Old whine online: prescriptive grammar blogs on the Internet

DEBORAH SCHAFFER

Despite the glitter, prescriptive websites are often old hat

Introduction

Prescriptive analyses of English grammar no doubt post-date the introduction of the printing press to England in 1476, but not by much.[1] As soon as the dissemination of standards for written English became practicable, self-appointed experts working in every area from religion (Bishop Robert Lowth, for example) to science (including Joseph Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen) published their personal recommendations for improving the English language, and the tradition has flourished ever since, even after the advent of linguistics and descriptivism. Best sellers like TV newsman Edwin Newman's *Strictly Speaking* (1974) and *A Civil Tongue* (1975), along with film and Broadway critic John Simon's *Paradigms Lost* (1980), have been followed by an array of more recent prescriptive mass-market guides for the grammatically unwashed, perhaps most entertaining among them, Lynne Truss's popular *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (2003), but also Dennis Baron's *Guide to Home Language Repair* (1994), Patricia O'Conner's *Woe Is I* (2003), Bill Walsh's *Lapsing into a Comma* (2000) and *The Elephants of Style* (2004), and June Casagrande's *Grammar Snobs Are Great Big Meanies* (2006) and its encore *Mortal Syntax* (2008).

Language blogs online

In this age of totally wired information, it is only to be expected that grammar advice, like any other personal opinion, would find its true home on the Internet—specifically, in numerous blogs devoted to language topics, especially grammar. These 'grammar mavens' (Pinker, 1994: 373, from William Safire's self-description) vary quite widely in their areas of expertise, professions and attitudes towards their subject matter, as can be seen in Table 1. Some have already published books on grammar, like Baron (The Web of Language), Casagrande (Conjugate Visits), C. Edward Good (Good's Grammar), O'Conner (Grammarphobia), and Walsh (Blogslot), and so can be expected to have a ready-made following for their online opinings. Others are writers or editors of other sorts, like Mignon Fogerty (Grammar Girl) and Kate McCulley (Grammar Vandal), who have strong enough feelings about grammar to fuel blogs focused on that subject. Still other 'cyberprescriptivists' appear to be taking advantage of the open frontier of the blogosphere to share their deeply felt views even without writing or editing credentials equivalent to those of the other bloggers (for



Dr DEBORAH SCHAFFER received her Ph.D. in linguistics from The Ohio State University and is currently Professor of English at Montana State University Billings, where she teaches linguistics, composition, and genre literature. She was the chair of the Language Attitudes and Popular Linguistics conference area of the Popular Culture Association from 1991 to 2005, and still presents annually in that area. She has had articles published on a variety of phonetics, academic-writing, and popular-linguistics topics in such journals as English Today, ETC.: A Review of General Semantics, the Journal of Phonetics, the Journal of Popular Culture, and The Journal of Pragmatics, among others.
Email: dschaffer@msubillings.edu

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example, Syntax Sisters Daniele Jackson and Meredith Ellis are English teachers, but apparently not published authors or editors, and Kim Siever of Hot Pepper Blog is a website developer). And some are college professors, among them linguists Baron and Language Log bloggers Mark Liberman and Geoffrey Pullum, whose blogs are descriptive answers to popular prescriptivism, maintained to defend more linguistically savvy perspectives on language issues.

It is true that English grammar and writing advice can also be found online in other forms, including e-magazines (for example, *The Vocabula Review*), e-newsletters (like marketing expert Marcia Yudkin's *The Marketing Minute*) and other non-blog websites, but while these forums in the old days could have just as easily been disseminated in print form, the grammar blogs strike me as something quintessentially cyber-enabled, successful in gaining audiences for their bloggers' basically personal judgments primarily because of the power and reach of the Internet. If blogs, then, are the future of public opinion sharing (beyond 140-character pronouncements on Twitter, anyway), then a look at features common to grammar-focused blogs, especially those elements designed to attract and entertain readers, might tell us something about the future of English-targeted prescriptivism (and descriptivism) in the Internet age.

