



KATE BURRIDGE

# Weeds in the Garden of Words

Further observations  
on the tangled  
history of the  
English language

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## WEEDS IN THE GARDEN OF WORDS

If the English language is a glorious garden, filled with exotic hybrids and the continuing tradition of heritage specimens, then it is no surprise that we will also find some weeds. Linguistic weeds may have pronunciations we don't want or constructions that are out of place. We may be trying to hold on to words and usage we should perhaps have said farewell to. But as all gardeners know, what one gardener calls a 'weed', another may call a 'flower'. The same goes for words and their usage in English – sometimes we just haven't realized their virtues.

Kate Burridge follows the international success of her book *Blooming English* with another entertaining excursion into the ever-changing nature of our complex and captivating language.

Kate Burridge is Professor of Linguistics at Monash University. She has published widely on English language and linguistics and is well known for her broadcasts on ABC Radio's Soundback.



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OF WORDS

*Further observations on the tangled history  
of the English language*

Kate Burridge



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*And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field.*

Genesis 3:17–18



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# Introduction to the Weedy Traits of the English Language



*Weeds, as a class, have much in common with criminals.  
When not engaged in their nefarious activities both may have  
admirable qualities; a thief may be an affectionate husband  
and father outside business hours; an aggressive weed in one  
environment may be a charming wild flower in another.*

Sir Edward Salisbury puts it beautifully in the preface to his book  
*The New Naturalist: Weeds and Aliens.*

Weed experts, I gather, have great difficulty coming up with a scientific account of the term *weed*. In my own attempts to come to grips with the concept of the garden weed, I've encountered many different definitions: 'a plant growing where we do not want it'; 'a plant whose virtues are yet to be discovered'; 'a plant growing out of place'; 'a nuisance plant that interferes with human activities'; 'a plant that you do not want'; 'a plant you hate'. More precise definitions, it seems, are impossible – in fact, probably not practicable. The difficulty is that weeds are context specific. It depends entirely on location and on time whether something is classified as a weed or not.

Different soils clearly have different weeds. Some gardeners might spurn a plant that usurps and overgrows their garden. Others may admire that very same plant for its ability to thrive in the impoverished soil of their inner-city courtyard. Lantana, I recall when I was growing up, was much praised for its flowers and its capacity to flourish in neglected gardens. Like that other beautiful 'weed' morning glory, this prickly scrambler provided spectacular camouflage for suburban eyesores – rubbish mounds and rickety fences. Most Australians will also be familiar with the purple flowers

of that very pretty agricultural weed *Echium plantagineum*. On one hand, it competes with other plantings and contains alkaloids that can poison cattle. On the other, this attractive ‘wildflower’ provides purple carpets for tourists to enjoy and produces flowers for nectar when other species can’t. Presumably, circumstances dictate what common name this weed goes by – Paterson’s curse or salvation Jane. Many people make tea and wine out of that delightful weed, the dandelion. There are even some who grow it as a crop. Scotch (or English) broom is also a glorious-looking pest. Like so many other ‘garden escapes’, it does particularly well in the pasture land and bushland of North America and Australia. Plants often start off as cherished species – perhaps deliberately introduced as feed plants or garden ornamentals – but over time turn into aggressive weeds. When a prize was awarded to ‘prickly pear jam’ at the Australasian Botanic and Horticultural Society meeting in Sydney in 1848, *Opuntia stricta* (or common prickly pear) was highly valued as a drought-resistant fodder. But by the 1920s this rampaging menace was invading Queensland and parts of northern New South Wales at a rate of a million acres a year, until finally the cactoblastis moth was introduced to control the infestation. Clearly, many plants are weeds of our own making – we planted them in the first place. And frequently we are also the ones responsible for their success. Humans are among the main agents of weed dispersal. Moreover, many noxious weeds are totally dependent on the conditions and habitats that human activities create.

