# BAD ENGLISH

## CHAPTER FOUR

# *Bad grammar*

Correct grammar – the use of words in their orthodox relation to other words – is not difficult to master. It is a question of logic, and if regarded as such it will, by all but the most resolutely illogical minds, become second nature in anyone's usage of English. Grammar is designed to keep our language comprehensible and free from ambiguity. Although some writers and speakers of English (notably politicians) actively seek ambiguity, most users of English attain it only by accident. It is unfortunate when they do, because those with whom they seek to communicate are left in doubt about what they are trying to say. This defeats the purpose of communication.

Good grammar alone will not be enough to guarantee a good writing style: that depends too on the choice of words and the concision and originality with which they are used. The precise selection of words, with which I deal in Chapter Five, is also essential to conveying accurate meaning. However, grammar is the foundation of good style. Its violation or disregard has the same effect on language as filleting and removing the skeleton from a healthy being has on the body. The orthodoxy of its use has been established not only by logic, but by custom, practice and precedent. In educated and formal usage there is agreement about what that orthodoxy is. Users of English depart from it only if they wish to display a lack of conformity, which in formal contexts may cause those with whom they communicate to make assumptions about their intelligence and grasp of the language.

Those who have studied a foreign language tend to have a reasonable knowledge of grammar, though they are unlikely to have learned very much about it when acquiring their mother tongue. In preceding chapters we have examined the structure of a sentence, the building blocks of language and how to punctuate; grammar is the science of using those components correctly. It is about ensuring that nouns and verbs agree; that verbs take the correct prepositions and govern the right pronouns; that adjectives and adverbs are used appropriately; that tenses and participles are accurate; that clauses have the right subject and do not go off on an unplanned course of their own; and how in some instances the choice of the wrong word can lead to grammatical error. Above all, grammar is the means by which language remains logical, comprehensible and clear. If we learn to spot that offences against grammar are in fact offences against logic and clarity, we will come close to winning this particular battle in the war against bad English.

What follows is a discussion, broken down into sections according to the main parts of speech and other considerations, about what the main grammatical errors found in English are; and how to avoid them. In my experience of editing the writing of others, or simply reading it in newspapers, magazines and books, a surprisingly large proportion of mistakes seem to have had their origins in the writer’s failure to understand, or remember, whether the items or people being discussed in a particular sentence are singular or plural. Therefore, let us begin with matters of number.

# Passives

The **passive voice** of a transitive verb is used to create the form that no longer has someone doing something, but has that something being done by a person. It is the difference between “I drank the beer” and “the beer was drunk by me”. In good style, writers should avoid passives wherever possible. As is clear from this example, they are verbose. They are also indirect. As I have discussed elsewhere, they have political implications: they can be used to create distance and to de-personalise an action. There is a difference between “I have decided to sack you” and “it has been decided that you should be sacked” that should be too obvious to require further comment. There are more sinister applications, of the sort that turned writers and thinkers such as Orwell against them. A government finds it easier to say “restrictions will be placed upon the movement of people and upon their liberties” than “the government will place restrictions” because the apportionment of responsibility for so unpleasant an act is so much more blatant, and therefore damaging, in the second example.

In grammatical terms, the formation of the passive is straightforward. Another reason to avoid it is the complex mess of tenses that it tends to attract, rather like flies: from the mildly tiresome “the girl was being pursued” to the exceptionally irritating “the girl had been being pursued”. This voice also becomes extremely unattractive when compounded. Many verbs require another verb to complete their meaning. This is straightforward in the active voice (“he hoped to see her again”), but it may lead to an abomination (“it was hoped that she would be seen again”) in the passive. If an active sentence must be turned into the passive, only the main verb need change (“it was hoped to see her again”). Similarly, “they attempted to climb the hill” just needs to be “it was attempted by them to climb the hill”, and “we intended to cut the grass” would be “it was intended by us to cut the grass”. However, why anyone should want to turn an active into a passive is beyond me.

