**Reading Skills Practise:**

**Awful, Pompous, and Artificial**

One of my students, Rolland Boylen, asked me recently (when we'd been discussing some words that don't have the same meaning in current English as they had in the Middle English text we were translating) if I knew what King Charles II had said when he first set eyes on the new St Paul's Cathedral. I had to confess I didn't. So Rolland told me: "King Charles described it as 'awful, pompous, and artificial'—and he was intending to be complimentary."

These three words are lovely examples of what is technically called degeneration or pejoration, that is, acquiring less favourable senses than they originally had. *Awful* has, besides, suffered a loss of intensity, such that its force is far weaker than it used to be.

Evidently, as King Charles used it, *awful* meant, literally, 'filled or filling with awe, awe-inspiring', just as *dreadful* and *frightful* meant 'filling one with dread or with fear'. What has happened with all three of these -*ful* words is that they've lost both their literal senses and their force and have become virtually synonymous adjectives meaning 'very *bad'*: "What did you think of the film?" "Dreadful!" —That doesn't have to mean it was a horror movie; it more probably means that it bored you to tears. And as adverbs these words don 't even have to mean ‘very bad': they just mean 'very *very* or *extremely* whatever it is': you might well describe Shirley Hazzard as an "*awfully* good writer" without being scared of her; and if you belong to the chardonnay set and you have to turn down an invitation to a cocktail party, you will doubtless tell your would-be hostess that you're *frightfully* sorry you can't come (pronounced, of course, "fraffy") when all you're doing is trying rather hard to be polite.

In its original sense, 'awe-inspiring', *awful* has long since been replaced by *awesome*. But even this, now, through overuse as an exaggerated intensifier, is losing its intensity in the same way as *awful*, as I was memorably reminded recently when my friend Emerson Brown (who teaches at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee) told me that one of his students had described a plate of spaghetti as "totally awesome" (pronounced, of course, "todally ahsum").

As for *pompous* (ultimately from Latin *pompa*, 'a solemn procession'), King Charles of course used it to mean 'magnificent or splendid'; whereas now, sadly, it has degenerated to the point where it suggests only an exterior *show* of magnificence over a hollow shell. In this sense it seems to be used particularly of old men, in such derogatory combinations as "a pompous old f\*\*t".

Similarly, *artificial* is now used almost exclusively in derogatory senses: 'contrived, false, not natural', hence (by implication) perhaps even '*un*natural'; whereas King Charles evidently meant that St Paul's had been designed and built with great art, skill, and ingenuity (which is, etymologically, what the word means: 'made with *art'*).

One could say, I suppose, that these degenerations in meaning are a rather sad comment on human nature. Be that as it may, we now know what to say to the politicians when they ask what we think of the notorious new barbecue facilities at Parliament House in Canberra: we just say that we find them, in the modern sense, "awful, pompous, and artificial', yes?

**Interpreting Implicit Information (reading between the lines):**

* *Synthesise info to interpret the behaviour/feelings of a character or recognise motive.*
1. What was likely Emerson Brown’s motive in telling his friend about the incident of the ‘awesome’ spaghetti? Give evidence.
* *Making sense of an argument where main idea not stated – use of repetition, tone etc to recognise.*
1. The author is commenting on the way words have changed but doesn’t state what he thinks about this outright. Use textual clues to conclude what his attitude might be toward this topic.
* *Interpret complex phrases/words using context and own understanding*
1. From the context what does “exaggerated intensifier” mean? And what does the word “etymologically” mean?
* *Use of punctuation to make meaning*
1. Why does the author use the yellow highlighted ‘;’ instead of a comma? Your answer should make it clear what the semi-colon adds to the author’s meaning.
* *Perspectives recognised and used to interpret.*
1. Use textual clues to determine what the author thinks of the “chardonnay set”. Give evidence for your answer.