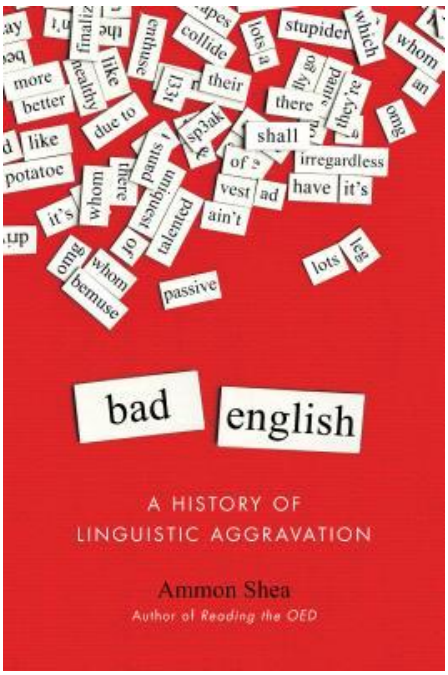

Bad English: A History of Linguistic Aggravation

Ammon Shea

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The author of *Reading the OED* presents an eye-opening look at language "mistakes" and how they came to be accepted as correct—or not.

English is a glorious mess of a language, cobbled together from a wide variety of sources and syntaxes, and changing over time with popular usage. Many of the words and usages we embrace as standard and correct today were at first considered slang, impolite, or just plain wrong.

Whether you consider yourself a stickler, a nitpicker, or a rule-breaker in the know, Bad English is sure to enlighten, enrage, and perhaps even inspire. Filled with historic and contemporary examples, the book chronicles the long and entertaining history of language mistakes, and features some of our most common words and phrases, including:

Decimate
Hopefully
Enormity
That/which
Enervate/energize
Bemuse/amuse
Literally/figuratively
Ain't
Irregardless
Socialist
OMG
Stupider

Lively, surprising, funny, and delightfully readable, this is a book that will settle arguments among word lovers—and it's sure to start a few, too.

Bad English: A History of Linguistic Aggravation Details

Date	:	Published June 3rd 2014 by TarcherPerigee
ISBN	:	9780399165573
Author	:	Ammon Shea
Format	:	Hardcover 272 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Humanities, Language, Linguistics, History, Audiobook, Writing, Education, Reference, Adult, Humor

From Reader Review Bad English: A History of Linguistic Aggravation for online ebook

Marcella Wigg says

A decent smackdown of prescription in English grammar. Shea is preaching to the choir here. I have long been irritated by grammatical prescription. Especially by people who feel the need to correct my grammar in casual conversation. As if I, an English major in college, don't know that according to grammar rules I was taught in elementary school, the proper response to "How are you?" is "well," not "good." Shea presents the reasons why grammar hardliners should cool it, including from fronts I had not previously considered, including the fact that in many of the examples of irritant words he offers, the usage maligned by grammarians actually predates the one promoted as more correct. Language changes, and we need to keep open minds to accept the change. Some of the words once promoted as "proper" seem completely ridiculous a century later (e.g. "limb" as a polite euphemism for "leg" among upper crust American women).

That said, I found this book got a bit repetitive in parts. Maybe I just disliked the formatting: the discussions of Orwell's hypocritical failure to follow his own grammar rules and whether Shakespeare invented as many words as originally thought were way more engaging than the many, many examples described at length of prescription being incorrect or illogical in its assessment of a word or usage. This is likely the result of my being a casual reader rather than a linguist, but it affected how I felt about the book, as I wanted more essays!

Lisa says

We all have our language peeves, plus the rules we were taught in grade school, plus Strunk and White and whatever other usage guides we consult. And much of that is wrong.

Writing manuals and stylebooks are plagued by language “rules” that have no basis in English grammar, that fail to take into account the fact that living languages change, or that are someone’s “aggravations” that got codified, serving only to distinguish those in the know from the “barbarians.”

Author Ammon Shea, who read the entire Oxford English Dictionary over the course of a year (and then wrote a book about it, “Reading the OED”), must have seen while he was reading it how many of the linguistics truths we hold dear aren’t really true at all. Couple that with all the peevers that come out of the woodwork when the topic is grammar or usage (Shea has written a couple of other books on that as well), and there’s plenty of fodder for another book, hence the informative and entertaining “Bad English.”

The book directly takes on the peevers who believe that every “aggravate” meaning “irritate,” every vogue “verbed” noun, every “irregardless,” every split infinitive, every sentence-ending preposition, every sentence-starting conjunction is one more blow of the wrecking ball against our noble and pure English. And because Shea has done his homework -- what better source is there than the OED on matters of English? -- he’s not just counter-peeving, he’s backing up his assertions with research and facts, busting myths and correcting the correctors.

