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0521548322 - Blooming English: Observations on the Roots, Cultivation and
Hybrids of the English Language - Kate Burridge

Excerpt

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Why a Garden?



'Tis an unweeded garden, that grows to seed

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, sc. ii

Most of the material in this book is provided by the 180 or so radio pieces that I've written for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC's) *Soundbank*. These pieces are generated largely by 'talkback' calls during radio programmes I've been involved in – members of the public phone in to the radio station and put directly on air their observations on language and queries about usage. Very often these calls involve complaints about the language of others. We are all born with a keen ear for the ill-chosen word and the grammatical error of our fellow speakers!

What's obvious from these calls is the tremendous enjoyment people derive from their language. Most of us love messing about with English, it seems – looking up word origins, playing with language, manipulating it to create new and exciting expressions. Even something as everyday as slang illustrates over and over again just how inventive we can be. But our love of language is also reflected in the time we spend worrying about usage. Look at the hours we invest in checking things in dictionaries and style guides, thinking and arguing about the words and constructions we use – especially, of course, the words and constructions that others use. What is striking is the intensity of emotion that accompanies these worries. I could never have predicted the number of furious letters and emails that followed my suggestion that the possessive apostrophe was a useless addition to the English language and we would be better off without it. Such passionate support for a piece

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of punctuation we imported from the French nearly five hundred years ago!

When I was trying to think of an idea that would provide a framework to unite all of the short pieces on language that I'd written, I ended up choosing a gardening image. People's concerns about language bring to mind a picture of the English language as a garden that, if not carefully and constantly cultivated, would quickly become unruly and overgrown. As Shakespeare put it, 'Tis an unweeded garden, that grows to seed'. Or, as one of the more passionate supporters of the possessive apostrophe put it to me – 'we shall have no formal structure of our language: it will become unteachable, unintelligible and, eventually, useless as an accurate means of communication'.

Language 'gardeners' can be found in all sorts of associations. They promote an array of causes from Plain English and simplified spelling through to Esperanto and Klingon. There are, for example, various apostrophe support groups out there – even one dedicated to the abolition of aberrant apostrophes like *Plea's Flush the Toilet* and *Canva's Hat's*. As a student I became good friends with the president of another group calling itself 'The Society for the Preservation of Old English Strong Verbs'. Strong verbs are those like *thrive*, *throve*, *thriven* – my friend is probably one of the few persons left for whom the past of *creep* is still *crope* and the past of *climb* is still *clomb*. But equally gardeners are those folk who simply enjoy looking things up in dictionaries and usage books, who spend time thinking and talking about language, and who like punning and playing Scrabble or Balderdash. We are probably all secret language gardeners of some sort.

And there is clearly a tremendous amount of pleasure to be had pottering about in the verbiage – edging, staking, cutting back, keeping bugs at bay. Why else would someone spend the time calculating that *foolish* could be spelt 613,975 different ways? Or that fifty million schoolchildren spend ten million hours daily on learning the English spelling system. (If that's not enough, this chap went on to calculate that this is roughly equivalent to the number of inches between London and Hull.) I mentioned Esperanto and Klingon. In fact there are hundreds of people out there all inventing languages simply for the pleasure of it – *conlangers* they're called, or 'constructed language creators'. And how many of you

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have lain awake at night trying to figure out just what it is that rhymes with *orange*? What is that third word in the English language that ends in *-gry*? There is even, as I write, a discussion on the Internet on this particular topic. In fact, there are hundreds and hundreds of different websites dedicated to language issues as diverse as word order, rhyming (where you can find out exactly how many words rhyme with *orange*), oxymorons, idioms, spoonerisms, phonetics, backformations, clichés and collectives. Most people create these websites for the sheer intellectual fun of it.

The garden is also an image that nicely caters for the arsenal of prescriptive texts (dictionaries, style guides, usage books, grammars) that give a standard language like English much of its muscle. These are the conservatories, the greenhouses and the hothouses that nurture our language, often artificially keeping alive features that have long perished in ordinary usage. It's in these linguistic nurseries that we protect and cherish endangered constructions, words, meanings and pronunciations. The neat lists and beautifully spun paradigms inside the dictionary and handbook provide the glasshouse counterpart to the outside 'wild garden' of language.

