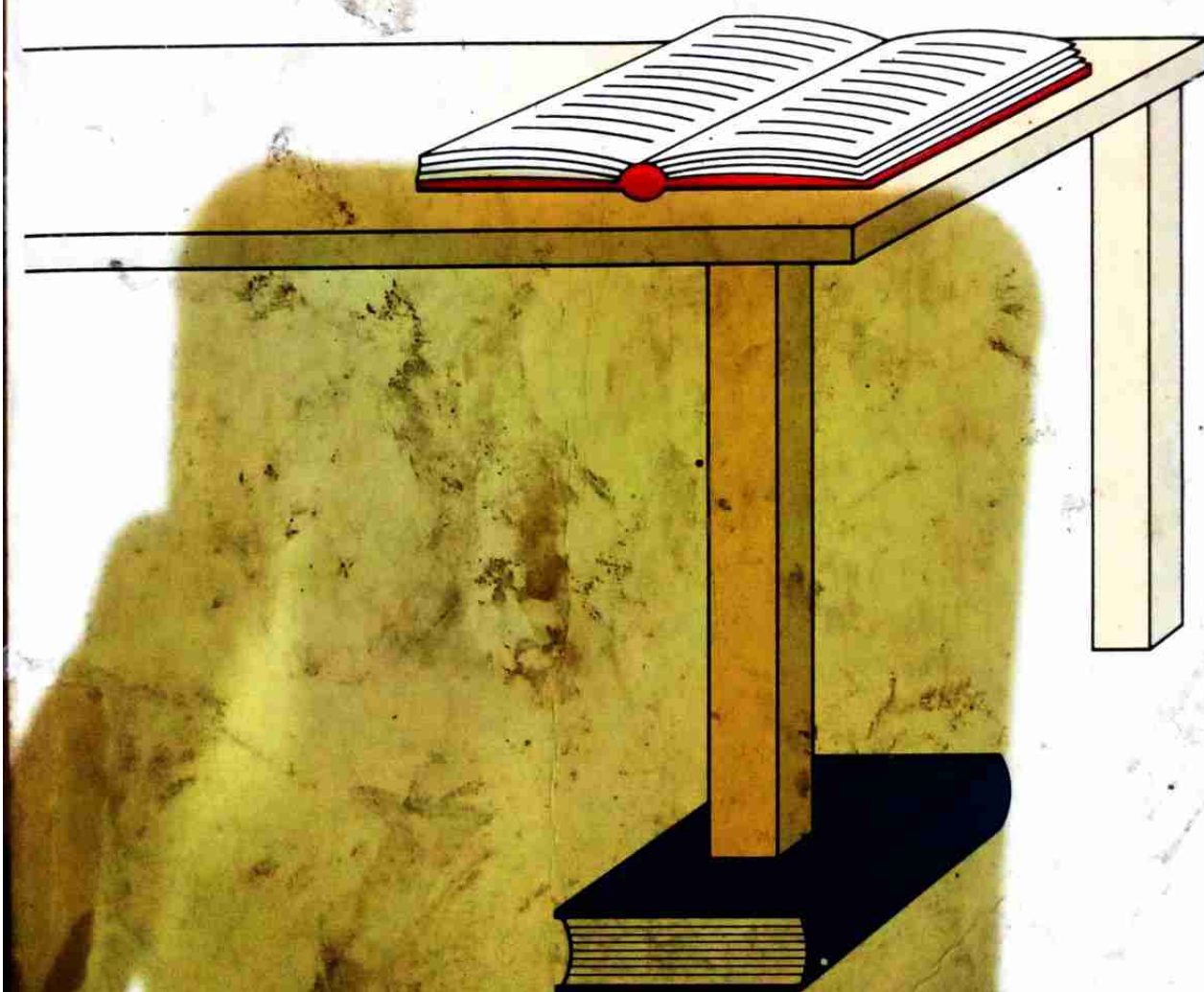


PENGUIN REFERENCE

USAGE AND ABUSAGE

ERIC PARTRIDGE



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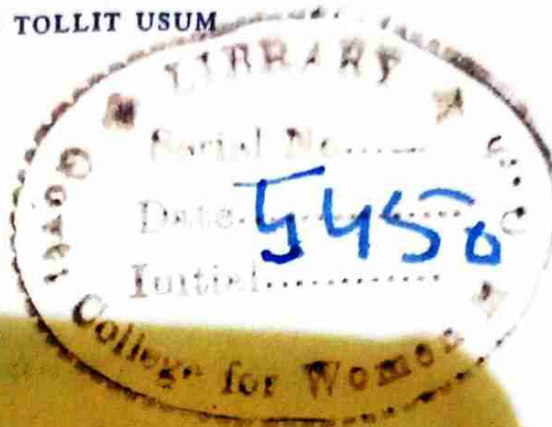
ERIC PARTRIDGE

USAGE AND ABUSAGE

A GUIDE TO GOOD ENGLISH

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ABUSUS NON TOLLIT USUM



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IN MEMORIAM
DR C. T. ONIONS, C.B.E.

