



Rick Thompson

# writing for broadcast journalists

second edition



media skills

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# Writing for Broadcast Journalists

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‘This is a superb book which combines the rare mixture of high quality information with humour. The style of writing engages the reader from the introduction, and the experience and insight of the author occasionally make it difficult to put down, a rare feature of a textbook. I would unreservedly recommend this book not only to those studying journalism, but to students of language and all who use the spoken and written word as the “materials” of their work.’

Barry Turner, *Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University and University of Lincoln*

‘Rick Thompson’s guidance manual is packed with advice to would-be writers for this medium. He’s someone with years of experience at the top level of the national and international profession, and he’s smack up to date with his references. The book is aimed at journalists, but anyone with a serious interest in developing their literacy will learn a lot about professional writing skills from what he has to say.’

Roy Johnson, *www.mantex.co.uk*

*Writing for Broadcast Journalists* guides readers through the significant differences between the written and the spoken versions of journalistic English. It will help broadcast journalists at every stage of their careers to avoid such pitfalls as the use of newspaper-English, common linguistic errors, and Americanised phrases, and gives practical advice on accurate terminology and pronunciation, while encouraging writers to capture the immediacy of the spoken word in their scripts.

Written in a lively and accessible style by an experienced BBC TV and radio editor, *Writing for Broadcast Journalists* is the authoritative guide to the techniques of writing for radio and television. This new edition has a special section about writing online news.

*Writing for Broadcast Journalists* includes:

- practical tips on how to avoid ‘journalese’, clichés and jargon
- guidance on tailoring your writing style to suit a particular audience
- advice on converting agency copy into spoken English
- writing to television pictures
- examples of scripts from some of the best in the business
- an appendix of ‘dangerous’ words and phrases to be avoided in scripts.

**Rick Thompson** has held senior editorial positions with BBC News at the regional, national and international levels in television and radio. He now trains journalists in central and eastern Europe, and is the Visiting Professor of Broadcast Journalism at Birmingham City University.

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## **Media Skills**

SERIES EDITOR: RICHARD KEEBLE, LINCOLN UNIVERSITY

The *Media Skills* series provides a concise and thorough introduction to a rapidly changing media landscape. Each book is written by media and journalism lecturers or experienced professionals and is a key resource for a particular industry. Offering helpful advice and information and using practical examples from print, broadcast and digital media, as well as discussing ethical and regulatory issues, *Media Skills* books are essential guides for students and media professionals.

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# Writing for Broadcast Journalists

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Rick Thompson

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# 1

## Introduction

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Polonius: 'What do you read my lord?'

Hamlet: 'Words, words, words.'

(William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II.2)

An English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious.

(Dr Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*: Addison)

### WHAT THIS BOOK COVERS

This is a book about words, words that are usually spoken aloud and received into the brain via the ear, rather than the eye. Specifically, it is about the language and style of broadcast news. It is designed to help journalists working in radio and television to write scripts that will be clear, concise, accurate and elegant. This new edition also has an extended section on writing for online news sites, because many broadcast journalists must do this routinely as the electronic media converge.

There are an estimated ten thousand broadcast journalists working in Britain, with about thirty thousand more studying media or journalism at any one time. Overseas, there are countless thousands more writing in the English language. I have yet to meet one who admits to being a poor writer. But inaccuracies, confusing usage and newspaper-style journalese can be heard on the airwaves every day.

All journalists in broadcasting should aspire to be among the best in their chosen profession, not merely to be competent enough to hold down a job. In any medium, it is impossible to be a great journalist without being a very good writer. So I hope this book will stimulate younger broadcast journalists to become more familiar with the English language, and encourage established reporters and news producers to reassess their own writing style. It should help

them to write scripts with more ambition, and I hope it will encourage them to love the language, and enjoy the process of writing.

## WHAT THIS BOOK DOES NOT COVER

This book is not about writing for newspapers or magazines, a technique completely different from writing for broadcasting. Nor does it attempt to deal with TV, radio or online production. Many other books and guides cover in detail the various ways news or documentary programmes are planned and assembled, including research, ethics, interviewing techniques, editing sound and pictures, studio design, and the technical aspects of broadcasting such as camerawork, sound recording, satellite newsgathering or studio transmission. For example, other books by Routledge include *Researching for Television and Radio*, *Production Management for Television*, *The Television Handbook*, *The Radio Handbook*, and *Producing for Web 2.0*.