"One of the things that is most curious about people who hold themselves up as language purists,” Shea writes, “is that they seem to spend considerably more time complaining about language than they do celebrating it, much as if an art lover focused all their efforts on diatribes about the painter who were ruining

the medium rather than the ones who were advancing it." Yes, Shea used “their” as a singular on purpose.

Shea breaks his examinations down into words whose meanings have changed (many words, such as “decimate,” have had this happen more than once, and Shea’s explanation of the original original meaning of “decimate” isn’t the kill-every-tenth-person sticklers would have us believe), words that are “not a word,” “verbed” nouns, grammatical gremlins, things that are “ruining the language,” and the arguments that people use to defend English. He ends up with a list of “221 Words That Were Once Frowned Upon,” from “accessorize” to “zoom,” which has some entries that will likely surprise you.

The book is a fun (yes, it’s fine to use “fun” as an adjective, despite that usage having been called “slovenly” as recently as 1980, Shea notes) look at how and why peeves develop, the history of various words and usages, and the ever-shifting nature of English. “Language has an irrepressible desire to change,” Shea points out, “and there are almost no words in English that have been around for more than a few hundred years without taking on new meanings, changing their old ones, or coming to simultaneously mean one thing and the opposite.”

Shea’s lively prose makes this book an enjoyable romp through the history of English while providing fodder against language alarmists. Anyone who can get the phrase “punctilious nitpickery” into print obviously has both a love of language and a sense of humor.

But he does go a little overboard: He’s quite harsh on Orwell’s classic “six language rules,” focusing on the letter of the rules (and the fact that Orwell himself breaks them frequently) rather than their spirit, which allows much more flexibility. He doesn’t have a lot of patience with those who dictate language use -- referring to “screeds” by “language scolds” -- which is understandable, but he doesn’t really distinguish between the priggish prescriptivists and the people whose job it is to produce professional communication for a mass audience.

As an editor, I recognize that language is a living, changing entity and that obsolete rules, rules that aren’t rules and distinctions that are simply “secret handshakes” do no one any good. I also know that language needs to follow some standards in order to effectively and credibly communicate. “Bad English” is a great tool for arguing against the non-rules and shibboleths, but not every rule is bogus, and not every guideline is repressive or worthless. For the sake of clarity in communication, there need to be common standards -- but they need to exist for the sake of clarity, not for the sake of barring words or usages some “purists” don’t like.

Chris Eirschele says

Writers will want this book for a reference on their desks but, for the first time, read it through cover to cover. Worth highlighting and page marking, too.

Dorrit says

Boring!

Jaclyn says

3 1/2 stars. This book presents a lot of information about grammar, and I really enjoyed that the author was objective in presenting various words, phrases, or rules that some view as correct or incorrect. It presented a lot of information, and then told "both sides" of the argument for or against that rule, including the history behind many rules or arguments. The only drawback, to me, was that I thought it could have been organized a bit better. I thought some of the chapters or way things were presented was a bit confusing, and that it could have probably been presented in a better way. This was really informative, and I enjoyed a lot of the history and background that was offered, in addition to the various rules and topics addressed.

Courtney says

A great book! It is literally (not figuratively) a history of grammarians' (is that apostrophe in the correct place?) gripes about the semantics and grammar of the English language, most of which I didn't know were ever a problem! It is funny and it appealed to my nerdy linguist side. If you too have a nerdy linguist side, or if you are a "grammar nazi" who needs a dose of reality, I highly recommend this book.

CM says

Between You and I, split infinitive, hopefully and more? Here the author presents a historical analysis on each of these contested English usage. The narrative is always like this: the usage didn't get any backlash until 16th century, then some grammarians started to find fault with it and the public followed but now we are all free to say what we want as the rule against it is not coherent/logical/feasible, all presented with a long list of references.

While I'm definitely on the descriptivist side of such debates(so is the author), this book reminds me of the lively energy the writing of Mr David Crystal as that is more than a bit lacking here.

An informative reference.

PoligirlReads says

This was a good read! Shea is a very humorous writer. What I enjoyed was that this book underscored the fluidity of the English language and how many of the rules of writing are a relatively modern concept. Are there rules? Yes. But the idea is that rigidity that some may wish, simply cannot win over popular usage (like starting sentences with "but").

The setup was fun. Each chapter would begin with a quoted "rule," followed by another quote that directly contradicts it. Even better was when it would come from the same source! I got a kick from the Potato(e)

chapter, on how all Americans now know how to correctly spell potato due to the unfortunate Dan Quayle. Or, as Shea notes, "Dan Quayle died for your sins." Ha!

Two highlights in particular are the listing of the vulgar Americanisms...that are actually British in origin, and "Shakespeare vs. Hip-hop: who said it?"

