

Martin Amis: My father's English language

How should 'controversy' be pronounced? How are 'refute' and 'decimate' misused? Kingsley Amis's guide, *The King's English*, revealed all. Martin Amis celebrates his father's interest in language

Martin Amis

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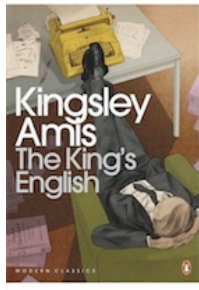


A way with words... Kingsley and Martin Amis in the 1990s. Photograph: Dave M Benett/Getty Images

Kingsley Amis was a lenient father. His paternal style, in the early years, can best be described as amiably minimalist – in other words, my mother did it all. It should be noted, though, that if I did come across him (before he slipped back into his study), he always said something that made me laugh or smile. This went a long way. And the humour usually derived from the originality of his phrasing. When I was 16 or 17, and started reading books for grown-ups, I became, in his eyes, worth talking to. And when, six or seven years later, I started using the English language in the literary pages of the newspapers, I became worth correcting. I was in my early-middle 20s; my father was still amiable, but he was lenient no longer.

The King's English

by Kingsley Amis



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"Has your enormity in the *Observer* been pointed out to you?" he asked with enthusiasm over breakfast one Sunday morning (I had left home by then, but I still spent about every other weekend at his house). "My enormity?" I knew he was applying the word in its proper sense – "something very bad", and not "something very big in size". And my mistake was certainly atrocious: I had used *martial* as a verb. Later, while continuing to avoid *hopefully* (a favourite with politicians, as he insists), I pooh-poohed his reprimand about my harmless use of the dangling *thankfully*. I also took it in good part when, to dramatise my discipleship, as he saw it, of Clive James (a very striking new voice in the 1970s), Kingsley started reading out my reviews in an Australian accent. But there was one conversation that I still recall with a sincere moan of shame: it concerned the word *infamous*. In a piece about the "Two Cultures" debate, I referred to FR Leavis's "infamous crucifixion of CP Snow". "You leave us in no doubt," said Kingsley watchfully, "that *you* disapproved of it." I remained silent. I didn't say, "Actually, Dad, I thought *infamous* was just a cool new way of saying *controversial*."

Infamous will in fact now serve as the reigning shibboleth (or "test word", or giveaway). Anyone who uses it loosely, as I did, is making the following announcement: *I write without much care and without much feeling. I just write like other people write.* As Kingsley puts it in *The King's English* (and "the King", by the way, was a nickname he tolerated):

Both adjective and noun [*infamous* and *infamy*] used to be terms of extreme moral disapproval, equivalent in depth of feeling to 'abominable' and 'wickedness'. Then quite recently . . . the adjective weakened in severity to something on the level of 'notorious' [or, he might have added, simply 'famous'] . . . The noun *infamy*, although seemingly out of use, retains its former meaning, but *infamous* is now unusable through ambiguity.

Kingsley gives some good examples (so-and-so's undergraduate life in the 1920s is "now infamous"). But I wish he were alive to savour what must surely be the final profanation of this blameless adjective. A Guardian sportswriter recently referred to Steve McLaren – the sacked manager of the national football team – and "his infamous umbrella". All McLaren had done with his umbrella was stand on the touchline under it, during a downpour (which was considered a little unmanly). With *infamous*, we see linguistic incuriosity in its most damaging form. A supposedly smart addition to the language becomes an inadvertent subtraction. "Unusable through ambiguity": the same can be said of *brutalise*, *decimate*, *crescendo*, *dilemma*, *alibi*, *avid*, *oblivious*, *optimistic*, *eke out* and *refute*, among many others.

Such a tendency is nowhere better caught in *The King's English* than in the entry under *Déjà vu*, an uncanny sense of:

Its original application was to a transient psychological state, not uncommon among those under about forty, in which the subject feels that he has seen before some place where he has provably never been in this life (thus providing fanciful evidence for reincarnation). The journalistic contribution has been to apply this feeling to some event or situation a person *has* witnessed before . . .

