Hard-boiled critics seek to escape yoke of scrambled English language

Date: February 3, 2013

Warwick McFayden

Language needs gatekeepers but change is inevitable.

*''When I use a word,'' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ''it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.''*

*''The question is,'' said Alice, ''whether you can make words mean so many different things.''*

*''The question is,'' said Humpty Dumpty, ''which is to be master - that's all.''*

***Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll**

LIKE, you go Humpty Dumpty. You were one revolutionary egg in the free-ranging field of etymology. Never mind master of the universe, you were master of the lexiconverse. Your exchange with the innocent Alice came to life this week through the letters page of *The Age*.

Over the past fortnight or more, the page has been pummelled with the voices of the outraged, the despairing and resigned. There's nothing new in this, and no it's not about our politicians or public transport. It's about our language, or rather the pet hates of the writers towards the overused and the overwrought members of English.

Humpty rather forcefully tells Alice he gives a word the meaning he chooses. You can't avoid the ovoid's directness, but was he right? Apparently not, perusing the comments. We're not a happy little bunch of Vegemites at all.

*It goes without saying, if you will, that having gotten this far, some persons might want closure on back-to-back impacts on the language. But having said that, at this point in time, the enormity of the currently and constantly dumbing down of how we speak is actually incredible. It is absolutely amazing and, of course, it is not going to change any time soon. Some believe speaking proper has passed on to the ultimate resting place. But with all due respect, perhaps some words have merely been sunsetted. Who knows, maybe they're not as vibrant as they should have been. Are you right? Am I right? Exactly. How ironic. Perhaps we should all go to the gastro-pub.*

Perhaps we should. Every second or third word or phrase in the preceding paragraph was taken from correspondence to *The Age*about the woes of the language.

It goes without saying that it's poor form, and then we keep saying it.

Speech is born within us as thought, which we then (some with less of it than others) say, spray, sneer, sing, whisper, wail, laugh, mumble, jibber and gabber into the world. It then becomes a living thing, and as all living things do, changes with time, and the times.

Some words grow old, some grow weary. Some are worn out from too much use. In fact, there should be a retirement home for worn-out words: The Consonant Gardener or The Verbal Village, if you will. The infirm of meaning could be placed there and perhaps when they've recuperated enough brought back out into the world. Unless they're completely wrung out. Goodbye, gadzooks. You're never coming back, methinks. Which is a pity, for it has a certain frisson of surprise and cheekiness about it.

One can feel for all these custodians of the language. One could label them pedantic or reactionary or both. But the language needs such gatekeepers, up to a point. If there were no constancy to the meaning of words, well, anarchy would be let loose upon the world. And yet if there were no flexibility, we would imprison the language in a cell without colour or light.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, Samuel Johnson saw the publication of nine years of his, and a team of researchers', work. *A Dictionary of the English Language* comprised 43,000 headwords and 113,000 quotations, which showed the context for the words. He wrote in the introduction: ''When I took the first survey of my undertaking, I found our speech copious without order and energetic without rules; wherever I turned my view, there was perplexity to be disentangled and confusion to be regulated; choice was to be made out of boundless variety; without any established principle of selection; adulterations were to be detected without a settled test of purity; and modes of expression to be rejected or received without the suffrages of any writers of classical reputation or acknowledged authority.''

Humpty Dumpty would love that pre-Johnson definition of language in the 1700s - ''copious without order and energetic without rules''.

There was a saving grace back then, however. The word cliche did not exist.