## THE APPROACH

Of course, there is no universal writing style. The approach of this book is to recognise the paradox that many writers like to have a set of rules, yet the best writers are individualists, even innovators. Clearly there are generally accepted standards of English. Without a firm footing in those standards, it is much more difficult for a journalist to develop an individual voice that is liked and admired. Clichéd writing is a product of clichéd thinking. So this book tries to give many examples of usages or phrases best avoided. It also gives examples of good technique, but recognises that truly creative writing cannot be copied or even taught.

Style is subjective. In this book, if I wish to express a personal dislike or preference, I try to make it clear that this is my own view. You can judge for yourself whether or not you agree. But I have also included many comments and suggestions taken from interviews with leading professionals with many years' experience, and have referred to in-house style guides from different news organisations (see Further reading). These include the first BBC TV news style book, *A Question of Style*, written in the '70s by the late Peter Elliot; the later *BBC News Styleguide*, compiled by John Allen in 2003; the BBC's internal World Service Radio Guide; and the section on broadcast skills on the BBC College of Journalism website, which became publicly accessible in 2009, as well as house-style booklets from independent radio and television. There are also references to long-established guides to print journalism. So this book is a distillation of the experience and ideas of many others. A key

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theme is that writers should know precisely what they are doing, using language deliberately and carefully rather than casually and thoughtlessly.

Many of the examples used to illustrate the main points come from BBC News. There are several reasons for this. First, the British Broadcasting Corporation is widely recognised as the benchmark for spoken English. For nearly 90 years, it has developed, studied, considered and debated the best way to write factual scripts for broadcast, and has set a standard of writing practice in the industry. Secondly, with nine TV channels, two of them offering continuous news, about sixty national and local radio stations, the World Service radio network and its big online site, the BBC produces far more electronic and broadcast news than anyone else in Britain, indeed it claims to produce more than any other broadcaster in the world. A third reason is that, during the many years when I worked in the BBC, I was able to collect examples and ideas from the corporation's news programmes. Of course, there are many fine writers working for commercial broadcasting companies, and examples and opinions from independent radio and television news are also included in this book.

The concept of 'BBC English' is not fixed in stone, and the language of news-readers may seem remote or antiquated to many people who live in the diverse communities of Britain and the English-speaking world. *Writing for Broadcast Journalists* recognises the dynamic nature of the spoken word, and the growing number of different voices on the airwaves. In the age of twittering, blogging and bite-sized news on the move, it tries to give sensible advice to balance the preferences of traditionalists with the rapidly changing usages of younger generations.

## Good spoken English

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The most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

(Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*)

### ARE STANDARDS SLIPPING?

There is a vigorous debate in progress about the standards of English. It is taking place in the educational establishments, literary and academic circles, the Palace of Westminster and the columns of almost every national and regional newspaper. Most commentators attribute the perceived decline in standards to a less formal English curriculum in schools, reflecting less formality in society at large. Others blame television. This is not a new subject of debate.

Outspoken Prince Charles sparked a storm last night after he blasted schools for teaching English bloody badly.

(*Sun*, June 1989)

The Prince of Wales's widely reported contribution indicated a concern among traditionalists that has grown over the years. In August 2003, David Hargreaves, a former head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, the body then overseeing exam standards, expressed concern that children are not being taught to write properly. 'There should be more traditional grammar and spelling and we should penalise work when it is wrong. We have to accept that there is a major problem with students writing well'. (I think he meant 'with students *not* writing well'.)

In the same year, the eminent English scholar Lord Quirk, a former British Academy president advising the Specialist Schools Trust, deplored the fact that so few students are now required to read classic literature. 'We are in an

alarming downward spiral towards a culture that values only the contemporary'. He has urged the British people 'to regain pride in using English properly'.

In 2010 The Director of Corporate Affairs at Tesco, Lucy Neville-Rolf, complained bitterly that many of the school-leavers and graduates joining the company 'can't write', and that 'exams are getting easier', a view echoed by Sir Stuart Rose, the Chairman of Marks and Spencer, who said millions of school-leavers are unfit for work because 'They cannot do reading. They cannot do arithmetic. They cannot do writing.'

