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Thoroughly Modern Burchfield

by [John Simon](#)

Review of The New Fowler's Modern English Usage edited by R. W. Burchfield

The new, third edition of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*^[1] is out, ta-rah, ta-rah! It was edited by Robert Burchfield, a New Zealander and Oxford don, author of numerous books on the English language and editor-in-chief of the venerable—if not sacrosanct—*Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition. As editor also of the *Cambridge History of the English Language*, Burchfield made himself a true citizen of Oxbridge. But an ox bridge can be no better than a *pons asinorum*.

Besides giving full due to American English and looking into other Englishes, F3— as I shall call it with a bow to Auden and Isherwood's *The Ascent of F6*, a similarly daring enterprise in scaling the heights— boasts many other new features. H. W. Fowler's F1, born a year after me in 1926, predates my linguistic interests. F2, from 1965, was a light revision by Sir Ernest Gowers, a user-friendly volume of 725 duodecimo pages, and much easier to handle than the current 864 octavo ones. It was also decently modest. It did not, like F3, proclaim itself on the jacket "The acknowledged authority on English usage," the sort of self-advertisement worthy of Norman Mailer. And F3, of course, has a much jazzier jacket altogether.

It must be faced right off that Burchfield is essentially, though not entirely, of the descriptive rather than prescriptive school of language savants. Although he bridles at some usages, he is also astoundingly tolerant of others. About *of a*—as in "how big of a house?"—he writes that it "may possibly be a slowly evolving extension of a much older" usage; about *comprised of*, he notes that "opposition to this ... construction is ... weakening." It seems that "only elderly eyebrows are now raised" at *finalize*; passive defeatism is the order of the day: "We may rail against the loss of a useful distinction [between *amount* and *number*]— and I do—but can it be stopped now?"

There are times, though, when Burchfield is simply wrong—seduced, perhaps, by permissiveness. Under *machismo*, for instance, he accepts a secondary pronunciation with a *k* (mack-), as if the word were Italian in origin rather than Spanish, where "ch" is always pronounced as in Charles. I have no idea why he prefers *e pur si muove* for Galileo's *eppur* etc., as it is always given. Under *marvellous*, he tells us "usu. *marvelous* in AmE," though I have yet to meet an American unusu. enough to stick in that second, British *l*. Burchfield writes: "*Off of* is still strongly present in the language of the less well educated but is indisputably non-standard in Britain." It is just as non-standard in polite America; and what is that "still" doing there? In fact, *off of*, which was virtually unknown in America until a couple of decades ago, has now burst out all over, even among college graduates. So; not "still," but "already," and "even the educated."

Again, Burchfield is categorical about *penchant*: "still pronounced in a Gallic manner ... in English." Well, it has always been pronounced in an English manner in America, as all dictionaries attest. He

writes “de Saussure” for what, without a first name or *Monsieur*, is “Saussure,” in the Gallic manner. *Première*, accented on the last syllable, is not the “dominant” pronunciation in America, but the only one. *Remonstrate*, however it may be pronounced in Britain, is always accented on the penult in America. There is no such thing as *rhyme royale*: in French, it is *rime royale*; in English, both British and American, *rhyme royal*. Pace Burchfield, no civilized person pronounces *schism* with a *k* sound. The sentence “*Strait-jacket* is better so spelt rather than *straight-jacket*,” should be recast, “*Strait-jacket* is better so spelt than as *straight-jacket*.” And so on.

Though the principal problem with F3 is permissiveness, its second-gravest offense is fuzzy writing and thinking. Take this, under *literally*, where we are warned about using the word inexactly. “It’s a case,” writes Burchfield, “of ‘stop, look, and think’ before using the word in any manner short of its exact sense.” That strikes me rather like telling someone hefting a gun, Before you shoot to kill, stop to consider whether you’re committing justifiable homicide. Among the suspect examples quoted, two are especially interesting. First, from Nabokov, “And with his eyes he literally scoured the corners of the cell.” Obviously, eyes are less suitable than brushes for literal scouring. But isn’t hyperbole a legitimate trope? Yes, but scouring without the *literally* is in itself a heightened statement, so that the increment makes it pleonastic. By the way, the date given for the Nabokov quotation is 1960, in which year, according to the Library of America chronology, Nabokov produced nothing that could have contained that sentence.

