

Beware the English Language

(After Swift)

With the addition of new entries to the stock of personal pronouns beyond the traditional “he” and “she,” we have learned much in recent years about the tyranny of assigned gender terms, not to mention the assignment of gender itself. But language is more than pronouns, and if “he” and “she” once seemed as fundamental as atoms but do so no longer (whilst atoms themselves have opened inward into a galaxy of elementary particles), who’s to say our language doesn’t mislead us in a thousand and one other ways as well? Seemingly ordinary statements may well contain hidden catches, which is precisely why the conscientious among us are working even now to evolve more responsible and transparent ways of speaking.

In all probability the errors we fall into by employing the usual words in the usual configurations are so many and so profound we can scarcely begin to fathom them. They elude us because we inhabit them. They are the element we live in. From time to time, however, something seems to strip the veil from consciousness and we get a glimpse of influences, even constraints, on our thinking whose existence was never dreamed of till that moment. This experience of insight came to me not long ago when, for no reason, almost by free association, I happened to remember the artificial sentence typists used to practice because it contains all the letters of the alphabet—a sentence that might be considered, therefore, as a sort of cross-section of the English language:

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

If a statement like this, assembled merely as a typing exercise, should prove to be packed with myths, then truly such perils must be everywhere.

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In what is doubtless the most influential work in the humanities and social sciences (in all, the human sciences) over the past half century, Michel Foucault traces the rise of such impersonal instruments of rule as records, classifications, diagrams, tables. Beginning in the Enlightenment there came into being “a system of intense registration and of documentary accumulation. A ‘power of writing’ was constituted as an essential part in the mechanisms of discipline.”¹ The typewriter, with its much increased “power of writing,” filled a crying need for this information-based regime; and the *fox-dog* sentence (henceforth FD), employed as a typing drill, served as a clerical equivalent of the military drills discussed by Foucault with revelatory effect. Very fitting it is that something about FD makes it “register” unforgettably.

The basic architecture of FD is one of contrast. Two creatures—two “types,” one might almost say—meet as if in a proverb designed to implant itself in the group mind. Except that the fox receives two adjectives and the dog but one, the design of FD has a pleasing symmetry. Add the reversal represented by a fox that hurdles a dog, instead of a dog that hurtles after a fox, and you get a very pretty proverb indeed.

But what exactly does this saying say? To begin with, FD resonates with cultural basics like *The early bird gets the worm* and *A sleeping fox catches no poultry*, both of which warn of the folly of sleeping when you should be wide awake and, indeed, in action. In the competition of life, overindulgence in sleep makes a loser. Hence the dog of FD, so “lazy” that he lets a fox, his ancestral quarry, make a perfect fool of him. If a sleeping fox catches no chickens, neither does a dozing dog catch any foxes.

All the more seductive because they’re so pithy and entertaining, FD and the lore behind it enforce the notion (a) that life itself is a contest, and—this being so—(b) that your success or otherwise is determined by your play, and (c) that principles like (a) and (b) are immutable. It goes without saying that this fantasy of self-determination in turn supports the myth that each and every one of us earns our status in this world, regardless of society’s very real and deeply entrenched inequities. To understand why the theory that personal conduct determines success has such intuitive and well-nigh irresistible appeal at this hour, despite everything we know to the contrary, one need look no further than the kind of folklore handed down by tradition—and literally encoded in the hand itself, in the case of our test sentence.

But what makes the dog of FD so “lazy,” anyway? What but our own habit of moral typecasting, which is to say, making examples of others as if hanging a placard of shame around their neck? That canines spend much of their lives napping doesn’t make them lazy or establish their poor character. I personally know only too well a watchdog that goes from napping to snapping in the blink of an eye. Apparently the author(s) of FD just couldn’t resist deploying the epithet “lazy,” which at the time FD went into circulation was, let us remember, a term of disrepute applied notoriously to the entire non-white population.

Taunted, then, by a creature it ought to be chasing, the dog of FD stands (or lies) as a figure of failure. According to the mentality that gave us *The early bird gets the worm* and similar ditties, he who lazes rather than dedicating himself to the methodical accumulation of capital is likewise a complete and abject failure. Laziness represents the cardinal sin against the Protestant ethic, whose voice, Ben Franklin—the author of *A sleeping fox catches no poultry*, by the bye—would have relished FD as a one-sentence fable no less than he would have appreciated the typewriter itself in his capacity as a printer and inventor. The practicing typist, then, has the ethos of disciplined effort drilled in by finger exercises (see Foucault), whilst the wording of the test sentence (a) warns of the price of indolence, and (b) plays on folklore wherein you succeed or fail by your own efforts and nothing else.

If the hound of FD, who naps as his tormentor sports at his expense, figures failure, the fox of FD seems to have forgotten the brilliant exploits of his ancestors in the pre-capitalist era. Sir Reynard, the hero of the glorious fox-stories of the Middle Ages, surely knows that it's wiser to let a sleeping dog lie than rouse it by leaping over it, giving it a good strong scent, and teasing it with his tail. One might as well twist Fido's own tail. Reduced to performing a senseless stunt (as if he were a circus animal or indeed a cow vaulting the moon), the fox of FD has been denied his own hereditary attribute: brain—the power that once enabled Reynard to convince others of anything because he himself isn't tied down to belief in anything. A virtuoso like Reynard would never consent to play a part in a morality fable like FD. Reynard specializes in mocking piety, sincerity, the reigning fictions . . . morality itself.

There's something not right about the FD fox, in fact. Over the decades when learners pecked out the immortal sequence millions of times over on their Remingtons and

Underwoods, did no one pause to consider that foxes tend to be *red*, not *brown*? (“Reynard the Red,” the creature is called in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a work whose title alone signals the significance of hue.) What is it about *red* that kept it out of FD despite its obvious connection to the animal in question? Is it that red has political associations that are by no means to be attached to the winner of the fox-dog contest? Is it that even as the typists did their mechanical exercises, a certain nobody named *Redd Foxx* honed his skills in the kitchens of Harlem, performing out of public view among in front of fellow workers like Malcolm Little (later Malcolm X), thereby making himself the highly subversive comedian he became, one who could say things in public that couldn’t be said in public?

But let me be brief. Packed into a single sentence composed as a mnemonic exercise for the fingers is such misinformation as the following:

1. The world presents us with dichotomies: one thing vs. another, the quick vs. the lazy, the airborne vs. the earthbound. (Out of this style of mental bookkeeping grow the vicious binaries known to us all too well: the normal vs. the abnormal; the able vs. the disabled; heterosexual vs. homosexual; sheep vs. goats.)
2. Life itself is a test or contest with winners and losers. (Another binary, one that naturalizes the inequities of the capitalist order.)
3. In this competition every single one of us achieves success or the opposite solely and entirely by the quality of our play.

4. The moral failing of laziness or poor discipline makes losers.
5. Life's lessons (such as the above) must be protected from foxy irreverence.
6. The subversive and the incendiary, encoded by the color red, are to be excluded at all costs.

In closing, I reiterate: if a sentence as arbitrary as FD is infected to this degree with nonsense, then ordinary sentences in the English tongue must be simply rotten with errors that mislead us at every step. Beware: our very language betrays us.

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 189.