

# BBC Style

## A look at the Style guides and language of BBC Radio News bulletins

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*The remit of the BBC as one of the foremost broadcasters in the world has been largely unchanged in eighty years: to provide programmes that will inform, educate and entertain. The BBC is also afforded by many the role of upholding the British language. As the 2003 News Style Guide says, 'our use, or perceived misuse of English produces a greater response from our audiences than anything else. It is in nobody's interest to confuse, annoy, dismay, alienate or exasperate them.'*

*The BBC takes the style of its programmes seriously and throughout the years has produced Style Guides and Programming guidelines. In particular it is the language of its news bulletins which it feels has to be clear and effective, unbiased and grammatically correct. Many former BBC radio newsroom journalists, interviewed as part of a larger study into radio news writing, lament what they see as a decline in standards. This paper looks at the changing views on style in BBC Style Guides for News programmes since 1967. It focuses on four elements in particular: Americanisms, 'try and' vs. 'try to', 'concede defeat' vs. 'concede victory', and 'go(ne) missing'. It then compares what the guidelines say with what was actually written in a sample of news bulletins from the last forty years and occurrences of those selected words and phrases in the British National Corpus. The aim is to determine if and to what extent the guidelines on BBC language and the actual language might have changed.*

**Keywords: Style Guides, BBC, Radio News writing, Media Language**

### 1. Introduction

Some of the old boys [in the late 1960s] were really pedantic. For instance if you said a 'double-decker bus was in collision', they would immediately change it to either a 'double deck bus' or a 'double decker', you couldn't have 'double-decker bus'. And one chap insisted on calling the railway line 'the permanent way'. Another wouldn't let you refer to the king of Greece; you had to use the king of the Hellenes... Little quirks from rather pedantic people, but they did get things right and there was at that time more of a mood for accuracy. Life moves so quickly now, nobody ever seems to check anything and you spot far more mistakes going out on radio and television than you did in those days. But there was far less output going out. (Former BBC Journalist #12)

The remit of the BBC has been largely unchanged in eighty years: to provide programmes that will inform, educate and entertain. The BBC is also afforded by many the role of upholding the British language. The primary role of news is that it gets information to the public. It has a limited amount of time to do so and therefore clear and accurate writing is of the utmost importance, more so than in entertainment, drama or even longer current affairs programmes. (Luscombe, 2009) In addition, news needs to sound authoritative; the credibility of the reader

(and the news organisation) is at stake if mistakes of any kind are made in the stories. Many former BBC radio newsroom journalists worry about a decline in standards of writing. They argue the decline is partly due to the increased workloads faced by current journalists and the fact that fewer people now check the output before it goes on air than they did several decades ago. They feel it is also because less attention is paid to grammar and ‘correct’ writing in schools and the rest of society.

The Corporation appears very aware of the responsibility thrust upon it and throughout its history has debated issues of style and tone of its programmes. Moreover, it has on a regular basis since the late 1960s produced Style Guides and Programming guidelines which offer advice, some might say edicts on appropriate lexis, grammar and forms of address to be used in broadcasts. The Radio News Style Guides are particularly aimed at the corporation’s journalists who produce many hours of bulletins and summaries each day on an increasing number of networks.

This paper looks at the extent to which the guidelines on BBC style and the actual language used in the news output has changed in the period 1966-2008. It focuses on four elements in particular: Americanisms, ‘try and’ vs. ‘try to’, ‘concede defeat’ vs. ‘concede victory’, and ‘go(ne) missing’. It will use views from writers interviewed for this project, copies of bulletins and summaries available in the BBC Written Archives Centre in Reading as well as several printed during visits to the BBC and transcribed from radio output, and Style Guides and Policy Documents, also available in the WAC.

It also aims to answer the questions whether it matters if BBC output adheres to style conventions and ‘correct’ grammar, whether that is pedantry or a means of effective communication.