FROM WHOSE LUCID LEXICOGRAPHY,
SEVERELY IMPECCABLE ETYMOLOGIES, AND HUMANELY
CORRECTIVE ENGLISH SYNTAX I HAVE LEARNT
MORE THAN I CAN FITTINGLY EXPRESS IN
THIS RESPECTFUL DEDICATION

FOREWORD

THIS book appeared first in the United States of America; in October 1942. To fit it for American publication, Professor W. Cabell Greet extensively annotated the work; his valuable additions and modifications are indicated by the use of 'square' parentheses [thus].

Usage and Abusage is designed, not to compete with H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (that would be a fatuous attempt – and impossible), but to supplement it and to complement it, and yet to write a book that should be less Olympian and less austere. Even where the two books cover common ground, as inevitably they do occasionally, I have approached the subjects from a different angle and treated them in a different manner. Because I had always intended this to be a very different book, I obtained permission from such eminent scholars as Dr Otto Jespersen, who, to the great loss of scholarship, died on 30 April 1943 at his home in Denmark; Dr C. T. Onions; Professor George O. Curme; Professor I. A. Richards; Professor William Empson; to quote at length from their magistral works. And to the Oxford University Press I owe a debt of especial gratitude: without their magnificent dictionaries, *Usage and Abusage* would have been but a poor thing.

Despite – perhaps because of – its avoidance of competition with 'Fowler' and despite its debts, as deliberate as they are numerous, to other books, *Usage and Abusage* has, whether in the British Commonwealth of Nations or elsewhere, proved itself to be a work self-contained, independent, useful. To increase its usefulness and to bring this guide up to date, much new matter has been added in the fifth (1957) edition. On the other hand, much inessential detail has been removed.

ERIC PARTRIDGE

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A

a, an. The indefinite article is often introduced, though quite superfluously, in such sentences as: 'No more signal a defeat was ever inflicted' (quoted by Fowler). In 'He's the party as had a done it', its use is merely illiterate and may be due to the difficulty of pronouncing the two d's. It may represent here in 'I would a done it' and in *had'ave* (q.v.). It occurs also in illiterate speech such as Cockney 'I arst you wot you was a-doin' of' (D. Sayers), and American Southern Mountain 'He's a-singin' a love song' (ballad). Cf. 'Father's gone a-huntin'. It can hardly be condemned when used for lyrical euphony in 'all ablowng and agrowin'.

a-, an- for 'not' or 'without' should be prefixed only to Greek stems, e.g. *anarchic*. 'Amoral' (says Fowler) 'being literary is inexcusable, and *non-moral* should be used instead.'

a for an. See **AN**.

A in titles. See **TITLES OF BOOKS AND PERIODICALS**.

a + noun + or two takes a plural verb. The formula merely obeys the general rule governing an example such as 'Either the head or the legs are injured'; thus: 'Another good yarn or two [i.e. two good yarns] are to be found in *The Moon Endureth*.' Regarded in another way, *a good yarn or two* is synonymous with and tantamount to *several good yarns*, which obviously takes a verb in the plural.

Note that *a + noun + or so* must not be used as synonymous with *a + noun + or two*. *A pint or so* = *a pint or thereabouts* = *a pint (approximately)*. It would take a singular verb. If, however, you permit yourself to murder a woman or so, you must write *a woman or so are nothing to me*: jocular, maybe; bad writing, certainly!

abdomen. See **BELLY**.

aberration is not a synonym of *absent-mindedness*, as John G. Brandon makes it in *The Mail-Van Mystery*. 'Once, in a moment of temporary aberration, Mr Dorgan drew a huge, hook-bladed knife from a hidden sheath, felt its razor-like edge carefully with a black and calloused

thumb, then returned it with every sign of satisfaction.'

abide ('can't abide him') is not strictly incorrect, but a low-class colloquialism. [In American usage it may have homely or half-humorous quality.]

ability and capacity. *Ability* is a power to do something, or skill in doing it, whether the something be physical or intellectual. 'Here, promotion is by ability, not by birth'; 'He has outstanding ability as a surgeon - a writer - a pugilist . . .'. *Capacity*, apart from its physical sense ('power to receive or to contain': capacity of 1,000 gallons), means either 'power to absorb or learn knowledge as opposed to power-in-doing' or 'innate or native power as opposed to acquired power'. 'My capacity for mathematics is negligible.'

abjure, 'to renounce an oath', is very easily confused with *adjure*, 'to request earnestly, to charge a person under oath'. (*The Conc. O.D.*)

-able and -ible. See **-IBLE** and **-ABLE**.

ablution is now intolerably pedantic for 'the act of washing one's hands and face'; *perform one's ablutions* is but a sorry jest; and *ablution facilities* is an example of pompous Whitehalese, castigated by Sir Ernest Gowers. *Ablution* should be reserved for its religious senses:

1. (General.) 'The washing of the body as a religious rite.'

2. (Anglican; Roman Catholic.) 'The washing of the chalice and paten after the celebration.'

3. (Roman Catholic.) 'The washing of the priest's hands before assuming the sacred vestments, and during the celebration.'

4. (R.C.) 'The wine and water used to rinse the chalice, and wash the fingers of the celebrant after communion.'

(Definitions: *The O.E.D.*)

abnormal; subnormal; supra-normal. Any departure from the *normal* (or usual or standard) is *abnormal*. To distinguish further: Any such departure that is *below* the normal is *subnormal*; *above* the normal, *supra-normal*.

about should be avoided in such phrases as these: 'It is about 9 or 10 o'clock'; 'The