For all the political considerations of the passive, there remain fundamental problems of style. In her memoir of her late husband Harold Pinter, Lady Antonia Fraser writes that “technically, since my father was an earl and my mother a countess, I could be argued to be an aristocrat”.[13] Such an abomination is strange from so good and experienced a writer, and the tortuousness of the phrase indicates some moral difficulty that lies behind her admission. Her use of the passive leads us to question how it is that a *person* – even one so elevated and aristocratic as Lady Antonia – can ever

*be argued*. A point of view can be argued; so too can a contention or a policy. But can a person? Lady Antonia could have avoided this jumble had she used the active voice ("some will argue that I am an aristocrat") or, had she felt the need to retain the passive for purposes of distance, had she written "it could be argued that I am an aristocrat".

On a pedantic note, the passive voice of the verb *to work* is, correctly, *wrought* when the object that has been worked is some sort of material or substance. *Wrought iron* is iron that has been worked – *wrought* – by a farrier.

## Sequence of tenses

This is another of those rules that come so easily to those who have learned Latin or Greek but can seem a struggle for those who speak English. It is the matter of ensuring that, in reported speech, everything remains logical by observing the need to put everything into the past. Onions defines it as "the principle in accordance with which the tense in a subordinate clause 'follows' or is adjusted to that of the main clause".[14] This means that when the main clause has a present, perfect or future verb any subordinate clause is in the present; and if the main clause has a past or pluperfect, then a subordinate clause is in the past. "I have laid the table so that we can eat dinner" and "she will buy the tickets so that we may take the train" are examples of the first; "they went to the shop and bought some ham" and "we had some champagne and it made us drunk" exemplify the second. Onions specifies an exception to this rule, which is where something is "universally" true or at the time of speaking. I do not entirely agree with him. His first example is an arguable point ("he had no idea what economy means") and one can see how it may apply to other such concepts – "he did not believe that the earth is round". Yet in reported speech one would now, I think, be within the idiom to write "he had no idea what economy meant" or "he did not believe that the earth was round" without conveying any sense that economy now meant something different, or that the earth had changed shape.

So we should stick to the rule that once the verb in the main clause goes into the past tense, so must every other verb. Logic demands this, however strange the outcome may seem to untutored eyes and ears. Suppose a man says at this moment: “When I look into the bathroom mirror I see that I am bald.” If he chooses to record this statement in writing tomorrow, or in a year’s time, he must say: “I said that when I looked into the bathroom mirror I saw that I was bald.” Were he to put what he said in quotation marks, quoting directly what he had said, then he would not have needed to alter the tense. However, since he has decided to use an indirect quotation, he must put everything into the past tense. In some minds confusion will arise because the man, who presumably is still bald, is saying that he *was* bald, as if that condition has passed. However, to say “when I looked into the bathroom mirror I saw that I am bald” is simply wrong and illogical. It is not only with practice that one learns how to master the sequence of tenses; it is also with practice that one comes to understand that it is logical and makes sense.

The sentence “the leader of the party said he had ordered a review, and Mr Smith will repay the money immediately” is wrong. It should be “Mr Smith would repay the money”. If the main clause is in the past tense, so must everything else be, even if one of the subsequent clauses refers to action in the future. “I said that I shall go there” is also wrong: it should be “I said I should go there”. Perhaps in instances such as this there is a problem with the ambiguity of *should*, which as well as being the past tense of *shall* may also be interpreted as *ought*. The problem needs to be resisted. Precise writers will use the correct past tense of *shall* in reported speech. Should they wish to convey a sense of duty or obligation in the action they would write “I said I ought to go there”, which removes any ambiguity.