A total of 27 journalists, 12 former and 15 current radio news writers, were interviewed in the summer of 2008. Open questions were put to the current writers at their place of work (Radio News section at the BBC News Centre in London and Radio 1 Newsbeat Offices). The former writers were either interviewed face-to-face, or for practical reasons by telephone and (in two cases) by email. News output from the following years was examined: 1966, 1976, 1986, 1992, and 2006 – using newscasts of each 4<sup>th</sup> day of the week for 4 weeks starting at a random point in September (24<sup>th</sup> September). For each date the R4 (or Home Service) 1800 bulletin was reviewed. Several summaries (usually the 1900) from Radios1 and 2 (or Light Programme) were also included. Additional news output from other years (1967, 1968, 1974, 1975, 1983,

1985, 1993, 1995, 2005, 2008 and 2009) was consulted during the search for specific examples of language.

## **2. BBC Radio News 1966-2008**

Radio language to a large extent reflects spoken language (Starkey and Crisell 2009). As English is a living, breathing language that changes over time, it would seem appropriate to infer that the BBC's language has followed suit. Indeed the BBC says its role is not to pioneer, but follow changes elsewhere (Style Guides). In 1966 there were just three BBC Radio Services: The Home Service, The Light Programme and the Third Programme. A year later, the BBC decided to create Radio One as a response to competition from pirate radio broadcasters such as Radio Caroline which appealed to a younger audience. The Home Service became Radio 4 (R4), the Light Programme became Radio 2 (R2) and the Third Programme was Radio 3. Now in 2009, the BBC has 10 national radio stations, the World Service, and many local radio stations – all providing their own news output, tailored as much as possible to their distinct audiences.

Politics took up a substantial slice of the coverage in the 1960s and continues to do so today, although more so on R4 than on R2 and R1. Wars, civil unrest, natural disasters, accidents and unusual crime stories have been included throughout the years; it is merely the location and the players involved who have changed. In some instances the subjects have occupied bulletins for several decades, as in the case of the Northern Ireland conflict or the tensions in the Middle East.

The style of writing adopted in 1966 (and 1967) appears more matter-of-fact than in the other years and less conversational. Although the average number of words per sentence (approximately 22) is not that much longer in the late 1960s than in later time periods, the fact that there are no audio inserts gives the news bulletins a more laboured feel. As one former editor put it: 'the BBC was intoning to the nation'.

A major change in the news output since the 1960s has been the introduction of audio inserts into bulletins and later into summaries too. The inclusion of audio upped the pace of the news, but this also led many writers to feel that their job had become less one of writing and more one of introducing correspondents or organising the tapes for inserts. The length of the audio inserts appears to have become shorter too. BBC Radio 1 has seen the most significant changes in the type of audio used. Following the creation of Newsbeat, the network's own correspondents could gather news clips and its shorter snappier style stood in contrast with the 'lengthy

dispatches voiced by BBC Correspondents' (McKenzie 2007) which could be heard on R4. Today, audio clips as short as 7 seconds can be heard on the network.

The first BBC (Radio) News Guide or Style Guide was printed in 1967. The Corporation has published an updated Style Guide every few years since. There appears to be a longer gap in the 1990s, but this may simply be because guides from this time have not been kept by the Written Archive Centre, or by journalists who received one at the time. The style guide was seen by the BBC as one method of reminding journalists of the effect their decisions on news selection and delivery could have on a very large listening public and the duty they had to 'get it right':

In writing news for radio...we follow as far as possible natural conversational speech, but we need to temper it with the discipline of order and precision... We do not write for pedants; neither do we write for those who think journalese – especially American journalese – is English.

(BBC Radio Newsroom News Guide 1967)

Our use, or perceived misuse, of English produces a greater response from our audiences than anything else. It is in nobody's interest to confuse, annoy, dismay, alienate or exasperate them.

(BBC News Style Guide 2003)

For this study I have concentrated on the following guides primarily aimed at helping *National Radio News* journalists think about their style of writing: 1967, 1975, 1979, 1983, 1990, 1992, 2000 and 2003.

### **3. Pet hates**

Many former writers are concerned that as output has increased and the number of 'filters' ranging from typists (to whom they used to dictate) to editors has decreased, mistakes are not picked up. In what follows there is an overview of their top four "pet hates": "try and", "concede defeat", "gone missing" and "Americanisms".

