

KINGSLEY AMIS: THE PRESCRIPTIVIST

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Abstract: In *The King’s English: A Guide to Modern Usage*, Kingsley Amis identified H. W. Fowler as his great predecessor. Amis revealed himself as a soldier in the army of prescriptivists, voices that settle ‘modern linguistic problems’ while proudly parading as non-linguists. The book exposed Amis’s acrimonious dispute with descriptive linguists, while the writer delivered his very own brand of linguistics to his readers. This paper looks at the success of Amis’s book and its similarities with Fowler’s. It also emphasizes the continuity and popularity of usage handbooks while presenting some of their chief characteristics as exemplified by Amis’s work.

Keywords: H. W. Fowler, Kingsley Amis, prescriptivism, sociolinguistics, usage handbooks

1. Introduction

Should a linguist take a book such as Kingsley Amis’s *The King’s English: A Guide to Modern Usage* (1st edn. 1997) seriously? Well, the linguists’ gut reaction is likely to be a resounding ‘NO!’. But such an answer cannot come from a researcher interested in the ways in which the general public seems to think about and understand language. Since its publication in 1997, Amis’s book has been providing its readers with the ‘right’ solutions to many of their language conundrums while managing to be interesting, fun and a good read. In doing so, Amis has positioned himself in a long line of self-appointed language authorities who have been keeping prescriptivism and the ‘complaint tradition’ alive and well for centuries (Milroy and Milroy 1991, quoted in Milroy 1999:20).

2. The Popular Success of Kingsley Amis’s *The King’s English*

We will never know exactly how popular Kingsley Amis’s book has been, but we can get at least some inkling by considering the number of editions and by looking at how the book is faring on the Internet. In this section, I look at the first three pages of the Google search results got for the query “how many editions did Kingsley Amis’ *The King’s English* have?” made on 25 March 2015. I then address some of the content found on the Internet that deals with Amis’s book.

The book was published in a 1997 HarperCollins edition, a 1998 Thomas Dunne Books American edition, and a Penguin Modern Classics 2011 paperback edition. There is a Kindle edition as well (#1,053,480 in Amazon Best Sellers Rank on 7th April 2015). The appearance of four editions in eighteen years is indicative of a pretty high popularity. In addition, the book has received a rating of four out of five stars on www.goodreads.com and a 4.6 rating on

amazon.com. On this major shopping site, the book is ranked in position 44 in books of its kind. All in all, this book seems to have been fairly well received.

The Google query has also revealed five thoroughly positive reviews and blog posts whose main topic is the book in question. *The King's English* seems to be a force to be reckoned with, as two of the writers confess to have decided to change their ways and use the language as Amis indicated (see *Berks and wankers: A Canadian reaction to Kingsley Amis's English* (Charles 2013) and *Book of the Month: King's English* (Kingsley Amis) (Bookthrift 2011)). These texts possibly reveal the strongest reason why Amis's advice is taken seriously and why he is accepted as an authority: he is recognized as a good writer. In other words, it seems more than enough for someone to have established their ascendancy in using the language to be regarded an expert thereof. Online, Amis is referred to as "[having] a way with the written English word few could match in the twentieth century" (*Kingsley Amis and The King's English: A Guide to Modern Usage* (HarperCollins, 1997), Louis XIV/Jones 2013), as "a longtime British word maven" (*The Words of Summer*, Safire 1997), while his readers "[marvel] at the consummate skill with which the author used language" (*Book of the Month: King's English* (Kingsley Amis), Bookthrift 2011).