The next alleged abuse comes from the *Spectator* in 1991: “Zagreb believes that Europe is fiddling with face-saving diplomatic measures while Croatia—quite literally—burns.” On the one hand, all of Croatia did not actually burn; on the other, parts of it were burning—literally, I would say, rather than “quite literally,” which is redundant. So the question arises: how literal need *literal* be to qualify for literalness? Are scattered fires sufficient, or must there be a border-to-border conflagration? To be sure, Burchfield covers his flanks—or some other part of his anatomy—by saying that a few of his examples exhibit merely “a slight movement” in the direction of “the weakened sense” of *literally*, which strikes me as poor selection of illustrative examples.

The entry on *acquaintanceship* begins: “The logical progress of ideas in a sentence occasionally allows this word to slip into print, sometimes when *acquaintance* would have served instead.” Here confusion hath made its masterpiece. What kind of logical progress leads to slippage? Only the illogical kind, I should think. But a slip is surely an error, is it not? Not always, it appears. We get the prompt qualifier *sometimes*, from which we deduce that there are times when a slip is not a slip. So we now want to know exactly when the longer form would not have been improved on by the shorter, but about this F3 keeps mum.

Under *point of view*, we are told that it is “freely interchangeable with *standpoint* ... and *viewpoint*.” That is quite a departure from F2, which asserts that “the idiomatic English is undoubtedly *point of view*.” What accounts for Burchfield’s change of heart? All we get is, “The run of the context governs the choice of word.” Alas, “run of the context” is no clearer than “the logical progress of ideas.” Perhaps Burchfield meant “rhythm of the context,” in which case he should have said so.

Under *infer*, we get at first a firm distinction between *infer* and *imply*, with all the needed examples of correct and incorrect usage. But then comes the slippage, or slipperiness: “The clarity of the distinction between *imply* and *infer* is often questioned, and with a certain justification.” The argument for that “certain justification” is that the *OED* (Burchfield’s other baby) “gives unquestionable examples” of *infer* used in the sense of *imply*. These examples constitute “excellent supporting evidence from the 16C. to the 19C. (and some less impressive 20C. examples).”

This raises an interesting question: who exactly is a reliable witness, giving excellent rather than less impressive evidence? On this rock much—if not all—linguistics comes to grief. Excellent evidence is usually construed as coming from reputed writers and reputable publications. But are

writers, even great ones, above solecism? If famous writers are caught in error, as they often are, why should they be invoked as arbiters? Or is an error that can be found, let's say, in Alexander Pope and the present pope (quite a writer, he!), and in both Powells, Anthony and Dawn, *ipso facto* no longer an error? Does its occurrence in the *Times*—either the London or the New York variety, or both—absolve it from guilt? I think not. It was as fine a writer as Dickens who entitled one of his novels erroneously, and mistakes in large type hurt more than those in fine print.

But before we check out F3 on *mutual*, let's consider one more piece of information it offers on *infer*: “There is also abundant evidence that lawyers and judges sometimes use *imply* in contexts where a layman would have expected *infer*.” That raises the question of why lawyers and judges should be taken seriously when it comes to linguistics, and casts doubt on Burchfield's use of *layman* in this context. I would think that the *layman* here is not the non-jurist, as the statement implies (not infers!), but precisely the jurist who uses *imply* for *infer* and proves linguistically ignorant.

Now for Burchfield's crowning absurdity: “Linguistic attitudes tend to change as time goes on,” which may be the understatement—or platitude—of the decade. Forthwith our pundit turns prophet: what the “*OED*'s sense 4” tends to legitimate by all those examples “may well become one of the natural uses of *infer* at some point in the 21C.” Such prognostication can easily be misread as approbation; where is, at the least, a sense of regret about such an erosion of needed distinctions? True, it is now customary to make fun of Jonathan Swift for having deprecated the coinage *mob* from *mobile vulgus*, which, over his fulminations, became standard usage. But what if Swift was right, and it was enough to have *crowd* and *masses* and *hoi polloi* (not “the hoi polloi,” which Burchfield accepts). How many synonyms does a word need? It would be better for Burchfield to be proved wrong by the future than to prove a doormat in the present. The future might even turn out different if the Burchfields of this world took a more courageously combative stand.

On to *mutual*. F2 was clear on this one: “it involves the relation *x* is or does to *y* as *y* to *x*, and not the relation *x* is or does to *z* as *y* to *z*.” And it went on to reject “mutual friend” in favor of “common friend” or (lest *common* be mistaken for *vulgar*) “friend in common.” This may be a bit awkward, but better awkward than absurd. Burchfield, expectably, waffles away like the best waffle iron; indeed, this entry is as good a place as any from which to start scrutinizing F3. It condones “of mutual benefit to both the Scots and the English” without even noticing that *both* is redundant.