And if Britain's head teachers are to be believed, many pre-school children are now failing to develop speaking skills during the crucial early learning years. In a survey in England and Wales conducted by the National Literacy Trust and the National Association of Head Teachers in 2002, three out of four respondents said they were concerned about the lack of language ability among three-year-olds. Most blamed the length of time these young children spent in front of a TV screen rather than talking to other members of the family. The trust promptly launched a £2 million campaign to persuade parents to talk and read more to their pre-school children. A year later there had not been much perceived impact. In August 2003, the Chief Inspector of Schools, David Bell, spoke about what he called the lack of basic communication and behavioural skills in some children starting school. 'I am shocked that some 5-year-olds can't even speak properly.' A few months later, the new Primary School National Strategy was announced. It included the requirement that children in their first year at school across England and Wales would be given lessons in speaking skills, a move described by the Department for Education and Skills as the world's first national drive to improve oral communication. In 2007, Communication, Language and Literacy for the under-fives became part of the National Strategy of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

In the world of literature, too, there is shaking of heads, bafflement and even dismay in some quarters. In his youth, the novelist Martin Amis was regarded by contemporaries as a voice for his generation and something of an innovator in style. But his writing was also widely admired by traditionalists. More recently, he has been regarded as in danger of becoming anachronistic. In his critique on Amis's novel published in 2003, the *Independent* newspaper's columnist, John Walsh, himself a very fine writer, put it this way:

You might say it's not a crime to write badly, not necessarily a sign of moral bankruptcy. But Oscar Wilde would not agree and nor, I think, would Amis. No writer venerates the creative process more than he, the working of thoughts into prose. And that's one reason why he's parted company with the new literary universe. The generation now in the ascendant – the Zadie Smith generation – don't venerate language in

the same way. They venerate storytelling, personal testimony, plausible characters, understandable endings.

This clearly has a resonance for journalists. ‘Storytelling and personal testimony’ is our stock-in-trade. So should we be at all concerned that knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and classical models seems to be in decline? And what does this have to do with writing news bulletins?

### Standards in broadcast news

Certainly, the use of English is a regular topic of conversation in broadcast newsrooms in Britain. Many senior editors can be heard to bemoan the lack of ‘basic standards’. It is not a new concern. For many years, local and regional broadcasters in particular have been accused of accepting standards of scriptwriting that are lower than the general standards in national news and current affairs. In the late ’80s, the judges of the Royal Television Society’s regional journalism awards declared that they had found ‘too much sloppy writing and journalese’ in some news magazines. A BBC Local Radio News Editors’ Conference in 1990 commissioned a study into the use of language in news bulletins, which concluded, ‘There’s growing concern that deterioration is creeping in . . . imprecision, Americanisms and newspaper-style writing are too common.’ That concern persists into the twenty-first century.

Many experienced broadcasting editors and correspondents have been interviewed for this book. Among the older generation of editors, those recently retired from active service, for example, there seems to be no doubt about declining standards in the use of the language. Sir David Nicholas CBE was the Editor in Chief and Chairman of ITN during its golden years throughout the ’70s and ’80s, when *News at Ten* was widely regarded as the sharpest and most authoritative news programme on British television.

I think standards are falling. When you have bad grammar it’s like a cracked bell. I’m amazed that some of the loftiest people in the land can produce an ungrammatical sentence . . . The first thing in any writing is to have good English – the basic standards of good grammar. I find that in broadcast news, and in most types of television in Britain these days, there is some appalling, bad grammar! I remember one ITN correspondent said to me once – ‘Hey boss, I’d rather go into a combat zone than split an infinitive when you are listening.’

But it’s not that simple. Most senior editors, Sir David included, recognise that English usage does not stand still. Bob Jobbins OBE, who for many years was in charge of news and current affairs at the BBC World Service, puts it like this.

Nowadays, people place less emphasis on the prescriptive elements of grammar and the education system. It is quite shocking that young people leave universities with only a flimsy understanding of elementary grammar. On the other hand, the measure I would use to judge the standards of writing are things like imagination, and the ability to surprise and entertain. In that area, I think the writing has got better. If you listen to old bulletins broadcast 20 or 30 years ago, what strikes you is not how well-written they were, but how dull and predictable they were – how unadventurous they were.

Tim Orchard, a leading programme editor at BBC TV News throughout the '80s and '90s, believes that many young people aspiring to be journalists do not know the rules of English very well.

I detect a decline in standards in the use of English. There is so much American media. These phrases wing their way across the Atlantic and soon become common parlance here. But language can't be static. You have got to evolve with it.

Also interviewed for this book was Clare Morrow, who during the same period was Controller of Programmes at ITV's Yorkshire Television, supervising the channel's news and current affairs output. She thinks there is more formulaic and predictable writing these days.