These are, after all, still blogs, and therefore still a species of e-diary, though focused mostly on a relatively narrow range of language-related topics. The blogs in my survey (Table 1 includes a complete list of titles, along with other background information) do address much the same range of prescriptive interests as mass-market grammar and writing books cover, from classic rules of grammar, mechanics and usage to etymology and style, but often in less structured and more personal ways, in keeping with the nature of blogs, whose entries are ongoing, serialized and often interactive, with other voices besides the bloggers' also being heard. That is, many blogs will quote and respond to readers' comments which address earlier blog entries, ask questions of bloggers, or offer opinions on other matters, and guest bloggers and quotes from other websites are also included.

But additional topics not typical of print works also appear, including personal life events like the deaths of loved ones (Mrs. Write Right, Word Therapist) and accidents suffered (Watch Yer Language); comments on local or national news (Hot Pepper Blog); tech instructions (Hot Pepper Blog); obituaries (Language Log); plugs for the bloggers' own products, like print books or grammar or editing software (Good's Grammar, Grammar Girl, SPOGG Blog); and other language-related areas like the history of English (Grammarphobia, Grammar Police, The Web of Language), Ebonics (GrammarBlog), many additional sociolinguistics topics (The Web of Language), and the prescriptivism-descriptivism debate itself. For this concern, see especially Language Log and The Web of Language for descriptive viewpoints and Syntax Sisters for consistent prescriptivism, but also Arrant Pedantry, Blogslot, GrammarBlog, You Don't Say, and others for explicit defenses of descriptive or prescriptive attitudes.

The very names of these blogs and the bloggers' online identities show a keen eye for marketing to the target audience. They frequently capitalize on humor (note Conjugate Visits), alliteration (see Good's Grammar, Grammar Girl, Language Log, and Syntax Sisters), and rhyme (notably, SPOGG Blog), as well as flagging key topic terms like 'grammar' and 'English' and appealing to authority or expertise with names like Grammar Cop and Grammar Police (or conversely, to more subversive inclinations, as with Grammar Vandal), all clearly chosen to enhance impact and memorability. I especially like the title Cheryl Norman, Grammar Cop :-), with its cheerful emoticon balancing Norman's otherwise intimidating job description, but find the name [the] ENGLISH-BLOG [.com] a bit too fussy for true eye appeal. Likewise, the marketing of some blogs extends to the inclusion of catchy slogans or mottos, such as the following memorable slogans:

- *Arrant Pedantry:* '"This is the sort of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put."– not Churchill, but maybe some anonymous government official, or maybe no one at all.'
- *Conjugate Visits:* 'YOU KNOW, LIKE GRAMMAR AND STUFF.'
- *Grammar Girl:* 'Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing.'
- *Grammar Police:* 'Keeping the Web and the World Safe from Bad English.'
- *NCTE inbox:* '… news, views, and ideas you can use!'

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Table 1: A sampling of grammar-focused blogs*

