



Two self-published books

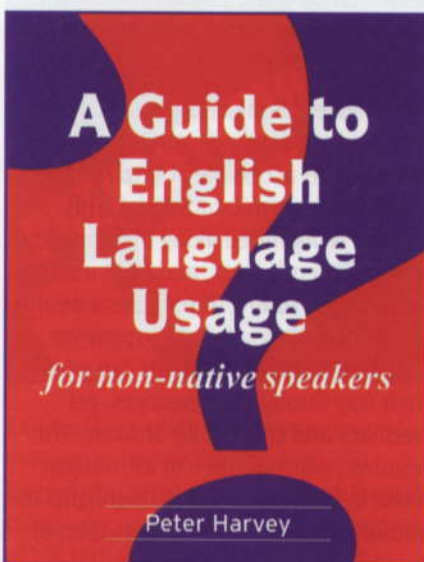
A Guide to English Language Usage for non-native speakers

Peter Harvey

Barcelona: Lavengro books 2008

<http://www.lavengro.eu/>

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For the last century, there has been a barrage of usage manuals informing us what to say and what not to say. The first compilations, most notably Fowler (2002/1926) were aimed at native speakers all mixed up between *intense/intensive*, *will vs. shall* or how to spell *accommodation*. With the boom of ELT, there was a new generation of usage books catering for second language learners largely preoccupied with acquiring standard English. A best-selling example of the latter breed, which has gone through several editions, is Swan (2005). As the title suggests, *A Guide to English Language Usage for non-native speakers* is aimed at learners. However, it is rather a broad, often surprising, book and many first language users will enjoy browsing through it.

A Guide to English Language Usage for non-native speakers has the familiar alphabetical format, going from *a* to *zodiac*. The entries are of five kinds. First, there are vocabulary points, such as the difference between *rely* and *trust*, and *brief* as a noun and verb. Second,

the most miscellaneous category, lists of words grouped topically, for example birds and their Latin names, proverbs, books of the bible, synonyms of *hit*. Third, grammar sections under their traditional titles, *irregular verbs*, *modal auxiliary verbs*, *participle clauses*, and the like. Fourth, pronunciation points such as the relationship between sound and spelling, and the cardinal vowels. Fifth, there are notes about, mainly, British culture, for instance *bowls & bowling*, the *civil service*, *Shakespeare*. The combination of all this information makes for an entertaining and illuminating read.

The vocabulary points address many of learners' weak spots such as *rise/arise/raise, rob vs. steal* and false friends like *assassin*. Generally, the book shows a high awareness of learners' needs – it is clearly written by someone with solid classroom experience. Sometimes, the discussion gets a little erudite and wanders off the point somewhat. For example, it is fine to point out that *clothed* is preferable to *clad* but that *clad* does crop up in compounds such as *snow-clad, richly-clad*, etc. However, the mention of the term *ironclad* to mean a warship and the back-formation verb *clad* is too much. One suspects the author of a little self-indulgence in writing entries such as, under *pepper*, "The fruit of the genus *Capsicum* is also called pepper (p. 290).", and, under *could*, "Etymologically, there should be no *l* in this word. (p. 116)." Perhaps this offers a different level of challenge to more capable learners.

The various topical lists appear the most random section of the book. The

content goes way beyond the most advanced language syllabus into the frankly obscure. I do wonder if learners need to know that the Latin names for *carp* and *hickory* are *Cyprinus carpio* and *Carya* respectively and it is difficult to see what use can be put to the atomic weights of all the elements in the periodic table (pp. 94-95). Without illustrations, these long lists are boggling for all but the most avid collector of trivia. On a more general point, artwork would do much to enhance the book. The only picture, again an odd choice for the sole illustration, is a grainy black and white picture of a car interior on p. 86.

The grammar sections offer neat and condensed portraits of rules and usage. The litmus test of how prescriptive any usage manual is can be found in the treatment of the split infinitive. Harvey provides a clear rationale of occasions when it is justified to separate complementiser and verb, and reaches the sensible conclusion (p. 362) that, "...there is, rightly or wrongly, a considerable feeling among English speakers that a split infinitive is wrong ... [so] a decision to split an infinitive deliberately should never be taken lightly". The grammar sections are in fact a strong area of the book. For example, the section on the word order of adverbs, a fiendish area for any learner, is remarkable in its comprehensiveness and clarity, especially the way it is summarised in the very handy table on p. 39.

