

# Lover of English slang takes on Truss and tradition

By Genevieve Roberts

When Lynne Truss laid down the law on apostrophes and sloppy language in her bestseller *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, the nation quailed.

But for those who failed to brush up their grammar, hope is at hand from a new book that celebrates slang and poor punctuation.

In a counter-argument to Truss's book, which sets out to preserve the traditional conventions of grammar, Kate Burridge, professor of linguistics at Monash University in Australia, even calls for the apostrophe to be dropped. "When I suggested on radio that the possessive apostrophe should be dropped from the language because people get it wrong so often, you would have thought that a public flogging would not have been a severe enough punishment," she said. "I re-

ceived hate mail, and letters from the apostrophe support group, though not all of them used the apostrophe correctly."

In her book *Weeds in the Garden of Words: Further Observations on the Tangled History of the English Language*, published this week, she calls for dictionaries to accept knowledge new words and usages of grammar and punctuation to stay relevant. She said: "Today's weeds – non-grammatical expressions and pronunciations – are often rewarding garden species if left to grow. The words Samuel Johnson described as low usage and cant, such as novel, bamboozle and capture, are now totally conventional."

"E-mail chat over the internet is a kind of speech written down, it has loosened the straitjacket effect to language that writing had. For example, the word

## □ Mind your language



The slang of the 'Little Britain' character Vicki Pollard should be recognised, argues Professor Kate Burridge

'gonna', as opposed to 'going to', is a marker of future time to replace 'will'," she says.

Euphemisms are also transient, she says, and will deteriorate in the future when people will be more direct about body parts and bodily functions.

Professor Burridge is supporting a campaign to get the *Little Britain* char-

acter Vicki Pollard's phrase "yeah-but-no-but" entered into the *Collins English Dictionary*. "People often sneer at markers like this, but they are significant phrases with mind-bogglingly complex meanings."

She thinks *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* shows the passion that people feel towards preserving the language. "Rules

### ■ Weed words that should go in the dictionary

yeah-no  
funnest  
pagejacking  
hoody (hoodies)  
blackberry (as in the mobile phone)  
happy slapping  
podcasting (making radio programmes available in a format that listeners can download to MP3 players)  
gonna

### Words that will be taboo tomorrow – predictions

crazy  
brainstorm  
cripple  
immigrant  
cancer  
mental  
half-caste  
dwarf  
fat  
thick  
dumb  
ginger

are important, but they are not all good. People can get too worried about these things. Communication is important, people are not being co-operative by focusing on specific words."

For Professor Burridge, the truly evil weed words are dishonest euphemisms that try to sound neutral when really they are nega-

tive, such as "friendly fire" and "downsize".

Professor Jean Aitchison, emeritus professor of language and communication at Oxford, applauds the book: "Truss's book is a terrible muddle. It is badly organised and fusses about things that are not trying to get good meaning across. I am a great admirer of

Kate Burridge's work, and care about words and worry about them, but it is the clarity that counts."

John Simpson, chief editor of the *OED*, said: "The *Oxford English Dictionary* is descriptive rather than prescriptive, and monitors the use of language. I have no objection to 'yeah-but-no-but' being included if it is widely used, but we like to classify the language and say that it is slang, or a regional variation."

Nigel Pickard, head of literacy at Hadden Park High School in Nottingham, said: "The truth is somewhere in the middle between Lynne Truss and Kate Burridge. Within schools ... we demand too much accuracy as opposed to creativity and imagination. But pupils do speak in a lingo, and we have to teach them the distinction between speech and writing. Not all pupils realise the distinction."

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