

[Don't Mind Your Language...](#)

By [Stephen Fry](#)

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Language. Language, language, language. In the end it all comes down to language. I write to you today on this subject as a way of welcoming you to [www.stephenfry.com 2.0](#) and because, well, it's a subject worth thinking about at any time and because fewer things interest me quite so much.

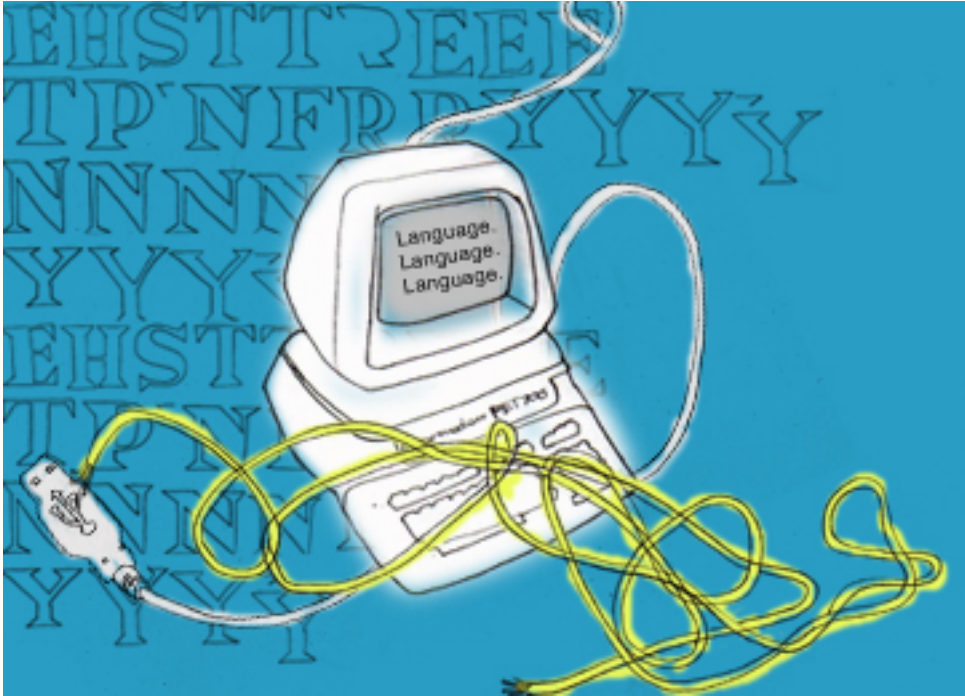


Image: Nicole Stewart for SamFry

There are so many questions and issues jostling, tumbling and colliding in my mind that I can barely list them. Is language the father of thought? There's one. Somebody once said, "How can I tell you what I think until I've heard what I'm going to say?" Is language being degraded, is it not what it was? Is there a right way to express yourself and a wrong? Grammar, does that exist, or is it a pedantic imposition, a kind of unnatural mixture of strangulation and straightening, like pleaching, pollarding and training pear-trees against a wall? Can we translate from one tongue into another without irreparable loss? And many, many more.

"Language is the universal whore that I must make into a virgin," wrote Karl Kraus or somebody so like him that it makes no odds. One of my favourite remarks. T. S. Eliot said much the same thing in a different way: "to purify the dialect of the tribe". But is there a "higher language", a purer language, a proper language, a right language? Is language a whore, used, bruised and abused by every john in the street ... is the idea of purifying the dialect of the tribe a poetic ideal or nonsensical snobbery?

I suppose we should remind ourselves of the old distinction made by the structuralists and structural linguists. I wrote a [sketch](#) about this years and years ago and if you know it, you'll have to forgive the similarities between what I found to be a source of humour and what I am now apparently taking seriously. Actually the one doesn't cancel out or refute the other. We can make fun of this kind of language about language and we can value it too. So bearing in mind that I am fully aware that I sound like the worst kind of pseudo-intellectual twazzock, let's look at that distinction. There is language, the thing itself, the idea of language. And then there is this or that example of language in praxis, in use. There is Chess and there is this or that game of chess. The Game of Chess and that game of chess going on over there. There is language, the human capacity – 'competence' as Chomsky calls it, The Game of Language – and there is utterance, the actual instance of its use – this sentence for example. Of course aside from both of these, there is the local tongue, English, French, Cantonese, Basque, whatever.

