

French spelling is worse

We laugh at the French Academy's tinkering with French orthography to make it easier for the poor children to spell (I predict that it will make no difference), but something far more sinister is happening in English: more sinister because it is not an identifiable institution that is at work, but a shadowy social force that is difficult to combat.

It is true that children's standard of spelling in France has declined over the last decades: even I, with my imperfect command of French, can recognise the laughably atrocious spelling of the correspondence that my sister-in-law receives from young adults in her business in France. And it is surely typical of the modern official mind that if there is a problem to be solved, the first approach is to try to define it out of existence, in this case by accepting bad spelling as correct.

But what is happening in English is worse. I am writing a chapter for an American academic book at the moment and have been shown several of its other chapters, all of high quality. As with practically all American academic writing nowadays, however, the impersonal he has been replaced by the impersonal she, except where they alternate. The expression his and hers has been universally replaced by hers and his, though the former is more euphonious and trips off the tongue more easily – as ladies and gentlemen is more euphonious and trips off the tongue more easily than gentlemen and ladies.

Needless to say, real feminists ought to be ferociously opposed to ladies and gentlemen, with its connotation of bogus and condescending gallantry directed towards women by putting

them first. They should be fighting for gentlemen and ladies (if the word ladies is permissible at all), for at least such a formulation would reveal plain and undisguised the oppressive and selfish nature of patriarchy.

The change from the impersonal he to the impersonal she is not spontaneous, but ideologically-driven. In some of the chapters of the book there is an alternation between the two impersonal pronouns which I do not believe could possibly have come about except by conscious effort.

In other words, we have entered the realm of Newspeak, but this time not imposed by any central party or state organisation, and therefore all the more difficult to combat.

The next step in the struggle, logically, would be to bring sanctions to bear on countries with languages whose nouns have gender. In French, for example, prostitution is feminine. Is this not a gross insult to women worldwide?

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