Name of site	Type of site	Writer	Background	Key topics
Arrant Pedantry	Blog	Jonathon	Editor, 'would-be linguist'	Language topics, usage, mechanics, more
Blogslot	Blog	Bill Walsh	Newspaper copy editor	Grammar, usage
Blue Pencil Editing	Blog	Lauren Holder	Writer, editor	Grammar, usage, more
Cheryl Norman, Grammar Cop:-)	Blog	Cheryl Norman	Writer	Grammar, style
Conjugate Visits	Blog	June Casagrande	Writer, editor, journalist	Grammar, usage, more
[the] ENGLISH-BLOG [.com]	Blog	B. Lee Hobbs	English professor	Grammar, teaching, more
English Grammar Blog	Blog	Justin	—-	Vocabulary, more
Everything Language & Grammar	Blog	Paul Yeager Sherry Coven	Editor, writer Editor, writer	Grammar, usage
Good's Grammar	Blog	C. Edward Good	Legal writer	Grammar, more
GrammarBlog	Blog	Gez, Tom, others	—-	Grammar, more
Grammar Girl	Podcasts with blog	Mignon Fogerty	Writer, editor	Grammar, usage, more
Grammarphobia	Blog, more	Patricia O'Conner Stewart Kellerman	Writers, news editors, journalists	Usage, grammar, more
Grammar Police	Blog	Keiti, Jeannette, Patricia, Shawn, Joe	Writer, software engineer, three English teachers	Grammar, diction, language abuse
Grammar Vandal	Blog	Kate McCulley	Freelance editor	Grammar
Hot Pepper Blog	Blog	Kim Siever	Website developer	Grammar, usage, tech topics, more
Language Log	Blog	Mark Liberman	Linguistics professors Geoffrey Pullum, et al.	Linguistics topics, including grammar
Mighty Red Pen	Blog	Unnamed female	Editor, writer	Grammar, more
NCTE inbox	Blog/ Newsletter	Tillie Davis Traci Gardner	NCTE administrator Educator, writer, editor	Grammar, more
Mrs. Write Right, Word Therapist (aka Writer/Editor)	Blog	Julia Temlyn	Writer, editor, more	Grammar, personal
One Step Forward	Blog	legbamel	Writer	Grammar, writing, more
SPOGG Blog	Blog	Martha Brockenbrough	Writer	Grammar, vocabulary
Syntax Sisters	Blog	Daniele B. Jackson Meredith B. Ellis	English teachers	Grammar, more
Triangle Grammar Guide	Blog	Pam Nelson	Journalist	Language usage/misuse, grammar, style, more
Watch Yer Language	Blog	Craig Lancaster	Newspaper editor	Grammar, style, usage, more
The Web of Language	Blog	Dennis Baron	English professor	Linguistics topics
WhiteSmoke Blog	Blog	"In-house top experts"	WhiteSmoke employees	Grammar, WhiteSmoke products
You Don't Say	Blog	John McIntyre	Newspaper copy-desk director	Language & writing, grammar, usage

*All blogs are at least mostly prescriptive in orientation except for Language Log and The Web of Language, which are uniformly descriptive blogs written by linguists.

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- *WhiteSmoke Blog:* 'Write better. Right now.'

One might also expect, given the popular nature (in the core cultural sense) of blogs, that these sites' references to popular culture might be more pervasive than those found in print books, and their style less formal or academic, and both expectations seem by and large to be true (with notable exceptions, however, considering the breeziness of writers like Casagrande and Truss). Certainly, many of the blogs comment on current language events in the news: for example, Triangle Grammar Guide has an entry on Bushisms (4 January, 2009), while Arrant Pedantry considers the punctuation problem presented by *WALL-E* and Wal-Mart (13 July, 2008). A couple of blogs seem to focus primarily on reporting and critiquing language errors in print or on printed matter in the public eye, especially signs (see Blogslot, Grammar Vandal, Mighty Red Pen). But other news of more general contemporary cultural import is also noted, as in Mighty Red Pen's item on the *New Yorker* Obama terrorist cover (14 July, 2008). Most of these blogs, however, as noted above, still concentrate primarily on their stated language-improvement mission.

And, one might argue, the majority of them do it quite seriously, sometimes quite scathingly (as in legbamel's 'round of scolding for lazy or under-educated writers' in One Step Forward, 2 August, 2008). Still, the dominant tone is nonjudgmental, crossing reasonable understanding with a sincere desire to enlighten and educate, often in solidarity-promoting first and second person and with other informal-style markers, like slang, also encouraging intimacy. Then, too, some bloggers are seriously irreverent (Casagrande again comes immediately to mind), and humor does figure in most of the blogs at least on occasion, and in some of them, as a clearly dominant style feature. This appeal to readers' funny bones is hardly unexpected in those blogs written by print authors whose books rely heavily on humor, like Casagrande and Baron, but other bloggers, too, clearly hope to use humor to make their grammar lessons more palatable, including Cheryl Norman, Martha Brockenbrough (SPOGG Blog), and Craig Lancaster (Watch Yer Language). At the other extreme, however, I found no laughing matter in the samples I examined of [the] ENGLISH-BLOG [.com], Hot Pepper Blog, NCTE inbox, or Triangle Grammar Guide, and the remaining blogs primarily come across as serious, with only occasional flashes of funny.

