

Prophetic warnings

By Theodore Dalrymple

Is it pedantic to remark on minor errors in the use of language? I think the answer is that it depends. Error, after all, is the joy of pedants, whether the error be serious or trivial.



Recently, I noticed a standfirst in the *Economist*: “The French president issues a dark and prophetic

warning”. What the *Economist* meant was that the French president prophesied something dark. A warning cannot be known as prophetic until the future it prophesied has come to pass. Whether a warning was prophetic can only be known in retrospect.

Is this a small distinction without a difference? In this case, I think not: for the word “prophetic” here implies truth. A warning cannot be called prophetic unless what it warns of has come to pass. A man may prophesy and be mistaken;

indeed most of my own efforts at apodictic prediction have been mistaken, but a warning may not be both prophetic and mistaken. President Macron's prophecy might very well turn out to be correct – he did not give a date limit to it, so that it could never be proved incorrect – but it cannot yet be known to have been prophetic.

Does this matter? The problem with the term “prophetic warning” is that the content of the warning is thereby taken as established fact. If it is established fact, then one must act upon it as if it were such a fact. This might have dangerous consequences.

This is not to say that what President Macron said was wrong: perhaps his direst apprehensions will come true. But still, his warning cannot yet be called prophetic. It is a prediction that, like any other, might prove mistaken. That, of course, is devoutly to be wished; let us hope that his prediction does not prove prophetic, or that his prophecy did not help it to become prophetic.

First published in [The Critic](#)