And so it is with the linguistic weeds that we produce. They often are structural features of the language whose virtues have yet to be realized. They are the pronunciations we don’t want, the constructions that are out of place, the words we create but hate. Like weedy plants they are entirely location and time specific. Many of our current *bête noires* are features we overlook or even admire in other languages. I have never, for instance, heard a speaker of English condemn the nasal vowels or dropped consonants of the French language. Double negatives (as in *I don’t want no dinner*) are rejected by many as a mark of illiteracy in English; yet double, even multiple negation is a standard attribute of many languages, including French. Features that we revile in the speech of others may well

be rampant in our own speech but go completely unnoticed by us (hesitation features such as *umm* and *err*, discourse particles such as *you know*, *yeah-no* and *I mean*).

This kind of doublethink shows up clearly in our confused attitudes towards regional variation. Many of us treasure the English spoken by the Irish and are horrified to learn that the linguistic effects of Irish are some of our current-day weeds, such as *baitch*, *youse* and *growun* (for ‘grown’). Many enjoy the invariant tags of the Welsh (‘They do good work, isn’t it’), the l-dropping of the Scottish (*fou* ‘full’ and *saut* ‘salt’), and their glottal stops (*wa’er* and *bu’er* for ‘water’ and ‘butter’) but despise these very same features when they appear on our own doorstep. Most of us, it seems, admire the linguistic features characteristic of picturesque and unspoiled rural parts of the English-speaking world. But often these are precisely the same features that we condemn in the regional dialects of heavily industrialized urban centres – the quaint rustic forms that make us go weak at the knees suddenly become bad and ugly-sounding.

Over time, too, the status of linguistic features can change strikingly. Words such as *aint* and *gotten* once flourished in the language of some of our finest writers. Something happened, and they fell from linguistic grace. Expressions at one time adored by speakers are often abandoned by those same speakers – overuse renders them a weedy cliché. The days are already numbered for some of our current vogue expressions – *absolutely*, *no worries*, *bottom line*. I’m sure there are many you would like to see eradicated. Even grammatical weeds are totally centred around human value judgements and these change with time. An exuberance of negative expressions (two, three, perhaps even more negators in a sentence) was a prized feature of Old and Middle English; yet, as earlier described, double negation has become the bane of many speakers today. Prized pronunciations can suddenly come to the attention of speakers and become irksome – sometime during the 18th century h-dropping, g-dropping, once posh, became scoffed at.

On the other hand, time can witness linguistic weeds turning into prized garden ornamentals. American linguist Geoffrey Nunberg describes how Benjamin Franklin once wrote to dictionary maker Noah Webster to try to convince him to ‘set a discountenancing mark’ upon the verb *to notice* and the use of

*improve* in place of *ameliorate*. It's hard for us to understand what possible objections Franklin could have had to these verbs. Both *notice* and *improve* are thoroughly respectable today. And so it is that many of our current irritating colloquialisms, sloppy pronunciations, errors of grammar, new-fangled meanings and slangy expressions will end up being part of the repertoire of Standard English in the future. Today's weeds can become tomorrow's respected and rewarding species.

### 'Magnificent constitutions'

*Few plants, when they are young and newly planted, can compete successfully with weeds, which have the advantages of enormous vigour, drought resistance, few diseases and, in many cases, the ability to produce anti-growth substances to fetter the development of other plants.*

Peter Cundall *Seasonal Tasks for the Practical Australian Gardener* 1989

I was crestfallen to see that the thriving (and therefore much-loved) plants in my own garden all featured prominently in Suzanne Ermert's *Gardener's Companion to Weeds*, most notably the white arum lily and the seaside daisy. That my blue periwinkle invaded and smothered all adjacent plantings I attributed to my gardening prowess – but there it was on page 164. There's clearly another aspect to weeds. They are highly successful. A component of *The Macquarie Dictionary* definition of *weed* is 'grows profusely'. Weeds, it turns out, share certain biological features that enable them to prosper. They have prolific and effective seed production and dispersal mechanisms, or they spread by rhizomes and tubers (which means they can regenerate from the smallest of fragments), and they're often unpalatable to browsers. In short, they are very, very hard to kill. As Vita Sackville-West describes them, 'all appear to be possessed of magnificent constitutions'.

