

THE MYSTERIOUS PROLIFERATION OF PLURALS

When the singular is suddenly not enough.

(Intelligent Life)

Last week I went to a lecture by the American novelist Richard Ford. Called “Why novels are smart”, it was brilliant and thought-provoking. But my thoughts were also provoked by the British academic who introduced him, commending – among other things – his “prose styles”.

Now, Richard Ford is without doubt a great stylist; but he only has one style. He has honed it over many years, and having brought it pretty much to perfection, he very sensibly sticks to it. So why this mysterious use of the plural?

The same question might have occurred to those listening to Radio 4’s *Start the Week* some hours earlier. In the course of a discussion about Germany, one panelist referred to the country’s “pasts”. I suppose you could argue that, since the country was divided for 40 years into East and West, it has two pasts – but that strikes me as sophistry. The sorry truth is that we are facing a new linguistic fad: the use of the plural where the singular has always been used before, and indeed would make much more sense.

Specifically, we’re talking about abstract nouns. I first noticed the shift a few months ago when another speaker on Radio 4 came out with “geographies”. For a while I thought it might be confined to academics; then I realised that it was creeping into the Double Dutch beloved of arts organisations. One spoke proudly of its “artistic outputs” and what the public wanted “in terms of outcomes”.

Even so, I felt reasonably confident that such pretentious nonsense would never spread to the world at large. But when, suddenly, I found new examples coming at me every day, I felt the dam of common sense cracking under the sheer weight of water. Watching the YouTube video of a political seminar, I heard a historian pontificating about “socialisms” and “desirable futures”; opening an email from a novelist, I discovered a blithe reference to “fictions”; browsing a press release from the ICA, I came upon “the interrelationships between African and European political histories”.

Virologists tracing the history of a disease speak darkly of the moment when it leaps from one species to another. I believe that nine o’clock on Tuesday morning saw such a moment, when a senior member of the NHS used the word “behaviours” on a national news bulletin. I saw too late how misguided my complacency had been: Pandora’s box had been opened, and no amount of wishing would put the contents back.