

The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide

Pam Peters,
Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1995

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby

Pam Peters' *Australian English Style Guide* has at last been published. It is the labour of a lifetime. The Foreword by Professor Arthur Delbridge, doyen of the *Macquarie Dictionary*, and the warm words about his inspiration in the author's Preface, place this book in the collection of national texts which emanate from the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia at Macquarie University in Sydney. Pam Peters lectures there in the School of English and Linguistics.

A style guide for the English language, and particularly for its use in Australia, might seem to some to be an *oxymoron*. Writers today constantly lament the pervasive relaxation (if not abandonment) of formerly standard principles of English grammar and the unstoppable adoption of neologisms, borrowed mostly from the United States of America. Advocates of the "True Doctrine" call for a rear-guard defence of the language against the onslaught of Americanisms, gender-neutral distortions, media dominance of values and trendy acceptance of inappropriate words, phrases, spelling and pronunciation. Some real hard-liners, such as Robert Murray call, perhaps ominously, for a "fightback". They demand forming "language preservation groups". Verbal Canutes, they seek to stem the tide of change in the living English language. They will have as little success as that king enjoyed.

It is into this world of change, decay and creativity of English language expression that Pam Peters, and Cambridge University Press, have launched this large volume. It is a unique effort to describe the use of the English language in the one continent of the world where a single language is

popularly spoken - Australian English. Pam Peters offers both an assessment of the current state of the English language in Australia and a tolerant guide to its style and usage. The book is not pompous. As befits its subject, it is racy, opinionated, fresh and reasonably tolerant.

How did language originate? How is it adapted in the human mind? How on earth did those first few grunts of our far-off ancestors develop into the sophisticated instrument of a modern developed language? Fortunate are we whose primary language is English. Without doubt, it is the international language *par excellence* (if I can use that phrase without offence). New words and phrases daily enter this international vehicle of communication. They come from other tongues and from scientific creations - for English penetrates every continent and it is unquestionably the international language of science and technology. Words drop out. Take "tiffin", for example. And yet in Ootacummund in India and at the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, tiffin is still served daily. Countries attempt to drop out. Thus Malaysia, after independence, dropped most English language instruction in its universities. Now it is returning, for it was discovered that few international scientific and expert journals are written in Malay. Economic progress uses English as its principal medium.

Part of the creativity of the English language derives from its intercontinental character, the history of its spread, its commercial dominance and its command of the world of science and technology. Part can probably also be attributed to the absence of any formal institution which seeks to control its use. Not for us an *Académie Française* which will define with precision correct language use and even sanction those who seek to mangle the language with *Franglais* or other linguistic perversions. The English, who, it is said, gained their Empire in a fit of absence of mind, spread their language, apparently, in much the same state of indifference. Perhaps it was their island isolation, and the lack of daily necessity to communicate with surrounding land powers speaking different languages that produced the notorious mono-lingual tendencies to which users of Australian English are antipodean heirs.

Throughout my life I have been the recipient of careful instruction in style. It began in my primary school where, along with reading and writing, I learned grammar. It continued into high school where I learned parsing and analysis, figures of speech and poetry. In the practice of the law, I soon learned the multitude of words and expressions that are peculiar to the priestly caste who carry on the practice of the law in its temples: the courts.

Pam Peters' book is full of old legal words which come from Norman French or from the time when every educated person knew Latin. Thus *habeus corpus* is explained. So is *subpoena* and *mortgage*. One of the problems of practising law in the English language is that in its marvellous imprecision, so fertile for poetry and literature, it usually presents two words for the single concept. Hence last *will* (the Germanic word) and *testament* (from Norman French). Little wonder that outsiders find the language and spelling of English as exasperating as its grammar is simple.

When I was appointed Chairman of the Law Reform Commission in 1974, I soon came to know the only other Australian style guide with which I am familiar. It is the *Commonwealth Style Manual*. This handy little book, prepared under the direction of a great master of the English language, the late John Ewens QC, sought to lay down the common way in which Australian Federal statutes should be expressed and official publications worded. Yet there was not a word in that book about gender neutral language. It makes you wonder what new waves of language style are just around that corner which we cannot yet imagine.

My later appointments to posts in the United Nations have exposed me to United Nations style. I fear that its rules must have been developed by relics of the continental bureaucracies which have now taken over the palaces of the European Union in Brussels. UN style is quite rigid. Everything is expressed in the third person. When I brashly wrote my first report as Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Human Rights in Cambodia, I did so in the first person singular and with direct speech. But this was soon thrown out. Sternly, I was told that the only acceptable style was "the Special Representative did this" and "the Special Representative saw that". My re-ification in the third person had begun.