One of the challenges confronting linguists is to determine the conditions that allow linguistic weeds to prosper in a particular language at a particular time. For example, sounds naturally drop from the ends of words and English has experienced massive ero-

sion of this kind. This has coincided with a complete overhaul of its grammar. All our close linguistic relatives are experiencing these same changes, but at different times and at different rates. Why? And why, within one language system, do some weeds end up flourishing while others eventually wither? For instance, language change is typically marked by rivalry between different forms. So what are the capabilities that enable one feature to be triumphant and spread through the language? Hundreds of slang expressions are created by speakers each year. Most fall by the wayside but some succeed – why? Pronunciations such as ‘shoo’ and ‘shooter’ for *sue* and *suitor* were denounced in the 17th century as ‘barbarous’. They were eventually eradicated. So how come *sugar* and *sure* (pronounced today as ‘shooger’ and ‘shaw’) snuck through the controls? And what enables certain linguistic weeds to extend their perimeters beyond one social group to spread to others? Many of the grammatical weeds I describe in this book are everywhere. Features such as irregular verb forms (*seen* in place of *saw* and *done* in place of *did*), plural forms of the pronoun ‘you’ (*youse*, *you-all*, *you-uns*) and *never* as a general negator crop up in non-standard varieties all over the English-speaking world.

The weed image raises an obvious question. Clearly there are truly nasty plants out there that pose serious environmental threats. But do our linguistic weeds ever have a truly detrimental effect on the landscapes they infest? They can be pesky, it’s true. Weedy words can be distracting to people, and if they are distracting, they interfere with effective communication. As you well know, linguistic features that offend or irritate (for whatever reason) become particularly salient. You might suddenly notice the chap you’re speaking with says ‘yeah-no’ a lot of the time and it’s starting to irk. Suddenly, all you can hear is the repetition of this disagreeable phrase. Meaning shifts, too, can occasionally cause misunderstandings at the time they’re occurring. What does that person mean by ‘next Saturday’ or ‘a couple of bread rolls’? What’s more, linguistic weeds can even disrupt the language system by introducing complexity and anomaly elsewhere in the language. Pronunciation changes, for example, often mess up the grammar. But while linguistic weeds are bothersome, they’re rarely truly pernicious.



So another challenge for linguists is to discover why it is that certain features become irritating to speakers. Certainly, many of our linguistic weeds represent recent developments in the language, and speakers are generally suspicious of the new. Yet many neologisms sneak in unnoticed, and many exist for some time, only later to attract adverse attention. There are pronunciations, for example, that many today condemn as sloppy – ‘ashoom’ for *assume* and ‘prezhoom’ for *presume*, for instance. No one has yet, as far as I know, commented on a similar pronunciation change that is currently turning *tree* into ‘chree’ and *street* into ‘shstreet’. The little marker *yeah-no* had been in Australian English for a good while before it started to crawl under the skin of some speakers. Why only now has it become such a source of irritation? Really, all this has little to do with the language as such, but with what is at stake socially. The significance of language usage derives from its cultural and social setting, and our squeamishness about certain words, pronunciations and grammar arises accordingly. Many encounter *yeah-no* for the first time in television and radio sports interviews, especially where competitors are being interviewed following a win. The expression occurs particularly often with younger, less experienced interviewees. Perhaps it is these associations with sports-speak that have now rendered *yeah-no* a weed for some.

### Classifying weeds

*One of the prettiest weeds that we have in our modern garden, and which alternates between being our greatest joy and our greatest torment, is the Welsh Poppy. It succeeds so well in this dry soil that it sows itself everywhere; but when it stands up, with its profusion of yellow flowers well above its bed of bright green leaves, in some fortunate situation where it can not only be spared, but encouraged and admired, it is a real pleasure.*

Mrs C W Earle

*Pot-Pourri from a Surrey Garden 1897*

Classifying weedy plants, I gather, is a tricky business. There is no one category – be it habitat, growth behaviour, morphology, life history – that will do for all plants in the weed flora. I have cho-

sen to classify these linguistic weeds straightforwardly according to habitat; in other words, where they reside in the language system. The book therefore organizes these weeds into three main groups – ‘lexical weeds’, ‘the weeds in sounds and spelling’ and ‘grammatical weeds’. These headings are handy but not entirely accurate. Like all our linguistic labels they give the impression of easily identifiable and neatly compartmentalized entities. However, such tidy classifications are never the reality and you’ll find there is some overlap.