The basic rule of not switching tenses in order to preserve the logical sequence is straightforward. In reported speech, everything, even the future, is in the past (“he said he would be going there the following day”). However, there are other considerations of the sequence of tenses that the usage of verbs throws up. Sometimes one reads sentences such as “the government has not and will not pretend to have all the answers”, which is grammatical nonsense; it must be “has not pretended to have all the answers, and will not”. If one chooses to mix up tenses in a clause and use different auxiliaries, it is important that the verb works for both or all of them; and, if not, to adjust it accordingly. A report of actions that have

taken place and are completed requires the past tense. In some journalism writers use the present tense even when reporting past events in order to convey a sense of immediacy. This may have its place in writing, for example, an account of an interview, but it has no place in news reporting, where it simply conveys a tone of cheapness and sensationalism. In more formal writing, in which a writer may be giving an account of events, it is simply wrong.

One final point about reported speech: in its purest form it contains no question marks, because no direct question is asked; and no exclamation marks either, for there are no exclamations. Both question and exclamation are neutralised by the report. Were one reporting “Will you come to dinner with me?” one would write “he asked whether she would go to dinner with him”. Note also the change of verb, to make it impersonal in the report. “I don’t believe it!” is reported as “he said he did not believe it”.

# Pronouns

Jespersen stops the traffic in his *Essentials of English Grammar* when writing about pronouns with his example “if the baby does not thrive on raw milk, boil it”.[27] The great Dane contends that “there is really little danger of misunderstanding *it*”, and he is right. There is, though, a danger of misunderstanding the British sense of humour. Knowing very well to what *it* refers, the average Briton will still chortle at the ambiguity, which means that the writer – who was seeking to make a serious point – will instead have created a distraction. There is a place for jokes in writing, but they are best when they are intentional.

The most common difficulties with pronouns occur when they lack the correct antecedent, or when (as in Jespersen’s example) it becomes unclear what the antecedent is. Take this example: “the woman bought a lottery ticket and proceeded to win it”. We all know what the writer is trying to say, but through lack of thought he has ended up saying something quite different. *It* can refer only to the lottery ticket, not to the lottery itself. Sometimes, confusion of thought causes writers to use a verb and then refer to it using a pronoun as though it were a noun, as in “John decided to propose to Mary, but she turned it down”. She could have turned *him* down, but since a proposal is not mentioned there is nothing for *it* to refer back to, other than something understood by the verb. Simply paying attention to what one has written, and thinking of the logic with which one uses a pronoun, will normally prevent such confusions as these. Idiomatically, there is one regular usage in English of a pronoun that requires no

antecedent. This is when *they* is used to describe a generality of opinion or people as in “they would, in those days, open a door for a lady” or “they say she is going to marry him”. This usage would not normally be found in formal writing.

There is also a danger of ambiguity when more than one subject has been introduced early in a sentence, or in a previous sentence, and it becomes unclear exactly to what the pronoun is referring. “Smith and Brown both pleased their teacher with their answers, and he rewarded them with excellent marks” gives no-one any difficulties. Although there are three masculine subjects it is quite clear that the *he* can only be the teacher. However, a sentence such as “Smith met Brown and he gave him a drink” is properly ambiguous, unless it has been made clear to the reader already who has control of a drinks cabinet. Logic may seem to dictate that the *he* automatically refers back to the subject of the sentence (Smith) but there is no reason why that should be so. There would be nothing ungrammatical or illogical about “Smith met Mrs Brown and she gave him a drink”, after all. In a sentence such as this another formula has to be used: either the use of “the former…the latter”, which is rather stiff, or simply the repetition of one of the proper names in the second clause in order to remove doubt. I would favour “and he gave Brown a drink”. Jespersen presents the example “John told Robert’s son that he must help him”, which he points out “is capable of six different meanings”.[28] Only one extra meaning should be sufficient evidence for a writer to know he has to find the means of eliminating the ambiguity.

Beware, in long sentences, of estranging the pronoun too far from its antecedent, as this too may give rise to doubts. As with much that can go wrong in writing, this fault may be rectified by the short sentence. This is true too of statements such as “Jane had eaten up everything on her plate, but her dislike of the salad dressing caused her mother to leave the lettuce on hers”. Until we get to the words “her mother” we think the possessive pronoun in “her dislike” refers to Jane. It is always better if the pronoun does not precede its antecedent.

