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ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

English Usage

A Guide to First Principles

Walter Nash



Language, Education and Society Series

English Usage

First published in 1986, this book examines the changing patterns in English usage and style. It encourages a constructive attitude to language, demonstrating the creative resources of grammar, discussing in detail the options of written style, and challenging the authoritarian spirit that inhibits usage. The central chapters are concerned with written usage, and pay close attention to questions of syntax and punctuation. The sense of writing, however, is always related to speech, and the value of usage as a social act is emphasised in the exploration of style as an individual function. Technical terms are explained and the text is illustrated with examples from literature and journalism.



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English Usage

A guide to first principles

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It is not the acquisition of any one thing
that is able to adorn,
or the incidental quality that occurs
as a concomitant of something well said,
that we value in style,
but the principle that is hid . . .

– Marianne Moore, 'To a Snail'

It were good therefore that men in their innovations would
follow the example of time itself, which indeed innovateth
greatly, but quietly and by degrees scarce to be
perceived . . .

– Francis Bacon, 'Of Innovations'

General editor's preface

Simply a list of some of the questions implied by the phrase *Language, Education and Society* gives an immediate idea of the complexity, and also the fascination, of the area.

How is language related to learning? Or to intelligence? How should a teacher react to non-standard dialect in the classroom? Do regional and social accents and dialects matter? What is meant by standard English? Does it make sense to talk of 'declining standards' in language or in education? Or to talk of some children's language as 'restricted'? Do immigrant children require special language provision? How can their native languages be used as a valuable resource in schools? Can 'literacy' be equated with 'education'? Why are there so many adult illiterates in Britain and the USA? What effect has growing up with no easy access to language: for example, because a child is profoundly deaf? Why is there so much prejudice against people whose language background is odd in some way: because they are handicapped, or speak a non-standard dialect or foreign language? Why do linguistic differences lead to political violence, in Belgium, India, Wales and other parts of the world?

These are all real questions, of the kind which worry parents, teachers and policy-makers, and the answer to them is complex and not at all obvious. It is such questions that authors in this series will discuss.

Language plays a central part in education. This is probably generally agreed, but there is considerable debate and confusion about the exact relationship between language and learning. Even though the importance of language is generally recognized, we still have a lot to learn about how language is related either to educational success or to intelligence and

thinking. Language is also a central fact in everyone's social life. People's attitudes and most deeply held beliefs are at stake, for it is through language that personal and social identities are maintained and recognized. People are judged, whether justly or not, by the language they speak.

Language, education and society is therefore an area where scholars have a responsibility to write clearly and persuasively, in order to communicate the best in recent research to as wide an audience as possible. This means not only other researchers, but also all those who are involved in educational, social and political policy-making, from individual teachers to government. It is an area where value judgments cannot be avoided. Any action that we take – or, of course, avoidance of action – has moral, social and political consequences. It is vital, therefore, that practice is informed by the best knowledge available, and that decisions affecting the futures of individual children or whole social groups are not taken merely on the basis of the all too widespread folk myths about language in society.

Linguistics, psychology and sociology are often rejected by non-specialists as jargon-ridden; or regarded as fascinating, but of no relevance to educational or social practice. But this is superficial and short-sighted: we are dealing with complex issues, which require an understanding of the general principles involved. It is bad theory to make statements about language in use which cannot be related to educational and social reality. But it is equally unsound to base beliefs and action on anecdote, received myths and unsystematic or idiosyncratic observations.

All knowledge is value-laden: it suggests action and changes our beliefs. Change is difficult and slow, but possible nevertheless. When language in education and society is seriously and systematically studied, it becomes clear how awesomely complex is the linguistic and social knowledge of all children and adults. And with such an understanding, it becomes impossible to maintain a position of linguistic prejudice and intolerance. This may be the most important implication of a serious study of language, in our linguistically diverse modern world.

Walter Nash's book tackles an important topic for this series:

a test case in some ways. Most people have their views on 'good English': but such views are often based on personal prejudice or received wisdom (or ignorance). Witness the demonstrable irrationality of complaining letters about pronunciation, style and usage which are sent to the BBC in their hundreds. They may be irrational in their arguments and ignorant of linguistic facts. It is not, however, irrational to worry about the issue itself: clear English is a valuable goal. And if people define a situation as important, it is important in its consequences.

It is a misunderstanding of a linguistic approach to think that it necessarily rejects prescriptivism. The real objection is to thoughtless prescriptivism. Walter Nash described his book to me on one occasion as a 'thinking person's Strunk and White', referring to the enormously influential, and highly prescriptive, American manual of style. The merit of Nash's book is that it does not just make statements about questions of style, without argument. It contains a lot of good advice, but this is based both on interesting description of usage and also on contemporary sociolinguistic thinking about linguistic variation.

Many British linguists and other academics have derided the freshman creative writing courses found in American universities for their vague and muddled aims: 'courses in existential awareness and the accurate use of the comma', as Malcolm Bradbury calls them in one of his novels. In this book, Nash shows that it is possible to give advice which is both detailed and principled. The advice is also that of a practitioner. Nash is himself a gifted author and, as well as other books on language, he has published short stories and an extremely funny novel (*Kettle of Roses*, 1982).

Michael Stubbs
Nottingham



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Preface

I once had the notion of calling this book a guide *for the time being*; the phrase actually remains in its final sentence, the fossil of a discarded intention. 'For the time being' was to be read in a double sense. I supposed, in the first place, that serious students of usage and style might find the book helpful as a first step towards more advanced studies; and in the second place I wished to acknowledge my own limitations – as indeed I still do. For the time being, these chapters represent all that I can usefully say on a very complex topic.

During the course of composition, I became aware of a third sense lurking in this key phrase. As I consulted various Usages published during the last eighty years, it struck me that books of this kind may be called political acts, to the extent that they appeal to a favoured, socially stable class of right-thinking people, whose assumptions they both inform and confirm. Because their authors have seldom if ever recognized openly the social implications of their work, Usages have become almost an artificial genre, handing down their encapsulated dogmas, losing touch with usage and users, losing touch with time, stiffly ignoring the need for the social philosophy of language which should irradiate such books. I say *should*; alas, I cannot claim to have supplied the defect on my own behalf, or to have done more than indicate (notably in my final chapter) an awareness of what is generally wrong with this species of text. I should like to attempt a new kind of Usage; but for the time being, I have composed one along more or less traditional lines.

At the outset, I proposed to write a very short text comprising a few basic prescriptions for written usage. The model proposed to me (but not by my present editor and

publisher) was W. Strunk and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*. This undertaking, the remains of which can be traced in my Chapter 3, confirmed for me what I already knew about the limitations of the *prescriptive*. I began to expand the scope of the book by essaying a broadly *descriptive* text, which could easily have run into several exhaustive (or exhausting) volumes. Signs of this effort are apparent in Chapter 2, an attempt to review the principal resources of English grammar in relationship to questions of style. At length it became clear to me that the aim of a work of this kind should be neither prescriptive nor ambitiously descriptive, but *constructive*; that is, that I should try to demonstrate and discuss helpfully the stylistic choices available to the user of English. This discussion, contained for the most part in Chapters 4 and 5, relates mainly to problems of written English. A final stage in composition I have already mentioned; in my Chapters 1 and 6 – the framing chapters of the work – I raise questions of usage in the general context of language and society. Chapter 6 in particular may appear to be severely critical of some venerated authorities. I must therefore insist that it is by no means my intention to be destructive (whoever writes about language lives in a glass house), but only to suggest that we should question conventional wisdoms, even to the extent of thoroughly revising our ideas of how problems of usage should be propounded and solved.

This description of the book's progress through stages of composition may suggest a haphazard and planless growth. I naturally hope that reading will dispel any such impression. An argument is developed from chapter to chapter, and is supported as fully as possible by illustrations. Some of these are of my own invention; some are taken from newspapers and journals (the source is in all cases acknowledged); and in one or two instances, wishing to indicate how 'usage' touches the extremes of casual colloquy and literary art, I have used passages of fiction or expository prose. I am sure that in developing my theme I have overlooked matters which many readers will think I should have treated; and I am equally sure that in many places I have sinned against principles of sound usage, even against principles I have myself endorsed. This is the destiny of all who dare to tell language what to do. We are apprenticed to fallibility.

In Chapters 1–5, quotations from literary and other works are furnished with details in full of title and author. In Chapter 6, where continual reference is made to a number of books on usage, I have adopted a system of abbreviated reference, by letter and number, which is clarified in the prefatory note to the Bibliography. The latter is a brief list of books on usage, style, rhetoric, and related matters. Some of these works are discussed in my text; others are listed, with brief annotations, for their potential value to students of this subject.

It only remains to thank those who have helped me to bring this book into being. My greatest debt is certainly Michael Stubbs, a shrewdly perceptive and mercifully patient editor. I owe Ronald Carter my thanks for his tactful encouragement, particularly at a time when I was inclined to put the work aside as an irredeemable miscalculation; and for their kindness in reading and commenting invaluabley on an early draft of the manuscript, I must express my appreciation to Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short. These were the sponsors of my work; and theirs will be a great measure of the credit if, on going out into the world, it makes friends.

University of Nottingham

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1

The usage trap

‘This boy calls the knaves jacks.’

– Estella, in Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

Reactions still triggered off by the sound of a vowel, the cut of a coat, the turn of a phrase. . . Once imbued with such reactions it is impossible to escape them; I know that until the day I die I shall be unable to escape noticing ‘raound’ for ‘round’, ‘invoalve’ for ‘involve’ (on that one an Army officer of my acquaintance used to turn down candidates for a commission).

– Diana Athill, *Instead of a Letter*

CONDITIONAL CLAUSES have always caused trouble to the semi-educated and the demi-reflective; to the illiterate they give no trouble at all. Most well-educated and well-speaking persons have little difficulty.

– Eric Partridge, *Usage and Abusage*

And so the upstart is put in his place, ambition is repressed, the meritorious sheep are distinguished from the barely deserving goats. How disagreeable these pronouncements are, and how embarrassing! – for few will read without a pang of misgiving the quotations that head this chapter. We are all inclined to judge others by their language, but we like to suppose that our comments are strictly fair and reasonable; the suspicion that in some matters we might be every bit as snobbish, reactionary, or pedantic as the worst of our authoritarian neighbours is disconcerting. But are these crude acts of discrimination inevitable? Or can we, recognizing in ourselves the only-human habit of being right, learn to tem-

per our dislikes, to make honestly reasoned observations, to counter prejudice with constructive argument? That question represents the theme of this book. We are to consider problems of usage and principles of style, but above all else we must try to understand how language is at our creative disposal; and how only by exploring its resources do we begin to free ourselves from the *usage trap*, that prescriptive snare that disables and confines the rule-giver as effectively as it intimidates the ruled.

1 Speaking and writing

Let us first look at a commonly received idea: that speaking is a debased activity, necessarily inferior to writing. This belief was firmly held in the eighteenth century, a time when men of letters were anxious to see the language 'fixed' in secure, correct, and durable forms. Here, for instance, is Dr Johnson on the theme of conversation versus composition:

A transition from an author's books to his conversation is too often like an entrance into a large city, after a distant prospect. Remotely, we see nothing but spires of temples, and turrets of palaces, and imagine it to be the residence of splendour, grandeur, and magnificence; but, when we have passed the gates, we find it perplexed with narrow passages, disgraced with despicable cottages, embarrassed with obstructions and clouded with smoke.

(*The Rambler*, no 14, 5 May 1750)

The imagery of architecture (making language the 'edifice' of thought) typifies the classical view of composition. Nouns of large compass (*splendour grandeur, magnificence*) suggest the scope of creative design in writing; participles denoting merely human predicaments (*perplexed, disgraced, embarrassed*) criticize the muddle of speech. Order and permanence are the virtues Johnson has in prospect, and he sees them in well-tutored, well-housed Composition, not in semi-educated, alley-dwelling Conversation.

The gross unfairness of this is that the image is allowed to dictate the terms of the argument. All that Johnson is really saying is that an author has time to plan his writing, to

consider its structure and refine its style; whereas when he enters into conversation he must do the best he can to meet the demands of the fleeting moment, and act his part in situations which he cannot wholly control. This does not mean that speech is a form of linguistic jerrybuilding. It implies that there are techniques of writing and somewhat different techniques of speaking – different, but nonetheless governed by ascertainable principles. The notion of principle and technique in spoken language, however, is alien to the authoritarian spirit. Does not the very etymology of the word *grammar* – *grammatikē tekhnē* – denote ‘the art of letters’? There is a rooted belief that if speech has any design, any resemblance to a style, it is by derivation from writing. The progression suggested in the *Rambler* passage is significant. A move is made from books to conversation, measuring the inadequacies of speech by the fixed standard of writing; not from conversation to books, discovering the peculiar features in which writing must differ from speech.

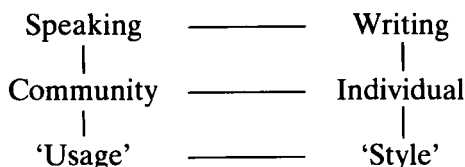
Such attitudes, long ingrained, encourage the assumption that in speech and conversation a *style* is hardly possible, or is available only in the form of a deliberate bookishness. Whenever criteria of acceptability or ‘correctness’ are applied to speech, it is seldom with the primary aim of promoting communication and effective discourse; nearly always, the object is *social* acceptability, the correct behaviour of a class, a coterie, a generation. The effect of this is stultifying. If you dissociate the study of speech from its proper connection with the study of creativeness in language, you allow it to become a mere adjunct of genteel nurture, like etiquette or discreet tailoring. You make a word a blow to self-esteem; you let a man’s vowels decide whether he is fit to hold a commission.

At the same time you complicate the difficulties of written language, because to affirm the status of writing as a higher thing than speech, an exacting craft, a linguistic attainment beyond the scope of the ‘semi-educated’ and the ‘demi-reflective’, you must burden it with delicate rules and quasi-regulations. You may decide, for instance, that sentences ought not to begin with *and* (this book begins and ends with such sentences); or that *tolerant to* is ‘incorrect’, an aberration from *tolerant of*; that *whilst* is obsolete; that *when . . . ever* (as in *When did Americans ever flinch from the truth?*) is a misuse

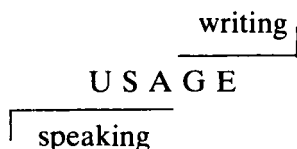
of *whenever*; that *such a(n)*, as in *He was criticized for inventing such an unbelievable character*, is a dubious idiom, the preferred construction being *He was criticized for inventing so unbelievable a character*, or *for inventing a character so unbelievable*. These examples, all but one taken from a reputable manual, typify the prescriptive spirits that makes the usage trap. The rule-giver becomes inordinately sensitive to vagaries of expression; he seeks out deviations that allegedly impair communication or reflect imprecision of thought. But it is rare for such pronouncements to be truly relevant to an efficient use of language. They are often like superstitions, to be observed for fear of incurring the penalty of some nameless curse. They do little to support the would-be writer; on the contrary, they complicate the problems of putting pen to paper.

2 Usage and style

To contrast speaking with writing is to imply other oppositions: of the community, negotiating *usage* through collaborative exchanges, and the individual, self-communing, shaping a *style* in isolation. First thoughts on the subject suggest these correlations:



But this is faulty in at least one respect, its restriction of usage to *speaking*. Usage surely means the consensus of practice in using language, whether in conversation or composition; it is a notion that embraces both modes of verbal activity, implying complementation rather than contrast:



Spoken idiom is adopted into writing through the naturalizing agency of correspondence, of newspapers, of advertisements, of all kinds of public communication; while in its turn writing influences many varieties of speech. As users of the language we learn to assess current conditions. Our judgments tell us that a particular expression is appropriate to speech, but perhaps not to writing; or to informal communication but not to formal exchanges; or that it belongs to writing rather than to speech; or that it is acceptable in writing and speech alike.

These judgments are related to a view of the individual and the community. The personality is not, after all, so mechanically constructed that we can firmly distinguish the effects and products of 'individual' experience from those of 'communal' interactions. The roles of private being and social being overlap. Then from this commerce of individual with community, and from the complementation of written usage and spoken usage, *styles* emerge; styles of creative individuals, writing, in isolation from their fellows, yet always conscious of community, interaction, speech; style of socially effective speakers, in company, bound to the passing moment, improvising, yet aware of individuality, of design, of linguistic resources drawn from the practice of writing. Modes of writing and speaking are subject to change. Usage changes continually, and irresistibly, though we may think all change is for the worse; and with changes in usage come gradual modifications in style and in views of style. Samuel Johnson, a classical writer with a hankering of lapidary permanence in language, knew about linguistic change, recognized the futility of trying to prevent it, and expressed his insight in a much-quoted sentence: 'To enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are alike the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desire by its strength.' The warning stands, for all writers on usage to heed.

3 Language on the move

One very good reason for not huffing *proscriptions* and puffing *prescriptions* is that time and chance are liable to blow your house down. Swift angrily dismissed *nowadays* as a piece of modish cant; but nowadays everyone says *nowadays* (apart

from wretches who prefer to say *at this moment in time*). Reading Eric Partridge's strictures on the expression *present-day* (which, in 1947, he condemned as an 'unnecessary synonym' for *present* or *contemporary*), I reflect a little sheepishly on my own tetchy resistance to our telecasters' *modern-day*, which seems to me abominable usurper of good old honest *present-day*. Time rings in the new words – rings in *nowadays*, rings in *modern-day*, rings in *telecaster*; and is not to be reasoned with. Dr Johnson was right; you cannot fetter a phrase, or manacle a manner of speaking.

There are changes in language which are readily understood, and which allow of scholarly explanations. With a little knowledge of phonetics and articulatory processes, we can interpret some changes in pronunciation. Acquaintance with the system of grammar, as a way of representing modes of perception and cognition, may help us to account for certain changes in syntax; we can see how similar constructions are confused, how one grammatical pattern develops analogously from another, how the struggle to express distinct perceptions leads to the creation or modification of syntactic resources. Our vocabulary, too, is demonstrably the product of cultural and psychological rulings. Scholars can show us how the meanings of words are changed or extended, how new words are brought into being, how one word usurps another, how there is such economy in language that no two words in living use can have exactly the same value.

All such changes – documented, classified, studied in the light of linguistic principle, psychological motive, historical fact – can be related to some sort of unifying hypothesis. They suggest a science, or at least a plausibly reflective account, of language on the move, in its slow budgings and re-alignings. But some usages are too close to us, too intimately bound up with personal experience, too fragmentary, too *complex* in being so close and so brokenly perceived, for us to be able to relate them to anything as cool and scientific as a hypothesis. They hardly enter into our experience as knowledge; they are more appropriately compared with gossip.

4 The gossip of change

Consider, for a digressive page or two, some personal examples of this 'gossip' of change. My father always called the knaves *jacks*; but my mother, who had been a domestic servant in a well-to-do household, never called them anything other than *knaves*. Moreover, she consistently referred to *court cards*, whereas my father said *face cards* (much to her amusement). They both pronounced the word *advertisement* with the accent on the third syllable, and stressed *controversy* on the second. My father pronounced *launch* and *staunch* to rhyme with southern British English *ranch*, having acquired the habit, I always supposed, from the naval personnel he met during the course of his work in a shipyard; if taxed or teased about it, he would reply that he was speaking the King's English – the king in question being George V.