The two for consideration however as those once fashionable Frenchies designated them are *Langue*, language as an idea, and *parole*, language as utterance. In this instance of *parole* I am using not only English, but my own brand of English, an English English salted, spiced, pickled, seasoned, braised and plated up to you bearing all the flavours of my class, gender, education and nature, discourses as you might call them. I am in some sort a language professional I suppose, in as much as I write and broadcast, I linguify for a living you might say. Nonetheless, I can no more change my language and the sum of its discourses than I can add a cubit to my height or, sadly it seems, take a pound from my weight. Well, perhaps that's going a little far. I can attempt to disguise my language, I can dress it up into even more elaborate and grandiose orotundity, prolixity and self-consciousness, Will Self-consciousness you might say, or I could dress it down into something stripped. Stark. Bare. Simple. It would be hard to dress it down into something raggedly demotic without it being a patronising pastiche of a street argot to which I quite evidently have no access and in whose mazy slang avenues I would soon get lost, innit? In a sense I am typecast linguistically and although I can for fun try on all kinds of brogues and dialect clothes, my voice, my style, my language is as distinctive as my fingerprints.

My language (as the sum of my discourses, as linguistic strata that betray my history, as geology or archaeology betrays history) is my language and it is a piece of who I am, perhaps even the defining piece. In my case it is in part a classical ruin, inherited boulders of Tacitus and Cicero bleaching in the sun along with grass-overrun elements of Thucydides and Aeschylus ... not because I was a classical scholar, but because I was taught by classical scholars and grew up on poets, dramatists and novelists who knew the classics as intimately as most people of my generation know the Beatles and the Stones. Without knowing it therefore, heroic Ciceronian *clausulae* and elaborate Tacitan *litotes* can always be found in the English of people like me. In part classical ruin, then, my language in particular has also mixed in it elements of my three Ws, my particular world wide web, my w.w.w, Wodehouse, Waugh and Wilde, three writers who greatly excited my imagination and stimulated my language glands like no other. I would add Vivian Stanshall of the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, Peter Cook and Alan Bennett as others of whom I am consciously aware. But the language of British movies, classic novels, sixties

and seventies broadcasters like Malcolm Muggeridge, James Cameron, Alistair Cooke, John Ebdon, Anthony Quinton, Robert Robinson, they all played their part in informing my spoken and written utterance too, not to mention the elemental styles which in turn informed their language. As Henry Higgins reminds us in *Pygmalion*, English is for all of us the language of Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible. We unconsciously use the tropes, tricks and figures of our great writers, just as we might without knowing it use a *terce de Picardie* or a diminished seventh when humming in the shower. And to our native English today we have added the language of American sitcom and drama, American movies and Australian soap operas.

I've used this analogy before, but I'll use it again. Think of London. Some of its outline was determined by the Romans who conquered it two thousand years ago, since then atop the ruins of the Roman, Saxon, Dark Age and Norman London was constructed a medieval city of winding streets, jostling half-timbered mansions and soaring stone cathedrals and churches. Then came, after the Tudor and Jacobean palaces and halls and after the restoration a period of renewed classical elements, the squares and avenues of Georgian and Regency London, elegant, spacious and harmonious. The Victorians brought long suburban streets, warehouses, libraries, schools, town halls and railway stations and in the twentieth century arrived a new architecture, office towers, corporate headquarters, airports, housing projects in glass and concrete, American and European statements of self-conscious modernity, statehood, brutalism, socialism, capitalism and democracy. It isn't I think, too much of a strain to see the history of our language in similar terms. A long sticky flypaper onto which at varying times of their importance the church, royalty, aristocracy, industry, commerce and international entertainment have accreted themselves. Saxon and Roman elements overlaid with the Norman French and Chaucerian and Church medieval English. A great renaissance of Shakespeare, the Bible of King James, Milton and Dryden leading into the classical English of Johnson and Pope. The Victorian English of industry, Dickens and music hall giving way to the English of the twentieth century, all the way through the arrival of radio and cinema, the political language of fascism, communism, socialism and finance, the Americanisms, the street talk, the rock and roll, the corporate speak, the computer jargon ... and here we are. Glass and concrete sentences right next to half-timbered Elizabethan phrases, a Starbucks of an utterance dwelling in an expression that once belonged to a Victorian banker, an Apple Store of an accent in a converted Georgian merchant's lingo. You get the point. Whether or not we are aware of the difference between a transitive verb and a preposition, a verb and a vowel, we are willy-nilly, heirs to Marlowe and Swift, just as that new Waitrose is a descendant (albeit a bastard one) of the Parthenon. Bear in mind that phrase willy-nilly, by the way – I shall return to it later. For the meantime, seal it in a baggie and stash it in your hoodie. Or fold it in scented tissue and lay it tenderly in your hope chest, according to taste.