Well then, if we cannot trust even our common friend Dickens (sorry, Charlie!), can we trust some sort of majority, or substantial minority, usage—which is what descriptive linguistics does? Again, I think not, and beg permission to digress somewhat. I can understand, though not condone, a usage such as “everyone [or *everybody*] removed their overcoats”—which Burchfield, citing fancy authorities, cheerfully approves—on the grounds that the logical *his* would slight women, and (here I agree) “his or her” would be clunky. But what about the following inanities that are gaining firm footholds?

Take, first, what used always, sensibly, to be “You can't eat your cake and have it too,” as it appears, for instance, in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Suddenly, we hear on all sides, “You can't have your cake and eat it too,” as it is listed in the *Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings* (1996). The first form makes sense: once you've eaten the damned thing, you can no longer have it. Not so the later, corrupt form: you can have your cake—enjoy looking at it, or keep it in the freezer, or have it set aside for you at the bakery—and then, at the proper moment, eat it, too. But some dolt somewhere along the line reversed the order, and it stuck.

Or take “I could care less,” as some dimwit misconstrued “I couldn't care less,” and now we are saddled with this absurdity. Burchfield, who records it, adds: “No one has satisfactorily accounted for the synonymy of what would appear to be [!] straightforward antonymous uses.” How delicately

this is put; simple human stupidity is no longer acceptable as an explanation—therein lies its supreme triumph.

Consider next a persistent American mispronunciation that, widespread as it is, has escaped the attention of both Burchfield and all American linguists known to me: *groceries* pronounced as “grosheries,” as if it were spelled “grocieries.” This stems from a faulty analogy with such like-sounding words as *glazier* and *hosiery*. False analogies of a similar kind account for any number of errors, yet this has not been sufficiently stressed. So, for instance, “work period” and “play period” begot the tautology “time period.” None of this is in F3; conversely, it finds space for the following entry: “*okapi* (Zairean animal). Pl. unchanged or okapis.” What a relief to know that however you form this plural, you will always be safe.

One could multiply instances—not quite *ad infinitum*, but surely *ad nauseam*. The treatment, for example, of *different than*, *protagonist*, *intrigue/intriguing*, and *cannot help but* I find highly objectionable in its passive acceptance. So what if Sir Hall Caine, as early as 1894, wrote “She could not help but plague the lad”; does that make the tautology respectable? Let me, however, conclude my case against Burchfield and others of that stripe (to avoid the controversial *ilk*) with a discussion of one of today’s choicest bones of contention, the misused *hopefully*.

Burchfield, interestingly, groups this under *sentence adverbs*, a term unknown to F1 and F2. I myself refer to it informally as “the impersonal *hopefully*”; others call it a sentence-modifying adverb. Burchfield begins with the undisputed use of the word: “in a hopeful manner.” But under the rubric *sentence adverb*, we read about the “bitter war” that erupted with *hopefully* “as its chief focus.” He states a general proposition: “in the 20C. there has been a swift and immoderate increase in the currency of *-ly* adverbs to qualify a prediction or assertion as a whole,” and offers as examples *actually*, *basically*, *frankly*, *hopefully*, *regretfully*, *strictly*, and *thankfully*. “Suddenly, around about the end of the 1960s, and with unprecedented venom, a dunce’s cap was placed on the head of anyone who used just one of them — *hopefully*—as a sentence adverb.”

On the basis of entries in the *OED*, but not only on them, Burchfield shows that this practice is of long standing. Yet what neither he nor other pontificators note is the difference between endings in *-ly* and those in *-fully*. The latter (and they are all equally culpable, it is only that *hopefully* is the most frequent) cannot be defended as, to quote Burchfield, “elliptical uses of somewhat longer phrases.” Thus *frankly* stands for “speaking frankly,” *strictly* for “strictly speaking,” and *actually* for “as things actually stand,” though *basically* does not expand so readily. But what is *hopefully* the contraction of? (Note that I do not hold with the antiquated injunction against split infinitives and sentence-ending prepositions.) Find me, however, the unelliptical version of *hopefully* if you can.

Simply stated, *hopefully* presupposes a human agent; but who is filled with hope in “Hopefully it won’t rain tomorrow”? Certainly not the rain, which, even if you think of it as having Cummingsian small hands, does not hope for its not coming, or even for its coming. Well, who then? Burchfield explains the opposition to all *-ly* adverbs as follows: “Conservative speakers, taken unawares by the sudden expansion of an unrecognized type of construction, have exploded with resentment that is unlikely to fade away before at least the end of the 20C.”