Why is it that people care so deeply about this garden? Is it simply because we now have these linguistic conservatories and hothouses that concerns with linguistic values and standards are so much greater? It appears not. People have been worrying about the garden for centuries. As Deborah Cameron's book *Verbal Hygiene* clearly shows, anxieties about language are underpinned by deep and complex social conflicts. We all refuse to leave language alone – it's part of our linguistic competence. Humankind would have to change beyond all recognition before these urges to cultivate and tidy up the language disappeared.

So where do linguists fit in? Are they the seasoned gardeners whose task it is to advise on what should be altered, removed or promoted in the garden? Should they be the ones controlling the pests, building the hothouses and performing the topiary? Linguists are in a tricky position here. They, of course, study language, in the same way that botanists study plants and zoologists research the physiology, anatomy and behaviour of animals. Should they therefore legislate language usage? Many people

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probably think so. For those people there's a very clear distinction between unwanted plants in the garden and those that should be encouraged. But let me put it this way. Should biologists denigrate certain species in the plant world that the wider community views as weeds? Should zoologists attribute evil to the cane toads which destroy indigenous species of amphibian? Should linguists disparage native speakers for dropping an *l* in *vulnerable* or condemn as 'linguistic atrocities' expressions like *youse*?

Linguists might argue that dropping an *l* in *vulnerable* is no different from losing the *l* in *walk* or *calm*. These sorts of reductions are a natural part of sound change. They will point out that *you* is historically plural, contrasting with singular *thou*. When social changes saw the disappearance of *thou*, *you* took over and dialects have been evolving new plural pronouns like *youse*, *you-all* and *you-uns* ever since. But while linguists might argue till they're blue in the face that all constructions are equally good and that change and variation are natural and inevitable features of any thriving language – it just so happens that most of the general community don't believe this is the case. Clearly, both parties approach language very differently. For linguists, it's a natural phenomenon, something that evolves and adapts. For many others, it's an art form, something to be cherished and preserved – understandably these people reject the neutral stance of the linguistics profession.

I recall a newspaper article that appeared in 1992 where linguists were described as 'categorically the dumbest people on the face of the earth – rather than trying to present and explain information they try to shield people from knowing anything useful about the language'. I hope this book goes some small way to bridging the apparent gap between linguists and the wider community – and without getting up the noses of either camp! What I've always believed, in fact, is that the two have much in common – a love of language and a desire to know what it's all about. And let me reiterate. Most of the segments in this book have grown out of observations made by talkback callers. To all these people (especially Bob of Bermagui) I owe a special debt of gratitude. I've learned much and have derived a huge amount of pleasure following up their queries. This does not, however, include the hours spent trying to find rhymes for *orange* or words ending in *-gry*!

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But let me continue with my thanks. In truth, this book has depended on the generous support of just so many people that I scarcely know where to begin.

Perhaps I should start with the obvious – the ABC. First, many thanks to those at *Soundbank* – Gary Bartholomew, Michael Taft and more recently Penny Johnston. I derive much enjoyment from writing these pieces and I am extremely grateful for their encouragement and their support. Many thanks also to both Terry Laidler and Peter Clarke for their regular linguistic programmes and for letting me take part. Their insights into language are remarkable and have been the inspiration of many examples in this book. To both Terry and Peter I owe a special debt. I believe those involved in the discipline of linguistics should also be grateful for the work being carried out by these presenters and producers at the ABC. We all need to pay more attention to the way language affects our lives, and their programmes have done much to bring language issues into the public arena as something we talk about with sport, health issues, economics and current events.

Many thanks to Ross Weber for putting up with those 4am starts, for patiently listening to and reading my endless attempts at rewording and for his fine ability to put me right. Thanks too to all those other dear and tolerant friends, colleagues and students who have also been so supportive during the time of writing this book. What would I have done without my colleague Margaret Florey who, after I'd been toying for days with such mundane titles as *Growing English* and *The Language Garden*, phoned and suggested *Blooming English* – it says it all! Jane Faulkner has given me constant encouragement and I am very grateful for her helpful comments. My special thanks to Eric Porter who bravely worked through the entire final draft and made extensive comments. Thanks also to Amy Williams who helped create the index and to that delightful pedant Kim Lockwood – I mightn't always agree with him, but I've certainly enjoyed and learned much from our discussions on language.