They... [Americanisms] are coming in too quickly. Another one is [that] everyone now says 'try and do something' and it should be 'try to do something'. There is a difference between the two, the 'and' should be referring to the 'do' and not the 'trying'. You could say these are pedantic .....but....the argument about letting grammar and words become too slack is that you then lose the ability to communicate nuances and subtleties – important ones...You communicate less by having a reduced vocabulary. (Former writer #5)

For each of these four "hobby horses", I will consider what the style guides, news output sample and the BYU-BNC British National Corpus say on the matter and where appropriate, consult

dictionaries from different time periods too. The BNC, which covers the time period 1985-1994, contains 100 million words from several registers including academic writing, fiction, newspaper text and informal conversation. A corpus can be used to find concordances, i.e. listings of the occurrences of words or patterns within a text so as to give interesting insights into the way language is structured and used Wynne (2007: 6).

### 3.1. “Try and” vs. “try to”,

#### *Style Guides:*

1967-79: no mention

1983: ‘Try to, not try and’

1993: ‘Try and: Many people regard this as sloppy. ‘Try to’ is correct.’

2000: ‘Try to, not try and.’

2003: *no mention of Try (to) as a phrase to be aware of. However, the phrase itself appears 12 times in the document, whereas ‘try and’ does not appear at all.*

#### *Bulletins:*

This phrase is not something one can specifically search for, but it is striking that every time the collocation appears, it appears as ‘try to’, whereas ‘try and’ never occurs in the sample.

1976 (14<sup>th</sup> Feb, R4 0800): to try to

1986 (2<sup>nd</sup> Oct, R4 1800): to try to

1992 (28<sup>th</sup> Sep and 2<sup>nd</sup> Oct, R4 1800): to try to

1992 (6<sup>th</sup> Oct, R2 2300): to try to

2006 (24<sup>th</sup> Sep and 14<sup>th</sup> Oct, R4 1800): to try to

Thus in all examples the “correct” form of ‘try to’ was used. It is not clear whether this is because the writer instinctively knew to use ‘try to’, whether the style guide helped him, or whether another journalist or editor changed a ‘mistake’ before it went on air. As the bulletins consulted form only a tiny fraction of what the BBC produces, no conclusion can be drawn on whether the “incorrect” collocations also take place. However, one would presume there must have been enough occasions in which that (nearly) occurred or else the retired journalists and all the style guides since 1983 would not have mentioned it as an example of “bad language”. Arguably, before 1983 the mistake was far less common and did not warrant inclusion in a guide.

#### *BNC:*

A simple search of ‘try to’ and ‘try and’ leads to 8707 occurrences for the former compared with 3901 for the latter. Sentences such as ‘[it] is worth a try and proves...’ in which the ‘and’ is

used as a connective, as well as reports of a rugby ‘try’ in sports copy, are not relevant. A random sample of 100 instances of ‘try and’ as a keyword in context (KWIC) suggests this form is mainly used in spoken language: informally, in meetings and in academic lectures. See figure 1.

