

### Book reviews

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*The Chemist's English*; by R. Schoenfeld, VCH, Weinheim, 1985, xii + 173 pages, DM 42.00; £12.50; US \$16.95. ISBN 3-527-23609-8. (Available in the U.K. from the Royal Society of Chemistry.)

This is an admirable book. I cannot recall reading for review purposes a book that has given me so much pleasure.

The author, who writes from long-experience as editor of the *Australian Journal of Chemistry*, states that he did not set out to teach readers to write good English, but to give them an appetite for good English. He describes his objectives as those of keeping the readers entertained and giving them confidence to write, but he surely hoped for, and will achieve, much more, namely a marked improvement in the writing style of anyone who takes note of what he has to say.

The nature of the book cannot be conveyed by presenting a few quotations from it, because each of the 35 chapters is a rounded essay to be read in its entirety, and in most cases brings out a single important aspect of the language. This is done in a most pleasant and amusing manner that leads readers on to appreciate concepts and usages that they might have thought they did not need to know about. I liked best the last chapter, entitled "Lights! Camera! Action!", in which, in considering the question of word order, the author advises readers to imagine themselves to be transcribing the sentence under analysis into the camera script for a silent documentary film, and finding that the most effective order of words conforms to the order in which the image builds up. (Those following this advice would no longer write, for example, "The solid was dissolved in ether, filtered, and...", a form which I see very often from British as well as foreign authors.) I must confess to surprise, however, at the sentence in this chapter reading as follows: "The first two instructions in scientific writing that the young chemist is likely to receive from his supervisor are: 'Don't overuse the passive voice' and 'Avoid writing in the first person.'" If this assertion is valid in Australia it points to a greater concern for the language in schools there than in those in Britain, where, in my experience, most students would not know the meaning of 'passive voice', and many not even that of "writing in the first person."

In general Dr. Schoenfeld accepts that usage must ultimately prevail over rules of grammar and older dictionary definitions. Thus he supports the use of *due to* where the accepted 'authorities' (including Sir Ernest Gower's *Plain Words*, which is also reviewed here) would insist on "*owing to*". He also rightly accepts the use, within the confines of Chemist's English, of *reflux* as a transitive verb. However, he still holds out (I am glad to see) against the use of *react* as a transitive verb (e.g. 'We reacted A with B' or 'A was reacted with B'), but I note that the highly regarded *Collins English Dictionary* (regarded by many experts as the best for information on current usage as distinct from etymology) gives as a definition, '*Chem.*: to undergo

or cause to undergo a chemical reaction', and it seems that the less literate chemists have prevailed. He has come reluctantly to tolerate the use of *anticipate* in the sense of *expect* (again condemned in *Plain Words*) and not only in its stricter sense of 'foreseeing an event, and doing something about it before it happens', making the comment: "Defenders of the distinction often make the point that expecting a marriage is not the same as anticipating it. But, at a time when social customs change, can we expect verbal customs to remain unchanged?"

I hope that this excellent book will be read by all those who submit papers in English to the *Journal of Organometallic Chemistry*, or at least by those whose mother tongue is English. And this prompts me to reflect on how pleasant it must be to be the editor of the *Australian Journal of Chemistry* and to have to worry about the choice between *that* and *which* in cases in which common usage would allow either. Most of the papers I deal with are from those who are not writing in their own language, and as I write this review I have in front of me a not untypical manuscript of which the following passage (amended only by removal of names of species which might permit identification of the author) is representative: 'We can suppose that reaction occurs by chlorine substitution and formation of the X monodentate complex. The loss of a bulky Y ligand and evolution to the bidentate complex is the final step. In supporting of this mechanism we have noted that the product of A with B (in order to obtain complex C) shows in some cases an IR spectrum according to a mixture of compounds. A major ability to carbonylation of the X complex respect to the Y complex (carbonylated only under forcing conditions) make the carbonylation possible. Comparison between spectra data suggest a decreasing donor ability to the Z moiety  $A > B > C$  which is according to the ability to substitute the Y ligand. The W ligand has a minor steric hindrance due to a lower size; this fact, along with its minor donor ability, leads to the isolation of the monodentate complex as the only product.' (A final point of interest is that, English being as tolerant as it is, the meaning of this passage can be discerned at every point in spite of the many errors!)

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*Plain Words*; by Sir Ernest Gowers. Revised edition by S. Greenbaum and J. Whitcut. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1986, vii + 288 pages, £3.95, ISBN 0-11-7011215.

This is a new edition of an excellent publication which first appeared in 1954. It is reviewed here not because it has any special relevance to chemists but because I should like to persuade all those who submit papers in English to me for the *Journal of Organometallic Chemistry* to read it carefully and then keep it at hand for reference. There is probably no writer of English who would not derive some benefit from it.

The emphasis is heavily upon writing simple and unambiguous English, and less on grammatical conventions and niceties of word usage, though these are not neglected. The chemical literature would be much more pleasant to read, and much