The journalistic contribution thus obscures the old meaning, while providing "the needy with a useful and quite posh-looking alternative to 'this is where I/we came in' and other tattered phrases". Similarly with *jejune*. On its journey from meaning "scanty, arid" to meaning "immature, callow", *jejune* has acquired an extra vowel and an acute accent, plus italicisation as a Gallicism. Kingsley quotes the following beauty: "Although the actual arguments are a little *jéjeune*, the staging of mass scenes are [sic] impressive." We watch such developments (in this case the gradual "deportation of an English word into French") as we would watch the progress of a virus; like babesiosis and fog fever, such viruses afflict cattle and buffalo and wildebeest; they are the maladies of the herd.

Kingsley's favourite dictionary was the *Concise Oxford*. "It's all you really need," he used to say, patting it or even stroking it. And the COD, I see, has come to toe the line on *infamous*, *déjà vu* and *jejune*, giving the new meanings pride of place. Kingsley would have offered no objection (though he did secretly pine for an extra dictionary "label": namely, *illit.*, to go with *colloq.* and *derog.* and the rest). Usage is irreversible. Once the integrity of a word is lost, no amount of grumbling and harrumphing can possibly restore it. The battle against illiteracies and barbarisms, and pedantries and genteelisms, is not a public battle. It takes place within the soul of every individual who minds about words.

Rather bluffly, perhaps, Kingsley draws up the battle lines as a conflict between *Berks* and *Wankers*:

Berks are careless, coarse, crass, gross and of what anybody would agree is a lower social class than one's own. They speak in a slipshod way with dropped Hs, intruded glottal stops, and many mistakes in grammar. Left to them the English language would die of impurity, like late Latin.

Wankers are prissy, fussy, priggish, prim and of what they would probably misrepresent as a higher social class than one's own. They speak in an over-precise way with much pedantic insistence on letters not generally sounded, especially Hs. Left to them the language would die of purity, like medieval Latin.

These are richly symmetrical paragraphs. Still, they need a little renovation. The class system, nowadays, has been more or less replaced by the age system (with the young and youngish as the aristocrats); and I for one can't help seeing the slipshod/pedantic opposition in generational terms. So for *berks* and *wankers* I would substitute something like *punks* and *fogeys*. Amis was in his 70s when he completed *The King's English* (which was published posthumously). But those who remember him as a reactionary – or, if you prefer, as an apoplectic diehard – will be astonished to discover how unfogeyish he is. With remarkably few exceptions, he takes the sensible and centrist course. He is also deeply but unobtrusively learned. As a result, this is not a confining book but a liberating one. All users of the language – no matter how green, no matter how grey – will be palpably strengthened by *The King's English*.

Let us get the fogey stuff out of the way, because there isn't much of it. For instance, Amis is surely fighting a losing battle on the five-syllable *homogeneous* (the population at large is quite happy with the "incorrect" *homogenous*); no one rhymes the closing syllable, or syllables, of *Perseus* and *Odysseus* with *Zeus*; no one says *alas* with a long second *a*, and to pronounce *medieval* "medd-eeval" (he prefers "meddy-eeval") is hardly

"an infallible sign of fundamental illiteracy"; no one stresses *peremptory* on the first syllable, and few of us do the same for *controversy* ("only a berk stresses the second"); on the question of using nouns as verbs, *authored* and *critiqued* are regrettable, true, but only a wanker would now object, as Amis does, to *funded*.

Elsewhere, he is a pragmatist, and not infrequently an iconoclast. The split-infinitive taboo is ridiculed as a "superstition", an "imaginary rule"; similarly, you may end a sentence with a preposition (and you may start a sentence with Arabic numerals). Amis is being rather more radical when he bluntly states that "the gerund" – a verbal noun with a possessive attached to it – "is on the way out", so that *excuse my butting in* has been supplanted by *excuse me butting in*. This contravenes strict grammar, but a rule "serves no purpose if nobody obeys it". More broadly, "the aim of language is to ensure that the speaker [or the writer] is understood, and all ideas of correctness or authenticity must be subordinate to it."