Your reactions to these weeds will be interesting. It’s true, I have organized the pieces into these sections for convenience, but also because we do react differently to linguistic weeds depending on where they live. With most speakers, I find, there is a continuum of tolerance. People appear to feel far more generous towards weeds within vocabulary than to those that inhabit our sounds and spelling. And weedy tendencies in grammar, it seems, attract the fiercest condemnation of all. Finally, you may find yourself surprised at the inclusion of some of the linguistic specimens here. This is to be expected. The expression ‘weed’ is, after all, anthropocentric – we view something as a weed in terms of our own experiences and values. As I mentioned earlier, the garden weeds in my *Companion to Weeds* include some of my most cherished possessions. And so it is with our linguistic weeds. They are totally centred upon the bees that are in our bonnets.

Just a final note on the organization of this book. Like its parent, *Blooming English*, *Weeds in the Garden of Words* is meant for dipping into, and this can be done at any point. Even though they might deal with related themes, the individual pieces are all self-contained. Let me also emphasize that these pieces were originally written to be read aloud on radio. They are therefore chatty, informal and probably in style resemble something closer to speech than to writing. They have no footnotes or endnotes. However, at the end of the book I have provided a bibliography detailing the authors I have cited. The list includes works of literature, of linguistics, and of course of gardening; the books that have inspired me – most notably *The Illustrated Virago Book of Women Gardeners* and Peter Cundall’s *Seasonal Tasks for the Practical Australian Gardener*, which supplied many wonderful quotations.

**Backdrop – standard languages and gardens**

*I cannot lay too great stress upon the neatness in which a lady's garden should be kept. If it is not beautifully neat, it is nothing. For this reason, keep every plant distinct in the flower-beds; let every tall flower be well staked, that the wind may not blow it prostrate; rake away dead leaves from the beds, and trim every flower-root from discoloured leaves, weeds, &c.; remove all weeds and stones the moment they appear; and clear away decaying stems, which are so littering and offensive to the eye. There is always some employment of this kind for every week in the year.*

Marie E. Jackson *The Florist's Manual* 1822

The story of English is a tangled history of nature and human activity – the endless tussle between, on one hand, ‘the boundless chaos of a living speech’ (as Samuel Johnson put it in the preface to his dictionary) and, on the other, Standard English, the variety that has been created over the years by the prescriptive endeavours of people such as Samuel Johnson.

Standard languages represent a kind of linguistic ‘best practice’ – a set of behaviours that claims to excel all others. Correctness, precision, purity, elegance are the perceived qualities of the standard. It is the measure of excellence – the ‘benchmark’, if you like, against which we gauge all other varieties of the language. Standard English is promoted in schools and used in law courts and government institutions; students use it in essays; broadcasters speak it on radio (although these days this requirement is sometimes relaxed); instructors teach it to foreign students of English. Speakers are somehow expected to acquire its rules and those that don’t are often regarded as recalcitrant, lazy, even incompetent. They are said to have poor grammar – or worse, no grammar at all. You’ll notice that we even call this privileged variety ‘the standard language’ and not ‘the standard dialect’. Since dialects are held to be substandard varieties of a language – varieties not quite up to scratch – the label ‘standard dialect’ would seem a kind of self-contradiction. For many people Standard English *is* English. What they think of as the rules of English grammar are the rules of this one

variety – more especially, in fact, its written form. Words aren't somehow real until they appear in a dictionary. People often ask whether something they've heard, or even used themselves, is an actual word or not. Use isn't enough to qualify something as language.