I've mentioned those French intellectuals the structuralists: one of their number, perhaps the best known, Roland Barthes, liked to use two words *jouissance* and *plaisir*. *Le plaisir du texte*. The pleasure of the text. Those who think structuralism spelt or spelled death to conscious art and such bourgeois comforts as style, accomplishment and enjoyment might be surprised that the pleasure of the text, the *jouissance*, the juicy joy of language,

was important to Roland and his followers. Only to a dullard is language a means of communication and nothing more. It would be like saying sex is a means of reproduction and no more and food a means of fuelling and no more. In life you have to explain wine. You have to explain cheese. You have to explain love. You can't, but you have to try, or if not try you have, surely, to be aware of the astonishing fact of them. We would never notice if the fat and protein rich food with which cows, ewes and nanny goats suckled their young could not be converted to another, firmer foodstuff that went well with crackers and grapes. We wouldn't go about the place moaning that sheep's milk was only of any use to lambs, any more than I have ever heard anyone wonder why pig's milk doesn't make a good yoghurt. In fact if you suggest drinking pig's milk or horse's milk, people look askance and go "yeurgh!" as if it's the oddest suggestion they've ever heard. We take what nature and custom have led us to accept. As Eddie Izzard pointed out, it's odd that bees make honey: 'after all,' he said, 'earwigs don't make chutney.' And take that arbitrary fruit, the grape: suppose grapes didn't uniquely transmogrify themselves, without the addition of sugar, into a drink of almost infinite complexity? We wouldn't wonder at the lack of such a thing as wine in the world, any more than we wonder that raspberry wine (despite the deliciousness of raspberries as fruit) can't, in the proper sense, exist or speculate on why the eggs of carp aren't as good to eat as the eggs of sturgeon. But every now and again we should surely celebrate the fact that caviar is so fine, that the grape offers itself up so uniquely, that milk products of three or four species have such versatile by-products for us, that the grain of some grasses can be transformed into bread, that the berry, pod or leaf of this plant or that plant can give us chocolate, coffee or tea, and that while the fuzz of this plant can't go to make a shirt, the fuzz of that unique one can and the thread of this insect can go to make a tie, while the equally impressive thread, in nature, of that other insect can't be spun into the simplest handkerchief. Is it weird that silkworms exist or is it weird that only the silkworm will do when it comes to silk and only the cotton plant when it comes to cotton? To put it again, in an accidental line of decasyllabic verse, 'none would be missed if they didn't exist'. And if language didn't elicit pleasure, if it didn't have its music, its juiciness or jouissance would we notice, or would always be destined to find pleasure in it because that's a thing we humans can do? Out of the way we move we can make dance, out of the way we speak we can make poetry and oratory and comedy and all kinds of verbal enchantments. Cheese is real, and so it seems, is the pleasure of the text.

I'm veering all over the shop. We'll return to pleasure later. Steven Pinker, the Harvard Professor who writes on psycholinguistics and the evolutionary development of language and the mind, has made quite a tidy living out of popularising what you might call Chomskian ideas. Noam Chomsky may be better known now for his penetrating critiques of American foreign policy, but he made his reputation as a pioneering linguist. His discovery (or theorem if you prefer) was that the mind comes pre-equipped for language, syntax and grammar, much as the body comes pre-equipped for growth and sexual development. A baby doesn't have underarm hair, but it has the innate program within it which, at a certain age, usually between twelve and fourteen, will be activated to start producing hair under the arms: a parent doesn't have to teach it, only the right and natural nutrients need to have been ingested over time so as to allow normal growth and it will just happen. So it is, argue the Chomskians, with language: each baby (given normal