There can be trouble, too, with accusatives. As I have noted elsewhere, the obvious need for an accusative pronoun when it is the object of a verb (“I hit him”, “he kissed her”, “we saw them” and so on) tends to get lost after an *and*. “He gave Mary and I his card” is clearly illiterate. ***Whom***, the accusative of the pronoun *who*, is now so in disuse that many

who hear or read it regard it as an affectation. This is ridiculous. However, as bad as not using *whom* at all is the art of using it wrongly. In the winter of 2009–10 this appeared in a newspaper: “the task of cutting is likely to fall to George Osborne, whom we hope will embrace the bold ideas…”. Take out the “we hope” and it clear that the *whom* has no place there. Mr Osborne, or rather his pronoun, is the subject of the clause and not its object. It is more often that one encounters the problem in reverse, as in “Mr Osborne, who we used to see in the House of Commons”, which cries out for a *whom*. It is sometimes possible, and always if possible desirable, to obviate such difficulties by splitting sentences into shorter ones. In colloquial speech *whom* has almost entirely disappeared; it should not do so in formal writing. As noted in the section on verbs above, the pronoun with the verb *to be* always takes the nominative case in formal writing; “it’s me” is colloquial and acceptable in informal speech.

When using the pronoun ***one***, be consistent. Within a passage of prose, should one use *one*, one should use it all the time. Do not shift to *you* in the following sentence, and then, quite possibly, back again. Some consider the use of this pronoun pompous. I would agree that in certain circumstances and contexts it very much can appear to be. I have used it throughout this book to describe the activities of an indeterminate third person, much as the French do not hesitate to do with the impersonal pronoun *on*. This little pronoun has a use that is both the same as our *one* but also rather wider in its idiomatic usages; yet the ground it covers is theoretically the same as that covered by *one*, which is why it is worth considering how exactly it is deployed. When a Frenchman says “*on dit qu’elle est folle*” he is saying “they say she’s mad”, without having to specify that “they” are any specific people other than the general run of his acquaintances. If he says “*ici, on boit du vin avec nos repas*”, he is saying “here, we drink wine with our meals”. If he says “*on ne veut pas le faire*” he is saying “you don’t want to do that”. This breadth of usage, still common in France (and enormously useful to the Francophone) is steadily being lost in English.

The pompous usage of *one* is most perceptible when it is used as a substitute for *I*. It is hard these days to excuse statements such as “one spent the weekend in the country with one’s friends” unless one is being satirical, or sending oneself up. Its use for other persons, as in the examples given in French above and as I have mentioned in Chapter One, is however much to

be commended. If enunciating a general principle to someone else, either in speech or in writing, it is far better to say or write “one shouldn’t run off with other men’s wives” than “you shouldn’t”, in case the listener or reader thinks he specifically is being addressed and aspersions are being cast about his moral character when, in fact, that is not so. Using *one* for the first person plural risks pomposity, as it does for the first person singular, even though *on* as a substitute for *nous* is perhaps its most frequent usage in French. It is perhaps idiomatically most acceptable when outlining general principles rather than describing what the speaker and others have done: no-one ought to find fault with “one votes at general elections in order to ensure one has a say in the running of the country” as a preferable way of saying “we vote…”. As with the *you* usage, to say *we* implies that that is why the speaker or writer and others associated with him take a specific course of action; rather than the intended meaning, which is to say why the generality of people do such a thing. *One* also has a role as a pronoun that creates distance between the speaker and the people whose activities he is describing. If, for example, referring to a shocking crime, a speaker were to say “I don’t know why one does that sort of thing” it is quite clear that *one* is a third person usage, meaning a person or persons unknown; it does, however, risk the rejoinder “but one doesn’t do that sort of thing”. I repeat, though: however one uses *one*, one must be sure to use it consistently.