Whenever my mother *laid*, or my father *set*, the table, they would put out *serviettes*. My mother, whose formal education ended at the age of eight, regularly mismanaged certain constructions, notably the relative clause: *I was going to pay the coalman last Saturday, which I might say he didn't come, so I couldn't*. My father, who left his grammar school at the age of twelve, could deftly negotiate all hazards of syntax, and had been instructed with such punitive rigour that he never, to the best of my remembrance, made a spelling error. My mother's use of language was vivid and original. She invented words to compensate for her occasional want of standard dictionary items (*teapotliddous* = 'vapid', 'inane'; *tittybottlous* = 'infantile', 'pusillanimous'); made frequent use of robust if somewhat opaque similes (*daft as a wagon horse*; *black as Dick's hatband*); and had a blunt way with bleak facts (*he's about ready for his box and another clean shirt'll do him both* = 'he will soon be dead'). My father liked 'fine' words (never a *beginning* if an *inception* could be arranged), and, when moved, dearly loved a literary turn of phrase (habitually referring to the graveyard, for example, as *our last resting place*).

On the rare occasions when I play cards, I refer to the *jack* either as a *court card* or as a *face card*. *Knave* is for me a 'literary' word, to be used humorously or parodically (playing-card knaves go with *looking glasses* and *drawing*

rooms; knaves in general are scurvy and wear wrinkled hose and greasy doublets). At school I was taught to accent the second syllable of *advertisement* and the first and third syllables of *controversy*. There I was also encouraged to rhyme *garage* with *barrage* (in my parents' pronunciation it rhymed with *marriage*). I stress the first and third syllables of *kilometre*, the first syllable of *harass*, and the last syllable of *cigarette*. I *set* the table, but if a guest arrives, I *lay* an extra place. Until I went to Cambridge, I followed my parents' example of referring to the serviceable *serviette*; thereafter I was tutored or teased into saying *table napkin*, a practice I have followed ever since. Having been educated (or institutionalized) at great length, I have got into my head enough grammar to replace demi-reflective difficulties with donnish dogma. I fret over constructions like *An honest man, the company trusted him completely*, which I would re-cast in the form *An honest man, he was completely trusted by the company* – maintaining this to be 'correct', even though hosts of scribes and mediamen would find no fault with the other. I am jealous to preserve into age what I learned in my youth, becoming irritable when *refute* appears as a synonym of 'deny', when *cohort* is used as though it meant 'accomplice' or 'colleague' (*Mr X, one of President Reagan's cohorts*), when *momentarily* is made to bear the sense of 'soon', 'at any moment', 'in a few minutes' (*We are approaching London, and will be landing at Heathrow momentarily*).

My pupils nearly all call the knaves *jacks*, refer generally to *serviettes*, and are amused by the bourgeois pretensions of my *table napkin*. They rhyme *garage* with *marriage*, as my parents did ('garahges' are for Rolls-Royces, 'garridges' for demotic Fords and family runabouts), and are in two minds about the accentuation of *cigarette*, shrewdly noting the effect of phrase- or clause-rhythm (e.g. in *Cigarettes are déar* vs *I smóked a cigaréte*). They are sensitive to the use of gender-suffixes and gender pronouns: *chairpersons* rule, and are not to be identified she-wise or he-foolishly. Although willing to concede that there may be something formally amiss with constructions of the type *Usually sober, the vicar found him snoring in the vestry*, they argue irrefutably (as they understand that word) that 'the meaning is quite clear'. In general, they have replaced 'correctness' with 'acceptability'. Mis-

spellings do not disturb them, and they seem to regard meanings as negotiable in committee – which, in a broad sense, they indeed are. They have grown up with television, social democracy, and the power of the peer group, and look askance at any authority that will not argue its laws. Only when they are turned out, as wage-earners (or rather, as *salaried employees*), into the world of middle-class institutions and aspirations, do they begin to demand prescriptive rules.

5 The diversity of change

Now all this is a ragbag of reflection and anecdote, from which no shaping principle emerges. Yet such scraps of gossip are brief evidences of the powers that create and change usage: of education and attitudes to its purpose; of regional and class dialect; of professions and employments; of the prestige of certain individuals; of fashion, or snobbery, of the need to be socially ‘in’ and the stress of being ‘out’; of imitations, of loyalties, affections, aversions, courtesies; of the fear of innovation and the anxious reverence for old, established things; of the reaction of one generation to another; of the impulse to poetic creation, humour, figurative language, metaphor. All of which is so diverse, so bewildering in its diversity, so variously printed on our separate lives, that we lose sight of principle and lean heavily on prejudice. This wretched boy calls a *waistcoat* a *vest*; and I cannot *help* noticing *harass* for HARASS; and I feel that only the semi-observant and the demi-semi-sensitive could have any difficulty at all with non-finite dependent clauses. When we reach the stage of making accusatory comment, we have recognized in ourselves an insecurity that craves authoritarian intervention – by anyone confident enough to tell us, without prevarication, without distracting considerations of ‘it all depends’, that there is a right position, and that we are in it. What we are really in is the usage trap.

6 Criteria of usage and style

The 'right position' presupposes criteria of rightness, and it is just here that longed-for authority begins to veer between the banal and the blindfolded. Expert opinion and hearsay alike endow certain notions with critical status. They are:

(a) *Clarity*

This is said to be achieved by avoiding ambiguity; avoiding 'woolliness' (problem: define 'woolliness'); avoiding 'muddled thinking'; and avoiding unnecessary complexity (but what is 'complex' and what are the limits of 'necessary'?)

(b) *Felicity*

This is achieved by avoiding 'awkwardness'; shunning 'prolixity'; eschewing 'turgidity'; vetting 'vulgarity'; cultivating a fluent continuity.

(c) *Appropriateness*

The secret of this, apparently, is to fit your language to your subject; also to fit your language to your audience; to observe the formalities, or permit the informalities, as the case may be; to use the common tongue commonly and technical terms technically.

(d) *Respect for the status quo*

The essence of this is the belief that all innovation corrupts and must be resisted.

(e) *Repudiation of fashions, mannerisms, and popular models*

Typified by indignant protests such as 'Slang is for people who are too lazy to think,' or 'We are all tired of this trendy jargon,' or 'I don't care if you heard it on TV, read it in the *Guardian*, or heard the Prime Minister say it – *it's wrong*.'

These points are somewhat mischievously framed, in mockery of prescriptions that too often prove to be roundabout, vapouring, and empty – not to say *teapotliddous*. Parody apart, what is represented is a pattern of responses to usage and style, involving three *constructive* tests (i.e. 'Is this clear?', 'Does this read well?', 'Is this the right level of language?') and two *constrictive* reactions ('this innovation worries me'; 'I am annoyed by this trick'). One difficulty that

inevitably snares anyone offering counsel on usage is that the constructive becomes the stalking-horse of the constrictive. The latter, ruled by the nose, the nape of the neck, and the nervous system, is beyond the scope of reason and justification. We cannot help our reactions, any more than we can help sneezing and yawning, and we certainly cannot rationalize them. For the constructive, on the other hand, we are required to find supporting arguments; we must say *why* some expression or construction is unclear, infelicitous, or inappropriate, and *how* it may be amended. Possibly a specious activity, this process of justification is nevertheless felt to be sounder than the blank instinctive response of 'This is just wrong, that's all.' So when we find ourselves in a constrictive position, we do our best to shift the fight to constructive ground. I might argue, for example, that the current tendency – virtually an accomplished change – to use the word *refute* as a synonym of *reject* or *deny* offends against the constructive principle of clarity; because by shifting the load of meaning that individual words have to carry, it invites the curse of ambiguity. The argument ostensibly justifies my objection, but it will not survive prolonged investigation. The semantics of English will soon accommodate the shift from *refute* = 'rebut' to *refute* = 'reject', and I will have to accept that my position is constrictive, i.e. that I dislike this usage because I dislike it; because it is a raw upstart; because it upsets what I have learned.

7 The elusiveness of criteria

Criteria of usage are difficult to apply effectively and consistently, even when the constructive will is unimpeded by the constrictive reservation. For this there are at least three reasons. One is that we so often make negative recommendations, letting *what should be done* be inferred from indications of *what should not be done*. Clarity, for example, is defined by the injunction to avoid ambiguity, woolliness, or wordiness. (Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage* contains the entry CLARITY. The opposite of OBSCURITY, q.v.). Seldom, if at all, is the virtue of clarity expounded positively, through creative exploration of the resources of language; an exploration that

asks 'What can be done?', 'Under what circumstances?' and 'How?' A second difficulty is that categories like 'clear', 'felicitous' and 'appropriate' often overlap, or are diverse labels for some vague aesthetic perception. Whatever we like or dislike we mark with approving or disapproving labels: 'clear' or 'unclear' might just as well be 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous', which could without much difference be 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate'. The criteria are really not very distinctive or objective.

A third weakness is that the search for the unclear is a quest that discovers too many phantom blunders and artificial follies. The point is well illustrated by numerous cautionary examples of 'ambiguity' that allow no one to doubt for more than a moment their single intention. This, for example, is not ambiguous:

It is difficult to be absolutely honest.

Nor is this ambiguous:

It is difficult, to be absolutely honest.

The two sentences express different meanings, but in neither case is the intended meaning uncertain. Punctuation provides the necessary clue; in speech, this would be done by intonation. It would of course be possible for a writer to convey a meaning *erroneously*, by omitting a comma or by mistakenly inserting one, but that would not be a case of ambiguity. It would be a simple blunder.

Many jokes, howlers, slips of the pen, etc., are said to turn on ambiguities:

Erected to the memory of James Macmillan, drowned in the Severn by some of his closest friends.

Prospective employers will be lucky if they get Nottingham graduates to work for them.

Not for a moment are these genuinely ambiguous, if an 'ambiguity' is something that leaves the reader/listener in two minds. Who is so naive as to be puzzled by them? We laugh because we see precisely what is intended, and how the intention has missed its mark (in one case, literally, a mark of punctuation). Such examples might well be cited as casual

and amusing *infelicities*, but they are not unclear. In the absence of an explanatory context, this is unclear:

I mean to keep all of father's books in the cabinet downstairs.

Neither a distinctive speech-pattern nor a corrective punctuation can disambiguate this sentence, which suggests two possible patterns of reference, i.e.:

Father owns/owned books. I mean to keep (= store) them all in the cabinet downstairs.

There is a cabinet downstairs. In it are some books that belong/belonged to father. I mean to keep (= retain possession of) them all.

In addition to these conflicts of reference, there are potential differences of *theme* and *focus* (on these terms see 2.7). What is the primary topic of discourse – the books or the cabinet? Various rewritings of the sentence suggest themselves:

I mean to keep all of father's books that are in the cabinet downstairs.

In the cabinet downstairs I mean to keep all of father's books.

All of father's books in the cabinet downstairs I mean to keep.

Of father's books, I mean to keep all that are in the cabinet downstairs.

Spoken English offers other solutions, in the form of utterances that announce a *topic* and append a *comment*, e.g.:

You know father's books? I'm going to keep them all in the cabinet downstairs.

About father's books in the cabinet downstairs. I'm going to keep them all.

The cabinet downstairs – that's where I'm going to keep all of father's books.

This process of topicalization can of course be extended to written English, in the form of such sentences as *With regard*

to the books in the cabinet downstairs, I propose to keep them all, or As for the cabinet downstairs, I mean to keep all father's books in it.

8 The constructive value of grammar

This example serves to make an important point about the study of grammar. Not that grammar is a panacea for the ills of the verbally inept; not that sentence analysis and the long parsing ever made a stylist; simply that the grammar of a language creates plural resources, offers more than one solution to problems of expression, shows some possibilities, at least, of escaping from the usage trap, which operates on the victim's conviction that there is only *one* answer in each difficult case. It will do nothing to help us if we say *jack* when fashion decrees *knave*, or to enlighten us if we say *invoalve* when prejudice requires *involve*. But if we try to understand the grammar of our language, so as to become sharply aware of the patterns of expression available to us when we speak or write, then we attain something of great constructive value. Grammar can be the workshop, studio, or laboratory of usage. Through it we explore idiom, i.e. we examine the interplay of certain constructions and certain dictionary items; through idiom we test the constraints and allowances of style. Some questions will always elude this grammatical/idiomatic investigation. There is no constructive exploration that will let us come to terms with *serviette* vs *table napkin*, for example, or with *notepaper* vs *writing paper*, or *toilet* vs *lavatory* – because these things are matters of fashion, of regional and temporal variation, of coterie usage, of a trivializing sensitivity to language that has much to do with habit, pretension, self-regard, and almost nothing to do with communication. Usage and style should carry more reliable credentials.

2

A little grammar: Styles of sentences

What's a' your jargon o' your schools,
Your Latin names for horns and stools,
If honest Nature made you fools,
What sairs your grammars?

– Robert Burns

Grammere, that ground is of alle . . .

– William Langland

Since we do need some of the jargon of the schools – enough, at least, to provide constructive references, frames of judgment in stylistic questions – let us examine a few patterns of the English sentence. The patterning may be quite simple:

Billy stole his father's car

or very complex:

After the police had scoured three counties, eventually tracing the young culprit to a cinema in Leamington Spa, where he had gone to see a repeat showing of '*Star Wars*', Billy's father was advised that it might be a good idea to keep his son out of mischief by providing the inquisitive little fellow with numerous video games of the sort designed to appeal to the adventurous if potentially felonious instincts of a child growing up in an age of diminishing respect for property.

It is easy to suppose that the first of these two examples might occur in speech, whereas the second could hardly be anything other than a piece of writing. No one, surely, would speak with such elaboration and precision of sentence-design,

except perhaps in oratory or prepared – i.e. *scripted* – address.

This does not mean that complex sentences are rare in speech, or that simple structures are foreign to writing. Sentences in spoken English can be quite complex syntactically, as the following, a recorded instance of actual speech, may show:

While I'm in the village I'll try and see if Mr Ward can find time to pop over later on this afternoon and get those garage doors to hang properly, if that's OK with you.

Many such instances of complex sentence-structure might be noted in ordinary domestic exchanges. It is true, however, that writing, because it relieves us of the burden of memorizing, allows us to produce sentences of greater length and intricacy than those we commonly construct when we speak. The speaker takes his sentences as they come; the writer, on the other hand, plans his text, develops a feeling for gradations of complexity, strives to understand the options relating to styles and functions of the simple and the complex.

1 Simple sentences (a): patterns and elements

On p. 17 is a table presenting some patterns of the simple sentence; it specifies certain elements of sentence structure (using a conventional and widely recognized terminology), and provides 'realizations' – i.e. specific instances, concrete examples – of these elements. The distinction between 'element' and 'realization' must be emphasized. The names of the elements, e.g. *subject*, *object*, *complement*, are abstractions. They do not denote specific words or phrases, or even particular categories of word or phrase. They are the names of functions, or, figuratively speaking, of positions in play. The positions are diversely filled, the functions discharged, or 'realized', in a variety of ways.

The tabulated examples will be seen to unfold a small narrative. The purpose of this is to demonstrate that a text of sorts might be constructed from strictly circumscribed syntactic resources, even though the limitations of such a stylistic enterprise may be readily apparent:

Elements of the simple sentence

S	V	A	C _s	O _i	O _d	C _o
The lesson	began					
John	wrote	on the black-board			the first example	
He	quailed	inwardly				
Some of these boys	looked		so hostile			
Their undoubted leader	was		the red-headed lad in the corner			
The young teacher, a novice in matters of discipline,	could not face				that insolent stare	
He	gave			the others	a timid smile	
Those hard-bitten veterans of classroom wars	must have considered				him	a simpering idiot

The elements of simple sentency-structure are:

- S = Subject
- V = Verb
- O_d = Direct Object
- O_i = Indirect Object
- C_s = Subject Complement
- C_o = Object Complement
- A = Adverbial

The terminology is that used in *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, by Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik

The lesson began. John wrote on the blackboard the first example. He quailed inwardly. Some of these boys looked so hostile. Their undoubted ringleader was the red-headed lad in the corner. The young teacher, a novice in matters of discipline, could not face that insolent stare. He gave the others a timid smile. Those hard-bitten veterans of class-room wars must have considered him a simpering idiot.

Each step in the story is a simple *declarative* sentence (i.e. a sentence making a statement) with a pattern requiring basically S and V, as obligatory elements. At S, as at O and C, occur so-called *nominal* items, i.e. nouns or noun-related expressions. Here are some of the nominal items realizing the element S in the sentences that unfold the tale of John's classroom ordeal:

a personal name, or *proper noun* (*John*)

a general name, or *common noun* (*the lesson*)

a *noun phrase*, i.e. a group of words with a noun as its *head* or indispensable member (*those hard-bitten VETERANS*)

a pair of noun phrases *in apposition*, i.e. as *tandem partners* (*the young teacher* + *a novice in matters of discipline*)

a *personal pronoun* (*he*)

These typify the general rule that in simple sentences S is realized by nouns, noun phrases, or pronouns. The noun phrase in its turn has simple and complex realizations. Simple instances are *a teacher*, *the class*; complex, *a very badly behaved senior school class*, *the incorrigible hooligans' long-suffering young English teacher*, *that first disastrous, never-to-be-forgotten General Certificate class with those hooligans in the fifth form school-leaving set*. In complex noun phrases, the *head* is augmented by an array of *modifiers*, which may precede it or follow it. In these examples, the word WINE is the head of the noun phrase:

not at all unpalatable Californian WINE

WINE in large bottles with colourful labels

Such patterns are called, respectively, *premodification* and

postmodification. In phrases of highly complex structure, the head may be pre- and postmodified:

not at all unpalatable Californian WINE in large bottles with colourful labels

Rules of sequence govern the ordering of modifying items. There is, furthermore, some correlation between the type of modification and the character of the information conveyed; e.g., in the following, between premodification and 'permanent characteristic', postmodification and 'temporary characteristics':

that one-legged Spanish RUFFIAN with his arm round Auntie

Other examples, however, simply suggest the value of pre- and postmodification as stylistic alternatives. We may write, for example, *an idiotically grinning police sergeant*, or, with a slight modification of wording, *a police sergeant with an idiotic grin*. In such cases there is an apparent choice, which must be related to the demands of a wider context. The choice is not always available. We may convert, or 'transpose', the premodified *ruffian with a wooden leg* into *wooden-legged ruffian*; but we cannot as convincingly transpose *ruffian with a horrible green eye-patch* – though *horribly green eye-patched ruffian* might be considered a striking turn of literary style. The normal prohibitions of usage sometimes challenge the creative spirit.

Some intricate notions and orientations to reality are expressed by realizations of the element V. These are not copiously exemplified in the narrative of John and his class, but a few pages of any novel or work of expository prose would certainly demand a reader's competence to recognize and 'decode' the following:

- (1) The notion of time, grammatically represented in *tense* (e.g. the past tense forms of *began*, *wrote*, *quailed*).
- (2) Notions of possibility, preference, choice, permission, necessity, contingency, etc., expressed in *mood*; e.g. 'they *must have considered* him a simpering idiot', where *must* expresses a conjecture on the part of the protagonist in the narrative.

- (3) Notions of perspective, or 'slant', on the event-in-time; called, in grammar, *aspect*. English regularly makes two important aspectual distinctions, in connection with expressions of tense. We distinguish between the completed event (*Noah built the ark one afternoon, before it rained*), and the event in duration, or in progressive overlap with other events (*Noah was building the ark one afternoon when it came on to rain*). We make another kind of aspectual distinction in reference to past events, which may be reported in the simple past (e.g. *I worked in London*), or in the past with the so-called 'perfective' aspect (e.g. *I have lived in London*). Expressions of past time may thus involve, variously, the simple past (*I read your book*), the past + progressive aspect (*I was reading your book*), past + perfective aspect (*I have read your book*), past + progressive + perfective aspects (*I have been reading your book*).