A special thank you to ABC Books who were a joy to work with throughout the production of the first version of *Blooming English*. Many thanks to Susan Morris-Yates and Matthew Kelly who made sense of my ramblings in the original proposal and to Jacquie Kent who was then so encouraging. I am also extremely

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grateful to Suzanne Falkiner for keeping me on my intellectual toes and for her wonderful editing. Now, here is someone with a keen nose (or should that be ear!) for ill-chosen words, grammatical errors, infelicities of style and punctuation. Her suggestions and insights – on virtually every page – were invaluable. More recently of course my thanks to Cambridge University Press, in particular to Kate Brett who was the driving force behind the release of *Blooming English* into the Northern Hemisphere. I am very grateful for all her hard work – and for her advice, especially when it came to pruning the Australianisms.

To conclude my thanks, let me point out I have numerous heroes in linguistics – fine writers like Jean Aitchison, David Crystal and Stephen Pinker who have shown that ‘the pointy-headed abstruse strudel of academic linguistics’ (to quote the same 1992 newspaper article) can make great bedtime reading. One real favourite of mine is Dwight Bolinger. Bolinger complained there was never enough debate about language, and using language to expose language was his life work – he was brilliant at it. The writing of these linguists has always been a great inspiration to me.

Finally, a note on the layout of the book. All of the sections are self-contained entities, as are the individual snippets presented within them. This is a book meant for grazing and browsing, not necessarily for reading from left to right, front to back, chapter by chapter – although readers can also do that if they wish.

Let me also emphasize that these pieces were originally written to be read aloud on radio. They are therefore chatty, informal and probably in style resemble something closer to speech than to writing. They contain no footnotes or endnotes. However, at the end of the book I have provided a list of references with the details of those authors I have cited. The list includes works of literature, linguistic books – and of course the gardening books that have also inspired me.

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The Complexity of Language



The intricate and folded rose

Judith Wright, 'Woman to Man', 1949

Most of the time we simply speak without ever noticing the extraordinary complexity that underpins our language. Underlying every sentence we utter is a highly organized arrangement of layers. Like some intricate folded rose, around forty-four distinctive sounds are organized into the syllables that combine to form hundreds of meaningful segments of words. These in turn combine to construct thousands of different words that then combine and recombine into an infinite number of possible sentences and discourses.

Talking animals?

You've probably seen nature programmes on television that document dolphinspeak, bird songs, bee dances – even talking horses. Perhaps you've read about the 'love songs' of the humpbacked whale. And some of those baby chimps do seem to communicate quite well with their trainers. I certainly had a parrot that said 'bless you' whenever anyone sneezed. But are any of these creatures actually communicating in a meaningful way? If not, what are the properties that distinguish our communication as unique?

It's a cluster of properties really, collectively known as the 'design features' of language. First, we humans initiate speech.

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You don't have to dangle a cracker or a glass of red wine in front of my nose to get me to speak – though it might help. Not only that, I can talk about all sorts of things that are quite remote from the here and now. For instance, I can talk about my good friend Jill who now lives in Albany and who broke her leg climbing the Porongorups last year. Animals can't do this. Animals are 'stimulus bound'. Typically, they talk about nothing but the present moment and things they can see. Even bees, who do quite well reporting on the location of patches of nectar, can't report on that awesome patch of nectar they visited last week, or wonder about the plight of rural bees in drought-stricken New South Wales. Bees can't swap stories about great nectar sources they have known.

Another feature of human language is that it's conventional and arbitrary. Our words are symbols. For example, there's nothing about my physical or psychological make-up that causes me to use the word *book* to refer to the printed work you're reading at the moment. There's no natural, no necessary connection between *book* and its meaning. It's simply that we are all agreed on calling it 'a book'. In this regard, in *Alice in Wonderland*, Humpty Dumpty was undermining the very foundation of human language – when he used a word, you might remember, it meant whatever he chose it to mean.