Jenny Lee says

If you love etymology (i.e. the origin of words), then *Bad English* should be a pretty entertaining read! I found the book especially interesting given the fact that I've worked as an ESL teacher for years, and long ago acknowledged just how crazy the English language is... Indeed, we have no idea how wacky our language is, and we should all be humbled that so many around the world endeavor to learn it (although I know this is arguablyy a reflection of market/neocolonial/globalization/etc.... pressues, but I'll save that rant for another day).

Michael says

Another fun [if I may use that "slovenly adjective"] romp through the English language with Ammon Shea! Those who take a prescriptive approach to English grammar will be outraged by his sly and humorous undercutting of many beloved and bogus ["a colloquial term incompatible with dignified diction"] rules that attempt to govern "our magnificent bastard tongue" [in the words of John McWhorter]. I found it to be well written, informative, and diverting [and yes, I do insist on using the Oxford comma]. But [if I may start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction] I draw the line when it comes to wildly splitting infinitives and putting prepositions places they should not be in. As I was putting away this volume, I found that I have an entire shelf of books on the history of English and the doomed attempts to make it either adhere to the rules of Latin grammar or to free its Anglo-Saxon purity from the inroads of Latinate diction. I suppose that, although I have been known to go on about the effect of restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses on the uses of "which," I am more in the descriptive camp with Shea and McWhorter and somewhat sanguine about the chances of English continuing to be a creative and elegant language despite inevitable changes. Like, I mean, what could possibly go wrong, you know?

Dave says

This book rocked my world. I have been (until today?) a pacifistic pedant--someone who silently judges others' grammatical errors without daring to interrupt and correct them.

Shea's book tells me to relax, or maybe to go to hell. Shea has researched the history of usage for dozens of words and phrases whose use is closely monitored by those who would defend proper English.

Shea's devastating point is that "proper English" is inevitably arbitrary, far more so than any of us would care to admit. Words and their meanings change in a language as widely used as English, and we should celebrate that instead of moaning about "uninterested/disinterested" (which used to mean the REVERSE of what they

mean now, according to Shea!). What we think is correct was not always so, even very recently.

A common theme in this book is quoting many of the great authors of English letters who frequently commit grievous errors against the Mother Tongue. If it was good enough for Shakespeare and Twain, who are we to say that it isn't good enough for us?

A fascinating side note is that Shea seems to be writing this book out of anger. His previous book, about reading the Oxford English Dictionary, apparently produced some small amount of scathing commentary about perceived deviations in his book from accepted writing style. So Shea decided to prove them wrong.

Cleverly divided into small segments devoted to individual words, the book is engaging and easy to read. I shall never again cringe when I read or hear someone use the word "literally" to mean "figuratively."

Anna Kramer says

Ammon Shea brings to Bad English what most linguists lack in their prescriptivist rants: a humorous rather than indignant look at the ever-changing English language. The book is not the most useful or comprehensive investigation of "linguistic aggravation", but its insightful analysis highlights the importance of the drive to preserve language and the paradoxical absurdity of that same overwrought fervor. What Shea lacks in cohesion he makes up for in sass, his dry sarcasm well worth the frequently missing explanations and definitions that would make this book an essential and comprehensible read.

Arianna says

I can't tell you how many times this book has made me laugh out loud. I utterly loved it.

Bad English: A History of Linguistic Aggravation belongs to the genre of learned exposition, although the language used is only occasionally academic. This book takes the reader on a journey through English language usage, and specifically which usages are or were considered "bad" English. Its pedagogic aim is aided by a conversational, at times quite informal style, which never takes away from the primary informational concern of the text. As the author himself states in the introduction, the intentional avoidance of jargon whenever possible makes the book appropriate and enjoyable for readers of any background.

Shea sets the tone of the book from its very first sentence in the introduction, featuring vivid metaphorical images and irony ("the blood of a freshly wounded language"). The second sentence presents the informal verb "peeved", meaning "to irritate", again functioning as a sort of statement as to what the reader can expect from the book. The author then sets about explaining clearly the aim of his work, which is the presentation of a history of English words commonly considered "mistakes" by more prescriptive speakers, who retain a largely conservative view of language as immutable — a view Shea does not share. The introduction ends with a *Note On Terminology*, followed by a *Note On Pronouns*, announcing the use of the third-person neuter singular they to refer to any single persons of either sex; this is followed by a brief *Note On Notes*.

Chapter One: Arguing Semantics discusses nine examples of words which have shifted in meaning in ways that have been strongly opposed by dogmatic defenders of the English language. Each subsection dedicated to one of these words opens with two quotes: one arguing against the semantic shift of the word discussed,

the other either arguing in favour of it, or more commonly directly using it in speech or writing. These quotes can be from different authors, or the same, and often the quote arguing against the semantic shift dates from several years later than the usage quote. Sources vary from blog posts to famous speeches to classic novels. The words discussed are *hopefully, literally, disinterested/uninterested, decimate, enormity, enervate, aggravate, unique*. The title of the book makes use of the more controversial meaning of *aggravate*, denoting the author's stance on the topic from the cover itself.