These complex and interlinking notions are conveyed in the *verb phrase*, which in its simplest form consists of the bare *lexical verb*, the word denoting an activity, a process, an event, a relation, etc. In a more complex form of verb phrase, the lexical verb is the head which is preceded by a sequence of *auxiliaries*. Some of the latter express mood, and are hence called *modal* (*can, could, may, might, shall, will, should, would, must, ought to, need, dare*). Other auxiliaries (e.g. *have, be, do*) help to specify tense and aspect (*We have been here before, He is taking his morning walk*), or in speech convey the emphasis of corrections and affirmations (e.g. *I have checked, it is ready, we did try*, in response to *you should have checked, I thought it would be ready, why didn't you try?*)

2 Simple sentences (b): complementation

Many simple sentences are constructed on the basic pattern SV:

The lesson began.
John trembled.

The lesson on the structure of noun phrases in English began.

John must have been trembling.

The lady in the green frock has arrived.

That one-legged Spanish ruffian with the horrible green eye-patch is snoring.

It is common, however, for the stem-structure, SV, to be extended in some way, for example through the addition of an adverbial element, A. Some examples of the SVA pattern (the diagonals mark out the three elements):

Our luggage/ has arrived/ at last.

The man in the next room/ has been snoring/ all night.

We/ are leaving/ on Friday.

The Thompsons/ are leaving/ now.

They/ have suffered/ here.

The manager/ behaves/ dreadfully.

The food/ comes/ in dirty little plastic containers.

The washbasin/ fell/ on Mr Thompson's foot.

Mrs Thompson/ cries/ a lot.

The A element may be a single adverb of time (*now*), place (*here*), or manner (*dreadfully*), or an adverbial phrase (*at last*, *all night*, *a lot*), or a prepositional phrase, i.e. a noun phrase introduced by a preposition (*on Friday*, *in dirty little plastic containers*, *on Mr Thompson's foot*).

In other patterns, the SV base is *complemented* by a C or an O. In the pattern SVC, a verb of the type *be*, *become*, *look*, *seem*, is followed by a *subject complement*, an adjective or nominal item related to or equated with the subject of the sentence; e.g. *comic*, *a neglected genius* in

The first murderer looked comic.

Van Gogh was a neglected genius.

This kind of complementation is sometimes called *intensive*, as opposed to the *extensive* complementation of the SVO pattern. Compare

↓
The first murderer looked comic (SVC intensive)

with

↗
The audience loved the first murderer (SVO extensive)

or

Van Gogh was a neglected genius (SVC intensive)

with

His contemporaries neglected the genius of Van Gogh
(SVO extensive)

The arrows indicate the structural relationships of 'intending' and 'ex-tending'. In the last example, the phrase *the genius of Van Gogh* realizes a *direct object*, an element which, like S, is represented in the simple sentence by nominal items.

The primary structures SVA, SVC, SVO are compounded in more elaborate patterns:

Shakespeare / left / his second-best bed / to his wife.
(SVOA)

The Thompsons / were / miserable / all week. (SVCA)

SVO may combine with an element O_1 , *indirect object*, or with C_0 , *object complement*:

Shakespeare / left / his wife / his second-best bed. (SVO₁O)

She / found / the mattress / lumpy. (SVO_d C₀)

These extended structures admit of further extension through the addition of an A element:

Mr Thompson / gave / the manager / a piece of his mind /
next morning. (SVO₁ O_d A)

A more enlightened age / would have made / Van Gogh /
comfortable / with a pension. (SVOC₀ A)

3 Transitivity

Verbs in the pattern SVO, which take *extensive* complementation, are classified as *transitive*. (*Transitive*, like *extensive*, carries its purport in its etymology; it signifies, literally, 'going across', i.e. from its point of departure in the SV group to its goal in the O) The pattern SVO₁O (as in *I must send my publisher a note of apology*) is by some grammarians called *distransitive*, there being two 'goals', the indirect object (*my publisher*) and the direct object (*a note of apology*). Verbs in

the pattern of *intensive* complementation, SVC or that of adverbial extension, SVA, or the bare stem-formula, SV, are said to be *intransitive*. In fact, transitivity and intransitivity are not so much properties of the verb itself as of the patterns into which the verb enters. Some verbs are regularly intransitive, e.g. *arrive*, *expire* (thus *We went to the station to see if Daddy had arrived*; *while we were away the tortoise expired*; not *We went to the station to see if we could arrive Daddy*; *while we were away some scoundrel expired the tortoise*). Some verbs, e.g. *weep*, *sigh*, *laugh*, *wink*, are essentially intransitive, but may occasionally figure transitively, with a direct object in the form of a correspondent or semantically equivalent noun (e.g. *she sighed a deep sigh*; *the giant winked a gargantuan wink*; *the tyrant laughs his laugh*; *the oppressed weep their tears*).

In numerous instances a verb will enter into both transitive and intransitive patterns. Thus, *smoke*:

Jack / smokes (SV intransitive)

or

Jack / smokes / too much (SVA intransitive)

but

Jack / smokes / too many cigarettes. (SVO transitive)

Another example, *ponder*:

The Faculty Board / pondered (SV intransitive)

The Faculty Board / pondered / for three and a half hours.
(SVA intransitive)

The Faculty Board / pondered / the wording of a paragraph.
(SVO transitive)

The meaning of a verb may be determined by its patterning; e.g. *reflect*, in *Mary sat and reflected for a few moments*, is intransitive and is synonymous with *think*, but in *Her spectacles reflected the evening sunlight* it is transitive, and has the sense of 'throw back'.

4 Stative and dynamic

English verbs are variously compatible with the progressive aspect. Verbs denoting activities or processes will as a rule take the progressive, whereas some types, e.g. cognitive verbs like *believe*, *perceive*, *recognize*, ordinarily resist it. It is thus good English to say *I was ardently embracing Mrs Fothergill*, but unidiomatic to add *when suddenly I was perceiving the barrel of her husband's shotgun*. We distinguish semantically between *dynamic* and *stative* verbs. In their grammar, dynamic verbs like *work*, *run*, *argue*, accept the progressive forms (*he worked* – *he was working*, etc.); stative verbs like *be*, *know*, *consist*, do not. This generally convenient distinction is often blurred, as some verbs change their category with their context. For instance, we take it as a rule that *know* is stative and therefore not amenable to the progressive aspect: *She is knowing a good psychiatrist* and *I have been knowing this city for twenty years* are considered incorrect. But in certain cases, e.g. in hypothetical statements about future events, *know* can assume the dynamic/progressive character: *We should be knowing the results in a few days' time* (= *We should be learning the results*, *We should be getting to know the results*).

5 Order of elements in the simple sentence

For purposes of illustration, and because it effectively represents the 'normal' syntactic order, it is convenient to regard the simple declarative sentence as beginning with the elements SV. In fact, observation of everyday usage will remind us that this is a rule with frequent exceptions, and that S may be preceded by A, or even by C or O:

Really funny it was. (CSV)

A right Charlie I felt. (CSV)

Snobs I can't stand. (OSV)

Foreman, they made him. (C_o SVO)

Twenty pages of notes I gave that half-wit. (O_d SVO_i)

Apparently there is some latitude in the ordering of sentence

elements, a freedom that has a stylistic value. Consider the example:

His friends he cherished; his enemies he gave no respite.

What is immediately apparent about this is that it marks with quite powerful emphasis the formulation of something that might have been expressed in less rhetorical terms, as *He cherished his friends; he gave no respite to his enemies*. Indeed, the *fronting*, as we call it, of O or C invariably produces a sense of the *marked* construction, emphatically deviant from the customary, or *unmarked* pattern.

Some examples of 'normal' sentence structures, side by side with the same sentences marked by fronting:

Bill would drink cup after cup of tea. (SVO)

Cup after cup of tea Bill would drink. (OSV)

The postman brings some of our mail after lunch. (SVOA)

Some of our mail the postman brings after lunch. (OSVA)

They gave Tom a second chance. (SVO_i O_d)

Tom they gave a second chance. (O_i SVO_d)

Hamlet was a melancholy fellow. (SVC)

A melancholy fellow Hamlet was. (CSV)

A melancholy fellow was Hamlet. (CVS)

They made that rascal Professor of Ethics. (SVOC_o)

Professor of Ethics they made that rascal. (C_o SVO)

That rascal they made Professor of Ethics. (OSVC_o)

6 Location of adverbials

The location of adverbials in the simple sentence pattern is often a matter of stylistic interest, and sometimes creates problems of usage. They commonly occur at the end of the sentence:

The Professor of Comparative Anthropology wears lipstick on Fridays. (SVOA)

The Dean of Agriculture looks heavenly in fish-net tights.
(SVCA)

Even when there is more than one adverbial, the end-position is common:

The Reader in Necromancy will conduct his seminar in the Senior Common Room at two-thirty (SVOAA)

A lecturer in Ergonomics fell heavily down the stairs twenty minutes ago. (SVOAAA)

Members of the Senate convene for dubious purposes in the Board Room on the first Wednesday of every month at two-fifteen punctually. (SVAAAAA)

The types of adverbial illustrated here are called *manner* (Am – a somewhat unsatisfactory name for a rather broad semantic category), *place*, (Ap) and *time* (At). Am, Ap, At is the sequence in which they commonly occur:

The Research Fellow in Geriatrics worked happily in this room for forty years. (SVAmApAt)

She went dutifully to the library every day. (SVAmApAt)

The 'rule' of manner-place-time is by no means a stylistic commandment. The number of adverbials involved, the type of realization (as word or phrase) and the influence of particular items of vocabulary, to say nothing of questions of contextual emphasis, all create that fruitful uncertainty which is the making of style and usage. Which, we may ask, is stylistically preferable, the sentence *The professor stormed in a mood of prophetic rage down the corridor at half past ten*, or *The professor stormed down the corridor at half past ten in a mood of prophetic rage*? The first has the order SVAmApAt, while the second, which may be thought to give the better reading, is sequenced SVApAtAm. One motive for preferring the latter sequence could be the perception that *down* is dually related, to the verb it follows (compare *The professor came storming down on us*), and to the phrase it introduces (*down the corridor*), and consequently that this Ap ought to come next to the verb. A further reason might be that the phrase *in a mood of prophetic rage*, being longer than *down the corridor* and *at half past ten*, creates a cadence, a rhythmic weighting.

A third factor is *focus*, i.e. the placing of emphasis on important information.

7 Focus

In simple sentences, information is customarily processed with a movement from 'known' to 'unknown', or 'given' to 'new', or 'topic' to 'comment':

Our butcher has run away with a vegetarian.

Here the subject of the sentence, *Our butcher*, provides the 'given' information, or 'topic' ('I say, you know our butcher?') while the predicate furnishes an amplifying 'comment' ('well, he's run away with a vegetarian') comprising 'new' information answering questions of matter ('what?') and manner ('how?' 'Under what circumstances?' 'With whom?')

The initial element of such sentences, expounding 'given' information or a proposed 'topic', is sometimes called the *theme*. A companion term, *focus*, relates to the word or phrase that carries the main, commentary burden of 'new' information, e.g. the word *vegetarian* in our example; in speech the focus is accentually marked, e.g.:

Aunt Mary's wolfhound bit the young *postman*.
(focus on *postman*)

Aunt Mary's wolfhound bit the *young* postman.
(focus on *young* = as opposed to the older postman / other postmen)

Aunt Mary's wolfhound *bit* the young postman.
(corrective focus on *bit*, e.g. not *licked*)

The first of these examples has the *end-focus* that characterizes unmarked forms of the simple declarative sentence.

Clearly, the ordering of elements in a sentence can affect the theme-focus relationship. When, for example,

He's run away with a vegetarian
becomes

A vegetarian he's run away with!
(= 'of all things!' 'what d'you think of *that*?')

the fronting creates a focus-bearing theme, or *marked theme*. It is thus possible for a sentence to be doubly focused:

Every blessed day he feeds those confounded pigeons.

Here the emphatic marking of a theme accompanies a no less emphatic end-focus.

8 The passive as focusing device

Fronting is one way of adjusting the informational focus. Another is to convert active into passive. Thus

(1) Jack fed the hungry birds

may be recast in the form

(2) The hungry birds were fed by Jack.

In example (1) the subject-element is realized by the name of an *agent*, Jack; the object-element by a noun denoting *recipients*, the birds; and the sentence is focused on the noun indicating the recipient role. In example (2) the subject-element is realized by the noun phrase denoting the role of recipient; an adverbial phrase (*by Jack*) indicates the agent-role; and the focus is now on the word naming an agent (*Jack*). The passive transformation refocuses the sentence.

Note that the agentive 'by-phrase' is often omitted, i.e. if the identity of the agent is irrelevant, or unknown, or, possibly, if there is more than one agent. This is not uncommon in narrative. We may tell a simple tale in the active voice:

Jean has washed the dishes, Joan has put the children to bed, Jack has made up the fire.

Or in the passive:

The dishes have been washed by Jean, the children have been put to bed by Joan, the fire has been made up by Jack.

But if we wish to present a tale of *events* rather than to focus on personalities, we omit the by-phrases:

The dishes have been washed, the children have been put to bed, the fire has been made up.

A further step in this instance might well be to delete the auxiliary verbs from the first and second clauses:

The dishes have been washed, the children put to bed, the fire made up.

9 Postpositioning

Some special sentence-forms facilitate the postponement of items into a position of end-focus. One of these is the so-called *existential* sentence, exemplified by the assertion *There is a reason*, in which a 'dummy' subject *there* is followed by the verb *be*, which in its turn is followed by the 'true' subject, *a reason*. If the statement were cast in the form *A reason exists*, end-focus would bring the verb, *exists*, into prominence, whereas the existential construction focuses on *a reason*.

The general formula for the existential sentence is:

There + BE + S + (phrase or clause)
 or other
 existential
 verb, e.g.
 'exist'
 'occur'
 'come'

Some examples:

There is a God.

There was someone at the door.

There may be no reason to suspect him.

There then occurred a remarkable event.

Existential sentences thus offer alternative formulations to simple sentences (e.g. *A remarkable event occurred* vs *There occurred a remarkable event*). In a few cases, the existential construction is the standard form. Thus, we usually assert the existence of a supreme being with the sentence *There is a God*. We might say *God exists*, or *God is*, but these formulations – particularly the latter – put a stark focus on the verb.

Another 'postpositioning' structure is the *extraposition*, patterned as follows:

IT + BE + C + (clause)
 seem
 appear
 happen
 etc.

Examples:

It was a pity (that) you could not come.

It seemed heartless to wake her.

It appears (likely) that he has broken his leg.

The clause following C is the 'true' grammatical subject of the sentence, shifted into a position where it takes end-focus. The first two examples can be rewritten so that this clause becomes the first element, or theme: *That you could not come was a pity*, *To wake her seemed heartless*. The third example can only be re-written in this way if a complement (e.g. *likely*, *true*, *probable*) is supplied: *That he has broken his leg appears likely*. In this, as in the other rewritings, the complement is now the element that takes end-focus.

The *cleft sentence* has a superficial resemblance to the extraposition. From a single clause, e.g. *The dog ate my dinner*, we may derive twin-clause forms (hence 'cleft'), such as *It was the dog that ate my dinner*, or *It was my dinner (that) the dog ate*. The formula for the cleft sentence is:

IT + BE + S/C/A/O + who/that-clause

the focus is on the element immediately following BE; it is thus possible to compose cleft sentences clearly indicative of a focus on subject, object, complement, or adverbial. Some examples:

It was Darwin who developed the theory of evolution.
 (= 'Darwin developed the theory of evolution'; focus on S)

It was my money (that) you lost.
 (= 'You lost my money'; focus on O).

It was here that the battle was fought.
 (= 'The battle was fought here'; focus on A)

It was green that we painted the bathroom.
 (= 'We painted the bathroom green'; focus on Co)

The cleft sentence is a formula of some stylistic value, enabling the writer to demonstrate a special or contrastive focus without having to resort to the typographical shifts of underlining, bold type, capitals, etc.

The *pseudo-cleft* sentence is an SVC pattern in which S or C is realized by a *wh*-clause (most often *what*, sometimes *who*, *which*, *why*, *how*), e.g.;

What mother painted last year was the bathroom.

Why she did it is a mystery.

How she managed is a miracle.

A medal is what she deserves.

What she did was paint the whole place brown.

In current colloquial English, a sense of syntactic cleavage in sentences like the last-quoted often prompts the restoration of a deleted subject to the clause realizing C:

What mother did was, she painted the bathroom.

What we're going to do now is, we're going to put this card into this little bag.

In such structures, one clause (the *wh*-clause) appears as 'topic', the other as 'comment'.

10 Structural variation and focus-shift

Many shifts of focus become possible when frontings, passive transformations, and 'postpositioning' structures are taken into account. Here are some variations on a sentence:

Father painted the wall deep purple.

Deep purple, father painted that wall.

Deep purple was what father painted the wall.

What father painted the wall was deep purple.

What father did was paint the wall deep purple.

What he did was, he painted it deep purple.

The wall was painted deep purple by father.

That particular wall father painted deep purple.

There was a wall that father painted deep purple.

There was one wall that was painted deep purple by father.

There was this wall – deep purple, father painted it.

That wall there – painted it deep purple, father did.
 It's a fact that father painted the wall deep purple.
 It was father who painted the wall deep purple.
 It was deep purple that father painted the wall.

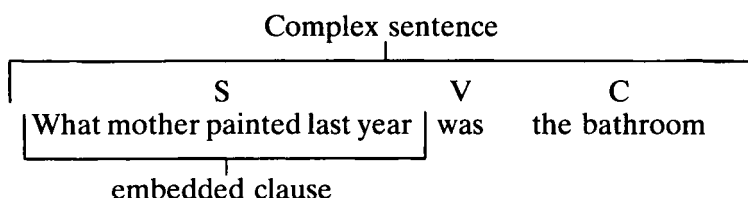
Such elementary demonstrations point to the existence of a wide grammatical *repertoire*; a simple declaration may be made in many ways, with diverse emphases, with varied contextual implications, with gradations of appropriateness to speech or writing.

11 Complexity

Many of the examples in the last two sections fall into the category of *complex* sentences. They embody more than one clause, i.e. more than one process of the type represented by SV, SVA, SVC, SVO, etc. In the following sentence, for example, one clause is embedded in another:

What mother painted last year was the bathroom.

The simple sentence *Mother painted it last year* (SVOA) becomes an embedded clause realizing the element S in a complex sentence, the structure of which may be represented as follows:



A complex sentence, then, in some way elaborates or reduplicates the SV etc. process, whether by embedding, as in the example above, or by some other mode of interlinking. Most of the sentences we use in writing or in continuous speech are complex. Earlier in this chapter we tried to compose a piece of narrative in simple sentences. It would be difficult to do this at any great length, and in some types of discourse, e.g. the conduct of argument, it would be virtually impossible. There is a recurrent need to expound facts or

concepts in greater elaboration than the structure of the simple sentence permits. Consider, for example, the expressions of time in the following:

- (1) She will come later.
- (2) She will come whenever she can manage to get rid of her visitors.

Here we have a simple and a complex sentence, each conveying the message 'She will come at some time'. In the simple sentence, the notion 'some time' is embodied in the adverb *later*. In the complex sentence 'some time' is expressed by a *subordinate clause* (*whenever she can manage to get rid of her visitors*), in which a *non-finite clause* (*to get rid of her visitors*) is embedded. The simple and general notion *later* is elaborated in this complex structure.

In speech as well as in writing there is an incessant need to supplement, modify, and elucidate, clarifying questions of time, identity, reason, result, process, instrumentality, etc. These motivations make for grammatical complexity. Furthermore, the complex sentence expresses the close linkage – the contingency, causality, or simultaneity – of ideas, circumstances, and events. Two simple sentences taken conjointly (e.g. *I ate the cake. I was hungry*) may suggest a causal relationship, but do not expound the contingency of action and explanation as patently as a complex structure incorporating the two statements (e.g. *I ate the cake because I was hungry, Being hungry I ate the cake, I was hungry so I ate the cake*, etc). Simple sentences present simple sequences: *He opened the door. He faced his accusers; She washed the dishes. She found a gold filling*. Complex sentences can convey a sense of overlapping events, or of co-occurrences: *Opening the door, he faced his accusers; While washing the dishes, she found a gold filling*. In these and in other ways the complex sentences express modes of perception and cognition.

