the title page,” Burchfield wrote in the preface to his edition, “even though his book has been largely rewritten in this third edition.” Sad to report, Burchfield broadened, modernized, streamlined, and along the way essentially destroyed a dazzling book by turning it into a merely useful one.

Those who love language, who view its deployment in speech and in writing as a craft requiring artful care, will continue to rely upon and cherish the original, charming book that is *Modern English Usage* and its irretrievably idiosyncratic author—a masterpiece of personal lexicography in a field dominated by the dull and impersonal.