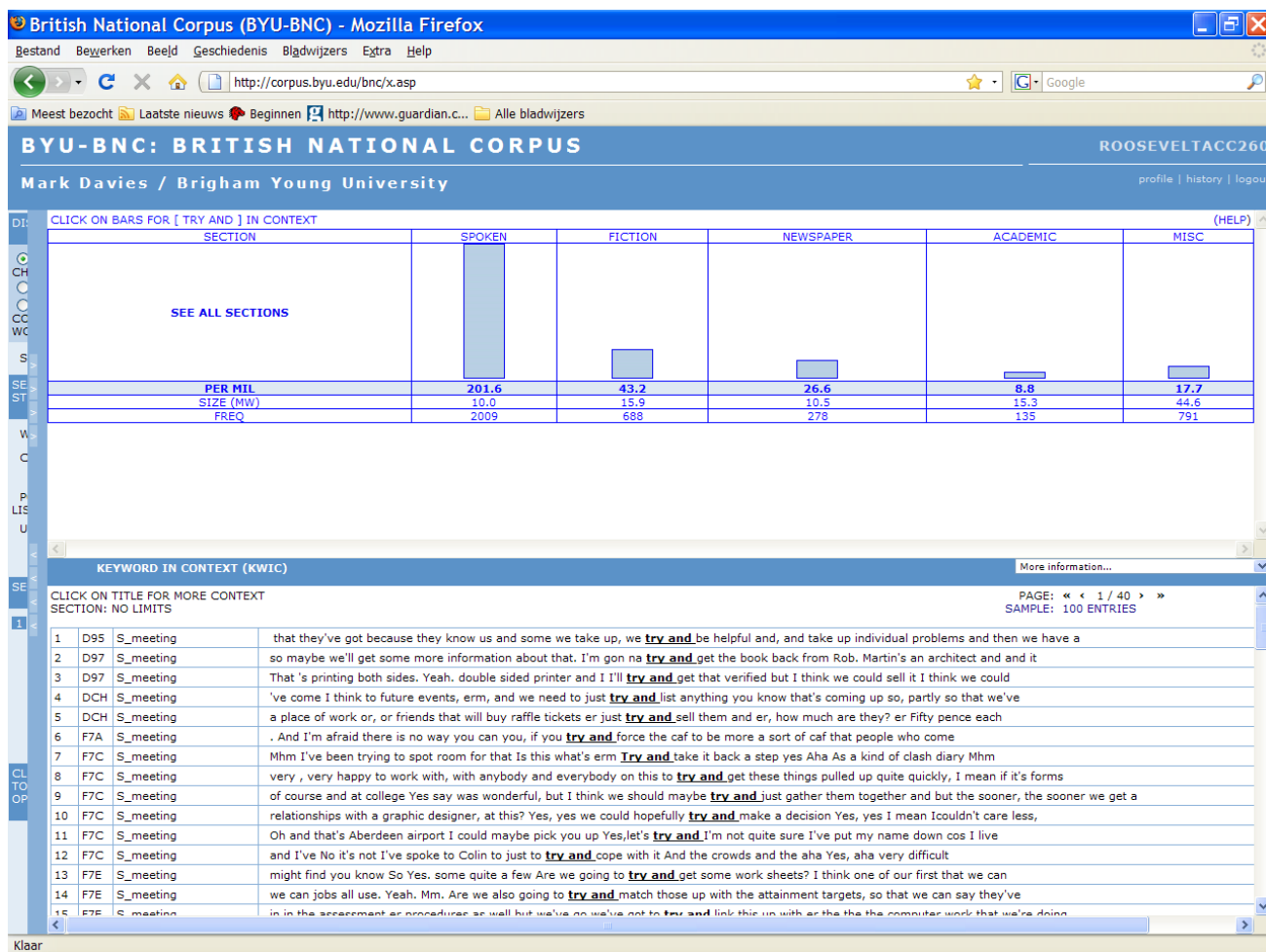


Figure 1

Often when included in newspaper texts, the form ‘try and’ is part of a direct quote from someone speaking. However, there are also examples in which the ‘try and’ form is used in written language, including in “official” publications such as customer information leaflets from the Royal Mail or The Tourist Information in York, in fiction and non-fiction books. A search for the collocation ‘try and’ in just broadcast news gives 48 returns (compared to 28 examples for ‘try to’ in broadcast news). Programmes using ‘try and’ include The Six O’Clock BBC TV News, Central TV News, Fox (Radio) News (it is not clear whether other news programmes are included in the corpus). In the majority of cases ‘try and’ is part of the unscripted talk or interviewee responses to questions, rather than in the newsreader’s text. In the case of ‘try to’ the spread across the various registers is much more even.

One would need a similar corpus for the periods before 1985 and after 1994 to try to ascertain whether there were significant differences in the usage of ‘try to’ versus ‘try and’.

*Dictionary:*

The Oxford English Dictionary 2006 advises that ‘try’ can be followed by either ‘to’ or ‘and’ but ‘some traditionalists regard **try and** as incorrect, while **try to** is seen as more appropriate in formal writing.’ Furthermore, it argues: ‘The construction **try and** is grammatically odd [because] it cannot be inflected for tense (e.g. the sentence *she tried and fix it* is incorrect). For this reason **try and** is best regarded as a fixed idiom used only in its infinitive and imperative form.’

