

STABILITY AND CHANGE

In an editorial note in *Science* [**137** (1962) 1025], Warren Weaver, of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in New York City, discussed pungently the modern trend in the usage of the English language. First he pointed out, for contrast, the precision of communication of information by the genetic mechanism (DNA molecules), as when a virus particle

involves a cell with its "unambiguous and dictatorial . . . packet of coded genetic information," and the infrequent inaccuracies that cause mutations—which "almost always turn out to contain useless misspellings which nature wisely discards." He then went on to say:¹

Man seems to be much more careless about preserving the integrity of his inter-communication. Lawyers, especially in their terms of art, and scientists, in their use of a precise and well-defined vocabulary, appear to be the chief guardians of verbal and syntactical stability. For all others, the modern idea seems to be that "language is a living, growing, thing"; and growth in all directions, including downwards toward the low level of the street, apparently seems entirely acceptable to many.

One must grant that language is alive and evolving. Human words should change occasionally, but I think that at the best these mutations are the result of the radiant effect of poetic imagination or the responses to new necessities. It does seem reasonable to hope that new words should not be accredited merely because they are used by substantial numbers of careless, lazy, or ignorant persons.

Indeed, should we not protest in general against current trends towards more and more sloppiness with words and with grammar?

I want to make a plea for the older editions of Fowler's *English Usage*; for Strunk's *The Elements of Style*; for the continued use of the subjunctive mood; for the universal use of a comma before the final "and" in a series of listed items; and for all those similar rules of established grammatical virtue which have of late been scorned by so many.

I would enjoy adding comments about the newly revised Webster. But *Science* must be sent through the mail.

¹ This portion of the editorial is reprinted by permission.