development) has an innate language faculty, a language instinct Pinker calls it: local differences between Chinese and English are not, according to this theory, so very profound. A parent doesn't teach language, much as they may think they do, they just occasionally spoon-feed a bit of vocabulary: moo-cow, baa-lamb, colours and so on, usually – you'll never hear a parent say “and these are called ‘stairs’ or ‘to wash’ means ‘to clean with water’” – the child absorbs that kind of vocabulary without teaching. The really clever bits, the structure and lexical rules ... these no parent can teach because it's highly unlikely they will even be aware of them. You do not say to an English child: “the aorist of ‘to see’ is ‘saw’ the perfect is ‘have seen’”. You don't even tell them that to give a sense of the past you add ‘-ed’ to the end of the verb. ‘I play,’ ‘I played’. Many parents will not know what a verb is, nor will they need to, any more than you need to know what an alternator is to drive to the shops or, more pertinently, any more than you need to know what a bronchial tree or alveoli are in order to breathe. This may sound obvious to us all, language as a natural, evolved innate faculty; after all, the theory has been understood and mostly accepted for forty or so years, but if you look back over the history of linguistics to beyond the time such a word even existed, over the shoulders of Saussure, Jakobson and the Brothers Grimm to the earliest philologists and language investigators, there was no obvious reason to suppose that language was innate. Or at least not innate in that way. Many believed, quite seriously, that the Biblical explanation in the story of the Tower of Babel was the true answer to the riddle of language, just as they believed in the Flood and the Creation. Others thought that there was a ‘natural’ language, a primary tongue. Some suggested that it was Latin, others, out of religiosity, that it must be Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic. They went so far, under the patronage of bishops and monarchs who took an interest in the subject, as to take foundling children by way of experiment and isolate them completely from all human congress, to give them no access to language at all while they grew up, in the hope that they would revert to some posited universal and original language, the linguistic equivalent of a chemical element or primary tissue, and thereby prove once and for all which of the world's tongues had primacy. Of course what happened was that such children invented their own language amongst themselves, true languages with wide vocabularies and complex syntactical structures. It is a shame in a way that it would now be considered too cruel to repeat the experiments, just imagine how much would be revealed by a study of these unique languages.

Other theories touching on the nature and origins of language that have had some vogue include that of Professor Jayne's 1976 book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, a fascinating and bold attempt to explain language and, more fundamentally, consciousness itself. Richard Dawkins said that it “... is one of those books that is either complete rubbish or a work of consummate genius, nothing in between.” Whatever the truth or cogency of Jayne's central argument, it remains an elegantly written and provocative read and helps raise the issue of whether language is necessary for the subconscious mind, let alone the conscious, to exist. His theories of metaphor are especially interesting. But let's return to pleasure before we get bogged down in bibliography.

For me, it is a cause of some upset that more Anglophones don't enjoy language. Music is enjoyable it seems, so are dance and other, athletic forms of movement. People seem to be able to find sensual and sensuous pleasure in almost anything but words these days. Words, it seems belong to other people, anyone who expresses themselves with originality, delight and verbal freshness is more likely to be mocked, distrusted or disliked than welcomed. The free and happy use of words appears to be considered elitist or pretentious. Sadly, desperately sadly, the only people who seem to bother with language in public today bother with it in quite the wrong way. They write letters to broadcasters and newspapers in which they are rude and haughty about other people's usage and in which they show off their own superior 'knowledge' of how language should be. I hate that, and I particularly hate the fact that so many of these pedants assume that I'm on their side. When asked to join in a "let's persuade this supermarket chain to get rid of their 'five items or less' sign" I never join in. Yes, I am aware of the technical distinction between 'less' and 'fewer', and between 'uninterested' and 'disinterested' and 'infer' and 'imply', but none of these are of importance to me. 'None of these are of importance,' I wrote there, you'll notice – the old pedantic me would have insisted on "none of them is of importance". Well I'm glad to say I've outgrown that silly approach to language. Oscar Wilde, and there have been few greater and more complete lords of language in the past thousand years, once included with a manuscript he was delivering to his publishers a compliment slip in which he had scribbled the injunction: "I'll leave you to tidy up the woulds and shoulds, wills and shalls, thats and whiches &c." Which gives us all encouragement to feel less guilty, don't you think?

There are all kinds of pedants around with more time to read and imitate Lynne Truss and John Humphrys than to write poems, love-letters, novels and stories it seems. They whip out their Sharpies and take away and add apostrophes from public signs, shake their heads at prepositions which end sentences and mutter at split infinitives and misspellings, but do they bubble and froth and slobber and cream with joy at language? Do they ever let the tripping of the tips of their tongues against the tops of their teeth transport them to giddy euphoric bliss? Do they ever yoke impossible words together for the sound-sex of it? Do they use language to seduce, charm, excite, please, affirm and tickle those they talk to? Do they? I doubt it. They're too farting busy sneering at a greengrocer's less than perfect use of the apostrophe. Well sod them to Hades. They think they're guardians of language. They're no more guardians of language than the Kennel Club is the guardian of dogkind.

