



[The King's English](#) by Kingsley Amis
Penguin Modern Classics (ISBN-13: 978-0141194318)

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) June 2011

*At once the 'lie' and the 'elite' of crowds;
Who pass like water filter'd in a tank,
All purged and pious from their native clouds;*

(*Don Juan* By Lord Byron - Canto XIII)

This was the first use of the word 'elite' in the English language since the mid-15th Century, when it was used to describe a Bishop-elect. It was itself a 'borrowed' term from the old French *eslite* ('selected' or 'chosen ones'). Though Byron seems to be indulging in a bit of sarcasm in *D*

on Juan

, the term fell into common usage and generally came to describe a group of people who set themselves apart from society through their tastes in the 'finer things in life'. The term was sometimes used interchangeably with 'snobs', but there is a vast difference between the pretensions of snobbery and the rigorous defence of values that was a characteristic of elitism.

I say 'was' because although there is an Elite with us today, it bears no similarity to the informed and practiced Elite of which Kingsley Amis was an exemplar. Whilst the older Elite saw themselves as guardians of culture, who would make the occasional demand on the Arts Council to cough up the cash to cover the overspend in productions of Wagner at the Royal Opera House and would demand the expulsion of anyone who dare to present themselves, at the high temple, in denims, they did hold to a system of values, even if those values were for their exclusive appreciation.

By contrast, today's elite are philistines, but instead of keeping their ignorance to themselves they see their aim as an egalitarian crusade to spread the word of their Gospel. Their contempt for the old guard matches their horror of 'chavs' from areas such as Wythenshawe in Manchester or Norris Green in Liverpool.

Both 'toffs' and 'chavs' are seen to represent an 'Old England' that the smart set would prefer to forget about. Whilst having no compunction about giving voice to their naked hatred for white working class youth (usually male), in the same breath they mock the 'toffs' and all that is associated with the old school tie brigade. As Brendan O'Neill says: "In reality, it is a highly individuated campaign rather than a political battle, motivated more by the politics of envy and resentment for the rich than by anything resembling a principled position . . ." (see Brendan O'Neill [The culture war on toffs and chavs](#)). As such they offer little alternative to the cultural traditions of the old Elite, beyond some vague relativist concept of respect for other 'cultures' and that the rest of us adhere to their version of niceness.

Amis had nothing but contempt for the upper class who spoke pedantically; careful to enunciate each spoken word. He referred to them as *wankers*. However it was the lower orders that he saw as the real enemy, though he was rather reserved in labelling them 'berks':

***Berks* are careless, coarse, crass, gross and of what anybody would agree is a lower social class than one's own. They speak in a slipshod way with dropped Hs, intruded glottal stops, and many mistakes in grammar. Left to them the English language would die of impurity, like late Latin.**

(Quoted by Martin Amis. *Guardian*, 27 May 2011)



As such, Amis indicated the class nature of language, which can be traced back to the Norman conquest when many French words entered the language. For instance the Norman nobility created a system in Briton of separating the terms for animals and their meat. The animal name is English ("cow", "sheep", "pig") while the names of the meats derived from these animals is French ("beef", "mutton", "pork"). This suggested the gap between the noble dinner and the commoners *mete* (a term which referred to food in general) that they slaughtered.

In many ways *The King's English* acts more as a companion to H.W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (published in 1922)

, which was re-issued by Oxford World's Classics in 2009 (and is the only readable reference book that I know of). The point is that both books have a certain quaintness to them as their subject is hardly taken seriously these days. Each book represents a middle-class trend of professionalisation - asserting itself as a unique strata from the businessmen and shopkeepers – who were increasingly playing the role of state functionaries in institutions and the evolution of modern local government from the 1830s onward. This trend coincided with the growth of interest in languages (see David Crystal's introduction to H.W. Fowler.

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p.viii - ix); their history and regional varieties, which saw a growth in vernacular literature, from writers such as Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, that continued up to the outbreak of World War 2.

Whereas Fowler's book was a response to an inquisitive and confident middle class, Amis's *The Kings English*

can be seen as a last gasp attempt to save the English language from 'barbarism'. What is striking about Amis's book is how subjective it is. It would be easy to simply dismiss it as the ramblings of some old reactionary. It is certainly not rigid in its analysis of words, terms, prefixes, suffixes, idioms and pronunciation, but it is the outcome of a learned and passionate mind.

The entries are in chronological order and, for the most part, are the result of Amis's frustration. Some might prefer 'intolerance' and that does seem to be the case when Amis is discussing 'Americanisms'. He opens the section by declaring his pro-American ideals and pointing to the fact that as far back as 1789 Benjamin Franklin sent the lexicographer ". . . Noah Webster a list of unauthorised words that should carry a 'discountenancing mark' in his eventual *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828)" [p.26].

American

English evolved from the various dialects of the early settlers but took on a greater (political) importance with the War of Independence. With the rise of America as a world power - particularly in the post-WW2 period – Americanisms came to replace many aspects of Anglicism and Amis bemoans this, citing the Fowler brothers, who in their book

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(1906), made clear that “The English and the American language and literature are both good things; but they are better apart than mixed.”

The section on the use of ‘And’ is one of the most hilarious, yet informative, parts of Amis’s book; suggesting how easy it is to make a blunder as well as creating a great deal of confusion. Having pointed out the misuse of a comma in a sentence that is also a list (peas, carrots and broccoli); noting the tendency to put a comma after the penultimate word and before ‘and’, he then goes on to point out that ‘and’ can be used more than once in a sentence as well as stating the legitimacy of using ‘And’ to begin a sentence.

Amis never shies away from his prejudices and the subject of this book allows him plenty of scope to indulge them whilst wittily avoiding causing offence. Take the section on the word ‘execute’ where he states that the term was generally thought to describe judicial decapitation. And those who held to this definition he refers to as the ‘half-educated’ [p. 64].

The most interesting parts of *The King's English* are those that deal with socially or politically-loaded words and uses. Having stated that he looked forward to the total equality of men and women, if only because it would bring about the end of feminism, he points to the problem with writing ‘he’ or ‘she’ and seems to agonise about it because, as he states; “. . . I would rather be safe than sorry, and to find myself the occasion of some feminist outburst about unconscious (or conscious) chauvinism . . . “ [p. 68]. Originally published, posthumously, in 1998, it is incredible to think that, though meant in jest, this statement speaks loudly to us in these more delicate times where offence is taken as a result of the most innocent of things (e.g.: see [Cadbury's insult Naomi Campbell and Black women](#)).