Reflexive pronouns such as *myself, yourself, himself, ourselves, yourselves* and *themselves* are horribly misused today. Perhaps it has something to do with the increasing self-obsession of modern life. It should have purely an emphatic use, as in “I did it myself” or “he attended to the matter himself”, which suggests a point of contrast – he did it himself as opposed to someone else doing it for him; or it should serve as the object of a reflexive verb, as in “you should be ashamed of yourselves” or “she promised to take care of herself”. What it emphatically is not is a synonym for the personal pronoun in any of its cases. Phrases such as “he gave it to myself” or “I saw yourself there” are sheer abominations.

With what Fowler so charmingly calls “nouns of multitude”, think carefully before choosing a pronoun. As I have noted elsewhere, the idiom about whether certain nouns of multitude are singular or plural is not always settled; I also prefer the singular unless (as with the England cricket team) there is a prevailing idiom of plurality. So when one reads in a newspaper a story about a crime and about “the Victim Support Unit, who have been in

touch”, it jars. First, should the personal pronoun *who* be applied to an impersonal body like the Victim Support Unit? I think not. The moment one changes the pronoun to the impersonal *which* in the example above, one sees that the idiom demands a change of number too; so one has “the Victim Support Unit, which has been in touch”, which is idiomatically far happier. The same is true of all such impersonal bodies: it should be “the Government, which has advised”, or “the county council, which has offered”, or “the governing bodies of the three schools, which have agreed to work together on the question”, and so on.

Some accidents with pronouns are the result of carelessness or illiteracy. The most notorious is a version of the greengrocer’s apostrophe, where *it’s* is used for *its* as in “the business has had *it’s* worst year for decades”. Variations of this horror include “mind *you’re* language” or its equally objectionable converse “let me know when *your* here”. The third person pronoun *their*, because of an abundance of homonyms, is a minefield. In correct usage one writes “they could not believe *their* luck”; yet one from time to time sees “they could not believe *there* luck” or even “they could not believe *they’re* luck”. As with “your”, there may be abuses in the opposite direction: “she could not see why *their* should be a problem,” and so on. Few people are sufficiently stupid to make such mistakes; many more, however, are sufficiently careless.

The final pronominal difficulty is one that I noted at the start of this book, one created by linguistic history and evolution: there are no relative pronouns meaning *he-or-she*, *his-or-her* and *him-or-her*. Almost daily, one reads or hears utterances such as “the teacher told each member of his class that they were to stand up” or “neither John nor Mary had remembered their books” or “every boy and girl had a present given to them”. The problem is at once apparent: the prolixity, in the first example, of “told each member of his class that he or she was to stand up”; in the second of “neither John nor Mary had remembered his or her book”; and in the third of “every boy and girl had a present given to him or her”. Being a pedant, I regard these usages of *they*, *their* and *them* as unacceptable. However, the alternative forms verge on the absurd. Often, in cases like this, it is easy to recast the sentence to obviate the problem. In the first example one would avoid the need for a singular by writing that the teacher “told all his class that they were to stand up”. In the second, one would write “both John and Mary had forgotten their books”, which also removes the need for a singular. In the

third, one would recast it as “a present was given to every boy and girl”. Perhaps the next development in our grammar will be to rectify this deficiency; though progressives would argue that it has already happened, and we pedants should overcome our resistance to *they*, *their* and *them*. No doubt in another century we shall have done. It is interesting to note that when a plural pronoun is required in French to cover both genders, *ils* has always been deemed to suffice; but then the French have always had a distinction between the masculine *they* (*ils*) and the feminine *they* (*elles*), which we have lacked. We seem a little way behind.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# *Three sinners*

Some groups of people – state officials, academics, lawyers, certain breeds of scientist – talk to each other in a private language. Some official documents make little sense to lay people because they have to be couched in an argot that combines avoidance of the politically incorrect with obeisance to the contemporary jargon of the profession. Some articles written by academics in particular are almost incomprehensible to those outside their circle. This is not because the outsiders are stupid. It is because the academics feel they have to write in a certain stilted, dense way in order to be taken seriously by their peers.

