

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley
celebrates language.



I have long been struck by a strange paradox in our profession. Applied linguists and language teaching writers depend on language for their livelihoods. Yet, judging from the way they write, there are precious few who seem to love language itself – to relish its richness and celebrate its variety and expressivity. The academic genre seems dedicated to the ‘desertification’ of English, on the grounds of conformity to self-imposed conventions, and materials writing all too often produces an emasculated, lacklustre variety, on the assumption that learners must be sheltered from the genuine article. It seems we are content to subsist on the thin gruel of academic or instructional English, rather than experiencing the delight which comes from an encounter with the full vitality and diversity of the language.

I decided, therefore, to review a few books by mainly non-specialists which illuminate the language we use, and which do it in a way that bears witness to their own enthusiasm for it. These are people who delight in language and have a genuine wish to share their pleasure.



Landmarks

Robert Macfarlane continues to surprise with the freshness of his themes and the poetic quality of his language. His latest book, *Landmarks*, is a celebration of the vast vocabulary we have for describing the natural world – the landscapes, weather conditions, moods of water and sky, the changing of seasons and the states of growing plants and trees. Sadly, much of this vocabulary is being lost to a new lifestyle and a culture which has forgotten how to really look at the environment it lives in: ‘...the outdoor and the natural being displaced by the indoor and the virtual – are a ... symptom of the simulated life we increasingly live.’ Macfarlane’s aim is to reassemble ‘... some of this fine-grained and fabulously diverse vocabulary, and release its poetry back into imaginative circulation’. In the writer Henry Porter’s words these are ‘... words which do not simply label an object or action but in some mysterious and beautiful way become part of it’. The act of naming these natural particularities confers new significance on them: by naming in this way, we understand better what surrounds us and notice things we had overlooked before. Macfarlane claims that ‘... language does

not just register experience, it produces it’. Without this rich vocabulary, the landscape becomes ‘a blandscape’, and we are all the poorer for it.

The first chapter explains how the author became interested in the particularity of words related to landscape, when learning that a local inhabitant of the Isle of Lewis had compiled a ‘peat glossary’ of terms for describing all aspects of the bleak peat landscapes of that island. In the rest of the book, Macfarlane interleaves nine glossaries relating to specific landscapes with chapters about these landscapes.

The glossaries cover: flatlands, uplands, waterlands, coastlands, underlands, northlands, edgelands, earthlands and woodlands. They have some wonderfully expressive words. A few examples must suffice: *rafty* – of weather, misty, damply cold (Essex), *fizmer* – a rustling noise produced in grass by petty agitations of the wind (East Anglia), *dibble* – to rain slowly in drops (Shropshire), *fret* – a mist or fog coming in off the sea (south and eastern England), *glimro* – phosphorescence on the sea (Orkney) and *water-burn*, the same phenomenon in Kent. The glossaries alone are a word-board which repays extended browsing.

In the chapters, the author shares not only his own anecdotal relationship with all these various landscapes but also the work of others who have written memorably about them. For example, in Chapter 3, *The Living Mountain*, he reminds us of Nan Shepherd's eponymous masterpiece of landscape writing. In Chapter 4, *The Woods and the Water*, he introduces us to the precision in the writings of his great friend Roger Deakin. So, in each chapter, we have a double pleasure: reading Macfarlane's exhilarating prose describing his own experiences, and sharing in the writings of others on the same landscapes. But his overall message, that we risk losing an invaluable legacy if we continue to plunge into 'environmental illiteracy', is one we should heed – not to speak of the loss to the language itself. I am reminded of a line from R S Merwin's wonderful poem *Losing a Language*: '... the noun for standing in mist by a haunted tree.'

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable **A Word in Your Shell-like**

Dictionaries are good for the more systematic storage of language, but they cope less well with all the quirky and illogical features enshrined in popular phraseology and the connotations of proper names. For this, we need to go to idiosyncratic compendiums like *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. The 17th edition was revised by John Ayto, whose relish for the unexpected and otherwise unfathomable uses of words shines through on virtually every page. Opening at random to pages 162–3, I find entries on *Greenham Common*, *Greenwich Village*, *Grendel*, *Gretna Green marriages*, *Greyfriars* ... and much else. Pages 886–7 offer *Mau Mau*, *Max Factor*, *Maxim gun*, *Maxwell's Demon*, *Mayfair mercenary* ... and so on. Pretty well anything which informed speakers know about, because it is part of their cultural heritage and the networks of generally accepted knowledge, is there. And these are precisely the elements which make it difficult to penetrate to the heart of a language.

And if Brewer is not enough, there is Nigel Rees's *A Word in Your Shell-like*, subtitled *6,000 curious and everyday phrases explained*. As an example, pages 180–1 offer: *don't be vague – ask for*

Haig; don't call us, we'll call you; don't do anything I wouldn't do; don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes; don't forget the diver ... and much more. Taken together, these volumes provide both a precious reference resource and a delightful romp through the by-ways and back alleys of the language.


Mother Tongue **A Mouthful of Air**

Finally, two books written with verve and relish about most aspects of English. Bill Bryson's *Mother Tongue* offers a breezy and engaging account of many aspects of the English language. He covers not only the areas one would anticipate, such as the origins and historical development of English, pronunciation and spelling, but also the role of dictionaries in codifying the language, and fascinating chapters on names, swearing and wordplay. The book is refreshing, informative and full of humour.

Anthony Burgess was, of course, a celebrated novelist, so we would expect him to write well. What is less well-known is that he was both a polymath (he composed music as well as writing, for example), and an accomplished linguist with polyglot tastes. So it is a pleasure to travel with him in his exploration of language and of English. In Part I of *A Mouthful of Air*, he covers not just English, but language as a human phenomenon in general and the way other languages behave. Part 2 focuses on English alone. There is a wealth of topics here, including Shakespeare's language and a whole chapter on literature, showing especially the way poetry has been transformed. His chapter on *Low-life Language* is especially spicy. Throughout, he is outspoken, irreverent and disrespectful of authority. There is only space here for one quote, which gives something of the flavour: '... RP is no longer ... an adjunct or signal of social advance. Barrow-boys who punch computers in the money market represent the new prosperity, dressed in Cockney vowels and the glottal stop.' He is clearly fascinated by language, and shares his erudition in wise and witty observations throughout. Anyone who can make phonemes sound entertaining deserves our attention! The book dates from 1993 but has lost none of its impact.



There are, of course, exceptions to my assertions in the introduction above: David Crystal still seems able to muster enthusiasm for the language in all its variety; John Ayto continues to give pleasure in his exploration of new words; Jean Aitchison is one of the few applied linguists able to make investigating language look like a pleasurable pursuit; Deborah Tannen can find poetry in conversation, and Michael Hoey can still infect readers with his exuberant enthusiasm for the extraordinary ways in which language behaves. But they are in the minority.

And if we want to find a true zest and appetite for language, we all too often have to look outside our profession – *over the wall*. Even if we cannot teach all this to our students, it is surely part of our professional duty to remain as fully in touch with the language we teach as possible, and even demonstrate a genuine affection for it. 



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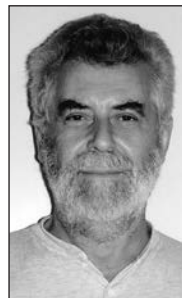
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