12 Coordination

Simple sentence units enter into the complex sentence as clauses, the linkage of which is frequently indicated by *conjunctions*. One very common conjunction is the word *and*

which can be used to *coordinate* so-called *independent* clauses:

We went on foot over the fields (Independent clause)
 and (Coordinator)
 the children travelled by car. (Independent clause)

The coordinator makes a non-dependent relationship between simple sentences which thus form the clauses of a higher unit, the complex sentence *We went on foot over the fields and the children travelled by car*. Neither of the clauses in this example has priority of meaning over the other; we could easily reverse their order – *The children travelled by car and we went on foot over the fields* – without damaging the sense of the sentence. The same would be generally true of sentences constructed with *but* and *or*, which are also co-ordinating conjunctions:

The children wanted a picnic, but the adults voted for bridge

or

The adults voted for bridge, but the children wanted a picnic

and

We could fry some eggs or we could go to a restaurant

or

We could go to a restaurant or we could fry some eggs.

Consider, however, some further examples:

We went on foot and the children followed by car next day.

The children wanted a picnic, but Janice had one of her famous headaches.

Here the order of the clauses is perhaps not so obviously or so freely reversible; turning the sentence around may imply a shift of meaning:

We went on foot and the children followed by car next day
 (= parties travel on sequent days)

is not necessarily the same as

The children followed by car next day, and we went on foot
(possibly = both parties are 'followers', travelling on the same day; i.e. 'the children travelled by car while we went on foot')

and

The children wanted a picnic but Janice had one of her famous headaches
(= therefore no picnic)

is not clearly paraphrased by

Janice had one of her famous headaches but the children wanted a picnic.
(possibly = 'nevertheless we went ahead with the picnic')

These examples point to the possibility of a variable semantic dependence between so-called 'independent' units. The specific wording of the component clauses is clearly of importance (e.g. *followed* and *next day* imply a sequence), and it appears that a coordinating conjunction is not an 'empty' sign of grammatical linkage, but may imply various meanings (e.g. *but* = 'on the other hand', *but* = 'with a constraint, limitation, or reservation', and *but* = 'despite which, overridingly').

It depends, of course, what we mean by *independent*. Confusion is avoided if the term is regarded purely in a grammatical sense. In the sentence *The children wanted an outing, but Janice had one of her famous headaches* there is a semantic relationship between clauses which are nevertheless called 'independent' because neither bears any structural mark of subordination or incompleteness. The conjunction *but* makes a grammatical link, but it is a link standing *outside* and *between* the two clauses.

13 Subordination

Another way of linking clauses in complex structures is called *subordination*. In the following sentences, the word *although* functions as a subordinator:

- (1) I liked the thesis, although Peter had reservations.

- (2) Although I liked the thesis, Peter had reservations.
- (3) Although Peter had reservations, I liked the thesis.
- (4) Peter had reservations, although I liked the thesis.

In each example there is a *principal* or *main clause* (In examples 1 and 3, *I liked the thesis*, in 2 and 4, *Peter had reservations*), and a *dependent* or *subordinate clause* integrally marked by its subordinating conjunction (*although*). In these examples the clauses are freely reversible, i.e. can occur in the order main-subordinate or subordinate-main, but the subordinating conjunction always remains a part of the dependent clause, marking its subordinate role, and is never construed as a link standing outside clause-structure. The subordinate clause therefore has the form of an incomplete utterance, because the incorporated conjunction implies that there is something left to be said: *Although I liked the thesis . . .*; *Because Janice had a headache . . .*; *When he comes . . .*; *Since you do not reply . . .* etc.

Not all subordinating relationships are expressed by conjunctions. In many sentences the subordinate clause is *non-finite*:

Driving to Savannah, we laughed a good deal.

(Compare 'As we drove to Savannah we laughed a good deal.')

I would give a lot to see Charleston again.

(Compare 'I would give a lot if I could see Charleston again.')

He worked on desperately, shunned by his colleagues.

(Compare 'While he worked on desperately, his colleagues shunned him.')

Driving to Savannah and *shunned by his colleagues* are *participle clauses*, i.e. clauses in which V is realized by the present or past participle of a verb. *To see Charleston again* is an *infinitive clause*; V is realized by the infinitive form of the verb.

Some subordinate clauses are verbless:

Sprightly as ever, he cycled across the Sahara at the ripe old age of seventy-two.

They found his lordship under the table, dead to the world.

In these examples, *sprightly as ever* and *dead to the world* can be construed as verbless clauses having an *adjectival* relationship to the main clause. They may be compared with non-finite clauses like *to tell the truth* or *given the circumstances*, which qualify the main clause *adverbially*. Compare

Plucky as ever, he ran well
(*Plucky* etc. relates adjectivally to *he*)

with

Given the circumstances, he ran well
(*Given* etc. comments adverbially on *ran well*)

Expressions like *given the circumstances* are in effect *disjuncts*, items making a comment, a reservation, a qualification of some sort. Typical disjuncts are *amazingly*, *actually*, *oddly enough*, *naturally*, *of course*:

Amazingly, he cycled across the Sahara at the age of seventy-two.

They found his lordship under the table, actually.

My wallet was handed in, oddly enough.

Naturally, the cash was missing.

I had reported the theft, of course.

Note that disjuncts are not integrated with the clauses whose meaning they qualify. We might compare *amazingly* as adverb, in *He cycled amazingly across the Sahara* (= 'in an amazing manner'), with *amazingly* as disjunct, in *Amazingly, he cycled across the Sahara* (= 'I am amazed by this'). (On *hopefully*, *thankfully* as disjuncts and adverbs, see p.152.) Disjunctive expressions are commonly single words or short phrases, but may also take the form of a clause with fixed wording:

Believe it or not, he cycled across the Sahara at the age of seventy two.

They found his lordship under the table, to tell the truth.

My wallet was handed in, strange to say.

As expected, the cash was missing.

I had reported the theft, needless to add.

14 Branching

There are two major ways in which subordinate clauses may be structurally related to a principal construction. One relationship is sequential: in the left-to-right progression of the text, the dependent material either precedes or follows the main clause, e.g.:

- (1) Although he had come very early, in the compulsive way of one who frets about punctuality and consults his watch every minute, he almost missed the interview.
- (2) He almost missed the interview, although he was one of those people who go very early to any appointment, consulting their watches every minute, so fretful are they about punctuality.

The arrangement in example 1, where the principal clause (*he almost missed the interview*) is placed at the end, or 'right' of the text, is called *left-branching*; example 2 illustrates the converse strategy of *right-branching*. These are important possibilities in the repertoire of stylistic choice. For example, left-branching is frequently used to hold attention, create suspense, or delay the giving of information, while right-branching often occurs in contexts which require the establishment of fact or principle before the making of qualifying comment. A further possibility is *mid-branching*:

- (3) He almost – despite his early arrival, his compulsive fretting about punctuality, and his habit of consulting his watch every minute – missed the interview.

Here the elaborate parenthesis is a literary device that serves to sharpen focus on *almost* and *missed the interview*. The example might suggest the casually interruptive habit of speech (*He almost – would you believe it – missed the interview*), but such sentences are as a rule deliberately designed, for writing or for oratory.

15 Embedding

A second possibility is *embedding*; the subordinate clause is

incorporated into the structure of the principal clause, as in the sentence *What mother painted last year was the bathroom* (see p.32). In that sentence, the clause *What mother painted last year* is embedded, as the realization of the element S, in the structure of a superordinate clause. Two further examples, with non-finite clauses as S:

To save money / can be / hard. (SVC)

Starting the car / proved / difficult. (SVC)

An embedded clause may function as Object:

Everyone / could see / what had been done (SVO)

or as Indirect Object:

He / gave / whoever was in charge / a piece of his mind
(SVO_i O_d)

or as Subject Complement:

Security / is / what most people desire (SVC)

or as Object Complement:

Suffering / has made / him / what he is (SVOC)

or as Adverbial:

My belongings / lay / where I had left them (SVA)

Non-finite clauses have potentially ambiguous relationships with the main clause. Punctuation (or in speech the intonation pattern) signals the distinction between linear (branching) and embedded constructions. Compare

We didn't ask them, to tell the truth
(*to tell the truth* comments disjunctively on the statement
We didn't ask them; compare *We didn't ask them, actually*)

with

We didn't ask them to tell the truth
(*to tell the truth* is embedded, as O, in a superordinate clause; compare *We didn't ask them that*)

and compare

He stopped, puffing at his cigarette
 (a right-branching relationship of principal and subordinate clause)

with

He stopped puffing at his cigarette
 (the non-finite clause is embedded; compare *He stopped work*).

16 Beyond the sentence

Grammatical relationships continue beyond the confines of the sentence, entering into the larger structure of the text or extended utterance, in such a way that the *cohesion* of the elaborated pattern is continually demonstrated. This is a topic of such breadth as to defy treatment in a few pages, and the following passage will serve only for purposes of brief general illustration:

It has been suggested that grammatical change can best be interpreted in terms of the community of speech rather than in terms of the psychology and physiology of the individual. If this is indeed so, it might then appear that the examples of grammatical change so far given challenge this principle, since phenomena like analogy and levelling are amenable to psychological rather than social explanations. We must consider, however, that the border between individual psychology and communal tendency is necessarily ill-defined; and also that there is nothing that passes into the communal domain that does so without meeting resistance and censorship. All linguistic change tends to be communally suspect as 'corruption' or 'innovation'; so much so, that any modification would probably be rejected were it not for the fact that changes in their onset are covert, devious, departing from accepted norms by margins too trivial to be observed. Furthermore, there are times when 'accepted norms' are not available. Writing, for example, tends to create a set of grammatical norms; if letters and literacy are not a general characteristic of a culture, or if for some reason the literate tradition is interrupted, the likelihood of accelerated grammatical change is increased. Institutions provide us with another

kind of norm. At first sight, it may seem extravagant to claim that our concepts of public behaviour and of personal relationships in various contexts can have an effect on our grammatical system, but the case is not difficult to make.

(Walter Nash, *Our Experience of Language*)

This paragraph from a textbook on language unfolds its argument by means of small features of wording that connect one sentence with another and integrate the whole passage into a larger context. Any reader encountering the passage in isolation, as it appears here, can readily infer the existence of a preceding and a subsequent text. *So far given* indicates that something has gone before, and *at first sight* suggests that something is to follow. Such expressions reveal that the text is not complete in itself; otherwise, it stands as a self-sustaining unit, by virtue of diverse linkages that connect and group its successive statements.

Consider, for example, the relationship of the first two sentences. The first sentence ends with the long extraposed clause *that grammatical change can best be interpreted in terms of the community of speech rather than in terms of the psychology and physiology of the individual*. (On extraposition see p.30.) In the second sentence, the word *this* is used *anaphorically*, in backward reference, making a link with that long clause: *this* = *that grammatical change can best be interpreted*, etc. If we note how the linkage is reinforced by *indeed*, which makes a connection with *suggested*, it becomes apparent that an expository strand of syntax runs through the first two sentences: *it has been suggested . . . if indeed this . . . then (that)*. This process extends into the third sentence, where the linking item is the conjunct *however*, taking into scope the preceding *it might (then) appear*.

The first three sentences are held together in the structure designated by *it has been suggested . . . if indeed this . . . then (that) . . . however (the following)*. Between the third and fourth sentences there is a break in syntactic linkage; a new process of framing begins with *All linguistic change tends to be communally suspect as 'corruption' or 'innovation'*. This topic-asserting clause is linked to its successor (after the semi-colon) by the phrase *so much so* (= 'this is emphatically the case', 'the foregoing is true to the extent that . . .'). In the

next sentence the linking expression is *furthermore*, reinforcing an assertion by adducing an additional circumstance; and in the sixth sentence it is the phrase *for example* that makes the link. Another syntactic frame has now been constructed: *All linguistic change tends to be communally suspect . . . so much so (that) . . . furthermore . . . for example*. The sentence *Institutions provide us with another kind of norm* starts a new grouping, even though its vocabulary is linked with that sort of preceding sentence: *another kind of norm* recalls *a set of grammatical norms*. The final sentence, beginning *at first sight*, starts the process of framing the next phase in the argument; we anticipate a link of some sort, and in fact the first sentence of the next paragraph contains the phrase *for example*, in backward reference to *the case is not difficult to make*.

Only a few of the devices used to link sentences in continuous discourse are represented here. There is an elaborate repertoire of words and phrases that effect coordinations, subordinations, emphases, antitheses, corrections, disjunctions, etc., in the extended text. Such items add a further range of options – text-framing options – to those involved in the making of sentences, and are an important stage in the progress that leads from the simplest facts of grammar to the most complicated possibilities of style.

17 The grammatical repertoire

Grammar regularly offers more than one way of making a statement, marking an emphasis, putting a point, or achieving any expressive aim. There are, in effect, syntactic synonyms, comparable with the synonyms of vocabulary in that no two equivalents make an exact match of meaning. For example, the sentence *I wrote the book easily* can be reformulated in a variety of syntactic shapes:

To write the book was easy.

The book was easy to write.

It was easy to write the book.

Writing the book was easy.

The writing of the book was easy.

The book was easily written.

Only by locating each of these in a context might we judge its appropriateness. Just as words may be deemed 'synonymous' but not co-terminous, so forms of sentences – e.g. *The book was easy to write* and *Writing the book was easy* – may share a central meaning and yet express contextual distinctions. One of the hidden principles of style is the selection of the form that best fits the context.

There is, in fact, a *repertoire* of items, idioms, constructions and grammatical processes, which every competent user of the language commands. Repertoire choices can in many instances be reduced to simple oppositions, e.g. the 'marked' versus the 'normal' order of elements in a declarative sentence:

Thirty miles they marched that day

versus

They marched thirty miles that day.

Or the active versus the passive:

The decision angered us all

versus

We were all angered by the decision.

Or the declarative versus the existential sentence-form:

The House was in uproar

versus

There was uproar in the House.

Or the extraposition versus its inversion:

It is all too obvious that mice eat cheese

versus

That mice eat cheese is all too obvious.

Or the simple versus the cleft sentence:

The knave stole the tarts

versus

It was the knave who stole the tarts.

Or the participle clause versus the adverbial clause:

His work finished / Having finished his work, he drank
three beers in quick succession

versus

When he had finished his work, he drank three beers in
quick succession.

Or the embedding of the infinitive versus the participle
clause:

To paint in watercolours requires great skill

versus

Painting in watercolours requires great skill.

But the list might be continued through many pages, only to
be rewritten many times over, as the permutations of these
simple pairings are explored.

Let us call a halt here, with the clear emergence of an
important principle, that of *choice*. Being at liberty to choose
is the real problem of usage, the central difficulty of style. We
do not say of the alternatives listed above, that one of each
pair is wrong or inferior or infelicitous while the other is
correct or commendable. If asked in each case to express a
preference, we would begin, no doubt, to postulate contexts
and purposes. Grammar evolves in response to complex
motivations and demands; style expresses the freedom and
the discipline of exercising options among the profusion of
grammatical forms. In all this there is little room for simple
rules and recommendations. The more we consider the elab-
oration of language, the more naive must prescriptiveness
appear. Nevertheless, we cling in hope and doubt to the
notion that some principles may be usefully prescribed, as a
basis for sound stylistic practice. This is the theme of our next
chapter.

3

Prescriptions

Rules and models destroy genius and art.

– William Hazlitt

You write with ease, to show your breeding,
But easy writing's vile hard reading.

– R.B. Sheridan

1 A basic style?

Prescriptions are rules of verbal conduct, sometimes supported by argument, sometimes dogmatically laid down: e.g. that we should avoid the passive, not use too many adverbs, steer clear of verbs ending in *-ize*. What is frequently baffling about such pronouncements is their refusal to concede the possibility of turning your style to suit your purpose. We are warned absolutely against this word, encouraged totally on behalf of that construction, until we receive the impression that there is only one style worthy of the name, whether we write a learned treatise or a letter to Uncle Podger. Edicts of 'never' and 'always' override the caution (and truthfulness) of 'it all depends'.

It does all depend, of course. It depends on the convenience of speech, the reflective strictness of writing, the formality of a situation, the progression of a text, the intimacy of participants in discourse (speaker-listener, writer-reader), the assertions of a personality, the desire to inform, to question, to direct, to imply, to persuade, to entertain, even to deceive. There are many determinants of style, and many acts of communication are stylistically complex. It might then seem artificial to propose a distinction between 'first-level' and 'second-level' problems of usage, and to presume, as a

working notion, the existence of a basic style. At the outset, however, there is some value in the assumption of primary rules and procedures which the writer may set aside only under special circumstances. What we practise at this 'first level' is a style intended to cope efficiently with ordinary transactions, simple reports, arguments, analyses, announcements, directives. These day-to-day purposes leave much to the individuality of the writer, but still are governed by one or two principles of primary competence.

2 Coherence

The first necessity is a coherent text. Every sentence should be firmly constructed, each part standing in clear relationship to the rest, so that the meaning emerges unambiguously and there is no vagueness of wording to puzzle the reader for a single moment. This is an exacting skill, in which all writers must at times falter. When the design is botched through haste, or for want of proper forethought, the text drifts towards incoherence:

While so many people continuously moan about ever increasing prices – albeit at a lower rate these days – in so many areas, the truth is that in the private sector science and the market place have combined to see a whole host of technological marvels come down in price in recent years – from pocket calculators, digital watches, home computers, to, now, the video.

(Daily Telegraph)

Journalists are hard-pressed to produce their copy quickly, and it is perhaps a little unfair to turn to these hasty compositions for examples of mismanaged writing. Nevertheless, this piece of editorial comment from a national newspaper is certainly a flawed construction, a complex sentence that sets out to summarize an argument, but flounders badly.

The first clause is particularly inept:

While so many people continuously moan about ever-increasing prices – albeit at a lower rate these days – in so many areas . . .

The mistaken use of *continuously* for *continually* makes an unintended joke. The real problem, however, is the clumsy parenthesis and the failure to establish unambiguously the pattern of adverbial elements in the clause. Do we suppose the writer to mean that *people continuously moan, albeit at a lower rate these days*, or that *prices are ever-increasing, albeit at a lower rate these days*? The first supposition raises the question of how to measure a rate of moaning, particularly if the moaning is continuous. The second presents the paradox (not unknown to government spokesmen and political apologists) of prices that are ever-increasing at a lower rate, getting higher slower and making us richer as we grow poorer. Neither interpretation makes a great deal of sense. Further, do *people moan in so many areas*, or are *prices increasing in so many areas*? This prompts the further question of what is meant here by that vogue word, *area*: a space (*People are continuously moaning in Sainsbury's car park*), a department of business or public life (*People are continuously moaning in the Civil Service*), or a type of commodity (*People are continuously moaning about the price of a drink*)?

The remainder of the sentence is not quite so badly managed, but still makes heavy going of what should be a relatively easy course. Consider, for example:

science and the market place have combined to see a whole host of technological marvels come down in price . . .

The writer evidently feels that in metonymy lies power: *science* and *the market place*, not 'scientists' and 'salesmen'. This rhetoric, however, results in an oddly unsatisfactory configuration, suggesting a 'combination' of entities that do not very obviously 'combine'. (One might as well say that *Religion and the hearse have combined to see a whole host of people interred*.) Assuming such a combination to be admissible, however, or reading 'scientists' and 'salesmen' for *science* and *the market place*, there is yet another query: do parties *combine to see* (or *watch* or *observe* or *experience*) an event? The following examples are idiomatically dubious (to say the least):

Education and the stock market combined to observe the rise of the middle class.