### **Bounding and cultivation**

*Large or small, the garden should look both orderly and rich.  
It should be well fenced from the outer world. It should by no  
means imitate either the wilfulness or the wildness of Nature.*

William Morris *Hopes and Fears for Art* 1883

Standard English is a variety that has been artificially constructed over many, many years, not by any English Language Academy (because there hasn't been one), but by a network of different groups, including writers of style guides and usage manuals, dictionary makers, editors, teachers and newspaper columnists. Over the years their cleaning-up activities have amassed an arsenal of prescriptive texts that have gone to promote and legitimise a single fixed and approved variety. These dictionaries, grammars and handbooks record, regulate, tidy up and iron out. Their neat lists, elegant definitions and fine-spun paradigms necessarily ignore the 'wilfulness' and 'wildness' that are part of the diversity and variability necessary for a language system to thrive.

Standard English is in fact a recent arrival on the linguistic scene. Standard languages have to be nurtured, and from the time of Old English, around a thousand years ago, until the late Middle Ages, the language existed with very little attention paid to it at all. Certainly, there was one dialect of Old English known as West Saxon that did have a bit of an edge over the others, but this is not, however, the predecessor of our modern standard. To begin with, its career was cut short by the arrival of the French in 1066. For several centuries after the Norman Conquest, English was well and truly under the Norman French thumb. French and Latin were the languages of power, and when people wrote it was typically in these languages. Eventually when writers started writing in English again, they did it in their local variety, using home-grown forms and spellings. And most important, there was no single prestige model

that people were under pressure to follow. There were no dictionaries, no grammars, no spelling books, and variation was rampant. People's attitude to English also reveals it was a long way from being standardized. They didn't think of it as entirely respectable, so when it came to serious literature they continued to use Latin.

But things gradually changed. By the late medieval period the dialect used in and around London was starting to get the upper hand. From the early 1400s those in King Henry V's court began corresponding in English, and much of the business of government at this time was conducted in 'King's English'. It's important to emphasise that the success of the London dialect wasn't because of any linguistic advantage it had over other contenders. It wasn't a conscious choice. When varieties come to dominate in this way, it's not for linguistic reasons. London English piggy-backed on a series of geographical, cultural, economic and political episodes. These included the emergence of London as a political and commercial centre and its proximity to Oxford and Cambridge; Chaucer's literary genius; and William Caxton's first printing presses in Westminster – these had the combined effect of putting London English in such a position that standardization was inevitable. If a city other than London had possessed the same non-linguistic advantages (let's say York), the dialect of that region would have spread in the same way. And how different Standard English would be today!

It was during the 16th century that English really began to take off. Suddenly people started to talk about the language in regard to its grammar, vocabulary and writing. And there were clues that standardization was just around the corner, for they also began to talk about their language in a more judgemental fashion. Sure, people had been making judgements about other people's speech for centuries. Observations on regional varieties were commonplace, but now for the first time we find a real vocabulary of abuse. On one hand, there was the right sort of language (described as 'pure', 'natural') and, on the other, the wrong kind (described as 'corrupt', 'false'). These labels hint at the concept of an approved standard – to stray away from this ideal was to stray away from what was pure and good. But it still took until well into the 18th century before English truly ousted Latin as the language of learned and technical writing. In the

preface to his 1653 *Grammar of the English Language*, John Wallis wrote of how the importance of English had driven him to write a grammar. I should add that Wallis had chosen to write his grammar in Latin. Poor old English still wasn't quite up to the task!

Clearly, gardens and standard languages have much in common. Both are human constructions and they share two fundamental characteristics. They are restricted by boundaries and they are also cultivated. Prescriptive endeavours have left Standard English regularized and homogenized – bound. There is no room for variation. There is no room for options. Speakers cannot vacillate between *lie* and *lay* or *I done it* and *I did it*. Only one choice carries the stamp of approval. We are looking here at a kind of linguistic monolith with a fixed set of strict rules and conventions that now defines linguistic ‘best practice’. It is an ideal we have for our language, and everyday usage will never quite come up to scratch. Even speakers and writers whose language comes closest to ‘best practice’ frequently violate the rules of the Standard – probably because the Standard is, in a sense, too correct. Constructions like *Whom did you see at the party?* and *The data are misleading* are simply too pernickety for many speakers, even for formal occasions.