The World Wide Web proves useful in determining the wider context in which this book circulates. In *The Words of Summer* (Safire 1997), Amis's book is suggested among others that "will make you a better reader, writer or orator". The online writer of the review *Berks and wankers, prescriptivists and descriptivists* uses a passage from Amis to introduce and comment on an argument between two "thoughtful language commentators". Finally, *Neither pedantic nor wild?* (McNay 2000), the introduction to *The Guardian and Observer* style guide, also recognizes Amis's *The King's English* place in "sharpening professional tools as well as for entertainment." Indeed, one finds out that the *Guardian* editors are expected to "be interested in the language, in its proper use and its development" and to make regular use of books such as this, as well as Gower's *The Complete Plain Words*, Partridge's *Usage and Abuse*, Orwell's *Politics and the English Language*, and Fowler's *Modern English Usage*. And in reading such advice, one understands with whom Amis keeps company.

3. The Fowler Connection

Amis's title was inspired by the Fowler brothers' *The King's English*, published in four editions, the first in 1906. Later, H. W. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926, 1st edn.) had seventeen editions and reprintings spanning seventy years (cf. Bex 1999:93 and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008b). A further edition of the very first *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, with a new introduction and notes by David Crystal, appeared in 2009. Such a successful publishing history is impressive by any standards. David Crystal (2003:196) notes that Fowler's usage guide is "[o]ften referred to in the revered tones which one associates with bibles [and] it is the apotheosis of the prescriptive approach". In the *Preface* to his own *The King's English*, Amis nominates Fowler's *Modern English Usage* as his "great predecessor" (Amis 2011:xv). To a large extent, he identifies his own aims with those of Fowler and uses his spectre to motivate and lend authority to his own endeavour, "a work of definition and reference" containing "a collection of more or less discursive essays on linguistic problems". However, Amis does not expect his advice to be heeded, but hopes he, like Fowler, will contribute to the English language

becoming worse less quickly, and states: “A lost cause may still deserve support, and that support is never wasted” (Amis 2011:xv).

The reader encounters Fowler cited, commended, criticised, admired, corrected and taken as model in close to fifteen percent of the book’s entries. The situation may be described in terms of a mature former student having a lively discussion with his master, or a pupil being not quite sure whether he has succeeded in emulating his teacher. Here are some examples of how Kingsley Amis introduces Fowler in the body of his own *The King’s English* (the entries where they appear are given in parentheses):

Fowler never said anything without good reason. (Amis 2011:8; “All right”)
I cannot improve on Fowler’s contradistinction [...]. (Amis 2011:41; “Delusion, illusion”)
Fowler got it wrong for once. (Amis 2011:65; “Fivepence”)

It should not come as a surprise, then, that there are notable similarities in the way the two authors approach their work. Bex (1999:95) called some of Fowler’s entries “idiosyncratic”, a word that applies very well to Amis, too. He often gives advice or offers rules because some word or phrase “sounds” to him in a certain way. And it is not just the content or the stance, but the choice of the entry itself that clearly indicates plain personal preference. He could be called whimsical on several occasions, as when he titles an entry “Jargon 2001” (Amis 2011:106-109), reminiscent of the sci-fi book and movie title *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Amis often insists on exhibiting his own peculiar tastes, for example, when his “tolerance wears thin [...]” (Amis 2011:5). For all his idiosyncrasies, he does have a moment of clarity and sincerity when he states: “Some of these entries are justifiable, if at all, chiefly because I had some remark to make and could find no better place to make it” (Amis 2011:142). *The King’s English*, therefore, is Amis’s speaking tube to whoever is listening.

In *The Language Wars*, non-fiction writer Henry Hitchings (2011:192) says of Fowler: “He is much more flexible in his thinking than many of his admirers seemed to imagine”, and the same could be stated of Amis. While he is relentless in offering rules and advice and incessant in labelling language, he does come up with the odd word of wisdom: “Whatever the merits of any rule, however, it serves no purpose if nobody obeys it” (Amis 2011:60) and “In ordinary conversation, some people perhaps feel that *less* is a more informal word than *fewer* and talk about *less* cabbages. This is forgivable if you like the people” (Amis 2011:63).