Tom and Bert combined to see their team win.

'Combine to' surely implies a resultant action, process, development, etc.;

Good teachers and clever businessmen combined to ensure the rise of the middle class.

Tom and Bert combined to score the winning goal.

These irregularities do not prevent us from grasping the intended meaning, but they are irritating, as minor kinks of language making small semantic knots in the text. There is yet another tangle towards the end of the text, where the bracketing *from . . . to* construction is improperly used. Strictly speaking, this construction should not introduce a list, but only identify extremes or termini. Thus we might say:

The whole family was there, from old Grandpa Bloggs to little baby Susan

not

The whole family was there, from old Grandpa Bloggs, Aunt Sarah, Aunt May, Uncle Jim, Cousin Alf, Mum, Dad, Jessie, Jessie's boyfriend Sid, Margaret, Cissie, young Jack, to, most recently, baby Susan.

The *from . . . to* bracket is pointless if a detailed list is supplied. It may even be misleading because of its customary implication of some sort of polarity (*from the richest to the poorest, from the oldest to the youngest, from the tallest to the shortest, from the very primitive to the highly sophisticated, everything from a pin to a piano*, etc.). Possibly the writer of the editorial meant us to infer that pocket calculators were the *first* technological marvel to come down in price, followed by digital watches, then by home computers, and *lastly* by video players, so that *from . . . to* implies 'from earliest to most recent'; but this interpretation is not really justified by the text, which confusedly blends two processes, that of indicating a span and that of presenting an inventory.

The text is not incoherent in the sense of being unintelligible. Cursorily read, it makes a lump of meaning: *Everyone complains that prices keep going up. The truth is that in the*

private sector some prices are coming down, Thanks to technology and shrewd commerce we are now paying less for pocket calculators, digital watches, home computers, and video machines. It is only when the text is read with the attention demanded by an editorial in a 'quality' newspaper that this meaning dissolves in the ambiguities and false relationships of the language that purports to express it. In that sense the text is incoherent.

3 Simplicity

Coherence is often threatened when a writer tries to make a unit of text carry more than it will conveniently hold. This is one of the commonest breaches of the basic principle of *simplicity*. Here is an example:

Writers on the philosophical aspects of perception rarely concern themselves with illusions or hallucinations involving any other sense than vision, but if we are to learn about the status of hallucinations in general this is unduly restricting, and may be actually misleading, if there turn out to be certain features peculiar to hallucinations in the sphere of vision which, in the absence of information about other forms of hallucinations, might be taken to be characteristic of hallucinations in general.

(Sir Russell Brain, *The Nature of Experience*).

This complex sentence creates no ambiguities, and will be seen to be logically constructed, if one has the tenacity to follow its argument through a chain of subordinations-within-subordinations. Therein lies its fault; by the time the construction has proceeded from *but if* to *this*, to *if* again (introducing an existential proposition in the subjunctive mood, *if there turn out to be*), then on to a *which*-clause, travelling through a parenthesis (*in the absence of information*, etc.) before arriving at a passive with a modal auxiliary (*might be taken*), the reader is a little disorientated.

The text can be simplified – which does not mean that it can be made available to simpletons. Its technical abstractions will remain, and its syntax cannot be reduced to the nursery level of drastically simple sentences. Nevertheless, some

simplification can be attempted. To begin with, it can be broken into three separate sentences, preserving the original wording:

- (1) Writers on the philosophical aspects of perception rarely concern themselves with illusions or hallucinations involving any other sense than vision.
- (2) If we are to learn about the status of hallucinations in general this is unduly restricting.
- (3) It may be actually misleading, if there turn out to be certain features peculiar to hallucinations in the sphere of vision which, in the absence of information about other forms of hallucinations, might be taken to be characteristic of hallucinations in general.

This makes the text a little easier to follow, but only a little; it exposes the problem without offering a wholly acceptable solution. Sentence 3 of this breakdown comprises the most awkward part of the original text, and it remains teasingly complex, defying reduction as long as its wording is kept intact. Then the next step must be to revise the wording along with the syntax. Here is a version:

Writers on the philosophical aspects of perception rarely concern themselves with hallucinations involving any sense other than vision. This is unduly restricting if we are to learn about the status of hallucinations in general. It may even be misleading, if we consequently assume that certain features of visual hallucination are also characteristic of other forms, about which we have no information.

This version simplifies the text with no appreciable reduction of its content. One highly complex sentence has been broken into three somewhat less complex units. There is one important change of branching, i.e. from the left-branch of *if we are to learn . . . this is unduly restricting* to the right-branch of *this is unduly restricting if we are to learn*. This change is made for the sake of firmer textual cohesion (on cohesion, see p.40). There is also some reformulation, or 'translation' – e.g. *turn out to be* is expressed in a different way by *consequently*, and the cautious, modally coloured passive *might be taken to be* is re-phrased by the straightforwardly active *we assume that*.

These simple changes have produced a somewhat clearer text. Its relative simplicity has been brought about (a) by analysing the content, i.e. by asking whether it might be divided into segments or phases, and (b) by looking at the most direct and compact way of presenting this segmentation. As a footnote to the exercise, it must be said that this extract is taken from the printed text of a lecture. What we have here may therefore be an imperfect compromise between the improvisations of spoken address, with its straggle of *ifs*, *ands*, *buts*, and *whiches* (any lecturer will recognize the symptoms), and the tidier regime of writing. 'Tidiness', indeed, is the object, and were it not for cosy domestic connotations, the word might serve our purposes better than *simplicity*. A complicated text may still be tidy.

4 Compactness

Tidy expression is compact expression; and this is achieved partly by cutting out the unnecessary word, partly by finding the brief equivalent of the expanded phrase. Writing of a talkative kind, e.g. the language of sports correspondents, is often rather loosely constructed:

It looks touch and go, however, whether Hoddle will be fit to tour South America with England in June – and it could also interfere with his prospects of joining a top international club during the summer.

(*The Times*)

Having survived by the skin of their teeth at Gosforth in the last round of the John Player Special Cup, Wasps will not be smiling at the prospect of facing a daunting task at Orrell this Saturday minus three of their regular backs.

(*Guardian*)

These sentences exemplify a peculiar semi-colloquial semi-literary style which is acceptable in the context of the sports page, where it is recognized and even enjoyed as a distinctive genre. Criticism may therefore be disarmed; nevertheless, these examples can be improved. The first might be rewritten thus:

Hoddle's injury, however, could exclude him from England's tour of South America in June, and could also prevent him from joining a major foreign club during the summer.

In the original text there is no obvious antecedent for the second *it* (in *it could also interfere*, etc.; on antecedence, see p.59). In the revised version, *injury* is the unmistakable subject of the two coordinated clauses. Other changes produce a firmer, less 'wordy' reading: *could* obviates *looks touch and go whether*, and *prevent him from* subsumes *interfere with his prospects of*. As for the second example, what prospects beyond prospects are contained in the phrase *smiling at the prospect of facing*, i.e. smiling at the prospect of having something in prospect, or smiling at a prospective prospect? To say that someone will not be smiling at the prospect of facing a daunting task is as absurd as to say that they will be scowling at the idea of considering an unpleasant thought. A revision might read:

Having barely survived at Gosforth in the last round of the John Player Special Cup, Wasps will not look forward to playing at Orrell this Saturday without three of their regular backs.

For any journalistic fault we can always find the excuse of haste to meet the call for copy. That plea cannot be made on behalf of academic portentousness, of the kind reflected in sentences like these:

Despite the successful establishment of the scheme as mentioned above, it is clear that there is considerable spare capacity in terms of the video replay network.

Needless to say, where a gap is seen to have developed between teaching and learning it is logical to attempt to close the gap by diagnosing student weaknesses and by providing students with help and guidance concerning remedial learning.

(*Teaching at a Distance*, no. 23, issued by the Open University)

It is remarkable that so much flaccid English should be

written by educationists; these are by no means rare examples. The first could be rewritten:

Despite the general provision of video replay machines, they are seldom used

or:

Although there are plenty of video replay machines, few people use them.

And the second:

Needless to say, if students are not learning what they are taught, we should find out why, and try to help them.

'Needless to say', indeed; when the message is reduced to simple terms it seems hardly worth transmitting. Such revisions often criticize a thought as much as they criticize the language in which it is couched. The author of the second example might object that *remedial learning* is an appropriate technical term, but it is not readily apparent that *help them* says less than *provide with help and guidance concerning remedial learning*. I ask my doctor to *cure me* or *help me get better*, not to *provide me with help and guidance concerning the recuperative process*.

5 Discretion

Acceptable prescriptions will be those that make for coherent, simple, compact writing. There is one other quality to consider. How far should a writer allow a personality, with all its whims, heats, ironies, eccentricities, to be displayed in his text? Here are some examples of writing that advertises the presence of the writer:

The traditional Springtide wails can be heard from the Greater London Tories as the customary grants to batty left-wing groups are dished out by the Ken and his henchpersons.

(*Guardian*)

Marilyn, one pauses respectfully, imagining those football

buttons cascading down that bust, was the other half of The Other Half (BBC 1).

At least, that I imagine is the way it was meant to be as Victor Lowndes is the former boss of the Playboy Club and usually described as a colourful millionaire while Marilyn is only a retired bunny with a nice line in gentlemen-prefer-playmates chat. (*Guardian*)

All the specimens yet mentioned have been productions of individual caprice: the writer for some reason or other took a liberty, or made a mistake, with one expression; he might as well, or as ill, have done it with another, enjoying his little effect, or taking his little nap, at this moment or at that. (H.W. and F.G. Fowler, *The King's English*)

The first passage is from a political 'diary' column, the second from a review of television programmes. Their styled and self-conscious chattiness, like the talkative tenor of the sports commentator, is appropriate to a genre; the object in each case is to amuse the reader for a moment, in reference to ephemeral things. (Perhaps even now *the Ken* must be glossed; it refers to Mr Ken Livingstone, socialist leader of the Greater London Council.) The stylistic display is characterized by a free mingling of 'literary' (e.g. *Springtide*) and extremely colloquial words (e.g. *batty*, *dished out*); by a heavy jocosity – Mr Livingstone gets the honorific article, *the Ken*, as though he were some Highland chieftain; by a coy intrusion of the authorial self (*one pauses respectfully*); and by some arch and artful word-play (*henchpersons* for *henchmen*, parodying the vocabulary of the Women's Movement; *gentlemen-prefer-playmates* recalling the phrase 'gentlemen prefer blondes' and alluding to the naked girls of *Playboy* magazine, demurely styled 'playmates').

The third passage obviously does not fall into this category of cute words for keen consumers. It is an extract from a classic textbook, chosen from a section in which the authors examine and criticize the neologisms of various writers, among them Thomas Carlyle, George Meredith, and Herbert Spencer. This is a matter of some substance and solemnity. Yet even here there is a hint of personality, particularly in the phrases *enjoying his little effect, or taking his little nap*. *Nap* is

a mischievous lapse into the colloquial, and *little* patronizes some distinguished authors. 'They *will* do it, these people who should know better' is the message spoken, *sotto voce*, by this text. A personality emerges (not too agreeably) from the passage, but as an incidental quality of the writing, not as the principal object. We may perhaps distinguish between self-expression and *posturing*. The whole purpose of the first two examples is to strike the entertaining posture.

Vigour and high spirits can be very desirable qualities in writing, and certainly we must not assume that all departures from a flat non-committal style are examples of culpable affectation. Many styles, among them the most distinguished, are 'affected', and in no bad sense; to put on a mask, take on a role, is one of the writer's legitimate functions. We should never wear the mask vainly, however. We must use discretion, tempering the manner to the topic, observing what our older rhetoricians called a *decorum*.

6 Prescriptions

A style cannot be made by rule or taught by recipe, but some prescriptions may still be necessary. What follows here is a list of recommendations, to each of which some explanatory comment is added. The first prescription, dealing with matters of elementary care, should be observed at all times; the rest apply under conditions noted in the commentary.

Prescription 1 *The components of a sentence must be clearly and unambiguously related*

In particular, note the following points:

(a) Verbs agree with their subjects, in the category of *number* (i.e. as singular or plural). Thus *a code of principles have been drafted* is incorrect, because the formal subject of the sentence is *code* (requiring *has*), not the plural *principles*. This is an example of 'false agreement' or 'false concord'. In such a simple illustration, the point may seem obvious; nevertheless the error is not uncommon. Writers (and also typists and compositors) are often misled by items in proximity; thus *a code of principles* may prompt the false agreement

because the item immediately preceding the verb (i.e. *principles*) is plural. Collective nouns (e.g. *set*, *series*, *number*, *class*, *committee*, *government*) offer occasional problems of interpretation:

A group of solicitors are planning to set up the first solicitors' property centre in England.

(*Daily Telegraph*)

Group is singular and requires a singular form of the verb. However, this sentence could be excused the charge of false agreement if it were argued that *group* here refers to a number of individuals rather than an entity. Words like *class* have this ambivalence: *The class was unruly* is 'correct' if *class* is seen as referring to a unit, while *The class were amused* is equally correct, if *class* is taken to refer to the people comprising the unit. Simple failures of concord, or apparent anomalies, rarely puzzle the reader. The usual response to a lapse of subject-verb concord is one of irritation or scornful amusement at an evident illiteracy. Breaches of subject-complement agreement usually escape censure:

The measures are regarded as an indication of General Zia's nervousness about opposition to his regime. (*Daily Telegraph*)

It would be a severe critic who, noting the lapse of agreement between *measures* (plur.) and *indication* (sing.), would demand the revision: *The measures are regarded as indicating General Zia's nervousness*, etc.

(b) When the subject of a sentence is elaborately and carelessly realized, there is a danger that the sentence will lose coherence and that the reader will be misled. An example:

The commitment, sharp competitive edge and not least ability of almost all the juniors and not just the finalists to hit skilful spectacular winners, made it a heartening weekend. (*Daily Telegraph*)

The structure is SVOC_o, thus:

S: The commitment, sharp competitive edge and not

least ability of almost all the juniors and not just the finalists to hit skilful spectacular winners

V: made

O: it

C₀: a heartening weekend.

This breakdown shows the elaborate realization of S in a front-weighted sentence (on 'front-weighting' see further pp. 77, 87). The general sense may be outlined as *The commitment, competitive spirit, and skill of all the junior players made it a heartening weekend*. The sense of structure is lost, however, in the elaboration of a triple subject, the headwords of which are *commitment*, *edge*, and *ability*. The elaboration is inelegant and idiomatically questionable. *Not least* seems to require an article or a possessive pronoun before the following noun. (Thus, *The Women's Institute, the church choir, and not least the Brownies contributed to the success of the afternoon*, or *Fluency, skill in composition, and not least an ability to please public sentiment made him a fashionable painter*.) *Not just* comes confusingly in the wake of *not least* and *almost all*. The *and* of *almost all the juniors and not just the finalists* is a further source of confusion, since it might prompt the inference that the juniors and the finalists are separate groups of people; a better reading would be *almost all the juniors, not just the finalists*. The major problem, however, it is the awkward length of a noun phrase with a postmodifying sequence into which a non-finite clause is embedded: *ability of almost all the juniors and not just the finalists to hit skilful spectacular winners*. A little punctuation would ease the burden of this: *the ability of almost all the juniors, not just the finalists, to hit skilful spectacular winners*. This does not entirely smooth the reader's path, and there remains in the sentence a shadow of ambiguity, in that the infinitive clause *to hit skilful spectacular winners* is apparently governed not only by *ability* but also by *commitment* and *competitive edge*. It is possible to rewrite the sentence, keeping the long S, but clearly articulating its three component elements:

The commitment of the players, their sharp competitive edge, and not least the ability to hit skilful spectacular winners, shown not only by the finalists but by almost all

the juniors, made it a heartening weekend.

The ponderous front-weighting remains, but the sentence is no longer confusing or ambiguous.

(c) Syntactic concord and semantic concord go together; the grammatical frame links compatible references. The principle calls for illustration. An example, therefore:

The recognition by Barnes that, no matter residence in Wales since early childhood and schooling at Bassaleg, he was English in thought and deed, was a happy day for English rugby – besides being a heart-felt tribute to his splendid Welsh mentors.

(*Daily Telegraph*)

The gist of the sentence appears to be that Barnes, brought up in Wales, happily decided to be an English rugby player; otherwise it is difficult to make much sense of it. The structure is SVC, with the words *The recognition . . . thought and deed* as S. The element C is realized by *a happy day*, etc., and then, in the appended participle clause, by *a heart-felt tribute*, etc. Thus there are two basic propositions:

The recognition that he was English was a happy day for English rugby.

The recognition that he was English was a heart-felt tribute to his splendid Welsh mentors.

The objection to the first of these is that a *recognition* is not a *happy day*. These are semantic incompatibles; one might say with comparable absurdity that *The concept of curved space was an exciting time for physics*. It is of course acceptable to write *It was a happy day for English rugby when Barnes recognized*, etc.; in that case the syntactic form marches with the semantic intention. The second proposition requires us to attribute to *recognition* the meaning of 'something expressed': *In recognizing the fact that he was English* (= 'while putting his recognition into words') *he also paid heartfelt tribute to his Welsh mentors*. This concrete/dynamic sense of the word is at variance with the abstract/stative sense it bears in the first proposition. Two meanings are smudged into one in this sentence.

One other blunder may be mentioned. It occurs within the

parenthetical sequence *no matter residence in Wales since early childhood and schooling at Bassaleg*. The wording falsely suggests a conjunction of *early childhood* and *schooling at Bassaleg*, i.e. *He had lived in Wales ever since his early childhood and his schooling at Bassaleg*. The true conjunction is, of course, that of *residence* and *schooling*: *He had lived in Wales ever since early childhood, and had been schooled at Bassaleg*. One way of removing this ambiguity would be to replace *early childhood* by a premodifier (to *residence*), thus limiting unmistakably the reference of *and*: *despite his life-long residence in Wales and his schooling at Bassaleg*.

(c) The importance of the small grammatical words must by now be evident; it is essential that their reference and scope should be exclusively clear. It should not be possible to mistake the *antecedent* of a pronoun or preposition, i.e. the part of speech on which it properly depends. When the antecedent is misread, the meaning of the sentence is called into question. Thus, *The officers ordered the men to clean their quarters* is ambiguous, because it is not clear – without information from a supporting context – whether *their* refers to *men* or *officers*. Given the sentence as it stands, a reader might very well assume the nearer word, *men*, to be the more likely reference. This psychological rule of proximity affects more than one grammatical pattern in English. The separation of a preposition from its antecedent is a potent source of ambiguity, much exploited by humorists:

Among the exhibits was an ingeniously constructed gaming table for up to eight players with detachable legs.

The antecedent of *with* is *table*, not *players*, a fact that the unlucky ordering of the sentence momentarily conceals. Sober sense cannot, however, be wholly restored by putting the phrase *with detachable legs* next to its antecedent, *table*:

Among the exhibits was an ingeniously constructed table with detachable legs for up to eight players.

New problems of antecedence arise (*detachable legs for up to eight players?*) because *table* ‘governs’ *for* as well as *with*. What is needed is some careful punctuation, or, if a well-placed comma is unavailing, a rewording of the entire sen-

tence. Punctuation is not always the answer, as the following remarkable example shows:

Handsome brickie Tony Barker cemented an amazing bond as he lay dying . . . between his wife and his mistress.
(*Sun*)

The dots suggest an uncomfortable awareness of the ambiguity lurking in this treacherous construction. The proposed antecedent of *between* must be *cemented* ('he cemented a bond between them'), not *lay dying* ('he lay dying between his wife and mistress'); yet the hastily defensive punctuation will not prevent the amused reader from taking the sentence in the latter sense. It is easy enough to avoid the ambiguity by slightly re-ordering the construction:

As he lay dying, handsome brickie Tony Barker cemented an amazing bond . . . between his wife and his mistress.