Indeed, the creators of the Standard themselves do not always observe their own prescriptions. Later in this book I look at some of the recommendations of one of the very early codifiers, Bishop Lowth. His *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) was one of the first grammars of English. Lowth was very clear in the grammatical rules he laid down. Yet, in his own private correspondence, he constantly flouted these rules. It's not clear what motivated his choices here. Perhaps his recommendations were inappropriately formal for his intimate letters. But the point is that language is simply not amenable to being forced into perfect standard moulds, and anyone who attempts to do so will undoubtedly find themselves in as contradictory a position as Lowth did. Prescriptive endeavours necessarily promote a kind of mental dishonesty – either self-deception or full-blown hypocrisy.

Speech communities are extremely complex and language has to cover a huge range of social behaviour. Yet, variability and mutability – qualities intrinsic to any linguistic system – do not sit

happily within the classifications of a pure and consistent standard variety. The label ‘standard’ entails not only ‘best practice’ but also ‘uniform practice’ and this is only practical in the context of the written language, especially formal written language. To adapt William Morris’ description of the garden, it’s the written language that we can fence off from the outer world. The writing process (and the conscious self-censorship that accompanies it) has a straitjacketing effect that safeguards the language to some extent from ‘the boundless chaos of a living speech’ – in other words, the flux and variance that is the reality of language. And in a sense it’s our dependence on, and veneration for, the written word that now blinds us to this reality.

### **The garden is never static**

*... perhaps the chiefest attraction of a garden is that occupation can always be found there.*

Alicia Amherst, *Children’s Gardens* 1902

Clearly writers of dictionaries and grammars are going to be in an impossible position here. In their book on English words, linguists Stockwell and Minkova describe how many fine dictionaries such as *Funk and Wagnall’s* have now dropped by the wayside because they didn’t update. People simply stopped using them. And yet if the dictionary makers and handbook writers do acknowledge current usage, howls erupt about declining educational standards. As one outraged citizen put it after the appearance of Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary* in 1961: ‘If a sentry forsakes his post and places an army in danger, the penalty is severe. If a guardian ceases to guard and neglects his duty to children, there are few who would not condemn. If a great dictionary forsakes its post as the guardian of our language, how can one avoid disappointment?’ (cited in Preston 2002, p. 149)

People clearly have faith in the idea of linguistic perfection, in the notion that a language should be uniform and consistent – and they want their reference books to tell them what is and what is not correct usage. Dictionaries and handbooks that acknowledge change are seen to be abdicating their responsibility. So too are

style manuals that recognise other options. But linguistic systems are never static and dictionaries and handbooks must reflect this to stay current. Take the collision in Antipodean English of the two verbs *bring* and *buy* – increasingly *bought* is appearing as the past of *bring* (instead of *brought*). Certainly these are early days, but the fact that *bought* now sometimes appears in print as the past of *bring* suggests the change is well and truly entrenched. Yet it would be a brave editor who takes this new usage on board. Of course, no one cares these days that *go* has filched its past tense *went* from *wend*. No one worries that the most common verb – the verb *to be* – is a mixture of four different verbs – *was/were* (from Old English *wesan*); *is/am* (from the verbal root *es-*); *are* (from *er-*); and *be* (from Old English *beon*). This is one linguistic mongrel! Standard English will eventually have to embrace the mixed pedigree of *bring* too – that is, if it survives.

Linguists are also clearly in an impossible position. I recall the time a new style guide for English appeared on the scene. In a discussion on radio with the writer Kim Lockwood, I suggested that the rules he outlined weren't cut-and-dried and that he should have guided his readers through the range of available options. Other rules, I argued, were no longer valid and should be dispensed with. One frustrated talkback caller summed me up – 'She doesn't get it, does she?' And that caller was right. There is a sense in which we linguists definitely don't get it. It doesn't matter what linguistic science says. Speakers of English believe in a standard language. They believe in, if not the existence, then the possibility of a totally regular and homogenous language system. And such beliefs are powerful – as anyone who has tried to mess with the cherished standard knows. Yet we are going to have to mess with this cherished standard if we are to develop a better and more constructive public discourse on language. To create a standard language or to build a garden is to enter into a partnership with natural processes. Languages and gardens are never finished products.



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