

Children Can't Speak or Write Properly Any More

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For centuries now there have been recurrent complaints about the state of the English language. These complaints always seem to assume that the language is in decline and that this decline is associated with moral decline. Certain sections of society are normally held responsible for this decline, and one form that the complaint tradition can take is to associate linguistic decline with the use of the language by the younger generation. Young people, it is said, are liable to misuse the language, or not learn it properly; therefore, everything possible must be done to arrest this decline; for example, by tightening up in some way on language teaching in schools. In recent decades, there have been many complaints about what are believed to be declining educational standards, and in Britain such complaints have been fuelled by the government's proposals for a 'National Curriculum'. It is typically claimed that the schools are failing in their duty to teach children how to use English properly – both in speaking and in writing – and usually further claimed that this is due to modern teaching methods, which are said to be too permissive. Traditional methods, involving classroom drills and rote learning of correct spelling and grammar, are believed to have been in the past more effective in achieving and maintaining high standards of speaking and writing among children.

Although it is of course important that educational standards in schools should be carefully maintained, there is in reality nothing to suggest that today's youngsters are less competent at speaking and writing their native language than older generations of children were. Their ability to speak the language is just as good, and their ability to read and write it is, almost certainly, a great deal better on average.

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Let's first consider the question of literacy. Is there any really persuasive evidence that literacy standards have declined?

In 1850 in England and Wales 31 per cent of bridegrooms and 46 per cent of brides could not write their names in the marriage register. By 1900 the percentage had declined to 3 per cent, and this reduction was largely a result of the 1870 Education Act, in which the British Government recognized the need for *functional literacy* among the working population and encouraged the teaching of the three Rs to everyone. Functional literacy means only the ability to read and write for practical purposes – understanding written messages from employers, for example, or writing simple instructions to other workers. It does not mean the ability to read Shakespeare with pleasure or partake in a high literary culture. If 97 per cent of the people could write their own names in 1900, it does not follow that they were all highly literate. It is likely that many of these people could not reliably spell 'difficult' words like *accommodate* and *dessicate*, keep up with international news in *The Times* or even write a fluent personal letter. The national aim had been to achieve functional literacy only, as this was the minimum necessary for the demands of a modern nation.

Those who complain today that standards of literacy are declining assume tacitly that there was a Golden Age in the past when our children, for the most part, could read and write more competently than they can today, and the complaints fit into a pattern of complaint literature that has been with us since the eighteenth century. In these complaints, linguistic decline is associated with moral decline, and this is the most powerful myth of all. For Jonathan Swift in 1712, it was the 'Licentiousness which entered with the Restoration [1660]' that infected our morals and then corrupted our language. In the nineteenth century, the poet G. M. Hopkins found 'this Victorian English . . . a bad business' – a language in decline. As for today, a headline in the *Observer* (4 August 1996) proclaims that 'written English is dying amid jargon, obscenity and ignorance', and complaints of this kind can be found frequently in British and American newspapers. If we were to accept all this, we would have to accept that since the language has been declining since 1700, it must by now hardly be fit for use in writing a chapter in a book like this. Concern

about our children's literacy and use of language generally is an aspect of this myth of moral and linguistic decline – as our children represent the future of the language, and the moral decline is often said to be associated with permissiveness in teaching method. There is, however, a tacit assumption in present-day complaints that things were better in the Good Old Days of strong moral discipline. There was a Golden Age when children could write much better than they can now.

Present-day complaints are never clear as to the Golden Age when children were more literate than they are now. When could it have been? Presumably, it cannot have been the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when – it seems – nearly 40 per cent of brides and bridegrooms could not write their own names. Perhaps the Golden Age envisaged is more recent than this: 1970? 1950? 1940? But again, when we look back at those times, it seems that much the same kinds of complaint about declining standards were current then. More importantly, it certainly does not seem that general standards of literacy were higher then than they are now.