The guidance in the BBC News Style Guides and the actual usage on BBC Radios 1, 2 and 4, could suggest that the BBC writers are ranked among the above mentioned ‘traditionalists’.

### 3.2. “concede defeat” vs. “concede victory”

*Style Guides:*

1967-79: no mention

1983: ‘Concede: We now accept that concede can refer either to victory or defeat.’

1990: ‘Concede: Losers at elections concede victory, not defeat’

2000: ‘Concede: Losers at elections concede victory, not defeat’

2003: ‘Concede. Losers of elections concede victory, not defeat’

(2008 pre-publication guide: same as 2003 on this issue)

*Bulletins:*

This phrase did not appear in the sample of output selected with the “nth-method”, but as the issue of usage relates to election results I searched through the archives of bulletins and summaries for elections that took place in years similar or close to those of the main sample. It is surprising how few times sentences using *concede* or *defeat* are used in the stories that give election results. More usual than not, the emphasis is on the winning party and the act of concession or admission of defeat is not included. At other times, phrases such as ‘admitted that it’s lost’ are used. The following instances, of concede and/or defeat were found:

**1968** (6<sup>th</sup> November, News Flash on R1 and R3; election of Richard Nixon):

‘Mr Humphrey has just **conceded the election**’ (originally the script had said **conceded victory**, but victory was scratched out and the words ‘the election’ written in with pencil.)

**1976** (3<sup>rd</sup> November, R1 9.30 am):

‘Gerald Ford – still President until Mr Carter is sworn in next January – has not yet **conceded defeat.**’

(R4 10 am): ‘**concede defeat**’

**1983** (10<sup>th</sup> June 1983, R4 at 7 and 8 am): ‘The Labour leader, Mr Michael Frost, **admitted defeat** shortly after two o’clock...’

(R2 at 7 am): ‘on behalf of his party, he **conceded the election** shortly after two o’clock this morning.’

**1992** (10<sup>th</sup> April 1992, R1 at 07.30): ‘Neil Kinnock couldn’t hide his bitter disappointment and emotion as he **conceded defeat** at Labour Party HQ.’

2009 (16<sup>th</sup> May, R4 1300): ‘The country’s other main party the Hindu nationalist BJP has **accepted defeat.**’

Compare this latter BBC R4 version with what was said on BBC Online and Teletext: ‘The main opposition BJP and the Third Front conceded they had lost.’ The online version of the Daily Telegraph (Telegraph.co.uk) of the same day uses the same ‘conceded they had not only lost, ...’. BBC R2 and R1 coverage on that day had no mention of concede or defeat.

*BNC:*

‘Concede defeat’ throws up just 14 cases of KWIC: eight from newspapers and three each from the register heading of fiction and the heading miscellaneous. Of the 14 instances, half refer to elections; the others to a variety of other matters, including sport contests. The Daily Telegraph, the Independent and the Scotsman use the form when reporting on elections in 1983 and 1992.

‘Concede victory’ occurs just once, in the *Rugby World and Post* published in 1992. ‘Concede defeat’ therefore on the face of it appears more likely to be used than ‘concede victory’, but that would be misleading given the very small number of instances in which the phrase appears at all in the BNC. A search on Google in June 2009 for the phrase ‘concede defeat’ gave 235,000 returns and 1.5 million for ‘concede victory’. These statistics are not particularly illuminating; even adding the search terms ‘British elections’ still gives 31,300 results, and ‘concede victory British elections’ returns 39,500. Most of the search results are not from British websites or about elections. It merely serves to underline that both versions are frequently used by web users across the globe.

*Dictionaries:*

1975 – The Concise Oxford Dictionary:

Concede v.t. admit, allow, (statement, that); grant (right, privilege, points or start in game etc, to person); (Sports.sl.) lose (game etc.)



1978 Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English:

**concede** *vt* ~ **sth (to sb)**, admit; grant; allow: ~ *a point in an argument*. ~ *a point in an argument*. *He ~d ten points to his opponent/~d him ten points, i.e. in a game, /They have ~d us the right to cross their land. You must ~ that I have tried hard. We cannot ~ any of our territory*, allow another country to have it.