Amis is often preoccupied with intelligibility. I have identified half a dozen cases where the author clearly considers that making oneself understood is the overriding principle of all language use. He brings forth such arguments as “a rational being prefers being understood, and served [by a waiter], to being right” (Amis 2011:5) and “[s]o it goes with linguistic change: the aim of language is to ensure that the speaker is understood, and all ideas of correctness or authenticity must be subordinate to it” (Amis 2011:155).

There are many more ways in which Fowler and Amis resemble. For instance, they seem to share a deep disregard for women and women’s speech (see, for instance, Amis 2011:221). In addition, language use is equated with behaviour, as when Amis states “To behave properly you have to write [...]” (Amis 2011:154). In this line of reasoning, to speak ‘badly’ is to behave inappropriately. Inevitably, the further logical step is taken in that people are defined by the language they use. The list of similarities could very well continue with how both Fowler and Amis are sometimes inconsistent in their views, how they both identify errors in the way

journalists (and broadcasters in Amis's case) use language, and how they both tend to label usage they frown upon as being "idiomatic".

4. Kingsley Amis, Member of a 'Discourse Community' with a Pedigree

Amis's preoccupation with being understood is an old concern, dating at least back to the first half of the eighteenth century, to the normative stage in the standardisation of the English language. Thus, James Greenwood, in his 1711 *An Essay toward a Practical English Grammar*, started motivating his work thus: "Mens [sic] Intentions in Speaking are, or at least should be, to be understood" (qtd. in Watts 1999:46). But whereas Greenwood used this view so as to be normative and prescriptive, to argue for a 'proper' language, Amis concedes that often people need to use 'improper' language in order to get their meaning across. It is nevertheless fascinating how the same central idea has travelled such a long span of time to reach almost opposite conclusions.

One may identify a bunch of commonalities in the works of writers of grammars and language usage guides since around the turn of the eighteenth century, and even further back in time (cf. Watts 1999:62). Amis has quite a few things in common with these grammarians who may be called if not the creators, then at least the patrons of Standard English as we know it today. Thus, one can see an enduring 'community of discourse' that has been serving a certain audience with very particular needs, whose members' common goal is that of self-betterment, of becoming educated. By a 'community of discourse' Watts meant:

a set of individuals who can be interpreted as constituting a community on the basis of the ways in which their oral or written discourse practices reveal common interests, goals and beliefs, i.e. on the degree of institutionalisation that their discourse displays. (Watts 1999:43)

Amis's immediate discourse community is revealed as he refers to Fowler frequently, and to Orwell's *Politics and the English Language* (essay first published in 1946) a few times. Moreover, in the *Bibliography* section of *The King's English*, four other guides to usage are listed. Both this discourse community and some of its other members were easily identified by the book's readership, as the introduction to *The Guardian* and *Observer* style guide clearly shows (cf. section *The popular success of Kingsley Amis's The King's English*).

Robert Baker's 1770 *Reflections on the English Language, in the nature of Vaugelas's reflections on the French* is regarded as the first usage guide produced for English, although a precursor may be seen in the notes on syntax of Robert Lowth's 1762 *Short Introduction to English Grammar, with Critical Notes* (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008b). It is not just the format of the work – a miscellaneous unordered collection of rules – that exposes Baker as the discourse great-great grandfather of Amis by way of Fowler. Baker was not an expert in language matters, a point which he seems to have regarded as an advantage (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008a:5), and nor was Amis. Further red lines of similarity can be identified, tying authors of usage guides together through history. For instance, newspaper language was also attacked by Baker (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008b:14), yet another point shared with Fowler and Amis.