I'm not sure that standards have fallen exactly. But there's now a long-established convention that says – This is the way you do X and this is the way you do Y. That's lazy and sloppy writing. With so many more media outlets, when people can watch news everywhere, we can see a million not-very-good reporters on our screens. There are so many more jobs! There's bound to be less quality than when there were only a few TV reporting jobs. Now there are lots of people who are mediocre. The people who stand out are those who don't write in predictable phrases, and who think carefully about their stories. They make every word count, and they do something slightly different.

I agree with this analysis. There are many brilliant writers working in radio and TV journalism today, who have managed to shake off their inheritance of the stilted and formal broadcasting language of the immediate post-war period without abandoning good grammar. They deploy a wide range of vocabulary with a sensitivity to meaning, cadence and rhythm, which makes them great communicators.

Unfortunately, there are many more who do not achieve this standard. Employed in broadcasting today are hundreds of journalists who are murdering the language. Too many writers are content to deploy sterile phrases and tedious clichés. Blatant inaccuracies are endemic on the airwaves. I hope that readers of this book will be inspired to use English knowingly, correctly and, above all, creatively.



## The pressures on broadcast journalists

It is hardly surprising that standards of writing for broadcast seem to be so variable. The pressures on journalists working in the electronic and broadcast media have never been greater. The digital revolution is bringing more and more radio stations and TV channels, all competing for a slice of the audience, and in commercial broadcasting a slice of the advertising revenues. Every year seems to bring further budget cuts and the need for greater productivity. And digital technology has expanded the number of 24-hour news channels. As a member of the team that launched the BBC's first continuous TV news and information channel, BBC World, I remember well the frantic efforts required to keep up the relentless flow of information. It is very different from producing a half-hour flagship news programme on a general channel, where every word is weighed and discussed.

Computer-based technology also allows more multi-skilling. Many BBC journalists are now expected to file their stories for a range of outlets on radio and television; most edit their own radio features; some edit their own TV pictures. Some have been trained to use lightweight cameras, to shoot as well as edit their own TV pictures. ITV regional newsrooms are also deploying more and more of these video-journalists (VJs). And many journalists are now required to provide a version of their story for their station website as soon as it has been broadcast. 'Versioning' is one of the buzzwords of modern multimedia journalism.

There are particular pressures in regional television and local radio, where many graduate entrants or recruits from local newspapers learn their broadcasting skills. Local journalists are often under greater time pressure than their counterparts working for national or international programmes. Each journalist in a local or regional newsroom writes many stories in a day, and seldom has spare moments to redraft, revise or remould a script. There's also a high proportion of young, less-experienced journalists, who have yet to develop a good writing style. And there's less time for analysis and criticism of the output than in national newsrooms, where a reporter or producer is much more likely to be 'roasted' by the editor for using a word out of place.

On the other hand, the desktop or laptop computer with a fast broadband connection has put an amazing research tool at the journalist's fingertips. We can all gather information much more easily, check background facts, and access pictures and sound without having to run up and down stairs all day. We can alter phrases and move whole sentences around as we write, in a way that would have seemed miraculous in the days of the typewriter. We can even allow the computer to correct our spelling for us. So the pressure to produce more news more quickly is partly ameliorated by access to better tools

for the job. And pressure is what makes journalism challenging and exciting. As Bob Jobbins of the BBC World Service said, 'If writing were easy, it wouldn't be so much fun.'

## WHICH MODEL OF THE SPOKEN WORD?

The currency of broadcasting is the spoken word. But which version of the spoken word is correct? The quest for an authoritative version of the English language goes back hundreds of years, yet the debate about linguistic correctness is as lively today as it has ever been. Before we plunge into the techniques of writing, it is worth reflecting briefly on the evolution of the English language, its continuing growth as the dominant world language, and the special role played in that development by broadcast journalism.

Very many listeners and viewers feel that they know right from wrong in the meaning of words, the use of grammar and punctuation, and the pronunciation of English. In Britain, there is a powerful sense of tradition that is reflected in its political and legal institutions, its architecture and its tourist industry. This sense of continuity is also apparent in attitudes towards our language. Many commentators and writers of newspaper columns assume there is a purity to the language that should be preserved, and that if we don't adhere strictly to the rules, chaos will envelop us! We certainly shouldn't mess around with the language.