The pronunciation entries are also sound, if you forgive the pun. Sometimes they are mixed in with

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general vocabulary notes, e.g. the silent *b* in *doubt*, and each alphabetic letter shows its sign/sound relationship. There are also major entries devoted to phonetic symbols and general pronunciation matters, including stress-timing, assimilation and linking. The information provided is accurate and relevant, only occasionally venturing into rather peripheral points (for example elucidation of the Welsh // sound, p. 229). Phonetic script is used liberally so there should be an IPA chart in the supplementary pages.

Many learners and teachers will appreciate the cultural notes. The potted histories of the four countries in the British Isles (nicely distinguished from Britain, Great Britain and the United Kingdom on p. 80) are particularly useful as compact and coherent summaries of the political and social changes of two millennia. Even more so than with the vocabulary, the selection of items for inclusion and their emphasis is tricky and their reception probably depends on readers' personal interests and needs. Thus, I enjoyed the detailed entry under *police*, at last finding out what the difference between the various ranks – constable, inspector, superintendent, etc. – was. Similarly, I found the exposition of mathematical terms useful for my learners as this is something which doesn't really come up in coursebooks. I didn't really see the point of the entries for *breast*, *cholera*(a), *spake* or *lemming*, although the origin of the myth of lemmings committing mass suicide was amusing. Opinions on the merits of individual entries will vary, but the cultural information as a whole is well-presented, colourful and accurate.

Overall, *A Guide to English Language Usage for non-native speakers* achieves its purpose of offering clear and useful directions for learners who want to use standard English with all its idiosyncrasies and cultural overtones. Some of the information provided is a little arbitrary but it is refreshing to find a usage book which goes off the beaten track and away from the same old tired language points. Above all, readers

will be impressed by the range of the language and how it appears in all its sociolinguistic plumage. Harvey delves into the treasure trove that is English and comes up with a gem of a book. I think even he would forgive me for mixing my metaphors at this point.

REFERENCES

Fowler, H. (2002) *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1926).

Swan, M. (2005) *Practical English Usage* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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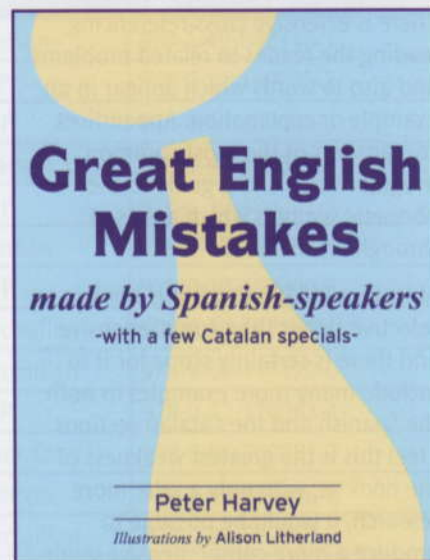
Great English Mistakes made by Spanish-speakers

Peter Harvey

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While *Great English Mistakes made by Spanish-speakers* is clearly aimed at the Spanish-speaking learner of English it is also valuable for the teacher of English working in a Spanish-speaking environment, preparing them for their students' inevitable misconceptions. It could also be used by English speakers wanting to improve their Spanish, although this is not the book's focus.

This book contains mistakes, ranging from *actually* to *young*, that every teacher of Spanish-speakers will recognise all too well. While all errors do not come from first language transfer, it is often the areas which are similar but not identical in L1 and L2 that are not noticed and so easily become fossilized. This book tries to overcome this problem by highlighting many of the false friends which exist between the two languages.

Arranged alphabetically around certain key words which regularly cause problems for Spanish speakers, the book includes grammatical (such as the perfect tense), phonological (e.g. /b/ and /v/) and cultural (Catholic and Christian) problems as well as