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The war against cliché has failed

Language can't remain in aspic, but cliché has defeated Martin Amis. Are there any linguistic developments we should be celebrating?

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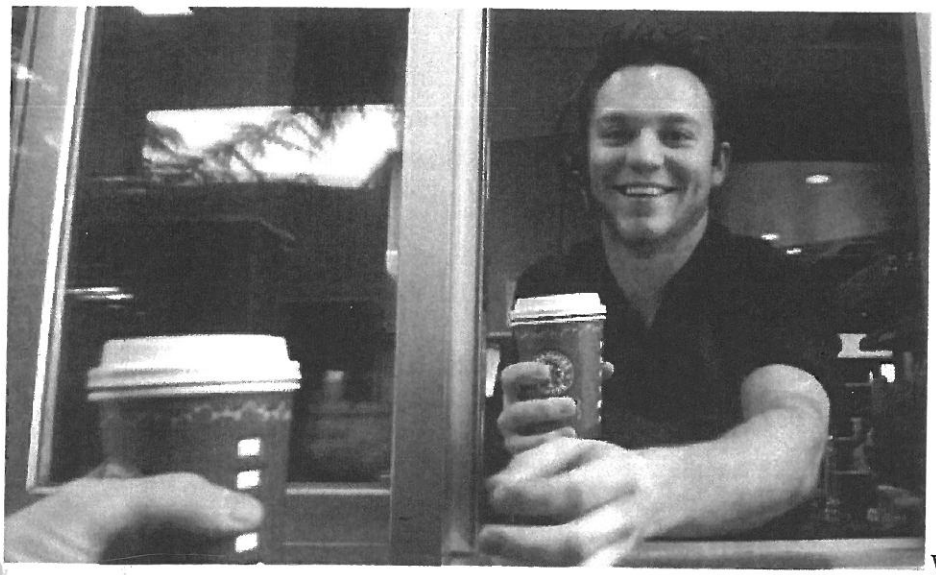

Would you like a cliché with that? ... picking up a drive-in coffee. Photograph: Elaine Thompson / AP

I am becoming increasingly exercised by our culture of outrage. Turn on your television and you will see bereaved families goaded into demanding, for the sake of "justice", severer penalties for criminals – though it is the severity of what was accepted as justice in the past that now shocks us. Meanwhile politicians, unaware of how sick we grow on a diet of flattery, keep congratulating us on belonging to a wonderfully tolerant country. They say they want our democratic "feedback" – the very word makes me feel nauseous. I remember how, before he was elected leader of the Conservative party, David Cameron promised to set aside the confrontational politics of the House of Commons. Have you heard his performances there lately?

Do you care what happens during question time? On the whole, we languish in indifference over most things until suddenly roused to spasms of moral ferment. "We know no spectacle so ridiculous as the British public in one of its periodical fits of morality . . . once in six or seven years our virtue becomes outrageous," Macaulay wrote. Much has changed since he attacked "the savage envy of [those] aspiring dunces" who denounced Byron. We no longer wait seven years for our virtuous eruptions: we have them every week.

In the literary world we are encouraged to mimic this outrage. Obituaries of Graham Greene focused on the appalling scandal of his never having been awarded the Nobel prize for literature, and those of Beryl Bainbridge loudly deplored

the gross unfairness of her being denied the Booker. As for Martin Amis, we cannot wait for him to die before encircling him with the names of prizes he has (so far) failed to win.

To my mind, it is Amis's campaign against the clichés on which our outrage feeds that has failed. Is there any meaning whatever in the repeated words we hear? "Fantastic" and "incredible" seem to parody or refute the statements they are intended to strengthen. Many of our newly minted clichés have a touch of violence added to them – such as "kick-start" instead of the quicker, simpler "start", and the aggressive coating of "batter" which (as if taking orders in a totalitarian restaurant) all cricket commentators suddenly began using one morning.

Several of the phrases used by media people suggest in Big Brother style the exact opposite of what they say – radio as well as television presenters claiming they will see us again in the next hour, day or week when surely it is we who may see or hear them. And everywhere there is the sound of single-syllable words, such as other people's "mums" or the soldier "boys" who are tragically killed in battle, which signal our everlasting child-status.

We need to be particularly careful when examining the language of bureaucrats and economists. I think I can see through "transparency" pretty well, but I cannot remember the words we used before "infrastructure" came into being – probably they were simple words such as "roads". "Efficiency", I realise, means spending as little as possible on something and, by not "throwing money at it", doing it on the cheap. So the word "efficiency" has come to mean almost the opposite of "competence". The phrase I particularly dislike, because I believe it to be deliberately misleading, is "taxpayers' money", which is used whenever the government is making absolutely certain nothing will happen. It is a bogus phrase because it generally refers to money which actually does not belong to the individual taxpayer such as you and me. What we are legally obliged to render unto HM Revenue and Customs belongs to our elected government. The taxpayer's money is what is left in her bank after her Revenue cheque has been cashed – but that is not what politicians mean when they use that phrase as an excuse for positive inactivity.

There is one simple way, I suggest, to make the language of our politicians more accurate and understandable, and that is to insist that the implementation of election pledges be compulsory by law (and may be broken only in exceptional circumstances after a successful appeal to the judiciary).

What has surprised me over the last 50 years has been the enthusiastic surrender of some of our language to the "special relationship" between us and the United States. When I first went to New York in the late 1960s I was surprised by the number of times I received the command to "Have a nice day" or "Enjoy". Whenever I thanked people, they would reply "No problem", though none had been suggested or envisaged. I predicted that the British would never pick up such sentimental formulas. Now I hear them every day.

I do not expect any language to remain static. But coming across so many combinations of letters (num-lock, jpg, and the iPad versus the iPod) which, like the mysterious mantras of a priesthood, do service for the words and sounds that spring up round modern technology, or hearing completely different pronunciations (such as "skedule" for "schedule") of words that were imprinted on me when young is a disturbing experience. And it is difficult to admit that the source of my rage is that very word minus its first letter. So I try to quell my indignation, lower my blood pressure and keep a lookout for developments of language that are precise, witty, useful and have aesthetic value. Have you noticed any lately?