By contrast, many animal signals are iconic; in other words there is a connection between the message that's being sent and the signal. For example, angry crustaceans will wave a leg, and those that are really cheesed off will wave a very large claw. The speed of beespeak directly relates to the distance of the nectar. However, not all animal signalling is so, and arbitrariness is not in fact unique to human language. More significant is that animal signals are based on the principle of 'one signal; one meaning', and this makes animals very limited in what they can say. Psycholinguist Jean Aitchison, for example, describes how one variety of male grasshopper has a choice of only six messages – 'I'm happy, life is good', 'I would like to make love', 'You are trespassing', 'She's mine', 'Let's make love' and 'Oh how nice to have made love'. Don't expect riveting conversation from a male grasshopper! By contrast we can talk about literally anything we like, when

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we want to and where we want to. We can if we choose say something completely ridiculous – ‘the man in the moon bought himself a pink feather boa’. It’s true some creatures, like monkeys, have quite impressive repertoires of signals, but they’re fixed. The remarkable thing about human language is its ability to make infinite use out of a finite means. Sounds, syllables, parts of words, words, all combine and recombine into an infinite number of different structures. This organization of level upon level is what distinguishes human communication from that of other animals. No animal communication has this sort of infinite capacity. Even beespeak, it turns out, can’t create a word for ‘up’!

OK, you’re probably thinking – what about chimp communication? Certainly it does seem chimps can cope with arbitrary symbols. They even show some creativity – but is there really linguistic processing going on? I’ll let you decide. Here are some typical sentences from one of the success stories, Nim Chimpsky – ‘Nim eat Nim eat’, ‘Tickle me Nim play’, ‘Me banana you banana me you give’, ‘Give orange me give eat orange me eat orange give me eat orange give me you’. So who would you choose to sit opposite at dinner – Nim or the male grasshopper? I think it’s safe to say, for the moment at least, humans are unique in their ability to use language.

Blooming insertion

The parts that make up words are called ‘morphemes’. These are the smallest units of meaning in the structure of a language. They include things like prefixes – the bits and pieces that come before the stems of words (such as *un-* in *unhappy*) and suffixes – the bits and pieces that come at the end (like *-able* in *readable*). Much rarer are things called infixes that are stuffed into the middle of a word stem. In English the only things that can be infixed are those expressive words which are used to intensify meaning. All of the seriously offensive intensifiers can be used this way, but there are plenty of sweeter-sounding remodellings too like *flippin(g)*, *friggin(g)*, *blinkin(g)* and *bloomin(g)*, as in *unbeflippinglievable* and *fanfriggingintastic*. One of the most famous examples is, of course, Eliza Doolittle’s ‘absobloominlutely’.

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'One Weetabick'



Even very young children are aware, at least unconsciously, that words have their own internal architecture. My colleague, Kersti Börjars, relates the following story about her son Nils. When, at the age of two-and-a-half, Nils was told off for having thrown his bowl of cereal on the floor, he declared it didn't matter because there was only one 'Weetabick' left in the bowl. In this case, Nils had analysed the final 's' sound of the brand name *Weetabix* as the English plural marker that you get in words like *tricks*. Similarly, Katie, when her parents were waxing their boat, helpfully suggested they might give the boat another 'wack' – like Nils, Katie had analysed the final 's' sound (in this case of *wax*) as the plural marker. Nils' sister Ellen at the age of three fell over in the playground and tearfully informed nursery staff she had hurt her 'two-head'. When she'd calmed down a bit, she corrected herself and said 'I mean my forehead'. Ellen had already worked out that words can consist of more than one part and that these can exist as independent words. She thought of this word as 'four-head', but being so upset from her fall she got the number wrong. Paul, a neighbour to Nils and Ellen, was told by his father not to argue. He replied 'Well, don't arg-me then'. The final sounds of *argue* are identical to the pronoun *you* and Paul had therefore assigned the structure 'arg' + 'you' to the word. Finally, there's Nils' buddy Ben, who in the bathtub one evening pondered over the name *testicles*. 'So what do they test?' he asked his mother. As their wonderful misunderstandings of structure reveal, Nils, Katie, Ellen, Paul and Ben were all aware of the fact we can divide words into smaller units of meaning.

An internet discussion between linguists from around the world revealed that this sort of expressive infixing is widespread and appears in all the major English dialects. It's a complex process with an elaborate set of restrictions. For instance, infixing doesn't