Many officials seem to have lost the knack of communicating with people outside their closed world. Some academics, however, are bilingual. If asked to write for a publication outside the circle – such as a newspaper – they can rediscover the knack of writing reasonably plain English. They do not indulge themselves in such a fashion when they write for learned journals. There are certain phrases that they feel obliged to use: *positing a thesis* always goes down well, for example, where most of us would simply *assert* or *argue* or, in a radical move, *say*. One example of this will suffice to make the point. It is from an American psychology journal:

> Human behavior is a product both of our innate human nature and of our individual experience and environment. In this article, however, we emphasize biological influences on human behavior,

> because most social scientists explain human behavior as if evolution stops at the neck and as if our behavior is a product almost entirely of environment and socialization. In contrast, evolutionary psychologists see human nature as a collection of psychological adaptations that often operate beneath conscious thinking to solve problems of survival and reproduction by predisposing us to think or feel in certain ways.[1]

It is almost as though the purpose of such writing is not to be clear: that the writer is recording research in order to prove to peers or superiors that he has discovered something. It does not seem to bother such people that their style is considered ugly and barbaric by anyone of discernment. It is repetitious, long-winded, abstract and abstruse. Those who write in such a way probably will not easily be discouraged, unless the prevailing standards of their disciplines change. What is important is that others do not think it is somehow clever to emulate them. Academia – however clever its inhabitants are supposed to be – seems the constituency most resistant to the notion of clarity's being the most desirable aspect of writing. The example above is not unusual or extreme. Its long words, scarcity of punctuation, abundance of abstracts and even the odd tautology ("innate human nature") suggest to me that little care was taken in trying to communicate what we must be sure are important ideas. Were I the sub-editor on whose desk this piece of prose landed, and it was my job to turn it into comprehensible English, I should need a stiff drink and a lie down before even trying.

This obscurity is not a vice confined to academics. Creative types tend to have their own private languages too, which help add to the aura of pretentiousness and self-regard that such people are reputed to have around them. I found the following on the website of Daniel Libeskind, the celebrated architect, about his designs to extend the Military History Museum in Dresden:

> The wedge cuts through the structural order of the arsenal, giving the museum a place for reflection about organized conflict and violence. This creates an objective view to the continuity of military conflicts and opens up vistas to central anthropological questioning.[2]

Few people will have any idea what much of that means. The ideal style is one comprehensible to any intelligent person. If you make a conscious decision to communicate with a select (or self-selecting) group, so be it: but in trying to appeal to a large audience, or even a small one that you wish to be sure will understand your meaning, writing of the sort exemplified here just will not do. This sort of writing used to be kept from the general public thanks to the need to find someone to publish it. The advent of the internet means that one is no longer so shielded from its pernicious effects as one used to be; and such accessibility and ubiquity threaten to have a pervasive effect on the soundness of the language and its susceptibility to corruption. It is estimated that 80 per cent of pages on the worldwide web are in a language purporting to be English.

The examples above are only by way of an hors d'oeuvre: now for three more extensive passages that show much that is wrong with modern prose. Gowers published *Plain Words*, and a sequel, more than 60 years ago in an attempt to drive bad practices in English usage out of the British civil service. For a time it seemed he had succeeded. The application of his classically-trained mind to the problem infected many of his colleagues with the same determination to clean up official English. The classically educated civil servant is no longer so apparent as he used to be, as this extract from the proposals for the Research Excellence Framework, published in October 2009 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, makes clear. I apologise for its length, but the "impact", as the drafter would no doubt have put it, needs to be clear:

> The REF will provide significant additional recognition where institutions and researchers have built on excellent research to deliver demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture or quality of life. To assess impact, we **propose** that:

- A rounded assessment should be made of the impact of the submitting unit as a whole, not the impact of individual researchers. Submissions

should provide examples of research-driven impact that arose from the unit's broad portfolio of work.

- The impacts must have been underpinned by high-quality research. The focus of REF is to identify research excellence, with additional recognition for strong impact built on that excellence.