This is ludicrous, to begin with, because of that “at least the end of the 20C.” coming three or four years before century’s end. “At least” arouses expectations of a considerably longer stretch. Next, how does Burchfield know, even roughly, when a resentment will end? Further, what is this “taken unawares”? Anyone with ears and eyes could witness this thing coming—first gradually, then diluvially—for quite some time. And it is precisely conservative speakers who, on the constant lookout for such abuses, are most prepared for them.

But, of course, the real cause for consternation—which Burchfield, after noting it, fails to

analyze—lies elsewhere. This abuse is a horrible example of cravenly shirked responsibility. In the insecure Sixties, people became increasingly uneager to stick out their necks and say, for example, “I hope X won’t be elected.” What if your interlocutor was for X? Now, saying “Hopefully X won’t be elected” removes the onus from the speaker’s person to a nebulous generality of hoppers, the ones for whom German provides *man*, and French *on*. *Hopefully* defuses responsibility through diffusion. And when people won’t even say “I hope it won’t rain tomorrow,” the moral cowardice that pollutes speech goes beyond the ungrammatical to the deplorable.

I repeat, neither F3 nor any usage manual I know of perceives the simple but salient difference between *-ly* and *-fully*. Some books, such as Sidney Greenbaum’s *Oxford English Grammar* (1996), avoid the issue altogether. *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (1989), however, is gung ho: “the storm appears to be moderating,” it proclaims, and cites the Prince of Wales’s using the sentence-modifying *hopefully* in a press conference. “What more prestigious cachet,” it asks, “could be put on it?” I don’t know —perhaps Lady Di’s endorsement. Conversely, *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1992) notes that opposition to it is growing: whereas in 1968 it was approved by 44 percent of the usage panel, only 27 percent approved in 1986. *AHD* concludes that the word has become a shibboleth.

To my satisfaction, there remain definite holdouts, preeminently Wilson Follett and Jacques Barzun’s *Modern American Usage* (1966) and B. A. Phythian’s wonderfully jaunty *Concise Dictionary of Correct English* (1979). I reproduce part of the latter’s entry because I relish its tone: “Uses such as *Hopefully the stain will not show* are illiterate. . . . *The climbers set off hopefully* is correct. *Hopefully, all the terrorists are now dead* is not correct, unless the intended sense is that they are dead in a condition of hopefulness . . . Like many Americanisms, however, this wrong use of *hopefully* is now so widespread that it will probably become standard English in due time. The reader is urged to resist this growth.”

That is the right attitude: a realistically pessimistic appraisal of the situation, but with determination to resist, and hope even against hope. How different from F3’s supine acquiescence! But then, Burchfield in many ways betrays what Fowler and Gowers stood for; indeed, in his preface, he is smugly condescending as he writes of Fowler’s “isolation from the mainstream” and “heavy dependence on schoolmasterly textbooks,” and wonders why “this schoolmasterly, quixotic, idiosyncratic, and somewhat vulnerable book . . . retained its hold on the imagination of all but professional linguistics scholars for just on seventy years.” In other words, a book for mere amateurs—but note that faint-hearted *somewhat*. Well, maybe the reason it did not hold the imagination of professional linguistics scholars is that they, poor things, don’t have any. Only slavish dependence on what the unwashed say and the illiterate write, with the now added encumbrance of political correctness.

One wonders why Burchfield was picked for this job when one notes his patronizing tone toward Fowler’s book: “It is not, of course, as antiquated as Aelfric’s *Grammar*. . . . But it is a fossil all the same, and an enduring monument to all that was linguistically acceptable in the standard English of the southern counties of England in the first quarter of the twentieth century.” In other words: parochial and passé. Yet what the Greenwich observatory was for time, England’s southern counties have been for standard speech. Things have indeed changed since 1926 and F1, but we must remember that all change is not for the better, some of it downright harmful. The new *hopefully* can foster needless ambiguity, as in this example from the *American Heritage Dictionary*: “Hopefully the company has launched the new venture,” where “the meaning changes depending on whether *hopefully* represents the standpoint of the speaker or the company.”

Even in elegant terseness, Fowler is well ahead of Burchfield. Consider F2 on *piebald*, *skewbald*: “P. is properly of white and black, s. of white and some colour.” In F3, this becomes the prolix, “A *piebald* *piebald* animal (esp. a horse) is one having irregular patches of two colours, esp. black and white. A *ski*

skewbald animal has irregular patches of white and another colour (properly not black).” Quite so, and what was that plural of *okapi* again?

Notes

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1. *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* edited by R. W. Burchfield; Oxford University Press, 864 pages, \$25. [Go back to the text.](#)

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