2003 Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's English Dictionary:

**concede** 1. If you concede something, you admit, often unwillingly, that it is true or correct. ...6. if you concede defeat, you accept that you have lost a struggle. ...*He happily conceded the election.*

2009 Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford Reference Online):

**concede** *v.* Finally admit that something is true. Admit (defeat) in a match or contest

The guidance and usage is therefore not consistent: while 'concede defeat' is acceptable in the 1983 Style Guide and used in output in 1976 and 1992, the more recent style guides tell BBC journalists to use 'concede victory' in elections, not 'defeat'. The examples in the dictionaries are not exactly helpful; in 1975 it was clear that concede when meaning to lose was thought of as slang used in sports. The problem with the verb appears to be that it implies both an admission and a granting of something, so it is easy to see why this verb might be used with defeat in one case and with victory in another; not very clear for a listener, anyway.

### 3.3. Go(ne) Missing

When a person is not where he is supposed to be, whether it is because he has run away from home, been abducted or merely failed to turn up on time because he had something else to do, journalists will often use the phrase 'gone missing'. The guidance has changed over the years:

*Style Guides:*

Prior to 1992: no mention

1992: "'Gone missing" was originally Army slang. It now has wider use, and has become journalese.'

2000: 'People do not "go missing". They are missing or have been missing since.'

2003: 'Go missing is inelegant and unpopular with many people, but its use is widespread.

There are no easy synonyms. Disappear and vanish do not convince and they suggest dematerialisation, which is rare.'

*Bulletins:*

R4 1800 on 6/10/76 “went missing” in story about three year old Julie Syndenham from Wellington, Somerset.

R4 1800 on 10/10/86: “two young girls missing from “ ...and later on “the girls disappeared”

R2 0700 on 1/5/92 “disappeared” and R4 1800 on 20/9/92: “disappeared”

Online News, 1 June 2009: ‘An Air France plane carrying at least 228 people from Brazil to France has *gone missing* over the Atlantic.’

BNC:

The search [go\* missing] returns 152 relevant KWIC: go missing, goes missing, gone missing and going missing. Although the frequency is highest in fiction, newspapers have the highest number of matching strings per million words. Figure 6.2 shows the first 16 of the total of 44 matching strings in newspapers.

DI	CONTEXT	TOT
1	GONE MISSING	27
2	GOING MISSING	8
3	GOES MISSING	4
4	GO MISSING	3
5	GOODWAY MISSING	1
6	GOALIE MISSING	1
	TOTAL	44

KEYWORD IN CONTEXT (KWIC)

ID	CONTEXT
1	under 20ft of water in the River Severn. The mother of two had <b>gone missing</b> after a blazing row with her estranged husband, Jonathan, at his home in
2	Marie Wilkes from Worcester. The pregnant housewife was found stabbed and battered after <b>going missing</b> when her car broke down on the M-50 motorway. Browning w
3	American Band leader Glenn Miller walked through it to play his last engagement before <b>going missing</b> in an aeroplane ... General, and later President, Eisenhower visited
4	found , frozen, in a ditch beside the busy A 34, after <b>going missing</b> for 4 days and nights. She'd told her husband she was going out
5	for the safety of a twenty six year old man from Hereford who's <b>gone missing</b> from his home. Stephen Chamberlain is believed to be depressed after splitting up with
6	security. Male speaker Youcan't mix inmates with them. Knives are <b>going missing</b> , we've had a hostage incident. Voice over The POA says the catering
7	an well. Aid workers from the Bosnia Aid Committee of Oxford had apparently <b>gone missing</b> for 4 days in the war zone. But it was the weather, not
8	Water Chairman missing Sir Roy Watts, the Chairman of Thames Water, has <b>gone missing</b> after being dropped off at his flat in London. 2 Two thousand, five
9	age range. Mr Davison, normally from Dulverton Avenue in Swindon, had <b>gone missing</b> after a pub fight in Carshalton. Mr Davison, who was 39, was
10	in studio A hunt has been launched for a German lorry driver who's <b>gone missing</b> after arriving in England with a load of melons. Wilfred Geisler, who's
11	in studio A hunt has been launched for a German lorry driver who's <b>gone missing</b> after arriving in England with a load of melons. Wilfred Geisler, who's
12	him to pay a further &ollar;170 to make up for the deposit that's <b>gone missing</b> . But this tenant says hecan't pay. He's literally down to
13	Video-Taped report follows Voice over River search ... divers called in after mother-of-two woman <b>goes missing</b> . Organic but ugly ... farmer's told to move out of his wood
14	, was in hospital last night with broken legs and arms. Both had <b>gone missing</b> from a centre for disturbed youngsters in Newton Aycliffe, Co. Durham. £16,500
15	more to come out about this flight." HOSTAGE JET: Did passengers <b>go missing</b> ? ANGRY: Mrs Chappell SPLINT STAR! Joyful fan snaps leg watching Linford's
16	copyright on it, Becker's got more than a bit and Lendl's <b>goes missing</b> when he most needs it. You get the drift. Now I'm not

