

On Police Phraseology

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THERE has been some discussion on the question of police phraseology, and a London Stipendiary Magistrate once thought fit to hold forth in somewhat stringent terms and pour scorn on the manner of speech of police officers, both in the witness-box and in reports. It has been said, in defence, that every trade and profession has its own particular language and it is quite easy to quote plenty of instances, e.g. the RAF, doctors and even lawyers, as well as the technical jargon of a great many trades. Nevertheless, it is true to say that police speech and phraseology is, at times, a fair target for criticism, not on account of the technical language used or even—except in a few cases—the use of incorrect grammar, but much more so for a general tendency to use a long word instead of a short word, or many words instead of few.

The fault arises from a desire to give more weight to evidence or reports and a belief that the impressiveness of words depends solely on their length and number. This is quite definitely untrue and, besides engendering a feeling of irritation in the listener, sometimes makes the police officer appear pedantic and, if taken to an extreme, rather ludicrous. There is no magic in mere words unless there is a deliberate intention to wrap up a statement with long and pretentious phrases so that not even the speaker himself knows what he means. This method may be suitable for politicians but is the reverse of desirable for police officers. The police officer's sole desire in framing a report or making a statement should be to make it as clear, as definite, as concise, and as simple as possible. We do ourselves less than justice to lay ourselves open to unnecessary

criticism and even ridicule if we go out of our way to be pompously impressive or to use stock words which, although they are in common use, are nevertheless misused.

To deal first with the question of grammar. I suppose that in the police officer's report the most general mistake is the split infinitive. The world is divided into two halves, one-half those who always notice a split infinitive and dislike it intensely, and the other half, who cannot even recognize a split infinitive and would not care if they could.

What is a split infinitive?

A verb consists of two words (not one) with the word "to" in front of the operative word, e.g. "to do", "to make", "to speak", etc. These two words form the basic part of the verb and together are called the infinitive of the verb, on which the whole of the various changes of the verb are built. The point is that each of these two words is incomplete without the other and they are inseparable and indivisible. It is strictly incorrect therefore to say "to quickly make", but it is correct to say "quickly to make" or "to make quickly". Perhaps this particular matter is not of vast importance but it is just the difference between right and wrong. If one were to write "you

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