The battle – the internal campaign – is in essence directed against the *false quantity*, in its non-technical sense. I mean those rhymes, chimes, repetitions, obscurities, dishonesties, vaguenesses, clichés, "shreds of battered facetiousness" and "shopworn novelties" (*past its sell-by date*, *Marxism lite*, no-brainer, and all other herd words and herd phrases): anything, in brief, that makes the careful reader "pause without profit". Naturally the other side of this circumspection is the acceptance, indeed the embrace, of positive linguistic change. Perhaps the most stirring passage in the book is the article on the word *Gay*:

The use of this word as an adjective or noun applied to a homosexual has received unusually prolonged execration. The "new" meaning has been generally current for years. *Gay lib* had made the revised Roget by 1987 and the word itself was listed in the 1988 *COD* under sense 5 as a homosexual . . . And yet in this very spring of 1995 some old curmudgeon is still frothing on about it in the public print and demanding the word "back" for proper heterosexual use . . . [O]nce a word is not only current but accepted . . . no power on earth can throw it out . . . The word *gay* is cheerful and hopeful, half a world away from the dismal clinical and punitive associations of *homosexual*.

An "old curmudgeon": towards the end of his life, Kingsley was monotonously so described. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* defines *curmudgeon* as "a grasping and miserly churl". Whereas all careful readers of *The King's English* (and of his novels) will find themselves responding to a spirit of reckless generosity.

My 1998 paperback of this book is festooned with praise from various pens. These snippets have a warmed and excitable quality; they are also unusually perceptive. Candia McWilliam says that *The King's English* is a work of reference that "may be read like a novel, from start to finish". And David Sexton accurately recognises "a late flowering of Amis's greatest gift as a novelist, his ability to draw out the implications of a whole life from a tiny detail of speech or behaviour". Both these writers have identified the unique charm of this "Guide to Modern Usage": its satirical expansiveness.

All my adult life I have been searching for the right adjective to describe my father's peculiarly aggressive comic style. I recently settled on *defamatory*. And here is an example from *Pidgin Latin*:

In origin . . . the French language is a simplified and corrupt form of Latin once current between Roman troops or colonists or traders on the one hand and the local peasantry on the other . . . One easily imagines dialogues between a scrounging legionary, perhaps a Vandal or a Parthian by origin, and a willing but benighted yokel.

LEGIONARY (in vile Latin): I want

water. Bring me water. *Aquam*.

YOKEL: Ugh?

L: *Aquam*! Say *aquam*, you bloody fool. Go on – *aquam*.

Y: O? (To be spelt *eau* when they get to the writing stage centuries later.)

L: Bring it to the high cliff. The high cliff. *Altum*.

Y: Ugh?

L: *Altum*! Say *altum*, you bumpkin. Go on – *altum*.

Y: O? (To be spelt *haut* when, etc.)

"A terrific book," wrote another reviewer, Sebastian Faulks. The prose "has that tense, sly quality of his very best fiction . . . a marvellous and quite unexpected bonus from beyond the grave". Mr Faulks couldn't be expected to know how true this was. Two months before he died, Kingsley had a heavy fall after a good lunch ("At my age," as he used to say, "lunch is dinner") and banged his head on a stone step. Thereafter, by degrees, he became a pitiable and painfully disconcerting madcap. He kept trying, he tried and he tried, but he couldn't write; he couldn't read, or be read to; and his speech was like a mixture of *The Cat in the Hat* and *Finnegans Wake*. Aged 73, he had just finished a book on the King's English; and now English was a language the King no longer had. His fate was a brutal reminder. We are all of us held together by words; and when words go, nothing much remains.

Plans for Kingsley's memorial service were quite far advanced when the typescript of the present book (then hardly more than a family rumour) was delivered to my door. I picked it up with a trepidation that the first few pages briskly dispersed. Here it was again, my father's voice – funny, resilient, erudite, with touches of very delicate feeling (see the entries under *Brave* and *Gender*), and, throughout, sublimely articulate. In truth, *The King's English* contains more concentrated artistic thrust than any of the five novels that followed his masterpiece of 1986, *The Old Devils*. The reason for this is, I think, clear enough. Love of life, like all human talents, weakens with age. But love of language, in his case, never did begin to fade.

- The following clarification was printed in the Guardian's Corrections and clarifications column, Thursday 2 June 2011. The Saturday Review ran an extract from the introduction, by Martin Amis, to *The King's English*, written by his father, Kingsley. The Review article contained this sentence: "We watch such developments (in this case the gradual "deportation of an English word into French") as we would watch the progress of a virus; like babesiosis and fog fever, such viruses afflict cattle and buffalo and wildebeest; they are the maladies of the herd." While the structure of this sentence is strictly accurate it has led several readers to point out that neither affliction results from a virus – babesia is a protozoan and fog fever is caused by the toxin 3-methylindole. However, like some viruses, they produce illnesses that affect herds.

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