

BOOK REVIEW

Howard, Philip. *New Words for Old*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1977. xv, 127 p., \$8.95.

One of the occupational hazards of editors is jargon and there is plenty of it around these days; perhaps a more expressive word for it is “gobbledygook,” the argot beloved of federal officials. Jargon has its place—words that describe technical aspects of work must exist—but to bend the meaning of good, old words is confusing and unnecessary. This is the theme of Philip Howard’s book, first published in *The Times* of London. Apart from its scholarly content, there are many diversions into the meaning of words: “Denim came from *Serge de Nimes* (the manufacturing town . . . in the South of France)” and “Jeans . . . from the material manufactured at Gênes, the French name for Genoa.”

Unlike Edwin Newman’s recent anecdotal volumes,¹ *New Words for Old* is arranged in two- to three-page sections, each headed by one of 42 jargon words; it is also more pointed, less folksy, and better written than Newman’s books. Such standards as “charisma,” “consensus,” “hopefully,” “interface,” “prestigious,” “scenario,” and “sophisticated” come in for their measure of scorn, but of more interest to physicians are the subverted scientific words “clinical,” “syndrome,” and our old battered friend, “parameter.”

“Clinical” comes from the Greek word meaning bed and is therefore used correctly in “clinical medicine,” that is, medicine at the bedside; but “Sensitive clinical doctors are upset that laymen understand their epithet to mean dispassionate, cold-blooded, and even computer-like. . . .” “Syndrome”—“a concurrence of symptoms”—is also used correctly in medical practice as in “Korsakoff’s Syndrome,” but it is meaningless to say “a physical fitness syndrome” or “a football fan syndrome.” “Parameter” has far

¹ Newman, Edwin. *Strictly Speaking*. Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1974. Newman, Edwin. *A Civil Tongue*. Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1975.

outstripped its original mathematical meaning; often there seems to be some confusion with “perimeter,” but parameter has never meant a boundary in a vague sense. This is another example of what Mr. Howard calls “hyperparametritis,” an obfuscation of meanings beyond the scientific definitions given in his book.

“Usage” is the war cry of the self-styled innovators of language, but H.W. Fowler, the greatest expert of all on usage, would have none of today’s misplaced jargon. *Modern English Usage*,² Fowler’s classic (another vogue word, but justified in this instance) is quite clear on what jargon is: “Jargon is talk that is considered both ugly-sounding and hard to understand . . . the use of long words, circumlocution, and other clumsiness.”

Do we have to “prioritize” the words we use? If we do (or perhaps if we do not), we might manage to save the English language—“hopefullywise,” did you say?

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² Fowler, H.W. *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, ed 2. (Revised by Sir Ernest Gowers). New York, Oxford University Press, 1965.

OTHER BOOKS ON USAGE ARE:

EVANS, BERGEN AND EVANS, CORNELIA: *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage*. New York, Random House, 1957.

FOLLETT, WILSON: *Modern American Usage*. (edited and completed by Jacques Barzun). New York, Hill and Wang, 1966.

GOWERS, SIR ERNEST: *The Complete Plain Words*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1963.

(Sir Ernest quotes this example of unspoiled writing from a ten-year-old child’s essay: “The cow is a mammal. It has six sides—right, left, an upper and below . . . The head is for the purpose of growing horns and so that the mouth can be somewhere. The horns are to butt with and the mouth is to moo with. Under the cow hangs the milk. It is arranged for milking . . . The cow has a fine sense of smell; one can smell it far away. This is the reason for the fresh air in the country.”)

PARTRIDGE, ERIC: *Usage and Abusage*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1973 (with a nine-page section on “Vogue Words”).