In Britain the 1970s were the time of the *Black Papers*, edited by C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, which, among other things, drew attention to what were thought to be low standards of literacy in teacher-training colleges. These complaints made quite a strong impact, but from our present point of view, they suggest that we will not find the Golden Age in the 1970s. So could the Golden Age perhaps be the post-war period – approximately 1945–60? One important development in Britain around that time was the 1944 Education Act.

Before 1944 the population of England and Wales was not guaranteed a secondary education, and tertiary education was blocked to all but the rich and a few winners of university scholarships. A few people were highly literate and well versed in great literature, but not the majority. Higher education was, frankly, elitist and a preserve of the few. Indeed, during the recent debates about the National Curriculum, there were some letters to the newspapers questioning whether there really had been a Golden Age in those years. Here is one:

For some time I have been wondering if I was suffering from an acute shortage of memory. I remember many children in my primary school

who were unable to read, and remember being shocked when called up for national service to find myself in a platoon in which the majority of members were illiterate . . . How consoling therefore to read . . . of Dirk Bogarde's experience: 'The great majority of what was called the "Intake" at Catterick Camp was, to my astonishment, illiterate.'

When exactly was the time that we hear so much about, when children could all read and write and do everything so much better than today's pupils? – Letter in the Observer, 4 April 1993

As national service ended in 1961, this is likely to refer to the 1950s. The army recruits had presumably been educated at secondary modern schools and had left at fourteen or fifteen years of age. The 1944 Education Act had guaranteed them a minimum secondary education, but at the bottom end of a selective elitist system and for a shorter time than now. Whether they had been taught to read and write by 'phonics' or by the 'look-and-say' method or in any other way seems, sadly, to have been beside the point for these young men. There can be little doubt that general standards of literacy were lower in 1945–60 than they are now.

There are other general indications that standards of literacy in Britain are likely to have risen since the Second World War. In 1950 there were fewer than twenty universities in Britain, with much smaller student bodies than now, and since then the pendulum has swung away from selective, elitist access to tertiary education towards a mass tertiary education system open to all who can benefit from it. There is also more public accountability within the system, so that its defects are more open to scrutiny. More than 30 per cent of the relevant age-group is now in tertiary education. It is unlikely that all of these are literary wizards, but it is equally unlikely that any of them can be called illiterate. What has happened is that the modern world requires a much higher level of functional literacy from a greater proportion of the population than in the past. We are expected to meet higher standards. It does not of course follow that everyone will be certain of the spellings of *supersede* and *dilapidate*: even the most highly literate have trouble with the spelling of some such words, simply because our orthography is complicated. We cannot measure 'literacy'

by singling out such examples (although this is what the complainers normally do).

Much of the journalistic commentary on this important question has been extremely biased and usually driven by a desire to return to traditional methods of rote learning in schools. It has been full of oversimplification and, at times, ignorance. In general, the problem (if such it is) has been presented in political terms, and those who do not exclusively advocate phonics and rote learning of 'difficult' spellings are presented as left-wing trendies (or, in the USA, 'liberals'). The imagery is that of a battlefield in which the forces of good and evil fight for the souls of our children. In the *Observer* (8 September 1996), Melanie Phillips presents the question in these terms, advocating rote learning and using headings such as 'Revenge of the Trendy Teachers'. These 'trendies' turn out to be a group of 576 university teachers of English (this must be a wide cross-section), and the letter she quotes from them is entirely reasonable. But she does not spare us the information that it was drafted by a 'Marxist', even though there is nothing Marxist in the reasoning of the letter. So we know what we are supposed to think of the letter before we read it. We can dismiss the opinion of 576 teachers of English and accept the opinion of one highly opinionated journalist, who gives no reliable evidence for her views. As for left- and right-wing politics – the British left-wing journal the *New Statesman* has often been outspoken in its defence of linguistic correctness, and one of the best-known advocates of 'liberalism' in language use is reported to have been a supporter of Mussolini. It is unhelpful to treat a serious question of this kind as if it were a political football. Teaching methods should certainly be debated, but there is no reason to believe that exclusive reliance on classroom drills and rote learning was particularly successful in the past. There was no Golden Age.

