

# Practical English usage

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The third, fully revised edition of Michael Swan's *Practical English Usage* reminds us how far the reference book industry in the field has come since H.W. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* in 1926. An amateur commentator who wrote his much-loved handbook on questions of practical English for the concerned Englishman who needed guidance, Fowler was steeped in the classics of Greece and Rome and paid no attention to descriptive linguistics. Swan, who describes himself as a 'pedagogic grammarian' (p.vi), has written several books in the area of language teaching that have become indispensable. He writes primarily for foreign students and their teachers, basing his work on extensive classroom practice that is informed by the best contemporary scholarship in English grammar and lexicography, access to electronic databases and the advice of numerous consultants and correspondents.

Swan addresses the practical problems of usage faced by the foreign learner. He concentrates on grammar but not at the expense of common problems in vocabulary and other areas of usage, such as idiom and spelling. The book aims at providing acceptable answers to questions that are difficult for these learners. It is not directed to specialists, who may not always agree with the terminology that is used or the advice that is given. It places some emphasis on grammatical and other differences between American and British usage but it is not primarily concerned with these matters. Nor does it aim at extended coverage of complex material.

What is correctness? Swan directs the reader to examples of several different meanings of the term: a sentence such as \* *I have seen her yesterday*, from the English of a foreigner; a usage which is common in standard practice but which some consider to be incorrect, such as *less people* rather than *fewer people*; and forms such as \* *ain't* or 'double negatives', which are widely used but which are not found in standard speech or writing. *Practical English Usage* is substantially based on differences between standard forms of the language, either American or British, and 'foreign' usage (p.ix). Nevertheless there are five sections (308 to 312) that are formally concerned with different kinds of English (standard English and dialects, correctness, spoken and written English, formality, and variation and change), and these contain cross-references to numerous other sections, such as American and British English (51), infinitives (280) and the use of singular and plural (532). How important is correctness? Swan's answer stems from a conviction that effective communication is more important than strict adherence to traditional notions of grammatical accuracy, which are often controversial, as in the case of the injunctions against the split infinitive or the preposition at the end of a sentence, since they derive from unrealistic prescription in the past.

Those who find some of his terminology 'unsatisfactory', who disagree with his assertion that 'grammar is not the most important thing in the world' (p.ix) or who fail to find their favourite problems discussed to their satisfaction are at liberty to consult the authoritative reference books that he cites in the acknowledgements or the introduction. They will not find, however, that these works contain such a detailed and carefully directed list of contemporary contents, from which foreign students or any user of the language for that matter may benefit, particularly in all those situations in which change in practice has become all too obvious. The sections on abbreviated styles (1), abbreviations and acronyms (2), headlines (240), and taboo words [two words] and swearwords [one word] (575) are cases in point. The same applies, possibly more so, to the sections that are new to the third edition, such as those on emails [not 'e-mails'] and text messages (147); standard English and dialects (308); correctness (309); spoken and written English (310); variation and change (312); and politeness (435 to 437). There is so much more for which users of *Practical English Usage* will be grateful – for example, the material on articles (61 to 70) and the list of 130 common mistakes, which is graded in four levels, from basic to very advanced and linked to the various sections. From the intermediate list: Don't say \* *My brother has got a new work*. Say *My brother has got a new job*.

Swan's dilemma is *exactly* where to locate his sense of norm in a book of this kind and how to say it. In 'mainly ... standard modern everyday British English' (p.ix)? In the combined authority of the two standard forms of English, American and British, which are discussed in these terms in the introduction (p.ix), but which then receive

a section on their differences (51), which he later describes as ‘generally unimportant’ (p.290)? Or in the sentence ‘The rules in this book are descriptive of standard British English’ (p.291)? It would be churlish to make too much of this point, however, given the liberal tone that pervades the work. It would also be inappropriate to take Swan to task for the lack of detailed reference to the various other Englishes. There are very real limits as to what is possible and Swan is well aware of them. Students and teachers are free to make their own additions. A much more interesting subject, which extends far beyond this review, is the reminder that *Practical English Usage* provides us of the international reach of the British reference and textbook industry in its service of English as the global *lingua franca*. Another theme waits in the wings, the possibility of change to notions of standard form with the development of international English. Swan notes that ‘it will be interesting to see what happens’ (p.290). Whatever emerges, the industry will be there.