The worst of this sorry bunch of semi-educated losers are those who seem to glory in being irritated by nouns becoming verbs. How dense and deaf to language development do you have to be? If you don't like nouns becoming verbs, then for heaven's sake avoid Shakespeare who made a doing-word out of a thing-word every chance he got. He TABLED the motion and CHAIRED the meeting in which nouns were made verbs. New examples from our time might take some getting used to: 'He actioned it that day' for instance might strike some as a verbing too far, but we have been sanctioning, envisioning, propositioning and stationing for a long time, so why not 'action'? 'Because it's ugly,' whinge the pedants. It's only ugly because it's new and you don't like it. Ugly in the way Picasso, Stravinsky and Eliot were once thought ugly and before them Monet,

Mahler and Baudelaire. Pedants will also claim, with what I am sure is eye-popping insincerity and shameless disingenuousness, that their fight is only for 'clarity'. This is all very well, but there is no doubt what 'Five items or less' means, just as only a dolt can't tell from the context and from the age and education of the speaker, whether 'disinterested' is used in the 'proper' sense of non-partisan, or in the 'improper' sense of uninterested. No, the claim to be defending language for the sake of clarity almost never, ever holds water. Nor does the idea that following grammatical rules in language demonstrates clarity of thought and intelligence of mind. Having said this, I admit that if you want to communicate well for the sake of passing an exam or job interview, then it is obvious that wildly original and excessively heterodox language could land you in the soup. I think what offends examiners and employers when confronted with extremely informal, unpunctuated and haywire language is the implication of not caring that underlies it. You slip into a suit for an interview and you dress your language up too. You can wear what you like linguistically or sartorially when you're at home or with friends, but most people accept the need to smarten up under some circumstances – it's only considerate. But that is an issue of fitness, of suitability, it has nothing to do with correctness. There no right language or wrong language any more than are right or wrong clothes. Context, convention and circumstance are all.

I don't deny that a small part of me still clings to a ghastly Radio 4/newspaper-letter-writer reader pedantry, but I fight against it in much the same way I try to fight against my gluttony, anger, selfishness and other vices. I must confess, for example, that I find it hard not to wince when someone aspirates the word 'aitch'. Haitch Eye Vee, you hear all the time now, for HIV. It's pretty much nails on the blackboard to me, as is the use of the word 'yourself' or 'myself' when all that is meant is 'you' or 'me' but I daresay myself's accent and manner is nails on the blackboard to yourself or to others too, in itself's own way. Myself also mourns, sometimes, the death of that phrase I bade you upon pain of slapping to remember some time back, 'willy-nilly', do you remember? Fold it in your hope chest, I urged, or seal it in a baggie. Well you can take it out now. Willy-nilly. What happened there? Willy-nilly is now used, it seems, to mean 'all over the place'; its original meaning of 'whether you like it or not' (in other words 'willing or unwilling') is all but forgotten. Well, that's ok, I suppose. I don't mind either that the word 'meld' is now being used as a kind of fusion of melt and weld, instead of in its original sense of 'announce'. Meld has changed ... that's okay. There's no right or wrong in language, any more than there's right or wrong in nature. Evolution is all about restless and continuous change, mutation and variation. What was once 'meant' in the animal kingdom to be a nose can end up as an antenna, a tongue, eyes, a pair of lips or a blank space once evolution and the permutation of new DNA and new conditions has got to work. If the foulness of the Kennel Club mentality was operated in nature, just imagine ... giraffes' necks wouldn't be allowed to stretch, camels wouldn't get humps, such alterations would be wrong. Well it's the same in language, there's no right or wrong, only usage. Convention exists, of course it does, but convention is no more a register of rightness or wrongness than etiquette is, it's just another way of saying usage: convention is a privately agreed usage rather than a publicly evolving one. Conventions alter too, like life. Things that are kept to purity of line, in the Kennel Club manner, develop all the ghastly illnesses and deformations of inbreeding and lack of vital variation. Imagine if we

all spoke the same language, fabulous as it is, as Dickens? Imagine if the structure, meaning and usage of language was always the same as when Swift and Pope were alive. Superficially appealing as an idea for about five seconds, but horrifying the more you think about it.