- Because of time-lags, especially with blue-skies research, the impact must be evident during the REF assessment period, but the research may have been undertaken earlier (we suggest up to 10-15 years earlier).

- The assessment will be based on qualitative information informed by appropriate indicators. Submissions should include the following evidence of impact:

  – An **impact statement**, using a generic template, for the submitted unit as a whole. This will describe the breadth of interactions with research users and an overview of positive impacts that became evident during the assessment period.

  – A number of **case studies**, using a generic template, to illustrate specific examples of impact and how the unit contributed to them. We propose one case study should be submitted for every five to 10 members of staff.

  – The case studies and the impact statement should include appropriate indicators of impact, to support the narrative evidence.

- The assessment will be made by the REF expert sub-panels, comprising people who understand research in the discipline and its wider use and benefits. Panels will be supplemented with members who are research users, to assess impacts.

- Sub-panels should assess impact against criteria of **reach** (how widely the impacts have been felt) and **significance** (how transformative the impacts have been). They will form a sub-profile showing the proportion of impacts meeting each level on the five-point scale. To achieve a four-star ('exceptional') rating, an impact would need to be 'ground-breaking, transformative or of major value, relevant to a range of situations'.[3]

The usual vices are there. The reader is saturated by abstracts. There is a torrent of jargon ("blue-skies research" and "the breadth of interactions"). It is repetitious. When it seeks to explain (as in the three examples of "evidence of impact") it merely introduces more jargon ("a generic template" and "qualitative information") that serves only to deepen the confusion. Seldom have the injunctions of the Fowlers and Orwell against using long words and in favour of using short ones, which I discuss in the next chapter, been proved to have more substance. Research into efficiencies to be obtained by the better use of English would, we must assume, not attract promises of funding.

Local government publications and websites are a goldmine of solecisms and catachreses. The frequency and velocity with which they have to communicate with the public has been matched by a decline in the ability of those charged to communicate to do so effectively and in accurate

English. This is from the Essex County Council website in the spring of 2010:

> Following the harshest winter in decades, Essex County Council in partnership with the Local Government Association is holding a national Snow Summit to assess the performance of Local Authorities this winter, and to find new and innovative ways forward for the future.
>
> The Snow Summit, which has a string of top speakers from industry, government, service users and even the Swiss highways division, will provide a forum for discussion and debate which will feed into new policy decisions.
>
> Delegates will assess delivery across the UK this winter and will have the chance to question the Government's policy of centralising salt supplies and rationing it to local authorities, known as Salt Cell. John Dowie, the Chair of the Department for Transport's Salt Cell will defend the Government's record.
>
> Schools, road users and businesses will all get the chance to argue their case, and the Automobile Association will challenge delegates with their recent survey findings taken from 20,000 of their members who used the roads this winter.
>
> The debates and technical sessions will contribute to the LGA's review process, meaning the Snow Summit will feed directly into future policy.
>
> Councillor Norman Hume, Essex County Council's Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation said, "This winter has been a challenge for us all and one that we have worked hard to meet.
>
> "The Snow Summit provides the whole country with an opportunity to look at what practices have worked during the recent adverse weather and analyse what could have been improved upon, as well as encouraging us all to look towards future preparations.
>
> "We're trying to enable the development of future UK winter services based on best practice gleaned from operations across the UK and the rest of Europe. This will provide a better foundation to shape the way in which both local and national government can work together with their partners to keep the country moving."

> Councillor David Sparks, Local Government Association said, “Councils have a crucial role to play when it comes to winter weather and keeping the country moving. The LGA will be conducting a review to learn lessons from this winter, looking at what was done well and what can be done better.
>
> “The LGA is pleased to be associated with this event, organised by Essex County Council as an important part of that process. Councils and their staff have worked tirelessly to keep the country moving this winter but it is only right to see where we can improve preparedness for bad weather.”