Grammatical humor

The humorous devices these writers employ include many common in print grammar guides, and indeed, in any text aiming to entertain as well as edify. One finds puns, amusing allusions, sound play, fun figures of speech, just plain cute or whimsical turns of phrase, and frequently, humorous examples of language mistakes or other patterns under discussion. Full jokes, irony, and sarcasm, on the other hand, occur quite rarely, although the occasional ad-hominem zinger can be found. Some prime examples include the following:

Puns: 'Four Grammarians of the Apostrophocalypse' (Mighty Red Pen, 6 July, 2008); 'hyphen-ventilating' (SPOGG Blog, 30 July, 2008); and 'verbs are moody' (Blue Pencil Editing; 24 June, 2008).

Amusing allusions: Julia Temlyn requests, 'Calgon, take me away' (Mrs. Write Right, Word Therapist, 8 March, 2008); Brockenbrough urges split-infinitive avoiders to appreciate that exceptions arise, and in those cases, '…don't hesitate to boldly go' (SPOGG Blog, no date); and the Syntax Sisters head an item on the spelling of *gray/grey* 'Can I Get a Vowel? . . .' (19 March, 2008).

Sound play: Alliteration appears frequently, as in the headings 'Punctuating Pandas' (referring to Truss's book; Web of Language, 6 December, 2006) and 'Word Wars' (Mighty Red Pen, 6 July, 2008); and rhymes also occur, as in 'word nerds' (Blue Pencil Editing, 8 July, 2008, and elsewhere) and the heading 'Apostrophe Catastrophe' (Mighty Red Pen, 16 July, 2008).

Figures of Speech: Metaphors are the most common, my favorites including Jonathon's self-descriptions 'grammar free-love hippie' and '[former] grammar nazi' (Arrant Pedantry, 4 February, 2008); 'whiplash grammar' for alternating between *he* and *she* (a listener quoted in Grammar Girl's podcast #29); and Baron's declaration that 'there's no silver bullet that will turn bad writing into good, no just-add-water formula for producing perfect prose' (The Web of Language, 14 February, 2007). Other poetic devices are much rarer, but personification appears in Fogerty's worry that she 'will forever be an easy mark for sneaky,

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calculating typos that are out to get [her]' (Grammar Girl, podcast # 21), and a nicely effective simile frames Baron's comment on popular grammar self-help books: 'relying on such books for advice on writing is like relying on the almanac for a weather forecast. The information provided may not fit your individual needs or circumstances' (The Web of Language, 14 February, 2007).

Cute/whimsical turns of phrase: one of the GrammarBloggers reacts to a descriptive characterization of Ebonics with 'my initial thoughts on this were as follows—Balderdash, tish and indeed, fipsy' (GrammarBlog, 31 July, 2007); Casagrande evokes the 'melanoma gods' in reference to sunbathing (Conjugate Visits, 24 July, 2008); and Brockenbrough responds to another prescriptive opinion with 'they are wrong, bless their starchy little hearts' (SPOGG Blog, no date).

Funny language examples: redundant food-name examples include 'corned-beef Reuben,' 'roast-beef French dip,' and 'bacon BLT' (Blogslot, 4 July, 2008); and an item called 'Monthly Error Report' is salted with all sorts of objectionable language use, starting out with 'It's *definately* been . . .' and including 'Sherry and *myself*' and 'but *whose* counting' (Everything Language and Grammar, 6 July, 2008, italics original).

Ad hominem humor: McCulley quotes another blogger's unkind comment about Jessica Simpson's unpunctuated album title 'do you know [sic]': '…Jessica's dumb face [on the cover] is the question mark' (Grammar Vandal, 28 July, 2008); and Lancaster notes that Kurt Vonnegut called semi-colons 'transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing' (Watch Yer Language, 20 August, 2008).

An additional source of humor that occurs frequently in many of these blogs is made possible by the multi-media capabilities of computer-based sites to present an array of visual and auditory information. For example, featured on many of these blogs are such audio-visual aids as photos of offending signs or other printed matter, like newspaper headlines (Blogslot, The Grammar Vandal, Mighty Red Pen, Triangle Grammar Guide); handwritten error-filled notes (GrammarBlog); cartoons (Language Log); and humorous illustrations (see Cheryl Norman's New Year's greeting, 9 January, 2009). Unsurprisingly, a few blogs also include video clips that offer both visual and auditory content to be appreciated (see, for example GrammarBlog's 1 May, 2008, link to a YouTube clip of *Apprentice* contestants debating apostrophe use).