In court, there is a kind of style guide governing judicial opinions - although judges are in many ways the last true individualists. Not so long ago, the reasons of Australian courts, like those of England, were presented in dense prose. They were interrupted neither by subheadings nor by summaries. Now, at least in the New South Wales Court of Appeal, more attention is paid to the importance of effective communication of ideas. I am sure that the new *Australian English Style Guide* will add to the success of these endeavours. In my court, Justice R P Meagher is a vigilant guardian against occasional lapses in style. But every now and then a barrister, or even a judicial colleague, will utter a shocking expression such as "Between you and I". In a matter of seconds, Justice Meagher has swooped like an angry eagle upon

his prey. No gentle correction but a stern remonstrance is uttered. And if the offender is a judge, a furious note is passed expressing astonishment which I am admonished to share and if possible to express. My own diversions in court are much more harmless. They are usually confined to cartoon impressions of counsel and of my brethren. Imagine my astonishment at reading Pam Peters style guidance that, by the 1970s, "between you and I" had become "standard and even formal English". I fear that this lapse will not endear the *Guide* to my judicial brother or others of his classical bent.

The book is packed with information both on the peculiarities of Australian English and on a whole range of matters about which I was previously quite ignorant. The note on the use of "Aboriginal" as a noun - something I learned to accept from the Commonwealth *Style Manual* - suggests that this runs counter both to common written practice and Aboriginal preference. Perhaps if we leave this problem to one side, we will soon become used to calling the indigenous people "Koories", although this too is unhistorical and unacceptable to the *Guide*.

There is information in the *Guide* such as most readers never knew and possibly have little need to know. Thus the háček is an accent in the Czech and Croatian languages such as we see over the name of Beneš or Dubček. There is useful guidance on the proper use of words of similar spellings (mendicity and mendacity) or connotation (monologue and soliloquy). The *Guide* provides an interesting insight into different notions of onomatopoeia in different languages. Thus the familiar "snap, crackle and pop" of the breakfast cereal in English becomes "piff, paff, puff" in Swedish. Or "knisper, knasper, knusper" in German. Or "clap, knotter, creak" in Africaans. Pam Peters uses these variations to demonstrate that the sound effect of words in the inner chambers of the brain are relative to particular languages. Despite the universality of music, word sounds, it seems, are distinctly culture bound.

There are lively examples of the figures of speech. For a new generation which does not now learn these things in an organised way, there are examples of malapropisms and oxymorons. A host of information of this sort is placed before the reader with a full range of alternative spellings, differentiated words and expressions, still used Latin abbreviations, and a wealth of guidance on language use.

There are a few errors to which I feel duty bound to call attention. Doubtless they can be corrected before the second edition. I have already mentioned the

intolerable lapse of "between you and I". There is a similarly unacceptable endorsement of "different than". There is time for the author to recant obvious errors such as this.

More worrying is the use throughout the text of the apostrophe. Apostrophes are truly troublesome beasts. At the very moment in the history of our language where they seem to be disappearing from use as a signal of the possessive case, they have crept into this *Guide* in a wholly impermissible way. Thus, in the entry on "Different from/Different to" the author has written that one expert "argues that it's unremarkable in British English". For a moment I thought that this was just a mistake which had failed to catch the proof-reader's eye. Not so. It's the conversational form in print. In the entry on the use of the ending "re" and "er" (such as centre and center) the same wicked apostrophe reappears. "It's found in Shakespeare and in the earliest dictionaries", declares Pam Peters. There is no excuse. Such lapses must be searched for with benefit of word processor and zapped before they infuriate the readers of the next edition.

There is much in the Cambridge *Australian English Style Guide* to delight, amuse, inform and intensely irritate every reader. Upon matters such as the use of the English language, most of us have strong opinions - especially if we are professional users of words, as are judges and lawyers every day of their lives. I have no doubt that this book will become a companion of writers in Australia. It will join the *Macquarie Dictionary*, the *Macquarie Dictionary of New Words*, the *Dictionary of Australian Quotations* and the *Thesaurus* as an essential reference in the use of Australian English.

Now that the *Guide* has been published, the author has chartered her life's work. In a rapidly changing society, such as Australia, it can hardly be expected that the use of the English language will stand still. Pam Peters' approach is generally descriptive and not prescriptive. In this, she is a true supporter of the ubiquitous English language. Her book will become a classic.