Figure 2.

The KWIC returned for newspapers this time also include news scripts from Central TV news (which in the case of concede was put under Spoken: broadcast news)

In absolute terms there are few matching strings in the BNC, neither were they evident in great numbers in the sample of BBC output. However, this is undoubtedly due to the fact that (news)stories about people or objects who ‘are missing’ form but a very small proportion of the overall coverage (compare for example the number of KWIC for politic\*, which in newspapers alone is more than four and a half thousand.) It appears from the BNC that the various forms of go\* missing have been in use since the 1980s and from the BBC advice it seems the corporation has now also admitted defeat at the hands of changing modes of language.

### **3.4. Americanisms**

#### *Style Guides*

There are numerous differences between the American and British forms of English. While differences in spelling would not be noticeable on radio, diversions in the form of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary are. The style guides do not make reference to the first of these and the second and third are mentioned in varying degrees.

The first news style guide already railed against Americanisms: ‘Since it is the English language we use, we should preserve it against contamination by trans-Atlantic usages. The American obsession with the prepositional adverb is notorious. No longer, it seems, do Americans meet; they “meet up with”...there is the American love for new and strange verbs such as “to hospitalise”...’ (1967)

In 2003, the style guides writer John Allen, adopted a pragmatic approach, acknowledging that American forms of grammar and lexis were abundant because of television, film, music and the internet, but that the British Broadcasting Corporation ought to uphold British usage where possible:

New words are constantly queuing at language immigration control, hoping to be allowed in...Many American words and expressions have impact and vigour, but use them with discrimination or your audience may become a tad irritated. (BBC News Style Guide 2003)

There are two examples of Americanisms in particular that are given by those who worry that US forms are crowding out British usage: the tendency to turn nouns into verbs, such as hospital – hospitalization, and attaching prepositions to verbs, such as ‘meet with’ instead of ‘meet’. The 2000 Morley A-Z on style is uncompromising on both of these: ‘HOSPITALISE – Ugly Americanism. Avoid it.’; ‘MEET – Rather than meet with, which is an Americanism.’

None of the bulletins reviewed in this sample’s study had any instances of Americanisms, suggesting that the BBC radio news writers are able to eschew such language; to man

effectively the ‘language immigration control’ John Allen referred to. ‘Hospitalisation’ and ‘hospitalised’ is evident in other parts of the media, as in the following example: ‘So the news that dozens of people have been hurt – some badly enough to be hospitalised – by hundreds of angry bees...’ (Daily Mail, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009 page 15) Its use is not surprising as recent British dictionaries include it as a perfectly acceptable word. The 2003 Collins Cobuild lists it separately as a verb, (usually passive be V-ed) and in the 2006 Concise Oxford Dictionary hospitalize or hospitalise as a verb is placed as a derivative of the noun hospital. The BNC returns 113 matches for [hospitalis\*] spread across all sections, although least apparent in spoken language. [Meet with] returns 300 matches, including 30 in newspapers and 1 in broadcast. So it appears that back in the late 1980s and mid 1990s, these two types of ‘Americanisation’ at least had gained a foothold in ordinary British speech and written texts. The BBC has shown that it is being reserved about including these transatlantic forms of speech.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The answer to whether it matters that there are mistakes or that contested words and syntax are included in BBC news is ‘yes’. As the 1992 BBC Style Guide says

“Viewers and listeners still regard BBC News as an authority on the correct use of English, and they are genuinely offended when it is misused and abused...[I]t is not for us to set new trends...The audience should expect accuracy and fairness from the BBC – and clarity and good English from its journalists.”