Let us note first of all the eccentric command of punctuation. Then let us note how the official who has written this has a grasp of cliché (“way forward” and “worked tirelessly”) that perfectly complements that of the people he is quoting. Jargon is everywhere: “feed directly into future policy”, “assess delivery across the UK” and the now inevitable “best practice”. All that appears to be missing – and one cannot easily tell why – is the equally familiar “fit for purpose”.

That example looks like fine writing compared with our third sinner. The combination of earnest and politically-correct trade unionism and the lower echelons of academia has produced this nearly incomprehensible piece of prose, on the undeniably serious topic of stamping out the bullying of members of ethnic minorities in the workplace:

> Although some advancements have been made of late with research on the significance of gender as a factor in the perception and experience of bullying, for example issues relating to gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion (Pryor and Fitzgerald, 2003), much of the initial focus of bullying research has firmly concentrated on wide-ranging population groups rather than minority groups. Notwithstanding an appreciation within bullying research that individuals may continue to be treated inequitably due to their minority status, the possible impact of ethnicity has been afforded little attention, with most studies seemingly overlooking the issue altogether. Furthermore, the limited number of studies carried out on ethnicity and bullying have proved to be inconclusive due to methodological constraints, sector-specific

focus, limitations with sample sizes and varying experiences across different BME groups …

Utilising the growing evidence base from this relatively new field of research, this study aims to report on the extent of BME employee experiences of workplace bullying and the implications these experiences have on individual employees and organisations, employee representatives, industry in general, and policy makers, as they move into a new era of a single equalities and human rights framework through the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

### 1.1 *Aims and objectives*

The aims and objectives of this study are to use wide-ranging secondary data sources to:

1. Highlight the extent of BME employee experiences of bullying in comparison to the general workforce;
2. Identify the causes of BME employee perceptions of unfairness in the workplace, with a particular focus on sectoral issues and leadership style.
3. Develop the business case for tackling workplace bullying from a Black and Minority Ethnic Employee perspective.

### 1.2 *Methodology*

This 35-day research project has been carried out over a six-month period. In order to maximise the potential of this study, we adopted a multi-dimensional methodological approach including a literature review, consultation with experts, and planning / review

> meetings with Dignity at Work Partnership Steering Group representatives.
>
> Utilising extensive University of Bradford electronic and library resources, we conducted a comprehensive review of scientific journals, policy documents, statistics, and national and international reports in order to explore previously published data on workplace bullying with a particular focus on BME employees and the impact negative experiences have on individuals and organisations. In addition to a review of the published literature, this research has benefited from the inclusion of on-going or unpublished grey literature obtained by attending an international work psychology conference during the early stages of the project, and then partway through the study, hosting an experts conference to review interim findings.

Aside from the obligatory jargon with which this extract drips ("sector-specific focus", "on-going or unpublished grey literature" and "a multi-dimensional methodological approach"), what strikes one most of all about it is its sheer pomposity and self-importance. What is all this *utilising* when most people would be *using*? Why are we *commencing* when we could be *starting*? Where did the adjective *sectoral* come from? We are even treated to a *notwithstanding*. It is as if the writer is being paid by the syllable: no short word seems to be used where a long one will do. Since the piece is about bullying, that everyday word (in its inevitably frequent use) stands out in a sea of Latinity like a good deed in a naughty world. On top of that there are the contortions brought about by the coercion, or fascism, of political correctness. The entirely inoffensive term *ethnic minority*, still widely used and widely comprehensible outside the race relations industry, has been supplanted by the apparently more acceptable *minority ethnic*. I am sure there is a point to this private language, but it is hard to fathom.

The stylistic problems of this piece are also evident in its structure. Its paragraphs, in the early part of the extract, are long and dense. There is no variation in tone, which creates a sense of monotony. The long words mean that even the occasional attempt to keep sentences short pays no dividends. It is a clear example of a private language: written by the same sort of people, with the same cast of mind, as those for whom it was intended. It is a means of erecting a barrier against the outside world. In that

– whether or not it was the actual intention – it appears to be entirely successful.