In the USA, there seems to be a different view. Language is an instrument on which you can play your own tunes. Inventiveness and individuality are celebrated. So language is used much more flexibly. In America, new words are being invented all the time, and the English language offers countless possibilities for original expression and experiment (sorry, experimentation). In Britain, this attitude is heartily disliked. Correctness is respected. But who decides what is correct?

## The Queen's English

One of the reasons for the rise of English as a global language is its unique mix of European source-languages. Celtic, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Norse, Norman-French, all went into the melting-pot. In the Middle Ages, there were countless dialects. The language of the ruling classes was completely different from those of its subjects. Courtly English was certainly not the national model. (Even today, the English of the Royal Family has a rather peculiar accent, far removed from the everyday speech of the Queen's subjects.) And, of course, language is political. Language is power. Control communication, and you control everything.

In modern times, spin-doctors work behind the scenes to make a good living from this principle. But in the past, the political nature of language was clear to everyone, and for centuries, politics went hand-in-hand with religion.

In his ITV programme *The Adventure of English* in 2002, Melvyn Bragg pointed out that the late medieval period, when modern English was evolving, was a strongly religious time. Attending Catholic church was compulsory for many years. But the priests stood between the people and their God, retaining absolute authority in the process. Only the clergy were allowed to read the word of God – in Latin – and they did so silently. A bell rang to tell the congregation that the priest had reached a significant passage. This clearly produced feelings of frustration among many ordinary Christians.

In 1376, the York Mystery Plays began to enact Biblical stories to popular audiences, and the performances were in English. Around the same time, John Wycliffe was promoting the idea of an English Bible. The church responded by pushing a law through Parliament banning all English bibles, and authorising the arrest of all ‘lollards’ who toured the country preaching in English. In 1414, long after Wycliffe’s death, the Catholic Church felt so threatened by the call for worship in English that it declared him a heretic, dug up his body, and scattered it in the River Avon.

But less than a year later, Henry V was sending letters home from the Agincourt campaign in France, and they were written in English. They were clearly intended to be sent around the country and read aloud in market squares – the first broadcast-news war reports! When Henry had returned from France, he wished to continue these regular newsletters to the people. But which version of English was correct? There were hundreds of dialects and a host of different spellings. He established the ‘Chancellry’ to produce official and legal documents with uniform spellings and definitions.

The process of standardising English took another leap forward later that century with Caxton’s printing press. He complained, ‘These days, each man will utter his communication in ways that diverse others will not understand!’ He needed a standard, and many of the spellings he chose remain in use today. In the early sixteenth century, the English language Bible finally arrived, courtesy of the remarkable William Tyndale, who translated it from the original Hebrew and Greek, though he had to emigrate and live in Cologne to avoid persecution by the English church, which had convicted him of heresy.

## **Standardising English**

It was Henry VIII’s rift with Rome which gave a huge boost to the English language. He ordered that an English Bible be placed in every parish church

in the land, in a dramatic reversal of the Catholic Church's policy to deny open access to the word of the Lord. By the end of the sixteenth century, there were many competing versions of the Bible in English. The King James Bible of 1611, largely based on Tyndale's original translation, was the first truly authoritative version of our language. Melvyn Bragg points out that although it was written in a deliberately archaic style, it was written to be read aloud by the clergy. It has rhythm, cadence and poetry. And writers of broadcast news should note that it has short phrases. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' So, with most of the population illiterate, the first national model of the English language was written to be heard rather than read.

English still had countless versions and spellings, and in the mid-eighteenth century Dr Samuel Johnson embarked on his great work – his *Dictionary of the English Language*. He hoped it would standardise usage, regularise spelling, define meanings, avoid confusion, and enable the nation to communicate with clarity and certainty. It took him sixteen years. On publication, he found it necessary in his preface to point out that he had found it impossible to fix usage with rules. 'Language is too volatile for legal restraint.' It is almost a confession that he had been wasting his time, because language changes all the time, and no book can stop it.

This notion did not deter the Victorians. With absolute confidence, built no doubt on Britain's extraordinary industrial and military power, they turned to classical models for art, architecture and music, and for language. Books of grammar based on Latin were taught in all schools. My own 'baby-boomer' generation of post-war children were still using school books based on these imposed theories of English. We were told that 'compared with' is correct; 'compared to' is wrong. 'Different from' is correct; 'different to' is wrong, etc. And if the letters to the *Daily Telegraph* from 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells' are an indicator, most people of my generation and that of my parents believe these assertions with absolute conviction. The consistency of usage produced by these rules is still the bedrock of modern English. People who had experienced this classical style of English education were the first broadcasters. In Britain and around the world, that meant the voice of BBC Radio.