The dots now serve a different purpose – perhaps the one originally intended; they express the pause that precedes a revelation, explanation, or definition. The sentence is still absurd, because of the silly play on *cement* and *bond*, but at least it is unambiguously absurd.

(d) Be particularly careful in relating a main clause and a dependent participle clause, adjectival clause, verbless clause, or disjunct. Here are some cautionary examples, mostly noted from TV news transmissions:

- (1) On reaching Kenya, our problems were not over. (ITN news broadcast)

(Here is the classic error of the 'dangling participle'; it is not 'our problems' that reach Kenya. The well-worn classroom example is *Coming to school, a bus nearly ran over me*. Re-cast: *Coming to school, I was nearly run over by a bus*; and similarly, *On reaching Kenya, we found that our problems were not over*.)

- (2) Once having gained sufficient interest locally, a harder socialist message can be introduced. (*Guardian*)

(It is not the 'socialist message' that gains local interest. Replace the participle clause with an adverbial clause: *When sufficient local interest has been attracted*, etc.)

- (3) Observed from the shore, negotiations for the hijacked vessel continue. (TV news broadcast)

(It was in fact the vessel that was being observed from the shore while the negotiations were taking place. Again, rewrite with an adverbial clause: *Negotiations continue while the hijacked vessel is observed from the shore.*)

- (4) Standing behind her, a bearded Armenian shouted instructions, a pistol held close to her head. (TV news broadcast)

(The introductory participle clause is correctly related to its main clause, *a bearded Armenian shouted instructions*. It is at the end that the sentence loses its way. Was the Armenian a bearded lady intent on suicide? Read: *Standing behind her and holding a pistol close to her head, a bearded Armenian shouted instructions.*)

- (5) I made records of her talking, unaware that she was being recorded. (Student's essay)

(Who was 'unaware', 'she', or 'I'?)

- (6) If successful, this will be the first panda born by artificial insemination outside China. (TV news magazine)

(It is the insemination that needs to be successful, whether outside China or outside the Savoy Hotel. The sentence misrelates *if successful* with *panda*.)

- (7) Like London in 1851, there was an atmosphere of pride and optimism. (TV Broadcast)

(*Like London in 1851* is not properly related to the main clause. Two rewritings are possible: *As in London in 1851, there was an atmosphere of pride and optimism* – making clear the adverbial link with the verb *was*; or *There was an atmosphere of pride and optimism, like that of London in 1851*. *Like* presupposes the comparison of nominal expressions.)

- (8) Like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, different governments have pummelled and undermined our top industries and it is absurd. (Reader's letter in *The Times*)

(But Tweedledum and Tweedledee did not pummel and undermine anyone's top industries; they pummelled each other. In this case, a corrected version is elusive, because the underlying thought is confused. Possibly: *Indistinguishably aggressive as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, different parties in government have made our leading industries the object of their battle.* But it would have been better to forget dum and dee.)

It might be said of any of these instances except, perhaps, the last, that the meaning comes over clearly enough, despite the flaws of grammatical form. True; but it is none the less dangerous to permit any inadequate matching of form and content. Concede the elementary and obvious case, and the subtler error, more disruptive of meaning, may the more readily creep in.

Prescription 2 Keep a clear syntactic line; try not to lose your reader in constructional mazes

This prescription has been anticipated to some extent in comments on coherence and the dangers of the elaborated subject. It is rather easy to fall into the habit of making syntactic digressions and interpolations. Here is a cautionary example from a critical review of an art exhibition:

Its rows of sequential photographs, pictures and sculptures subscribe to the now derided – in this new age of uncertainty – clinical certitude of Structuralism. And of course in the metaphorical waffle of its 'Pier + ' spatially infinite 'Ocean' title, in its tendency to set the isolated moment against mind-boggling eternities – best exemplified by one artist who does nothing but send telegrams (subsequently retrieved and framed) from all over the world to his friends saying only 'I am alive' – in its general preoccupation with making static representations of time and interlude, it betrays the influence of the Space programme, then at its zenith. (*Spectator*)

This is, in its own word, mind-boggling. The stem of the second sentence is represented by the words *And of course . . . it betrays the influence of the Space programme.* Between the disjunct *of course* and the main clause *it betrays*, etc., there are three long adverbial constructions (*in the metaphorical waffle*, etc.; *in its tendency to set*, etc.; *in its preoccupation*

with, etc.). Two of these are separated by a long parenthesis (*best exemplified by*, etc.), which in its turn is interrupted by another parenthetical expression (*subsequently retrieved and framed*). The management of the sentence, as a sequence of parallel constructions, is seriously impaired by these interruptions. It even appears that the title 'Pier + Ocean' is breached parenthetically by the critic's own explanatory comment, *spatially infinite*. The fragmentation of the syntax, and the unwieldy length of phrase, can only confuse the reader.

Prescription 3 Avoid loose, comma-connected strings of independent clauses

Here is a prescription that requires careful illustration. Certain famous passages of English prose exploit with sonorous effect 'comma-connected strings of independent clauses':

We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and the oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. (Sir Winston Churchill)

But this is a planned rhetorical scheme, and no one could suppose that its progression of parallel constructions is anything other than deliberate. Quite different is the merely casual hitching together of clauses into a slack sequence:

The prescription directs you not to write like this, only slovens and people with no aesthetic sense write like this, it makes dismal reading, the merest child can see how bad it is.

Writers of fiction may construct such sentences *mimetically*, in echoing a style of speech or in representing the flow of a character's thoughts. In non-fictional prose this bemused rambling is a vice.

Prescription 4 Avoid the mannerism of the 'snapped' sentence – the headless predicate, the tailless subject, the brute interjection

There may sometimes be stylistic justification for writing a verbless clause, or one from which the subject has been

deleted, or one in which an adverbial or a complement stands for the whole sentence-process. This can be an effective representation of the powerful, incisive comment. It is, however, a potent, not to say strident, device, and a very little of it goes a long way:

That clipped style. Terse. Giving the impression of laconic strength. Not wasting words. Getting through to him. The reader. Keeping him on his toes. Driving him. Right out of his mind, probably.

Some tricks of style are like spices; you must know when to use them, and you need only a pinch. This is one such. Note the device, therefore, but do not let an occasional turn become a tedious habit.

Prescription 5 In your concern for coherence and simplicity, do not overwork the conjunctions 'and', 'but', 'for', 'so', 'then', 'yet', 'because', 'as'

There is a traditional distinction between 'loose' and 'periodic' sentence structure. The 'loose' structure is perfectly respectable as a stylistic resort; the designedly 'loose', however, is not to be confused with the shiftlessly 'lax':

Of course we should visit the dentist regularly, but we should also be responsible for our own oral hygiene, and that means daily brushing, so brush your teeth at least once a day; yet do not neglect the gums, because they must also be kept healthy, as it is round the rims of the teeth and the gums that plaque forms. Then the enamel is attacked, so your teeth decay, and you have to go to the dentist again.

The naive conjunctive rattle of *and . . . then . . . so . . . because* is often a feeble attempt to avoid the comma-connecting illustrated under Prescription 3. A very different matter is the planned simplicity of *and, then, so, because*, etc., in skilled narrative:

The old man made the sheet fast and jammed the tiller. Then he took up the oar with the knife lashed to it. He lifted it as lightly as he could because his hands rebelled at the pain. Then he opened and closed them on it lightly to loosen them. He closed them firmly so they would take the

pain now and would not flinch and watched the sharks come. (Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*)

This, for all its plainness, is elaborately calculated; the prescription has no force in such cases.

Prescription 6 *Avoid stylistic blends; keep unity of tone in vocabulary, do not mix metaphors, respect idiomatic logic*

A simple case of failure to 'keep unity of tone' in vocabulary would be made by the assertion *It's a wise offspring that kens its own poppa*, or *It's an insightful infant that has the low-down on its progenitor*. These absurd examples may at least strike a reader as having humour, of a sort; and indeed, a shift in the level of vocabulary, from the strictly bookish to the freely colloquial, or vice versa, can be a means of creating boldly witty effects. But this must be a 'second level' option. At the first level we try to keep a clear distinction between literary idiom and knockabout talk. They are inelegantly mixed in the following example:

In a linguistic appropriation that would cause a jolt to the Socialist Workers' Party organisers of the Right to Work marches in Britain, the US 'Right to Work' campaign is a fiercely anti-labour outfit that tries to get individual states to pass 'Right to Work' laws which makes union recognition more difficult. (*New Statesman*)

The primary failure of this sentence is syntactic; it violates at more than one point the requirements of our Prescription 1. If this is 'wrong':

In a nomenclature that often puzzles foreigners, the British public schools are strictly fee-paying institutions

or this:

In a terminological transfer that might give the Kremlin a surprise, the Salvation Army is a stubbornly peaceful organization

then this is also wrong:

In a linguistic appropriation that would cause a jolt to the Socialist Workers' Party organisers of the Right to Work

Marches in Britain, the US 'Right to Work' campaign is a fiercely anti-labour outfit.

'Wrong', that is to say, because the introductory adverbial expression is no more than loosely or impressionistically related to the main clause.

There is also an apparent breach of concord at the end of the sentence: '*Right to Work*' laws which makes union recognition more difficult. This is possibly a misprint – *makes* for *make* – or conceivably the result of omitting a comma that would relate *which*, etc., to *pass*: *tries to get individual states to pass 'Right to Work' laws, which makes union recognition more difficult.*

Apart from these lapses, the text is marred by the writer's failure to control the vocabulary, which lurches indecorously between the almost stilted formality of *linguistic appropriation* and the loose slanginess of *anti-labour outfit*. Words are used confidently, as though each one were vigorously and unmistakably stamped with a clear meaning, yet nothing is quite certain. What is a *linguistic appropriation*? Is it simply the borrowing of a word or phrase? Is illicit borrowing (i.e. *misappropriation*) in some way involved? Are we to understand that the borrowed phrase, having been appropriated or misappropriated, has been misapplied? And what manner of institution, organization, party, faction, group, unit, is an *outfit*? Can a campaign be an outfit? These are not merely whimsical questions; they point to the slapdash that mars the sentence from beginning to end.

The mixed metaphor is a commonplace of overstrained rhetoric. An examination candidate tells of a poet *weaving his pawns into the tapestry of his attack*; a newspaper leader-writer speaks of the *berserk fruits* of the government's economic policy; a reporter writes of a squabble in the art world:

An unseemly atmosphere flavoured by colourful insults and unsavoury accusations by distinguished figures in the art world has brought to boiling point an antipathy that has been building up for years between Dali's present advisers and friends and those once close to him. (*Daily Telegraph*)

Do not let your antipathy build up, lest a colourfully flavoured atmosphere should bring it to boiling point. Such examples require no further comment. As to what is meant by

'idiomatic logic', here is a curious passage from a student's essay:

Literary writers rely on an impressionistic grammar of conversation which – for all but intensive caricature – dispenses with the largely incommunicative dross generated by a process of 'thinking on the run', whilst retaining the recognizable syntactic hardcore of this medium.

The sustaining figure, presumably, is intended to be a metallurgical image, contrasting the 'core' of pure metal with the 'dross' formed in smelting (the figurative 'core' being the essential content of conversation, while the 'dross' is the token formula, the hesitant noise, the empty phrase). The student has muddled the image, however, by referring to *hardcore*. This is the layer of coarse, packed rubble used in making the foundation of a road or a building. In the essay, *hardcore* is presented as the literal and figurative counter-term to *dross*; and thus the central metaphor is blurred, or disjointed. The reader is not helped by persistent mismatches in the vocabulary. An *impressionistic grammar of conversation* is said to *dispense* with *dross*, which is *incommunicative* and which is also *generated* (by *thinking on the run*). It is easy to accept that an impressionistic grammar might 'dispense' with elements having no communicative function; or that a smelting process might 'generate' dross; but not that grammar 'dispenses with' dross, or that dross is 'incommunicative', or that it is generated by 'thinking on the run'. Such collocations are breaches of the idiomatic logic that requires each expression to have its fitting partner.

Prescription 7 *In formal writing, as well as in formal speech, make it a general principle to avoid stumpwords, jargon, and slang*

Stumpwords are the abbreviations of informal chat (*chat* itself being the stump of *chatter*):

The prof broke his specs at the Lit. Soc. do.

Twin carbs boost the revs and get you past those artic lorries.

The house is absolutely fab – all mod cons, a fridge, a telly, and a lime-green lav.

Stumpwords enter a lottery for acceptance into literary and formal usage; *mob* (*mobile vulgus*) has survived into standard from the eighteenth century, while *bam* (*bamboozle*), from the same period, has not. So *fridge* may become a standard item and *fab* may fade (indeed has already faded) with the years. It is not the writer's business to act as arbiter or promoter, however, other than by conservatively avoiding the use of stumpwords in formal English.

Jargon invites the same caution. We know that one person's jargon is another's technical term, and that every occupation has its special vocabulary, items of which sometimes find their way into broader usage. This is part of the ordinary growth of language, and it would be idle to resist the process that gives us, for example, the word *feedback* as a synonym of 'response', 'reaction', 'report'. What should be resisted is the pretentious attribution of scientific weight to quite ordinary statements: *The feedback from our pilot scheme was minimal* = 'We learned little from our first attempt.' In this way *formula* may be jargon, *context* may be jargon, *initiative*, *dialogue* and *parameter* may be jargon:

In the context of a no-growth situation, the parameters of a meaningful dialogue may be hard to establish, but hopefully the minister's initiative will open the way to a formula for industrial peace.

It is the element of pretentious hectoring that makes such jargon objectionable. Slang may also be a discourtesy to the reader, a mode of jocular bullying that forces his assent:

A fairly manky-looking cross-section of quacks, shrinks and sawbones had been assembled to discuss euthanasia.
(*Spectator*)

For *quacks* read *physicians*, for *shrinks* read *psychiatrists*, for *sawbones* read *surgeons*, for *manky-looking* read *repugnant*; collectively, make the translation *some unattractive representatives of the medical profession*. This short passage (from a review of television programmes) illustrates, indeed, the power and the danger of slang. Its power is to play on feeling, appeal to common-man sympathies, evoke temperamental responses, implant judgments, while it beguiles us with its impudence and colour; its danger lies in its distortions, its

exaggerations, its dissatisfaction with discreetly restrained expression.

Prescription 8 *Make your own phrases; try to avoid clichés and common cant*

In time all expression hardens (or crumbles) into cliché, and it is difficult to write more than a few sentences without having recourse to some well-worn phrase. The danger is not so much that you occasionally let your thought employ a cliché, as that you habitually allow clichés to represent your thought. Swift made joyful war on clichés in his *Polite Conversations*, and another sweetly sardonic Irishman, Myles na Gopaleen (alias Flann O'Brien, alias Brian O'Nolan) composed a superb 'Catechism of Cliché':

For what occasions does one have a boring and displeasing topic of conversation?

– For breakfast dinner and tea.

From what Aryan prototype do I not know you, sir?

– Adam.

What is the nature of the objection which you have?

– It is rooted

On what is it usual to have one's hours of waiting?

– End.

In what opulent manner does one deserve a thrashing?

– Richly.

With whom is one prepared to take one's chance?

– The next man.

And so on, for many a fecund page. A modern British thesaurus would abound in lustreless phrases from the tarnished word-hoards of journalists, politicians, trade union officials and public relations men. At best harmlessly dull, such expressions can at times have the dangerous power of language-vouchers that rescue the user from the necessity of expending real thought. Therefore never allow your economy

to be *blown off course*; eschew the *U-turn*, spare the *swinging cut*: take no thought for *take-home pay*, shun the *weekly shopping basket*, never hanker after a *package of proposals*, making *substantial offers*, in terms of *real money*, right *across the board*, at *this moment in time*; let nothing appear at the *end of the day*, or even while it is *early days*, and do not permit yourself to see *light at the end of the tunnel* or to *turn the corner*, though of course you should abandon *doom and gloom* (or vice versa) and forget that notorious *winter of discontent*. Grapple with language on your own account, for the sheer pleasure of conquest and possession. (At times you may even go *a bit over the top*.)

Prescription 9 *Try not to be verbose; as a first principle, choose the familiar and concise before the learned and expansive*

What we mean by 'learned' is perhaps open to dispute; Jack's learned word may be Jill's commonplace. It often appears, however, that 'book words' do strange things to the unbookish. A famous rugby player, commenting on the performance of the Welsh side in an international match, says *loose possession is a department they must elaborate in*, meaning *they must try harder to get hold of the ball*. What is the fascination of *elaborate*, that it must be so elaborately sought? And why does *possession* have to be defined as a *department*? Ordinary observations do not gain in value by being dressed in ambitious words.

Put no great trust in polysyllables. Here is a text with a familiar message:

In summation, let us posit that we have established the invariable relevance (a) of an unconditional confidence in the divine supervision of the human predicament, (b) a firm if rationally unmotivated expectation of a positive issue from situations of a critical nature, and (c) a supportive attitude of committed concern for our various associates – the latter being indisputably the item of paramount importance among these desiderata.

Discerning readers may prefer the simple language of the Authorized Version:

And now abideth Faith, Hope, Charity, these three; but the greatest of these is Charity.

7 Purposes

Nine questions of usage have been treated prescriptively. Five of the prescriptions concern syntax, four take up some matters of vocabulary; and that is virtually all that will be said, in this book, about rules of practice. Though the prescriptions are few, they are not, however, randomly made. They serve a purpose which might be described as courtesy in communication.

The syntactic prescriptions require a writer to avoid incoherent, confusing, loose, broken, or misrelated constructions; he is to make his text easy for a reader to follow, clearly demonstrating its connections and its logic. The prescriptions of vocabulary ask the user to be wary of the vogue word, the automatic phrase, the slick, the pretentious, the pert and self-preening, the familiar smirks, winks and nudges that might repel a stranger. The ultimate purport of all these prescriptions is *social*: in public or formal encounters, you must show consideration for those you address. Since what has been said in this chapter applies mainly to writing, the governing principle may be stated as 'Put your reader first'. Putting the reader first demands the cultivation of a coherent, simple, compact style – our 'first level' or 'basic' style.

The reader, however, is not the sole claimant to all the rights of discourse. A second principle might be formulated as 'Serve your subject conscientiously,' and a third as 'Give your personality its due.' Thoughts cannot always be simply expressed, and often the task of presenting a theme with urgency, with conviction, with real power of persuasion, demands that the writer should abandon his discreet and neutral stance. Complex topics and the demand for self-expression imply a 'second level' of style, not definable by *prescription*, but contained in *options*. The distinction between 'first level' and 'second level' is an artifice, of course; one 'level' is involved in the other, and there is no clear line (social or linguistic) to be drawn between them. It is reasonable to claim, however, that some criteria of usage presuppose an *interaction* with a reader (or listener, or 'receiver')

while others are related to the *design* of a message, and are thus based on the supposition that there are alternatives to choose from. To these possibilities of choice we now turn.

4

Options

A tale should be judicious, clear, succinct;
The language plain, and incidents well link'd. . .

– William Cowper

. . . the shortest way is commonly the foulest, and surely the
fairer way is not much about.

