

Gianni Rodari was the brilliant author of modern fairytales, so reading David Marsh's extremely amusing and deeply insightful interview immediately brings to mind one of his most famous fairytales: *The Nephew's trial*. For lack of an apostrophe his uncle, "a model of virtue," becomes the fathers of all vices. Who doesn't remember the saying "a full stop lost Martin his cowl"?

The small, seemingly insignificant full stop is instead crucial to understand written texts. The most accredited version of the origin of the story is that Brother Martin, the prior of an important monastery, was charged by his superiors to write a welcome message on the entrance door: *Porta patens esto. Nulli claudatur honesto*, in other words, Be the door always open. *Be it not closed to any honest person*. Instead Martin, absent-mindedly, shifted the full stop and wrote *Porta patens esto nulli. Claudatur honesto*, in other words, *Let the door be open to no-one. Closed to the honest person*. His superiors were grievously offended by the sentence that expressed the exact opposite of any form of protective Christian

charity. They threw poor Martin out of the Order and all because of that full stop forced him to give up his "cowl," in other words the cape symbolising his status. Marsh explains how the involuntary comic use of language or a typo is always lurking in the wings and how important it is to choose the way we express ourselves, what he calls *style* or *register*, so as to avoid gross misunderstandings. Punctuation is another illustrious victim of an ill-treated language. Since it is ostensibly invisible in speech, when punctuation is used in written texts it is put to the sword, even more than it was in the sketch of the famous letter in the film *Totò, Peppino and the Hussy*. The jury is still out about the fate of languages, not only Italian. The more we write, whether it be text messages or emails, comments on websites, etc., the more concerned we are about the state of health of our language. More and more alarm bells are being rung, complaints lodged, and SOS sent about spelling mistakes, syntax and logic. Marsh is not worried about these SOS. Instead he is more concerned about the increasingly widespread habit of politicians, but

not only politicians, in Great Britain, but not only in Great Britain, to falsify the meaning of words - their own and those of others - rather than the fact they actually tell lies. This falsification naturally has moral, social and political repercussions, because raising doubts about the link between language and truth sparks widespread distrust in human relationships. Hence the need to start loving words again, words that do good. The Jesuit Giacomo Lubrano was wont to say: "Those who speak badly, think badly." A saying cited in the past by Giovanni Raboni and later copied by Nanni Moretti. And whoever thinks badly, writes badly and... votes badly. Long live Razzi ☺! In this December issue dedicated to a good laugh, all of us at Telos would like to wish you Happy Holidays and a New Year full of good humour.

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DAVID MARSH

IDLENESS IS THE ROOF OF ALL EVILS

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Telos: Writing style is nowadays often almost ignored, moved in the background by the need of ever faster communication flows as if it were a quirky habit. What do you think about this trend, made of abbreviations and lack of punctuation? How can it be diverted?

David Marsh: It's a matter of choosing the right style for the right occasion - what linguists call *register*. There are different styles of communication for different occasions, and I think people instinctively understand this. Just as no one wears a suit and tie on the beach, or goes to a funeral dressed for clubbing, so no one would write a job application, say, in the style they would use to text a friend. Each of the situations in which we use language - asking the boss for a pay rise, chatting online, making a speech at a wedding, drafting a legal document, praying, texting, rapping, tweeting, and many more - has its own conventions that would be inappropriate in other contexts. Most people find it as easy to send a text to a friend as they would to speak to them, because they are comfortable with an informal style. Many people do struggle with formal writing, often because they are worried about making grammatical errors or spelling mistakes. This is one of the reasons I wrote my book: to help them feel more comfortable about communicating in a formal context. And of course when it comes to style, the best way to communicate effectively is to use simple, straightforward language - so often it is a case of explaining to people that they don't need to use fancy language, or know technical terms; it is not as complicated as they think! I don't accept that, because we use emails, texting and social media for speed or immediacy, we are unable to communicate formally when necessary. I also think that some of the fears expressed by conservatives are exaggerated. Take abbreviations, for example: yes we use them in text messages, but abbreviations of various kinds have been around for as long as language itself - AD (Anno Domini) is the same principle, linguistically, as LOL (laughing out loud). Research shows that in fact people use traditional punctuation in emails and even in text messages most of the time. You could argue that people are writing more than ever before, because of the popularity of smartphones, whereas not so long ago the traditionalists were complaining that young people would no longer be able to write because they spent all their time talking on their mobiles. I am on the side of the young people, not the traditionalists.

The States-General on the Italian Language were held in Florence in 2014: it was pointed out that one young Italian out of five is functionally illiterate. The labour market is increasingly looking for technical/scientific skills, but there is often little concern about how crucial an asset the ability to effectively communicate is. What do you think?