Clearly, if it were true that only systematic drills and tests would be effective in the teaching of literacy, we would have no excuse for not basing our teaching on them. But it does not seem to be true. My own experience is relevant, I think. I attended primary school in the 1940s in a rural area of Scotland. The headmistress believed in the

good old methods. Almost every day we had a spelling test (having been given twenty spellings to learn). When the tests were marked, the teacher drew a chalk line on the floor and invited those who had twenty correct spellings to come forward. Those who got one wrong and two wrong were also invited to stand on chalk lines. When it got to three wrong, however, she would loudly announce 'And now the failures!' A large group of sheepish children would come forward, and the teacher would then strap them on the hand – one by one – with perhaps two or three blows for the worst spellers. It was virtually always the same children who got the strap, and there is no reason to believe that these 'good old methods' were effective at all, except to punish and demoralize dyslexics and slow learners. They never improved. This may be an extreme example, but we should bear in mind that the advocates of maximum reliance on these methods never give any evidence that they really work and never advocate safeguards to prevent maltreatment and discrimination.

If there is no evidence for declining standards of literacy, what are we to say of children's speech? This is a more complicated question, beset with even more misunderstanding than the question of literacy. The first point that must be understood is that, whereas children normally learn to read and write at school, they do not learn to speak at school. The idea that schools are responsible for teaching the basics of spoken English is therefore a myth. Spoken language is acquired without explicit instruction, and by the time the child goes to school, the basic grammar and pronunciation of the variety of language that the child is exposed to has been largely acquired. The complaints about declining standards of speaking are not normally about the child's ability to 'speak English' (although they are often phrased in this way), but about the *variety* of English that he or she speaks. Like complaints about declining literacy, they are largely untrue.

What is at issue is not the child's competence in speaking English, but his/her competence in speaking a variety known as 'standard English'. This is equated in the public mind with 'correct' English. There are two points that must be made about this variety. First, it is not well defined as a spoken variety (it is essentially a written variety),

and judgements about correctness in speech are therefore often made on the basis of what is correct in writing. The 'rules' of speech are, however, very different from the 'rules' of writing. Second, in so far as it can be described as a spoken variety, standard speech is essentially the speech of the upper and upper-middle classes – a minority of the population. There is a very strong social dimension, and 'non-standard' accents and dialects are openly discriminated against and 'corrected', even though most people in Britain speak partly non-standard varieties. Generally, these varieties are said to be 'ungrammatical'. However, the acceptability or otherwise of these varieties is a purely social matter and has nothing to do with grammar.

Recently it has been announced that the government is to introduce 'grammar' tests for fourteen-year-olds. Among the grammatical 'errors' listed in an article in the *Independent* (19 June 1996) are the following: 'She come to my house'; 'We was going to the shops'; 'I threw it out the window'; 'The government think they can do what they like.' Of these, the last one is actually standard British English, which allows a choice between singular and plural verbs for certain collective nouns (such as *government*), but to get things wrong in this way is typical of the general incompetence of language prescriptivists. The others are widespread in spoken British English and are grammatical in non-standard varieties. Their acceptability, as we have noted, is a social matter. If they were common usage of the upper-middle classes (as *we was* used to be), they would be called 'grammatical'. It is probable, however, that the immediate reason for including sentences of this kind in 'grammar' tests is that they are not acceptable in writing today, even though many of them were acceptable to Shakespeare.

However, it is also proposed to teach children how to *speak* standard English in the belief that this will be good for them – it will give them more chances in life. If this is to be done by administering 'grammar' tests of the kind that seem to be contemplated, it will not work. There is in British English today a discernible tendency to level out regional differences in speech, and this process will continue regardless of grammar tests in schools. The latter in fact will merely continue the process of discriminating against non-standard speakers. In an age

when discrimination in terms of race, colour, religion or gender is not publicly acceptable, the last bastion of overt social discrimination will continue to be a person's use of language.

Source

Carlo M. Cipolla, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).