There is no evidence to suggest that audience expectations on accuracy and fairness are any different today than several years ago. The danger is that if the language is misused, listeners (and viewers) will start to doubt the validity of the facts reported to them. Incorrect grammar and a poor choice of vocabulary will be noticed, if not by everyone in the audience, certainly by enough who will be troubled by a perceived decline in standards. While many will be annoyed, even incensed enough to write to complain, others will simply turn off and distrust the corporation’s journalists on other matters besides language. If they misuse words, can they be trusted to get the facts right? Listeners show enormous loyalty towards the BBC, particularly towards a station like Radio 4 (Hendy 2007). With loyalty, however, also come expectations. The exacting standards placed upon the BBC’s newsgathering operation by large swathes of the population and policy makers are based on the fact that people feel they own part of the BBC. Because they pay the licence fee, they feel they have a right to complain vociferously when – in their eyes – the BBC gets it wrong.

It's no point complaining about the Daily Mirror or ITV, because you take what they offer, it's up to you. But I pay my licence fee; I feel that I have every right SIR (!) to complain about what I hear on radio, any part of the BBC. (Former writer #1)

While many of the retired journalists are anxious that standards of language are slipping, others are more stoical and acknowledge that language evolves.

[There have been] surprisingly few changes. I think the style book still seems to be holding sway! It will be interesting to see how, as the older hacks like myself melt away, the next generation move the language on." (Former writer #3)

I think it's less formal, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Just because language evolves, if it didn't we'd still be presenting wearing evening dress and soft shoes and all be very Mr Cholmondely-Warner. Some of the grammar is slightly shocking, but ..ha ha (laughter)  
(Former writer #10)

Trying to hold on to the way language was used in the past would, according to Burchfield (1985), be fruitless anyhow. He argues that nothing in language remains the same and clinging on to such ideas would be false hope:

Words and meaning, like elements, have half-lives, however durable they may seem in their dictionary form. Paradoxically, in the chambers of the mind, we tend to cling to the words and meanings that we acquire when young like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions. But change comes to everything. (116)

Of course there are errors, grammar that jars on the ear, unclear formulations and instances of hopeless alliteration. None of the bulletins reviewed in this sample's study had factual mistakes or major grammatical errors. Nor were there any instances of Americanisms, suggesting that the BBC radio news writers have not felt the urge (or have been able to resist the temptation) to use such language. Considering the enormous amount of output the BBC radio news journalists produce every day it, it is admirable that so much of what is written is clear, precise and grammatically correct. There will always be listeners who complain and for each one of those who formalise that complaint in writing, it is estimated by editors there will be numerous who mutter or shout in disgust at the radio when the 'error' is made. It is their right to voice their concerns, but there is no sense in the radio newsroom or at R1 that the number of complaints is increasing. It would be worth investigating output from other parts of the BBC to determine

whether grammatical and lexical errors are more common there than in radio news. Many former radio news writers think too many errors are now getting through “quality control”, but others acknowledge that their worries are probably part of the process of getting old and thinking everything was better in their day. Current writers do not feel much has changed as yet, although they too worry that in the future both factual and language accuracy will suffer.

In terms of content there have been very few changes: major political and foreign stories are still being covered, albeit less prominently now on R2 than on the Light Programme. R4 news too appears to cover a wider range of topics than it used to, partly due to bulletins becoming longer, and summaries more frequent. R1 has developed a style all of its own to meet the needs of a younger, hipper audience than forty years ago. One of the most significant differences has been the increase in the use of audio to illustrate news. More recently audience interaction, on R1 at least, has started to inform the order and content of the Newsbeat programme and summaries. In terms of language, R2 and R4 have changed slightly, but perhaps no more so than is due to changes in language elsewhere in society. In all instances the BBC has maintained the idea that its role is not to pioneer but follow, on due reflection, changes in the language elsewhere.

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