If you are the kind of person who insists on this and that ‘correct use’ I hope I can convince you to abandon your pedantry. Dive into the open flowing waters and leave the stagnant canals be.

But above all let there be pleasure. Let there be textural delight, let there be silken words and flinty words and sodden speeches and soaking speeches and crackling utterance and utterance that quivers and wobbles like rennet. Let there be rapid firecracker phrases and language that oozes like a lake of lava. Words are your birthright. Unlike music, painting, dance and raffia work, you don’t have to be taught any part of language or buy any equipment to use it, all the power of it was in you from the moment the head of daddy’s little wiggler fused with the wall of mummy’s little bubble. So if you’ve got it, use it. Don’t be afraid of it, don’t believe it belongs to anyone else, don’t let anyone bully you into believing that there are rules and secrets of grammar and verbal deployment that you are not privy to. Don’t be humiliated by dinosaurs into thinking yourself inferior because you can’t spell broccoli or moccasins. Just let the words fly from your lips and your pen. Give them rhythm and depth and height and silliness. Give them filth and form and noble stupidity. Words are free and all words, light and frothy, firm and sculpted as they may be, bear the history of their passage from lip to lip over thousands of years. How they feel to us now tells us whole stories of our ancestors.

One final thought I should leave you with which only occurred to me the other day. Sometimes, by accident, language fails to provide and when it does the results can be hugely detrimental to the human race. Orwell famously suggested that language preceded thought, such that if the word ‘freedom’, for example, is removed from the dictionary, then the very idea of freedom will disappear with it be and be lost to humanity. A smart tyranny, he said, would remove words like justice, fairness, liberty and right from usage. But my thought occurred to me when I saw a graffito which took up a whole gable end wall in London the other day. It proclaimed, in great big strokes of white paint: “One nation under CCTV”. A good angry point – the American dictum ‘one nation under god’ sardonically replaced with a comment about Britain’s unenviable position as the Closed Circuit Television capital of the world. But ... the satirical shout all but fails for one simple reason: CCTV is such a bland, clumsy, rhythmically null and phonically forgettable word, if you can call it a word, that the swipe lacks real punch. If one believed in conspiracy theories, you could almost call it genius that there is no more powerful word for the complex and frightening system of electronic surveillance that we lump into that weedy bundle of initials. For if CCTV was called ... I don’t know something like SCUNT (Surveillance Camera Universal NeTwork, or whatever) then the acronyms might have passed into our language and its simple denotation would have taken on all the dark connotations which would allow “One nation under scunt” to have much more impact as a resistance slogan than “One nation under CCTV”. “Damn, I was scunted as I walked home,” “they’ve just erected a series of scunts in the street outside,” “Britain is

the most scunted country in the world” ... etc etc. Or maybe, just maybe, we should stick to the idea of initials and borrow a set that have already taken on the darkest possible connotations of evil and tyranny. Surveillance System. SS. ‘Britain’s SS is bigger than that of any other country.’ ‘The SS has taken over the UK’. Neither of these assertions would sound nearly as good if substituted with those lame letters ‘CCTV’, would they? Well, whether Scunt or SS surely there really should be a memorable and punchy new designation for CCTV – at the moment it is simply too greasy to wrestle. I wonder what other enemies lurk in our society that need names to bring them out into the light? I look forward to your thoughts.

I do not look forward to your thoughts on which inaccuracies and grammatical ‘mistakes’ irritate you though. This is not Feedback on Radio 4, or the letters page of the Daily Telegraph. Oh alright, I take that back. You are welcome, of course, to disagree with my dislike of pedantry and to attempt to convince me that there is ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ English.

If I were to direct you to any books about language, I would certainly recommend Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct* but above that I would rate Guy Deutscher’s *The Unfolding of Language*. This brilliant linguist mocks pedantry and the idea of stasis in language with far greater elegance and knowledge than I can. His informed empiricism, in this reader’s opinion, knocks the sometimes tortuously conjectural rationalism of Pinker into a cocked hat.

But don’t feel the need to study language as a subject, the sheer act of reading and of writing and of talking is enough. And this too is enough. I shall stop now before I get all ... oh, it’s too late, I’ve already got all ...

Until the next time, fellow linguists, thank you and goodbye.

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