

Editorial

A rather curious article appeared in print recently. The headline ‘Students shouldn’t pay to study gobbledegook’ (*The Times*, 5 March 2015) is likely to have everyone interested in education nodding in agreement at once: ‘gobbledegook’ is a wonderful word that describes language that is meaningless or unintelligible, especially when it is too technical or pompous, and surely no sensible person would want to subject students to this. The sub-heading of the article, ‘Academics should be forced to write accessibly and stop trying to hide behind obscurity’, would seem supportable too, as long as it is accepted that academics *do* actually try to be obscure, and that when they do they *can* be ‘forced’ to stop. Certainly, the aim of all of us involved in scholarly writing and publishing must be to make sure that our ideas are expressed in the clearest possible way.

But the author of the article does insist that academic writing is widely made deliberately hard to understand, and, still worse, that students are actively encouraged by their teachers to write unclearly too, and we might begin to ask whether its author really knows much about education when they claim this. Readers of *English Today* will certainly know of people who write badly without meaning to. And there are undoubtedly some others who are misguided enough to think they will impress their readers when they over-complicate their writing. But do you know many who do this deliberately? Or do you know any ‘teachers’ at all who actively train their students to be unclear in what they write, telling them that they will seem especially clever if they do so?

The author of the *Times* piece cites an unnamed ‘social science professor’ as complaining that nowadays ‘[a]ccessible writing is sneered at as unsophisticated’, linking deliberately inaccessible writing with a need to gain success in professional promotion and in the obtaining of research funding. Experience in fact shows that generally in academic circles neither of these apply: serious scholarship is well regarded if it can be understood; serious scholars advance if they can explain themselves clearly,

and funding authorities tend to support research that is sensibly argued for and that is likely to be widely studied on its completion. Pompous, over-complicated language might work on those who are easily impressed, but this does not include people who really value knowledge, who want to add to what they know and who want to share what they have found out with others. We would be wise to avoid ‘gobbledegook’ ourselves, and to warn impressionable young writers against it too.

Four of the articles in this issue concern the varying fortunes of expressions which are currently the subject of some special concern. Fehringer and Corrigan’s interest is in social variation of possessive *got* in the Tyneside region of northern England. Seaton’s focus is literary, on the historical career of *What is it like?*. Cirillo offers a new analysis of *used to*, while Kostadinova, from Leiden’s Bridging the Unbridgeable prescriptivism project, tackles *literally*. In a similar vein to these, Poole engages with different types of discourse associated with a celebrated news item. The remaining three articles here, those by Sartor and Bogdanove, Ochieng, and Menking, range over English language issues concerning students from as far apart as Siberia, Tanzania, Thailand, and Japan.

The reviews with which this issue concludes relate to three books, two on English variation and one on the teaching of English. Bacchini’s evaluation is of Bayley, Cameron and Lucas’s *Oxford Handbook of Sociolinguistics*, while Braber reviews Clark and Asprey’s new description of non-standard dialect in the English West Midlands. Lyons reviews Ushioda on second-language motivation.

We wish most sincerely to thank the following for their recent peer-reviewing duties: Kingsley Bolton, Philip Durkin, Gibson Ferguson, Azira Hashim, Ray Hickey, Fumio Inoue, Bernd Kortmann, William Kretzschmar, Merja Kytö, Heinrich Ramisch, Li Wei, and Nuria Yañez-Bouza.

The editors

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