## **BBC ENGLISH AND BROADCAST NEWS ENGLISH**

As soon as the British Broadcasting Company (later the Corporation) was founded in the 1920s, the notion of 'BBC English' took root. Suddenly there was a national model of the spoken word. It must have had a great impact. Into people's homes across the country, from Aberdeen to Aberystwyth and from Belfast to Brighton, came an educated and authoritative voice, almost

as though the Word was coming from the heavens. But these words were coming from London. The speakers were overwhelmingly upper-middle-class, male, mainly public-school-educated, and they came largely from the London area.

The potential impact and influence of BBC Radio on a language that had always been fragmented into regional accents and dialects was soon realised by these broadcasting pioneers. In 1926, a BBC Advisory Committee on Spoken English was established, chaired first by the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, and then by George Bernard Shaw. The rigid rulings of the Old Etonians on that committee are thankfully things of the past. But many people still regard the BBC as the authority for Good Spoken English, particularly in its news and current affairs output. Every year, hundreds of letters and emails arrive at the corporation's national and regional offices, complaining about sloppy or inaccurate language on the airwaves. In 1979, the language expert Lord Quirk wrote in the *Observer* about the standards of English on BBC Radio.

No other organisation has such an opportunity or, I believe, such a responsibility to present a conscious first-rate model of present-day English; precise phrasing, well-chosen words, soundly-constructed sentences.

Thirty years later, in 2009, a group of seven Members of Parliament called on the BBC to appoint an 'English Language Standards Tsar', who would sit in Broadcasting House and, by some mysterious process, ensure that all the corporation's factual output would conform to 'correct grammar and usage'. Thankfully this proposition was ignored, and in some quarters ridiculed. But it shows that there is still a view in parts of the establishment that BBC News should be the standard-bearer for spoken English.

Received pronunciation (RP), the widely accepted model of the spoken word, which is relatively classless and, though rooted south of the Trent, is fairly neutral geographically, is, in my view, a product of BBC English. But it is now universal – a voice of the establishment certainly, used by many politicians and lawyers – but also the language of the platform speech to shareholders, or the boardroom presentation. Received pronunciation is by no means the BBC's exclusive preserve.

Nowadays, I believe 'BBC English' has been replaced as an unconscious model by 'Broadcast News English'. It is evidently true that the main British commercial TV channels and the national independent radio stations deliver news with an accent and style very similar to those of the BBC. In a 1994 article marking a Conservative government initiative to improve the teaching of English, the veteran author Anthony Burgess wrote, '... there is nobody to tell us where true English is to be found ... but to most people, *good English*

means the language of television newsreaders'. *Guardian* journalist John Mullan believes that BBC English still has a special authority:

BBC English is often spoken of in jest, as if it were some figment of the '50s. But the official parlance of the Corporation still does have its influence. The use of a word or phrase in, say, a news bulletin can signify its acceptance into standard English.

When he was appointed Director of BBC News, I asked Richard Sambrook whether he welcomed being the arbiter of correct usage.

Being a guardian of the language is not a responsibility that I want to take upon my shoulders, to be frank with you. I do believe it's right that the BBC should set some standards in the use of English, while being very sensitive to the range of modern usage, the need to be colloquial, and the need to be a part of the audience's world, not remote from it. We have to have good standards. But I do not think it is right for the BBC to carry that responsibility alone.

### English as a global language

Overseas, it seems clear that the BBC is still regarded as the model of spoken English. I have conducted journalism training courses in many countries, and everywhere I go, media students and professional journalists say they listen to BBC World Service radio, or watch BBC World News, to help them to learn English, as much as to enjoy the programmes or gain access to independent journalism. Globalisation has brought an unprecedented need for people from many different countries to be able to communicate effectively with one another. For various reasons, English has become the dominant global language.

According to the *Ethnologue* language survey, more than 800 million people speak English as their first language. Almost certainly more people speak Mandarin, but as a second language for international dialogue, English is unrivalled. In an article in the *Sunday Times* in October 2003, the broadcaster Melvyn Bragg wrote, 'English is understood by an estimated 2 billion people. It is the language of international finance, diplomacy, sport and entertainment. The rise and reach of English is a breathtaking adventure.'