One in five - what was the figure 10 years ago? Or 50 or 100 years ago? I cannot speak for Italy, but in the UK, standards of literacy are higher than they have ever been. One sometimes hears business leaders or politicians complaining about standards of English among young people and claiming that there was some golden age, perhaps 20 or 30 years ago, in which everyone knew their grammar and all was well with the world. This is rubbish. Again, it might not be comparable to the position



David Marsh has been a journalist for more than 40 years. He has a degree in history from the University of Sheffield and a master's degree in English language and linguistics from University College London. He began his career as a reporter with the Kent Messenger Group and subsequently edited local newspapers in Worcestershire and southeast London. He was a member of the launch team of the Independent in 1986, eventually becoming night editor. After leaving the Independent, he worked in Hong Kong for the South China Morning Post and then returned to London with the Financial Times. He joined the Guardian in 1995, where he is the production editor; he also edits the Guardian style guide, [Mind your Language](#) blog, and @guardianstyle Twitter feed, which has more than 60,000 followers. He is the author of *For Who the Bell Tolls: the Essential and Entertaining Guide to Grammar* (published by Guardian Faber, 2013), described as "a joy to read" ([Which English?](#)). David, 62 years old, lives with his wife, Anna, three-year-old son, Freddie, and dog, Lupin, in Newbury, Berkshire, 60 miles west of London. He also has three grown-up sons and two granddaughters. He is a Green Party activist and when he is not trying to save the planet he likes to relax by watching birds, butterflies and football, and listening to and playing music.

in Italy or other countries, but in Britain for many years a small percentage of pupils (typically 10%) were creamed off and sent to the best state grammar schools. This was in addition to the even smaller percentage whose parents paid for them to go to expensive private schools. Everyone else, around three-quarters of the population, went to "secondary modern" schools where standards were generally low. Things are much better today. In fact the biggest threat to standards of English come not from school leavers or students but from business leaders and politicians, many of whom speak in meaningless jargon and clichés and have lost the ability to communicate effectively. (And of course most of them are clueless when it comes to speaking foreign languages, unlike their counterparts in continental Europe.)

Mind your language is one of your most read columns. In there you often describe the political use of words. Could you please remind us what you wrote about the tarnished term "migrants"?

The language used by most British newspapers and politicians on the subject of migration has become debased. The very word "migrants" is toxic, used to frighten us by conjuring up images of what the Prime Minister, David Cameron, described as a "swarm" massing at our borders, threatening our economy and way of life. The word "migrant" is used to dehumanise people so that a headline will say "200 migrants drown in Mediterranean" and many readers will shrug - it's only migrants, after all. The aim is not to inform the public, or have a genuine debate about how what we can do to help some of the 60 million people who have been forcibly displaced; the object is purely to alarm establish an agenda that says: migrants are bad, and we must stop them coming here. The disparaging phrase "economic migrant" is intended to suggest that it is wrong for someone to move to another country to improve their financial situation (of course British people do this all the time but then they are known affectionately as "expats".) Terms such as refugees, displaced people and asylum seekers are more appropriate than "migrants" and these are the words we try to use in the Guardian.

Using politically loaded words is, of course, not restricted to the issue of migration. For example, have you noticed that the bad guys have "weapons of mass destruction", but the very same weapons held by the good guys (the UK) are our "independent nuclear deterrent"?

As the production editor of the Guardian, you have probably read all sort of linguistic misunderstanding. We are eager to read about the funniest ones?

Like all newspapers, we make factual errors all the time. Here is a correction we published in 2004. "In our profile of Daniel Dennett (pages 20 to 23, Review, April 17), we said he was born in Beirut. In fact, he was born in Boston. His father died in 1947, not 1948. He married in 1962, not 1963. The seminar at which Stephen Jay Gould was rigorously questioned by Dennett's students was Dennett's seminar at Tufts, not Gould's at Harvard. Dennett wrote *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* before, not after, Gould called him a "Darwinian fundamentalist". Only one chapter in the book, not four, is devoted to taking issue with Gould. The list of Dennett's books omitted *Elbow Room*, 1984, and *The Intentional Stance*, 1987. The marble sculpture, recollected by a friend, that Dennett was working on in 1963 was not a mother and child. It was a man reading a book."

Grammatical and punctuation errors that change the writer's intended meaning occur in copy every single day, but most of the time the subeditors catch and correct them. Sometimes they do slip through into publication, as when a review of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* referred to the "servant abusing Natasha" instead of the "servant-abusing Natasha": the hyphen made all the difference.

We carried the following headline:

"Alex Salmond [then leader of the Scottish National party] urged to stay sober for independence debate." We later replaced the word "sober" with "statesmanlike", which is what we had meant. On another occasion we quoted a black British right-of-centre entertainer turned politician as being a supporter of "apartheid". What she had said was that she was a supporter of "a party" (the Conservatives). But I think our funniest ever mistake, based on a single small typographical error, was when we quoted the chairman of a football team thus: "Our team was the worst in the First Division and I'm sure it will be the worst in the Premier League."

He had actually said "tea", not "team".