Among other common features that Amis's work shares with its predecessors, the most obvious one, perhaps, is the didactic intent, which in Amis is motivated by a particularity of his character, "the didactic or put-'em-right side" as he calls it (Amis 2011:xvii). In addition, Amis refers readers to models of (written) language, just like the grammarians of old used to refer their

readers to Milton, Addison, Dryden or Pope (cf. Watts 1999:59). And in Amis correcting Fowler, his very idol, one can see the reiteration of a long-time tradition, that of putting oneself above the very models proposed (Watts 1999:59). Telling readers what to avoid is also part of the long tradition of prescriptive grammars, as is the idea that one must have metalinguistic knowledge in order to be in control of the mother tongue. Why else would Amis have a glossary full of such terms (Amis 2011:228-35)? In brief, he is part of a long, century-old successful line of self-appointed arbiters of correct grammar, appropriate style and good taste.

5. What Exactly Is Kingsley Amis's *The King's English*?

In spite of the six various entries which contain the word *pronunciation* in the title, Amis's book is primarily a writing style guide. The author very likely borrowed the Fowler brothers' title in order to establish a link between two bodies of work sharing a common purpose. Hitchings (2011:192) reminds us that "[t]he most celebrated statement of the Fowler brothers' vision occurs on the book's first page, where 'general principles' for the good writer are succinctly set down". Amis does not follow this model to the letter as his rules, principles and recommendations are sprinkled all over. It also seems to be the case that he presupposes some familiarity on the part of the reader with what rules and principles for "better", "proper" writing have already been set down by former authorities.

In Amis's view, "careful writers" need to avoid or refrain from using certain words and phrases; in other cases, he gives his "own set of rules" or solutions. Despite all the precepts, he warns that "[t]he annoying truth is that almost every written word confronts the writer with a choice for which no rule will ever quite serve" (Amis 2011:80) and that "[t]he fact that a word or phrase satisfies one set of criteria is no guarantee that it satisfies all. [...] If a sentence keeps all the rules you know and still seems wrong, change it." (Amis 2011:121) His most frequent advice is that careful writers should refashion their texts whenever something wrong is identified. On the rather seldom occasion when he moves away from lexis, his focus on style is just as obvious, as when he claims: "A sentence [...] is a stylistic as well as grammatical unit." (Amis 2011:181)

6. Kingsley Amis at Odds with the "Linguisticians" (and Vice Versa)

There is little to add to Don Chapman's summary description of the divide between prescriptivists versus descriptivists, except to say that there is no question as to which side of the fence harbours Amis:

Generally speaking, linguists deplore the seeming naivety of prescriptivism, and prescriptivists deplore the seeming permissiveness of linguistics. Both linguists and prescriptivists claim to be experts: linguists claim to be experts on how language works, and prescriptivists claim to be experts on how language ought to be used. But few claim to be experts in both. Most prescriptivists do not hold advanced degrees in linguistics, publish language research in professional journals, or belong to professional linguistics societies, while most linguists pay little attention to prescriptivism. This divide presents a curious situation in which those who know how language works do not care much about the one issue that most non-experts care about (i.e. usage), and those who care about usage do not know much about how language works. (Chapman 2008:21)

Whether the use of the word *linguistician* in Amis's "Dialect or language?" entry (Amis 2011:42-44) was meant to be ironical, offensive, or just an old form is impossible to tell. It does not escape one's attention, however, that in the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua Academica* section of *The*

King's English, he makes a series of claims that position him on a collision course with language academics and researchers. He admits that, while he retained a continuous interest in language, he did not study linguistic matters much, of which he is sorry. But he finishes the section with the following comment, which may be felt like a bomb having gone off in the professional linguists' courtyard:

I am sustained by reflecting that the defence of the language is too large a matter to be left to the properly qualified, and if I make mistakes, well, so do they, and we must carry on as best we can pending the advent of a worthy successor to Fowler. (Amis 2011:xviii)

Probably the best word to describe Amis's opinion of language professionals is "unhelpful". They are the kind of people whom you *cannot* turn to when in need. Take Amis's comment in "Dialect or language?":

[...] no general consensus or overall definition of terms like dialect and language can be made to emerge. Nor is expert knowledge helpful in this way. It is rightly too particular, too partial, too local, in a word too expert to illuminate large, vague questions. (Amis 2011:43)