– Francis Bacon

1 Three types

Beyond the elements of style, choices proliferate. We have the freedom of our language, which includes the freedom to explore the validity of first principles. We may choose, in defiance of prescription, to construct syntactic labyrinths, to string out loose conjunctive lines, to make deliberate shows of jargon and cliché, to mix amazing metaphors. Nevertheless, we must know what we are doing. We must recognize the possibilities and the implications of our choices, so that we do not choose wrongheadedly. Though stylistic options are generally taken by instinct, nimble or stumbling, there are broad possibilities that can be defined and consciously borne in mind; the grounds of instinct, its field of operations, can be objectively drawn. These broad options are listed here under three types, identified as *Distributive Options*, *Presentative Options*, and *Options of Address*. They outline choices recurrently made when style is no longer a 'first level' matter of simple and serviceable documentations, but has shifted to a 'second level' of exhortation, persuasion, polemic, cool rationality, lyrical intensity, narrative guile: to some level of personal art that transcends yet still rests upon the common sense of common usage.

2 Distributive options

Our writings carry messages more or less spontaneously loaded into the containers called 'clause' and 'sentence'; we make up, in effect, a syntactic train with vehicles of variable size. Alternatives in packaging are open to us. On the one hand, a great deal may be crammed into a single box; on the other, the same material may be contained in a series of units. The distributive options include the following major possibilities:

Option 1 *The compound sentence-unit versus the sequence of short sentences*

Example:

(1) He brought his relief column to the bank of the river, where the little detachment was still holding out, although its ranks were pitifully depleted, not by enemy action alone, but also by the ravages of disease.

(2) He brought his relief column to the banks of the river. There the little detachment was still holding out. Its ranks, however, were pitifully depleted. This was not the result of enemy action alone. Disease, too, had taken its toll.

Comment:

Example 1 carries its narrative in the large vehicle of one complex sentence, whereas 2 proceeds in a train of simple sentences. Version 2 is perhaps easier to follow at first reading, and therefore is marginally the better response to a 'first level' demand for simplicity. The simplicity is a little forced, however, and the text plods along rather doggedly. For the sake of rhythmical variation it is often advisable to conflate sentences – e.g. *Its ranks were pitifully depleted, not by enemy action alone*. A notable feature of version 2 is that each sentence contains some small item that links it with its predecessor: *there, however, this, too*. The role of these words correspond to that of the conjunctions and adverbs (*where, although, not alone . . . but also*) in version 1, i.e. they demonstrate the relations and connections of the text. Some such demonstration is necessary, whether the writer chooses the complex sentence or the sequence of simple units.

In general, opt for simple sentences –

- (a) If each item in a programme of information is to be given equal weight with the others, there being no special prominences or suppressions of prominence.
- (b) If the reader is to hold in clear definition the stages of some process, the phases of some development, the terms of some argument.
- (c) If the dynamics of expression – whether in reading aloud or in the imaginative reconstruction of silent reading – are designedly ‘staccato’, with recurrent pauses.
- (d) If it is intended to project a distinctive manner or tone of voice, such as laconic matter-of-factness, or dramatic intensity.

Choose the complex unit –

- (a) If for the sake of aesthetic proportion and perspective some parts of the message can be brought into prominence while others are conveniently put into a position of reduced emphasis. Compare the relative muting of *not by enemy action alone* in version 1 with the much starker emphasis of *This was not the result of enemy action alone*. The patterning of theme and focus (see 2.7) is affected.
- (b) If certain points must be mentioned in passing; less honestly, if there are questions to be adroitly begged. The incidental point or the casual assumption can be framed in a subordinate construction. Note how certain propositions are palmed onto the reader in a sentence such as the following: *The latest proposals, one-sided though they may seem, are designed to control inflation and benefit the whole community by restoring financial confidence, at the acceptable cost of a small rise in the number of those who are for the moment unemployed*. The reader is asked to accept that the interests of one section of the community are those of the whole, that financial confidence is of paramount importance, that a certain level of unemployment is acceptable, and that unemployment is in any case a temporary condition. Acceptance is eased

by a somewhat shifty handling of the argument, shown up by an alternative version in which sentences make stark assertions: *The latest proposals may look one-sided. Nevertheless, they will control inflation and benefit the whole community. They will do that by restoring financial confidence. The cost will be a rise in the numbers of unemployed. The cost is acceptable.*

- (c) If the piece is intended in reading, to convey a smooth, fluent, easily paced effect.

The rhythm and dramatic impact of a passage consisting mainly of simple sentences may be enhanced by the introduction of one short, simple unit:

In the past the English used to be accused of complacency, discourtesy, and downright incompetence in their apparent neglect of major European tongues. Their linguistic ability, it seemed, was confined to schoolboy Latin and knowing how to order double whiskies in far-flung colonial outposts. Things have changed. The days of Empire are done, the classics are dying out of the curriculum, and the Englishman, shedding his incompetence with his complacency, is applying himself keenly to the study of French and German.

The short sentence *Things have changed*, unremarkable – indeed banal – as a statement, is powerful as a rhythmic gesture. A much weaker option would have been to incorporate it in a longer sentence, beginning *Things have changed, however, now that the days of Empire are done . . .*

Option 2 *Embedding versus expansion*

Here is a related option. Embedding, discussed in 2.15, packs one pattern inside another; but we can unpack the sentence and redistribute its information in a series of syntactic containers: e.g. we can rewrite *The sound I heard was a scream* as *I heard a sound; it was a scream*. Such ‘disembeddings’ are here called *expansions*.

Example:

- (1) The suggestion from the floor at its annual conference that the Confederation of British Industry get together with the TUC to work out new initiatives in retraining

and employment is imaginative and should not be let slip by the CBI leadership. (*The Times*)

This represents the style of editorial discourse in one of the 'better' newspapers, where such elaborations are not at all uncommon. Embedding is a mark of genteel journalism. The first clause consists of an extended subject (*The suggestion from the floor at its annual conference that the Confederation of British Industry get together with the TUC to work out new initiatives in retraining and employment*), a verb (*is*) and a complement (*imaginative*). This creates a heavily front-weighted construction that might be redistributed and expanded, for example as follows:

- (2) At the annual conference of the Confederation of British Industry, the proposal was made from the floor that the CBI and the TUC together should work out new initiatives in retraining and employment. The suggestion is imaginative and should not be let slip by the CBI leadership.

In this version there is an expansion over two sentences. The material from the subject of the first clause in the original text now makes up one sentence-unit. The second sentence in this rewriting corresponds to the coordinated second clause of the original, but a subject (*suggestion*) has been supplied to make a link with the foregoing subject (*proposal*). The pattern is still quite complex, and the process of expansion might be continued, e.g.:

- (3) An imaginative proposal was made from the floor at the annual conference of the Confederation of British Industry. This was that the CBI and the TUC together should work out initiatives in retraining and employment. The CBI leadership should not let the suggestion slip.

It may be noticed that in the course of expansion the framing and focusing of the message has changed, very slightly yet enough to modify a reader's impression of what is said. The general recommendation must be, when in doubt (e.g. if the text is at all obscure or cumbersome) expand. There is nevertheless a risk that if the writing is over-expanded the

style may lose its tension and compactness, and that the intended emphases may be shifted. These are matters that must be assessed in the larger context of composition.

Option 3 *Left-branching versus right-branching*

Branching has been discussed, with examples, in 2.14. Options in branching may reflect views of narrative or expository logic, i.e. of the proper sequencing of information, of presuppositions, of cause and effect:

- (1) Struggling to my feet and grabbing the fire-extinguisher, I shot a small blob of foam into the fish-pan.
- (2) The stove exploded, ripping out the side of the cabin.

The left-branch of 1 is the logical arrangement. A right-branching version – *I shot a small blob of foam into the fish-pan, struggling to my feet and grabbing the fire-extinguisher* – would comically defy the requirements of narrative sequence. The right-branch of 2 is necessary on the same grounds: to say *ripping out the side of the cabin, the stove exploded* would be to put the effective cart before the causal horse. Our presupposition is that destructions follow explosions, not vice versa.

In many cases, therefore, this is a logically determined option. But it can also be a psychological choice, as these examples may suggest:

(Left-branching)

When the skies redden and the sea boils, when fishes climb into the trees, when politicians admit their errors and football hooligans kiss, we will know that the millennium is at hand.

(Right-branching)

Our students are remarkably gifted, even if they read less widely than their predecessors, are less inclined to the play of ideas, more utilitarian in the planning of their studies, more confident in the gospel of efficiency.

Comment:

Left-branching keeps the reader in suspense, often enjoy-

ably, sometimes, perhaps, tediously. He is obliged to wait for, and is challenged to predict, the completion of a message. The distribution has two related disadvantages. One is that it tends to impose on the reader a psychological burden; he must keep mental tally of the subordinate items as he follows the branch towards the stem. The other is that the branch, consequently, cannot be extended at will. There must come a point at which its length begins to confuse and distract. It is no doubt for this reason that elaborate left-branches are often carefully organized in parallel constructions (e.g. the *when . . . when . . . when . . .* of our example). The regular design facilitates the reading.

Right-branching may be protracted to a length that would be intolerable in a left-branch:

Our students are remarkably gifted, even if they read less widely than their predecessors, are less inclined to the play of ideas, more utilitarian in the planning of their studies, more confident in the gospel of efficiency, and generally disposed to pursue courses of a strictly vocational nature that leave little room for the joys and revelations of speculative enquiry.

Branching of this length is possible because (perhaps only because) language can be recorded in writing; it presents a structure to be kept before the eye and thus the more easily to be held in the mind. The advantage of beginning with the principal item of information (in this case, *our students are remarkably gifted*) is that the psychological tension is eased; the main part of the message is out of the way, and the succeeding subordinated items do not have to be cumulatively recollected. There are dangers (or possibly sly advantages) in this. When the reader is not obliged to bear the whole message cumulatively in mind, he may tend mentally to shed each item as it passes, with the possible result that he loses touch with the basic proposition. An unscrupulous writer might exploit this in order to unbalance an argument or even shift the whole ground of exposition:

It is of course unthinkable that the death penalty should be reintroduced, notwithstanding the brutality of our society, the daily acts of callous violence, the merciless assaults on

the old and the weak, the appalling attacks on young children, the cases of rape that have become horrifyingly commonplace, the wickedness that, careless of suffering, rejoices in barbarous deeds of self-indulgence, knowing that it will almost certainly go unpunished.

The end of this sentence is saying something different from the beginning, and by the time the end of the branch is reached, the stem-proposition is almost indiscernibly remote.

Like left-branches, the right-branching text is often brought under the control of some scheme of repetitions or parallels:

This was a rally of mainly young men, who had been on the picket lines most of the week, who feel a sense of bitter injustice, who want a social revolution, who really believe that this is a police State, and who, having been on strike for five weeks, are also broke. (*Guardian*)

Note that in this case the right-branch, listing the attributes of the 'young men', is virtually obligatory. A left-branching version would be not so much a preference as an awkward contrivance:

Broke after being on strike for five weeks, really believing that this is a police state, wanting a social revolution, feeling a sense of bitter injustice, standing on the picket lines most of the week, they were mainly young men who attended this rally.

The long introduction comes to a lame conclusion.

Choose the left-branch whenever it seems desirable to postpone or suspend statement of the conclusive element in your message. This is a staple of oratory, and will therefore recommend itself if you are writing a text for performance – e.g. a lecture, a sermon, a speech. Note that this device is often used emotively rather than in demonstrations of plain reasoning; it induces a feeling – a sense of being enjoyably teased, a state of pleasurable expectation, an anticipatory relish.

Use the right-branch when your aim is to state and develop a proposition, particularly if the development is to be at all elaborate. Do not let the branch grow to such a length that

when you re-scan your own sentence you find yourself losing the sense of your stem-statement. When in doubt, stop the branch and start a new sentence, using your redistributed material to make a transition. Quite often in the pattern of exposition, sentences branch alternately:

Britain is still a pleasant place to live in, despite an ailing economy that breeds social unrest. Even though the political parties are divided within themselves, and extremist groups make a periodically violent showing, ours is on the whole a free, democratic, peaceful state.

The main clauses are (a) *Britain is still a pleasant place to live in*, and (b) *ours is on the whole a free, democratic, peaceful state*. These are the stems of successive sentences, between which the branches run, the first sentence being right-branching, the second left-branching.

Option 4 *Mid-branch versus end-branch*

The progress of a sentence may be interrupted by some word, phrase, clause, etc., making a qualification, supplying additional facts, correcting an omission; alternatively, this commentary material may be presented at the beginning or end of the sentence. Examples:

- (1) Shelley, for all his love of the sea, never learned to swim
- (2) For all his love of the sea, Shelley never learned to swim.
- (3) Shelley never learned to swim, for all his love of the sea.

Comment:

Version 1 exemplifies an 'interruptive' pattern: the expression *for all his love of the sea* invades the principal clause *Shelley never learned to swim*. In the other versions this qualification is presented as a left- or right-branch. Those patterns, therefore are not 'interruptive', but 'completive'. (Note that these are not standard grammatical terms, but convenient inventions.) The left-branch of 2 we may call 'pre-completive', the right-branch of 3 'post-completive'. In

writing, it is often useful to have the choice of interruptive or completive, although particular cases may impose restrictions on the range of the completive option:

Some famous novels – *Sons and Lovers* is an example that comes readily to mind – are autobiographical.

In this instance, one independent clause is interrupted by another. It is easy enough to redistribute the clauses in a post-completive pattern. A little punctuation does the trick:

Some famous novels are autobiographical; *Sons and Lovers* is an example that comes readily to mind.

It is also a simple matter to construct a right-branch with a subordinate clause:

Some famous novels are autobiographical, *Sons and Lovers* being an example that comes readily to mind.

What seems to be excluded is the pre-completive pattern; e.g. it is hardly acceptable to write: *Sons and Lovers being an example that comes readily to mind, many novels are autobiographical.* A left-branch in this case would require a somewhat different wording and form of the subordinate clause, e.g. *As the example of Sons and Lovers readily reminds us, many famous novels are autobiographical.* The sentence might also be recast in the form, *Sons and Lovers comes readily to mind as a famous example of an autobiographical novel,* but in that case the originally subordinate, branching element has become the main clause and the stem of the sentence.

Items that may occur interruptively range from adverbial conjuncts and disjuncts (*however, nevertheless, in fact,* etc.) through qualifying or amplifying phrases and clauses (*for all his love of the sea; Sons and Lovers comes readily to mind*), to mid-branches that run through elaborate syntactic sequences:

Though the centuries of our literature have provided many virtuous rivals, it is still Falstaff, the liar, the impostor, the drunkard, the associate of whores and cutpurses shamelessly presuming on his acquaintance with a prince of the blood royal, the swindler, the graceless white-haired

buffoon, who stands foremost in the ranks of heroically comic characters.

In the second clause of this sentence (*it is still Falstaff. . . who stands foremost in the ranks of heroically comic characters*) there is a long mid-branching sequence of noun phrases, running in one instance to the complexity of a construction with an embedded participle clause (*the associate of whores and cutpurses shamelessly presuming upon his acquaintance with a prince of the blood royal*). Here the mid-branch is undoubtedly the appropriate option. A redistribution would weaken the power of the long qualifying sequence: *It is still Falstaff who stands foremost in the ranks of heroically comic characters, despite the fact that he is a liar, an impostor, a drunkard, the associate of whores and cutpurses shamelessly presuming on his acquaintance with a prince of the blood royal, a swindler, a coward and a graceless white-haired buffoon*. The right-branch turns rhetoric into mere recitation.

A parenthesis, though it may suggest a haphazard drift of discourse, should never occur undesignedly. On the contrary, interruptive constructions should be the most deliberate of stylistic measures. Use them –

- (a) Artfully, to suggest the casual afterthought, the hasty concession, the matter to be incidentally mentioned.
- (b) Accentually, to isolate the subject or other leading element in a sentence, or to direct emphasis to a minor grammatical item: *Edward Lear – a most moving example – suffered from epilepsy; These are not, it should be noted, standard grammatical terms; America is still, whatever blemishes her critics may find, a great country*.
- (c) ‘Suspensively’, to postpone momentarily the completion of the sentence, and thus to draw attention to the end-position: *Finally something happened that might be called – with all due respect for the proprieties of language – sensational*.
- (d) Rhythmically and echoically, to suggest the pulse and cadence of speech.

3 Presentative options

In varying the distribution of material, we often make changes of prominence, drawing the reader's attention to this element or that. A given distribution implies particular characteristics of 'presentation'; the staging of the sentence changes, and with it our view of its properties and its plot. Indeed, as we have seen elsewhere, some striking and stylistically useful changes of presentation can be achieved within the framework of the simple sentence.

Option 5 'Normal' ('unmarked') order versus 'Fronted' ('marked') order

This has been explored in 2.6ff. In writing, the option can be exploited for dramatic alternations of emphasis.

Examples:

- (1) The bishop preached a sermon. (SVO normal order)
A very good sermon it was. (C_sVS fronted Complement)
- (2) Her cooking was excellent. (SVC_s normal order)
Such delicious cakes she baked. (OSV fronted Object)
- (3) She grew angry at times. (SVC_sA normal order)
On occasion she could be violent (ASVC_s fronted Adverbial)
- (4) They made him their leader. (SVOC_o normal order)
President they called him. (C_oSVO fronted Object Complement)
- (5) I owe Mary my thanks. (SVO_iO_d normal order)
Bert I owe nothing. (O_iSVO fronted Indirect Object)

Comment:

Such arrangements and rearrangements concern (a) what comes at the beginning of a clause, and (b) what, as a consequence, comes at the end. Each of these positions has a presentative value; the initial position as a place where a topic stands highlighted, the end-position as a denouement, in which the informative 'plot' of the sentence is completed. (Thus, *Our eccentric vicar may deliver . . . an*

abusive sermon; a sharp challenge; a knockout punch; the milk . . . but only the completion of the clause will show us what.) The end-position is often important as an antecedent base for connection with the next clause or sentence. Compare the following versions:

- (1) On the second Sunday after Trinity, before a full congregation, he preached his last sermon. It was on the text 'Blessed are they that mourn.'
- (2) His last sermon he preached on the second Sunday after Trinity, before a full congregation. It was on the text 'Blessed are they that mourn.'

The fronted object in 2 raises the dramatic style of the text, but very slightly weakens the linkage of the two sentences. In 1, where *his last sermon* is immediately antecedent to *It* at the beginning of the next sentence, the progression is clearer. Alternations of normal and marked order may sometimes be used to secure the cohesion of a sequence of sentences, linking one to the other heel-and-toe:

Many observers find the economic policy of the government strangely harsh. Harsh it must inevitably be. It would be extraordinarily strange, however, if at this point in her term of office the Prime Minister were to yield to demands for the abandonment of monetary restraint. Concessions and revisions she may allow, but not of the kind that would bring the whole of Conservative policy into disrepute.

In this passage there are four sentences, of which the second and fourth present clauses with fronting (*Harsh it must inevitably be*, *Concessions and revisions she may allow*), thus promoting a scheme of phrasal links between sentences:

Sentence 1: Many observers..... strangely harsh
 Sentence 2: Harsh must inevitably be
 Sentence 3: would be extraordinarily abandonment etc.
 Sentence 4: Concessions and revisions..... into disrepute.

Such links, it will be noted, may consist of a repeated word (*harsh*), an echoed construction (*must be . . . would be*), or

the contingency of related notions (*abandonment . . . concessions*).

Option 6 *Active versus passive*

One way of shifting the presentative emphasis of a sentence is to change from active to passive voice.