Whenever an international language is required, whether for maritime navigation or international air-traffic control, English seems to be chosen. Japanese scientists write many of their papers directly in English. The economic hub of the far east, Singapore, has named English as one of its official languages. About 50 million people in India speak and write English fluently (despite an attempt by Gandhi to ban the language shortly after independence).

As Lord Quirk has written, 'English is just as much big business as the export of manufactured goods.' The spectacular growth of English language schools in China, Japan and the rest of Asia attests to that. *The Economist* reckons that English teaching overseas is now the sixth largest source of invisible earnings, worth over £500 million per year. And after the international boost to the language from American movies, TV programmes and pop music, the internet is now accelerating the demand for English. According to Internet World Stats, English is by far the most popular email language.

Some British writers appear to think that this global dominance is due to an intrinsic superiority in the language. In his book *The English Language*, Robert Burchfield says, 'As a source of intellectual power and entertainment the whole range of prose writing in English is probably unequalled anywhere in the world.' That's quite a claim! I wonder how many other languages Mr Burchfield knows well enough to make a decent comparison. But English is certainly popular. Quite apart from being useful, it seems to be liked. People tell me it sounds quite musical. In his book about the English language, *Mother Tongue*, Bill Bryson says, 'English also has a commendable tendency towards conciseness, in contrast to many other languages.' Overseas students of English tell me they quite like the fact that English does not follow the rules, and that some words have so many different meanings depending on the context. And they even seem to like the nuances available from a wide vocabulary. The *Revised Oxford English Dictionary* lists well over 600,000 words, more than any other European language, and probably more than any language on the planet.

But international English is not the same as the RP we hear on formal occasions in Britain. The global version is hugely influenced by American usage. There's not much point asking a hotel receptionist in Tokyo, Tashkent or Trieste, 'Where's the lift?' – just ask them to show you to the elevator. And international English is a pared-down version of the language. Only when I began working for the World Service did I realise how much metaphor we use in British English. It makes it colourful, but also makes it confusing for foreigners. At the World Service, which broadcasts in over forty languages, there have been many instances of even the expert translators being baffled. On one occasion, the Somali service caused a stir by using a report stating that a neighbouring president had been welcomed at the airport with open arms; this was translated as 'he was welcomed with weapons drawn'.

## Popular acceptance

So, whether you are working for a public service broadcaster or for a commercial company, whether for a local, national or international channel, it seems

that large parts of the audience expect broadcast news to set a standard of quality in the use of language. This raises the question, where do we find the authority? Who decides what is right and what is wrong?

The philosopher and language expert C.E.M. Joad (1891–1953), a regular contributor to *The Philosopher* magazine, wrote in 1936 about the search for an authority on good English:

Who should be the arbiters? The lexicographers, philologists, grammarians or schoolmasters? No, *popular acceptance decides*, and rightly so. *We* (writers) must *judge* what our wide audience regards as acceptable.

I think that conclusion holds good today. We must have a very good idea of what our wide audience regards as acceptable, and what offends or distracts some of them. Language is not a branch of logic. If it were, our baffling spellings and silent letters would all have been eliminated long ago. Some preferences about grammar or spelling may not be logical. That is not the point. We want to communicate information to a very wide audience as clearly as possible, with no irritating distractions. The moment listeners become aware of the way language is being used, their concentration on the meaning of the words is lost. So the conclusion for any writer is to adopt a style and tone of voice that the wide audience they are seeking to reach will find acceptable.

### **Tradition versus changing usage**

Seeking a tone of voice that will command wide acceptability is often a question of balancing the traditional with the contemporary. One of the best scriptwriters I have worked with is John Humphrys, for many years a foreign correspondent with the BBC, then a presenter of leading news and current affairs programmes on television and radio. In 2003 he wrote an introduction to *Between You and I: A Little Book of Bad English* by James Cochrane. In this extract, he explains the need for journalists to find this balance and to use the language sensitively and effectively.

Like any other organism, language changes. It lives in the real world and gets knocked about from time to time. It adapts in order to survive. Look up almost any word in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and you can follow the journey it has taken over the centuries, changing its precise meaning as it twists and turns with the passing of time. Often its present meaning bears little relationship to its original one. It is silly to imagine that this evolution can be halted. It is even sillier to try.

But that is different from hoisting the white flag and surrendering to linguistic anarchy. A degree of discipline is not a constraint; it is a liberation. The more clearly we are able to express ourselves, the less room



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