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A Note on Hyphens

Fred Russell · Wednesday, November 25th, 2020

Does the use of hyphens tell us anything about a people? I believe it does. The English, for example are a nation of hyphenators. Winston Churchill is even on record as being against them – the hyphens that is, not the English – saying that words should be one thing or the other, standing alone or joined together. I am currently reading a Simenon novel translated into English by Stuart Gilbert (*Banana Tourist*, 1946). Gilbert was a heavy hitter, languagewise, a Joyce scholar and a big-league translator. You would have thought that he'd learned something from Joyce, one of the great word joiners in the English language (ghostwoman, manshape, watercloset, whitemaned, horsenostrilled). But no, not at all. Gilbert was a consummate hyphenator: dance-halls, field-glasses, passenger-list, police-officer, boat-deck, wave-lengths, death- chamber, mill-pond, bare-foot, police-car, shop-signs, road-house, table-cloths, night-club, deck-hand, boarding-house, bank-clerk, hotel-keeper, down-town, fishing-tackle, post-office, guitar-players, cubby-hole, lumber-room, taxi-drivers, joy-ride, bridge-party, cloak-room, and many, many more, to the point almost of craziness.

What is it that attracts the English to hyphens? I naturally suspect Samuel Johnson, and indeed his famous dictionary is full of them, while the diary of Samuel Pepys (1660s) and *The Spectator* (early 18th century) are relatively free of them. But for Johnson to have had an influence he would have had to address something very prominent, and rigid, in the English character. Fowler doesn't enlighten me. I go to his *Modern English Usage* knowing that he will have a great deal to say about hyphens, but he is pretty neutral. There is always practice and precept that combine to establish conventions, linguistic or otherwise. The sore point for the English are combinations of words that constitute a unified concept and consist of a noun serving as an adjective to modify another noun ("composite nouns consisting of a noun preceded by an attribute," as Fowler puts it), like dancehall or cloakroom. Somehow the English can't bring themselves to join words in a free-flowing marriage, finding themselves compelled to indicate that they once lived apart. The idea of running things together, obscuring boundaries, goes against the English grain. They like to see things in their proper place but are nonetheless forced to acknowledge that certain words belong together, so the hyphen is their compromise. Americans do not have such qualms. As with Churchill, a thing is or isn't and is treated accordingly, like police cars and stop signs, though different writers may favor one or the other form (tablecloth but sometimes table cloth, deckhand but sometimes deck hand).

Character certainly determines linguistic usage and conventions. The English are stiff, the Americans open and innovative. There is no getting around it. The English just can't let go, throw caution to the wind, live without even a linguistic lifeline. That's where the hyphens come from.

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