Examples:

- (1) Francis scored three goals out of his side's four. (Active)
- (2) Three goals out of his side's four were scored by Francis. (Passive)

Comment:

These examples differ in clause structure (SVO, SVA), and in the items realizing the subject (in the one case the subject is *Francis*, in the other *Three goals*). In these formal differences there is an important difference of narrative emphasis. Each sentence, it may be said, presents a theme followed by a story. (Or a topic followed by a comment: compare *Good old Francis! He scored three goals* and *Three goals today! Francis scored them.*) The theme of 1 is the player, Francis, and the story tells what Francis did. The theme of 2 is *three goals*, and the story answers the question 'who scored them?' The change from active to passive, then, is not merely a repositioning of actors on the syntactic stage; it is in effect a change of plot. Compare the following two passages:

- (1) A royal personage was to open a new wing of the cottage hospital, and all the villagers made efforts to ensure that her visit would be a memorable one. Bands of indefatigable Boy Scouts collected vast sums of money. Enthusiasts ran lotteries and bran tubs; there were flower shows and bingo sessions; benevolent pensioners performed prodigious feats of bowling and choral singing. Every able Jack and mobile Jill made a contribution.
- (2) A new wing of the cottage hospital was to be opened by a royal personage, and great efforts were made by all the villagers to ensure that her visit would be a memor-

able one. Vast sums of money were collected by bands of indefatigable Boy Scouts. Lotteries and bran tubs were organized; flowers shows and bingo sessions were arranged; prodigious feats of bowling and choral singing were performed by benevolent pensioners. Contributions were made by every able Jack and mobile Jill.

Though they use the same material, there is in these passages a contrasting scheme of prominences. Example 1 is about *agents* choosing and controlling their activities; example 2 describes *activities* drawing agents into their train – a turn-about which creates a slightly different narrative.

In some varieties of technical prose, e.g. the language of scientific report, the passive is a regular and conventional feature. Elsewhere it is the marked form contrasting with the 'norm' of the active. Use it –

- (a) In narrative or in rhetorical prose, to give chosen elements the prominence of 'fronting'.
- (b) To disclaim agency; to make detached or impersonal statements, particularly in report. The form of the passive which deletes the 'by-phrase' is often used in this way. (*A measure will shortly be introduced; The proposal has been considered.*)
- (c) To adjust the rhythm and weight of a sentence – e.g. to correct 'front-heaviness': *A public anxiously mindful of the toll of lives in the Chicago air disaster raised objections* may be recast as *Objections were raised by a public anxiously mindful of the toll of lives in the Chicago air disaster.*
- (d) As one of the means by which transitions from clause to clause or sentence to sentence may be facilitated. The passive transformation puts an adverbial phrase or the verb itself into the end-position, and this sometimes makes a convenient antecedent base: *A fine sermon was preached by the bishop* ↔ *who later entertained us with a harmonica recital*; *A clinic equipped with the most advanced facilities for the treatment of sick children was today officially opened by the Princess of Wales.* ↔ *Her Royal Highness visited the wards, and spent some time with the young inmates.* In the first

of these examples, a noun is immediately followed by its relative pronoun; in the second, a noun phrase and its synonymic variant are placed next to each other.

Option 7 'Declarative' versus 'postpositive' sentence forms

The 'declarative' construction simply makes a statement about a theme. What is here called the 'postpositive' type of construction (i.e. the existential sentence, the extraposition, the cleft sentence – see 2.9) puts the theme, or a whole statement, into end-focus.

Examples:

- | | |
|--|------------------|
| (1a) His failure is evident. | ('Declarative') |
| (1b) It is evident that he has failed. | ('Postpositive') |
| (2a) Problems abounded. | ('Declarative') |
| (2b) There were abundant problems. | ('Postpositive') |
| (3a) Eve stole the apple. | ('Declarative') |
| (3b) It was Eve who stole the apple. | ('Postpositive') |

Comment:

Example 1b is an *extraposition*, 2b is an *existential sentence*, and 3b is a *cleft sentence*. What they have in common is the use of a formulaic device (*it is, there are*, etc.) which is the verbal marker of an ensuing statement. (For fuller comment, see 2.9.) The forms give notice of an intention to state, or announce the performance of stating, and in that way may seem somewhat detached, academic, artificial. This is an impression which a little attention to everyday conversational exchanges may well challenge. *It's plain to anyone that he's on the make, There's a maggot in that lettuce, It's you that need a psychiatrist* are no more 'artificial' than *His aspirations are clear to all, That lettuce contains a maggot, and The person who needs a psychiatrist is you*. In many cases the postpositive form is the natural turn of speech. (*There's a knife in that drawer* is 'unmarked' by comparison with *A knife is in that drawer* or even *A knife will be found in that drawer*.)

Nevertheless, a common effect of 'postposing' is to put objects at a cool, impersonal distance, and often to draw the rough energy out of a text. Compare two versions of a narrative:

- (1) Everyone had obviously been looking forward to the team's return. Expectancy hung in the air; groups of people lined the platform, sporting rosettes and scarves, or clutching home-made banners. For a while nobody spoke. Then the stationmaster broke the silence.
- (2) It was obvious that everyone had been looking forward to the team's return. There was a general air of expectancy; all along the platform there were groups of people sporting rosettes and scarves or shouldering home-made banners. There was an interval when nobody spoke. It was the stationmaster who eventually broke the silence.

Version 2 suffers a little in the comparison. It lacks narrative urgency; in particular, the 'postpositive' forms greatly detract from the stylistic power of the verb. (Compare *there was a general air of expectancy* with *expectancy hung in the air; all along the platform there were groups of people* with *groups of people lined the platform*.) Narrative can certainly make effective use of postpositive structures – *Pride and Prejudice* begins with one – but seldom in the density suggested here. They are not uncommon in the prose of reasoning and analysis, where they can be used –

- (a) To state a generalized, impersonal, 'objective' case: *It is agreed that prisons are expensive to maintain.*
- (b) To express a verdict or judgment, as though with the weight of impartial authority: *There is no greater musician than Mozart.*
- (c) To give a syntactic framework to a nominal item (phrase or clause), for the purpose of presenting it to a reader. Thus, to convey the notion *objections to this argument*, one may use the frame of an existential proposition, *There are objections to this argument*, which may be preferable to the front-weighted *Objections to this argument exist*, or the passive *Objections to this argument may be raised*.
- (d) As one of the means of dealing with the recurrent problem of front-heaviness. Thus *Jack's habit of solving his problems partly by resorting to the bottle and partly by sheer self-deception is well known* is an awkwardly-

balanced construction that might be more effectively poised in an extraposition: *It is well known that Jack is in the habit of solving his problems partly by resorting to the bottle and partly by sheer self-deception.*

4 Options of address

Seldom is writing wholly a matter of expounding facts clearly and objectively, without reference to personal attitudes and relationships. There is, to be sure, a stylistic discretion, recommended in 3.5, but even within that neutral pale there may be manifestations of personality and attitude. As a style extends its ambitions, these manifestations are more frequent and more complex. Many writings represent a blending, whether skilful and deliberate or merely haphazard, of a 'speech-style' that echoes the informalities of ordinary conversation, and a 'book-style' reflecting the artifice and formality of literary convention.

'Book-style' is not necessarily equated with the idiom of literary art. It refers to a general mode of address incorporating features found in relatively high density in formal writing and somewhat lower density in informal daily talk; 'speech-style' characterizes elements in language strongly associated with personal interaction. Below are listed some prominent features of the two modes. The tendency, in written communications, for formal to merge into informal must be kept in mind. Further, we should take note of the artifice and occasional stiltedness of some bookish devices; the fact that they are mentioned here does not amount to a recommendation for use. For that a context is required, and some knowledge of the user's intention.

Speech-style

Use of personal pronouns, *I, we, you; I will give an example; We shall see; You should take care.*

Book-style

Avoidance of personal pronouns; compensatory use of passives and postpositive forms: *An example may be given; It will become apparent; Care should be taken.*

*Speech-style**Book-style*

Use of contracted forms, e.g. *they've, there'd, we're, answer's*.

General preference for 'non-modal' assertions: *I think he was foolish to leave; You win; You'll find it in any decent grammar*.

Somewhat restricted use of postpositive structures (but see the comment on Option 7).

Preference for the positive and the overstated: *They are clever; The plan is sure to fail*.

Use of exclamations and direct questions: *How strange!; What is the solution?*

Preference for expanded forms, e.g. *they have, there would, we are, answer is*.

Recourse to the speculation and ironic formality of 'modal' constructions: *I would have thought his departure ill-considered; It might appear that the victory is yours; Readers may care to consult a reliable grammar*.

(About the examples, note (a) that the modals occur in conjunction with other style-features, and (b) that this kind of wordiness, even with the best of facetious intentions, irritates many people).

Relatively frequent use of postpositive structures, notably in expository and analytical prose.

Frequent use of the negative and the understated: *They are not unskilled; The plan is hardly assured of success*.

(Note: In British usage, ironic modality, negation, and understatement may often be interpreted as marks of class – symptoms of 'talking posh').

Avoidance (by periphrasis, by the use of adverbial intensifiers, etc.) of the exclamatory and interrogative: *This is extraordinarily strange; A solution is called for*.

*Speech-style**Book-style*

Reliance on a 'coarse-graded' vocabulary, i.e. one with a low differentiation of synonyms; for example, *think*, *feel* to cover all manner of mental events.

Use of a 'free' vocabulary—i.e. free from constraints of text type or social propriety: *The guests enjoyed the affair* 'do' *beano* *get-together*. Attendant vice: laxity of expression.

Reliance on a 'fine-graded' vocabulary, i.e. one with a high differentiation of synonyms: *think*, *feel*, *suppose*, *consider*, *conjecture*, *estimate*, *assume*, *infer*, *surmise*, *suspect*, *speculate*, etc.

Use of a 'bound' vocabulary—i.e. dictated by text-type and social constraints: Jack's *party* is Jill's *reception* is a memorable *occasion* is a ceremonial *banquet* is a distinguished *assembly* is an informal *gathering*. Attendant vice: fixity of expression, i.e. cliché.

Texts present these elements in various mixtures. We may consequently speak of a *level of address* in assessing the extent to which features of speech-style or book-style predominate. In some texts the level of address remains fairly constant throughout; in others, for example in polemic and in some types of humour, there may be frequent shifts of level.

This is a complex topic, difficult to handle briefly, even more difficult to reduce to terms of serviceable recommendation. The two options briefly and rather tentatively set out below are of a general nature. One concerns the writer's attitude to his reader—his facial expression, as it were, or tone of voice; the other is a matter of grooming the text, to make a crisply assertive showing or to present a more circumstantial style.

Option 8 *Informal/familiar versus formal/conventional*

The labels speak for themselves; they denote the effect of language in bringing the writer closer to the reader, with a sense of intimacy, warmth, ordinariness, etc., or setting him at a distance in polite reserve and social convention. Attempts at the latter often result in the pompous wordiness

illustrated by one or two of the following examples:

Examples (a):

- (1) The chairman and the treasurer voted for cuts.
- (2) It was felt by the chairman and the treasurer that economies would be in order.

Comment:

Sentence 1 puts its message in familiar style; sentence 2 somewhat laboriously keeps the matter at a distance. The means of 'distancing' are (i) the postpositive construction (*It was the case X that clause Y*) (ii) the passive (*was felt by*), (iii) the use of the modal *would be* (rather than *were*), plus a 'book-style' cliché *be in order*, and (iv) the 'bound' element in the vocabulary (*economies* is conventionally appropriate to the language of official report, and to the institutional pomp of the chairman and treasurer).

Examples (b):

- (1) If you dissociate the study of speech from its proper connection with the study of creativeness in language, you allow it to become a mere adjunct of genteel nurture, like social etiquette or discreet tailoring. You make a word a blow to self-esteem; you let a man's vowels decide whether he is fit to hold a commission.
- (2) To dissociate the study of speech from its proper connection with the study of creativeness in language is to allow it to become a mere adjunct of genteel nurture, like etiquette or discreet tailoring. A word becomes a blow to self-esteem; a man's vowels are allowed to decide whether he is fit to hold a commission.

Comment:

The significant difference between these examples is that in sentence 2 the pronoun *you* is replaced by constructions which avoid personality. The infinitive, the passive, the inanimate subject, are used to keep *you* at a distance. Though the alteration in wording is quite small, the contrast is striking. Note particularly the treatment of the first sentence in the two versions. In 1 the opening sentence is introduced by a left-branching subordinate clause (*If you dissociate . . . language*).

The corresponding sentence in version 2 has no branching, but consists of a single clause with elaborate embeddings; S is an infinitive clause (*to dissociate . . . language*), and C another infinitive with yet a third infinitive embedded in it (*to allow it to become a mere adjunct of genteel nurture*). In this instance, the process of 'depersonalizing' radically affects the syntax.

- (1) The food's marvellous, though the rooms aren't all that good.
- (2) The cuisine is deserving of the highest praise; the accommodation, however, leaves something to be desired.

Comment:

The context evoked here is that of commending a hotel, resort, etc., whether privately, as in a letter, or more publicly, as in the columns of a journal, or in some form of official report. In sentence 1 the marks of informality are obvious: the contractions (*food's*, *aren't*), the freely coarse-graded word (*marvellous*), the colloquial intensifier (*all that* in *all that good*). In sentence 2 there are 'bound' elements, *cuisine* and *accommodation*, clearly dictated by the etiquette of this type of discourse. (*Rooms* are conventionally *accommodation*, and *cuisine* has a social and professional advantage over mere *cooking*.) In addition there are clichés, also bound to the convention, and absurdly stiff in their bindings: *deserving of the highest praise*, *leaves something to be desired*.

Examples (d):

- (1) The book is rather dull.
- (2) The book could hardly be called sparkling.
- (3) The author is learned, sincere, painstaking, but unimaginative.
- (4) The author is not without learning, and lacks neither sincerity nor the capacity for taking pains; his defect is a want of imagination.

Comment:

As a rule, assertion by negatives is a bad stylistic habit; sentences 1 and 3 have the merit of coming directly to the

point. Sometimes, however, a bantering and ironic detachment may be expressed through negation and other devices – e.g. the adverb suggesting a negative evaluation (*hardly*), or the verb or noun denoting a negative concept (*lacks*, *defect*, *want*). The examples point to the verbose habit of the negating and understating style; its banter is often ponderous. These sentences also suggest how an elaborate formality of style may necessarily combine several features – e.g. in sentence 2, the understatement of *hardly*, the modality of *could*, the passive of *be called*, and the fine-graded choice of word in *sparkling*.

Option 9 *Pattern versus paraphrase*

The art of rhetoric includes many figures of speech that require symmetrical balances, antitheses, repetitions and parallels in the structure of phrases, clauses and sentences. There is an artistic patterning of language that occurs not only in literary texts, but also in diverse non-literary functions, and in everyday talk. Its counterpart is a dutiful discursiveness that chooses to paraphrase or ‘spell out’ a meaning rather than reduce its expression to a compact pattern.

Examples:

- (1) Waste not, want not.
- (2) If you avoid waste, you will never be in need.
- (3) By making even the most trivial savings now, you may be ensuring survival and prosperity at some later date.
- (4) Argyle make friends but Watford make history. (headline in *The Times*)
- (5) Argyle pleased the spectators with courageous and skilful play, but it was Watford who, for the first time, won a place in the Cup Final.

Comment:

Examples 1 and 4 are patterned (with *w* echoing *w*, *waste* matched by *want*, *make* repeated in a variation of meaning) and have the pithiness that so often characterizes patterned utterance. There is a kind of riddling in them, an air of things unsaid that intelligence or experience must supply. Examples 2, 3, and 5 run to some length in their attempt to spell out a

meaning, leaving nothing to conjecture. Sentences 2 and 3 are in effect explanations of sentence 1, 3 being the fuller (or fussier) interpretation. Sentence 5 expounds the headline message of sentence 4. The examples conveniently illustrate by mutual reference the notions of pattern and paraphrase. There may be times when we experiment with a pattern and reject it in favour of a paraphrase, or begin a paraphrase only to realize that the intended meaning might be more cogently expressed through a pattern.

The multiplicity of verbal patterns can be reduced to three powerful configurations, often picked out by alliteration or some other phonetic device: the parallel, or yoke, the antithesis, or cross, and the sequence, or chain.

Examples:

- (1) Man proposes, God disposes.

A _____ }
B _____ }
(Thomas à Kempis)

- (2) One must eat to live, not live to eat.

A → ← B
(Molière)

- (3) . . . and that government of the people, by the people,
for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

A — B — C
(Abraham Lincoln)

Comment:

These classic examples illustrate, in the first instance, an arrangement of parallel clauses; in the second, an antithetical balance (the example presents the figure technically known as *antimetabole*, or *chiasmus*), and in the third place, a cumulative sequence of noun phrases marked by the evidently accented prepositions ('of the people, by the people, and for the people'). The ingenuity of these simple compressive patterns is soon discovered if one attempts to paraphrase them, e.g.: *Humanity has many aspirations and projects, but they are all subject to the will of God; Although eating keeps us alive, it is not the chief purpose of living.* Often it seems easier to make a pattern than to attempt a paraphrase, e.g. to say *The longer he lives the less he learns* rather than *His capacity to*

learn from experience seems if anything to decrease with the passage of time.

In general, patterning compresses, paraphrase expands. At times, however, a pattern may appear to be a form of carefully designed expansion. Compare, for instance:

. . . that democracy shall not die
with

. . . that government of the people, by the people, and for
the people, shall not perish from the earth.

The latter may in its turn be paraphrased expansively:

. . . that a political system allowing all citizens an equal
share in the government of their country shall not become
obsolete.

Lincoln's rhetoric takes a middle course (and a supremely effective one) between a laconic compression and a windy expansion.

Two passages of prose, one a classic text, the other by a famous authority on language and style, may be used to illustrate this contrast of patterning and paraphrase. The first is from Bacon's essay 'Of Studies':

Reading maketh a full man; conference, a ready man; and writing an exact man. And therefore, if a man write little, he had need have a great memory; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit; and if he read little, he had need have much cunning, to seem to know that he doth not.

The author of the second passage is Samuel Johnson, writing at something less than his formidable best:

The graces of writing and conversation are of different kinds, and though he who excels in one might have been with opportunities and application equally successful in the other, yet as many please by extemporary talk, though utterly unacquainted with the more accurate method, and more laboured beauties, which composition requires; so it is very possible that men, wholly accustomed to works of study, may be without that readiness of conception, and affluence of language, always necessary to colloquial enter-

tainment. They may want address to watch the hints which conversation offers for the display of their particular attainments, or they may be so much unfurnished with matter on common subjects, that discourse not professedly literary glides over them . . .

(*The Rambler*, no.14, 5 May 1750)

These two excerpts are comparable in content. Each is concerned with the various skills of language, and each points out that an individual may be practised in one skill and less adept in another. Bacon tells us what reading, writing, and discussion (*conference*) will severally do for us, and what compensatory powers we might need should we be defective in any of these. Johnson tells us that although some people may be equally skilled in writing and talking, there are many good talkers who cannot write well, and many practised writers who are poor conversationalists. His theme reflects that of Bacon. There are even points of verbal resemblance. Bacon's *a ready man* has its counterpart in Johnson's *readiness of conception, and affluence of language*; Johnson's *more accurate method . . . which composition requires* suggests Bacon's *an exact man*.

Where the two passages differ wholly is in their stylistic method. Bacon patterns his observations, reducing them to the memorable concision of maxims or proverbs. There are two sentences in the quoted excerpt, and each is built on a scheme of parallels. (Note how the sequence of key items in the second sentence reverses that of the first: (1) *Reading . . . conference . . . writing*; (2) *write . . . confer . . . read . . .*). This powerful brevity is exhilarating. It raises, however, certain problems of definition. We are left to supply our own interpretation of several words of large import, e.g. *full*, *ready*, *exact*. Bacon sets us the task of analysing his lexicon. What does he mean by *ready* – quick to respond, fluent, quick-witted, astute? Or by *exact* – precise in exposition, accurate in recollection? The price of compression is a measure of obscurity.

There is no jauntily helpful patterning in the second passage. The modern reader may need a gloss on the syntax, which is constructed round the bracketing expression *as . . . so*; 'Yet just as there are many who please by casual talk,