Chapter Two: Words That Are Not Words opens with a discussion of "artificial" neologisms, created by single people trying to express a particular meaning; these are *scofflaw*, but also *skycap, undefendable,* as well as *staycation*, and more. The chapter goes on to discuss other such words which have been introduced to the language: *belittle, balding, stupider, irregardless*.

Chapter Three: Verbing Nouns is about the productive yet controversial morphological process of zero-derivation, or conversion, through the examples of *impact, finalize, contact*.

Chapter Four: Sins of Grammar deals with controversies around the topics of splitting infinitives (using Star Trek's famous "*to boldly go*" as an example), the various uses of "different than", but and and used at the beginning of sentences, fun as an adjective rather than a noun, the use of *that* instead of *which* (or vice-versa) in relative clauses, ending a sentence with a preposition, the use of *very*, the confusion around *I vs. me* in sentences such as "It is I", "Between you and I" (hypercorrection), "I'm good".

Chapter Five: The Continuing Deterioration of the Language humorously takes on different ways in which English is changing, which to some who see all change as decline is cause for aggravation; it discusses the history of misuse of the apostrophe, the spelling of "potato(e)", discussion of "textspeak, emoticons" and initialisms especially in digital contexts, "ain't", *leg vs. limb, donate, like*.

Chapter Six: Defending English opens with a section titled "English vs. Latin", followed by "An English Academy", "Shakespeare's Language", brief essays on the history of English.

Chapter Seven: 221 Words That Were Once Frowned Upon, lists 221 words and a brief quote contrasting a particular (now accepted) use of it.

Christine says

Mr. Shea takes an in-depth look at the evolution of our English language. Traveling along an easily understood timeline he looks at words and phrases that began as mistakes and misspeaks yet have now become commonplace and acceptable in both the written and spoken word. And yes, there is a difference in what is acceptable in written and in spoken English. Just to enlighten you a little, “stupider” is not a word and “OMG” is not a 21st century acronym. Language is alive and as such it evolves with the times.

Mr. Shea does not only look at the words themselves but also at punctuation and grammar. Did you know there are seven – SEVEN – acceptable uses for an apostrophe? There are a multitude of words that began life as nouns and now are acceptable to use as verbs and adjectives. And yes, sometimes it is acceptable to split an infinitive. (Currently thumbing my nose at my grade 10 English teacher)

Every good teacher follows a lesson with a quiz, right? Well, Mr. Shea does not deviate and offers a quiz made up of 14 quotations asking his readers to choose which are by Shakespeare and which come from the

“disparate world of hi-hop/rap”. As you are muttering the phrase “piece of cake” under your breath, let me tell you, not quite as simple as it sounds.

This book is well researched and Mr. Shea quotes his sources (endlessly).

Irregardless (which I now KNOW is NOT a real word) and probably included as a preventative (which I now also KNOW is NOT a real word) measure to keep his readers from inadvertently making an error, the only fault I could find with this book comes at the end when Mr. Shea sites, defines and gives the appropriate reference for 221 accepted and commonly used words which were once frowned upon, some examples being: vest, upcoming, rotten, ice cream, balding, donate, fine and awful, etc (ekscetera which – I NOW KNOW – is acceptable for use in writing but never in speaking). Although this section was an interesting addition to the book it did seem to go on and on and on and on.

So how did I, a reader of primarily fiction end up with this book on my reading list? As difficult as it may be to believe I recently found myself in a discussion about verbosity, vocabulary, vernacular, comma splices and run on sentences. A few days later I was checking my library site for their newest audio book additions and this one popped up. Coincidence? I think not! I had to give it a listen. It was entertaining and, as much as I hate to admit it, I did learn a thing or two. If you are a constant reader, a writer, a speaker, a teacher or just someone enthralled with this English language we profess to know and understand, this would be a handy reference book to keep on that little shelf close to your desk, maybe between your dictionary and your thesaurus.

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sologdin says

An anti-prescriptivist exercise, perhaps part of the runaway hit niche subgenre of lexicographers’ humor.

Provides historical analysis of the usage of favorites such as: hopefully, literally, decimate, enormity, enervate, aggravate, unique, belittle, balding, stupider, irregardless, impact, finalize, contact, fun, very, inter alia. Reconsiders grammatical rules upon which linguistic fascists continue to insist: split infinitives, different from/than, but v. and, that v. which, prepositions at the end of a sentence, I v. me, and so on.

Final essay is an exercise in egalitarianism, and analyzes Orwell’s famous essay, ‘Politics and the English Language,’ particularly its six rules for effective communication, which Orwell more or less breaks in the course of the essay. Good stuff.

Recommended for bulbitators, lurcators, and the liguritious.
