

The Editorial Rod and Staff

The topics: *Roget's Thesaurus* and *Fowler's Modern English Usage*. Coincidentally, both articles hail from the *Atlantic Online*.

Sheidlower J. Elegant variation and all that. The Atlantic Online/December 1996. Review of The New Fowler's Modern English Usage, edited by RW Burchfield.

www.theatlantic.com/issues/96dec/fowler/fowler.htm

I came to Fowler's *Modern English Usage* fortuitously: It was a farewell gift from a co-worker when I took my first editorial position. My love of editorial work for over 25 years may very well be due to Fowler's inspiration: His advice has enlightened me, his wit has delighted me, and his harsh words have dismayed me. In fact, I have often had to censor some of his words in conveying his advice to authors. Nevertheless, whether harsh or humorous, his keen analysis, which sometimes required very close study on my part, was always rewarding. To illustrate the "excellent writing and good humor" that have contributed to the great success of this book, Scheidlower quotes Fowler's article on the split infinitive, which divides the English-speaking world into five classes based on their concern over this grammatical construction. No editor has lived without having read that passage.

In this book review, Scheidlower looks at a new edition of Fowler's classic by a person "hailed by *The Chicago Tribune* as 'the greatest living lexicographer'". Only a person of such standing could be qualified to take on the job of updating this "best and most popular" guide to keep it truly modern. Scheidlower provides an excellent overview of the two types of usage books: prescriptive ("laying down of rules") and descriptive ("the way a language works as observed in actual examples"). He also describes the evolution of *Modern English Usage* through several editions. In particular, he discusses the differences between the editing done by Gowers (second edition, 1965) and by Burchfield (third edition, 1996), and how Burchfield dif-

fers from Fowler himself. "Unlike Gowers, Burchfield has produced a totally new edition. He has rewritten every entry in the book." But, even though Burchfield's edition is "much more descriptive, or at least open-minded", Burchfield, like Fowler, could not resist some "harsh dismissals of disliked usages".

Winchester S. Word imperfect. The Atlantic Online/May 2001.

www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/05/winchester-p1.htm

This article is about *Roget's Thesaurus*, which I hold to be one of the wonders of the world. It is an amazing classification system not simply of words, but of all reality as humans experience it. When I use *Roget's*, I am often distracted from whatever mundane task I am about and begin to ponder life on the whole or the particular experience of which the word I was searching for is just a nuance. When I recover from my reverie, I sometimes reach for the dictionary. Apparently, however, there are people who use *Roget's* without ever reaching for the dictionary. That becomes a sticking point in this article that may, in its conclusion, be shocking to some editors.

The article starts slow but is worth the wait. Winchester discusses the nature of synonyms and the history of the thesaurus—*Roget's* was not the first; describes a thesaurus that was better than *Roget's**; explains how and why *Roget's* was different from others and a literally puzzling aspect of its use; and laments the terrible unexpected effect that the thesaurus has had on civilization.

The letters to the editor in response to this article are also worth reading and include one from Robert L Chapman, the editor of the fifth edition. Go to www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/09/letters.htm.

*Francis March: *Thesaurus Dictionary: A Treasure House of Words and Knowledge* (1903).