I think one can safely state that even now there is no general agreement among linguists on what dialect, or language, is. In the "Expert" entry, Kingsley Amis continues to assert his dissatisfaction. There are two major problems with experts. First, their opinions change over time and second, when they do manage to reach a definitive conclusion, it is on a matter no one cares about (Amis 2011:61). Language experts also seem to anger the public when what they reveal goes against tradition or common practice (cf. the entry "Ye olde", Amis 2011:226). Furthermore, Amis cannot come to terms with language specialists on what constitutes or should be regarded as a sentence because they "have been busy for decades saying that the old rules are dead, that a sentence is more or less any chunk of wordage anybody cares to sling together" (Amis 2011:181). The offended party do not remain silent either, and have harsh words to say about people like Amis, "these guardians [who] feel [...] entitled to prescribe what constitutes the 'grammar' of the language – usually without having studied that grammar in any depth or having a clear notion of what grammaticality is" (Milroy 1999:21). The difference is that professional linguists are their own audience.

What the reader gets in the end is a special blended brand of Amis linguistics. One of the writer's major concerns is language change, for which he provides explanations on two occasions. First, for the pronunciation of the vowels in Pall Mall from /e/ to /æ/, which he explains by social change. Here he evaluates his own exposition as "fanciful", but "possible all the same" (Amis 2011:117). Second, the amusing entry entitled "Pidgin Latin" aims to help the reader understand how Latin words were "perverted almost out of recognition" (Amis 2011:140) to become part of Spanish, French, English, etc. To attain his educational goal, Amis comes up with a few imaginary dialogues between a yokel and a legionary, one of which is reproduced below:

L: Our chaps are thinking of calling this place *Eboracum*. Go on, say it, you bog-trotter.
Y: York? (Amis 2011:141)

In such cases one must make allowance for the fact that Amis's creative strength resided in his ability to be imaginative and that he believed in the power of the fictitious example as a method

of instruction (cf. James 2013). Amis has a complicated relationship with language change: on the one hand, he is adamant that once the change has run its course, there is no turning back (cf. Amis 2011:78); on the other, he is against it. “Resistance to all linguistic change is obviously a healthy instinct” (Amis 2011:4), he states. For Amis, change only manages to destroy what is of value and causes confusion. Which is why, in his view, models cannot be found in the present, only in the dead past (cf. Amis 2011:49).

Thus we move into the realm of language death and birth. Languages die because people are too careless or too careful. At least this is what we are left to understand in “Berks and wankers”: “Left to [berks] the English language would die of impurity, like late Latin. [...] Left to [wankers] the language would die of purity, like medieval Latin” (Amis 2011:23). However, when it comes to innovation, Amis seems to feel uncomfortable on at least two accounts: first, he is not consulted, and second, he is not aware of how it happens (cf. Amis 2011:120, 16-17). The fact that he is not in control appears to be the crux of the problem.

7. Conclusions

The success of Kingsley Amis’s *The King’s English* is indicative of the author being in tune with his audience. He has obviously been catering for a need that has little in the way of being satisfied: guidance in language usage. Sociolinguists talk about the public’s ‘anxiety’ in using their own language as being engendered or heightened by self-appointed pundits and complainers as well as by an educational system which insists on treating language in terms of right and wrong. Amis offers ‘know-how’ where linguists have been offering ‘know-about’. Perhaps this is the main reason for his success. It is obvious that people want to learn, to better themselves and perhaps they turn to writers of language usage books because here they find what they expect: the familiar ‘do this, don’t do that’ of the public school environment. Through such an approach, they come closer to what they feel they need: a recipe for success. Clearly, Amis’s *The King’s English* is conceived in a manner that allows the public to relate to it. His language usage guide is a testament to the extraordinary continuity and survival of the written discourse of the usage handbook, its traditions and related points of contention.

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