Multimodal prescriptivism – old whine in a new bottle?

The multi-channel capabilities of websites also allow for other features besides the video links not found in print books. Almost all at the least include blogrolls or other lists of links to additional grammar- or language-related sites (or products), and any blogger who has also published a print book or has other merchandise for sale prominently displays photos of these goods on her or his site (often with links to sales pages); see, for example, Conjugate Visits, Good's Grammar, Grammar Girl (with additional links to Fogerty's podcasts), Grammarphobia, SPOGG Blog, and WhiteSmoke Blog.

And as in any prescriptive analysis of English grammar (i.e., involving opinions offered by self-appointed authorities without external, objective sources of verification), these blogs include the occasional judgment call which other grammarians might take issue with (as Lancaster says in Watch Yer Language, 16 July, 2008, 'when you point the finger, three are pointing back at you'), not to mention committing the occasional grammar – especially mechanical – error of the same type that they bemoan in the writing of others. Thus, B. Lee Hobbs disapproves of using *an* with *historic(al)*, saying, 'it is not correct use of the language or common parlance,' even while pointing out that '[a]lmost every announcer on NPR and WUNC' uses *an* in this way—not to mention many other modern English speakers ([the] ENGLISH-BLOG [.com], 3 November, 2007). And any number of blog entries are guilty of missing and misused punctuation marks (e.g., omitted hyphen in 'my school aged sister' in Syntax Sisters, 18 April, 2008); typos and other misspelled words (e.g., typo 'prepostion' for 'preposition' in Cheryl Norman, Grammar Cop :-), 20 May, 2008 – plus her egregious misuse of 'who's' for 'whose' in 'Elizabeth Sinclair, who's young daughter rushed into the house,' 21 June, 2008); missing words (as in the absent *or* in 'and have no clear right wrong answer' in Arrant Pedantry, 19 March, 2008); and even a dangling modifier in WhiteSmoke Blog ('As one of the most viewed channels on You Tube, we were very excited when Marina made a video about WhiteSmoke

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[on her You Tube 'program' HotForWords]!', 2 June, 2008).

Conclusion

In all these respects, then, the most cutting-edge form of prescriptive-grammar preaching, Internet blogs, is quite similar to the incarnations which preceded it, especially recent print guides (hardly surprising, since a number of these authors have also joined the blogging ranks), and so classic prescriptive philosophies are alive and thriving in both formats. Likewise, even though some bloggers and contemporary print authors show real awareness and understanding of the nature of descriptivism and of language itself, such knowledge does not appear to deter most of them from their quest to improve English speakers' and writers' purity, often one word-usage and punctuation gaffe at a time. And while some of these online and print pundits make occasional pragmatic appeals to writing clarity, audience-pleasing formality, and so on, in defense of their prescriptive advice, many, if not most, still rely on the value judgments of classic prescriptivism (or personal preference) to justify their positions and mission. So, for every Jonathon (at Arrant Pedantry) and Bill Walsh (at Blogslot) willingly acknowledging widely used language patterns, we find a Cheryl Norman or pair of Syntax Sisters who insists on the letter of the prescriptive rule. And even popular descriptivism-focused blogs like Language Log and The Web of Language, whose views are often explicitly recognized by prescriptivists, do not seem able to moderate the influence of prescriptive judgments on public sensibility.

And so not all that much has changed since Bishop Lowth and his cohorts first prescribed their grammar nostrums to English writers and speakers. Some bloggers have larger followings than others—Fogerty, for one, is highly popular, with her podcasts, website-posted podcast transcripts, and a recent book all receiving considerable attention—but all evidently fill the same need (in themselves and their readers) for demystifying and codifying English use and abuse that countless earlier prescriptivists have tried, but apparently have failed, to satisfy. Clearly, in a technology-permeated age when any individual can set up a forum on the Internet, those with strong opinions or sense of mission relating to language use are not passing up the opportunity to join the crowd. In fact, even if descriptivism were to actually triumph in the court of public opinion, it seems unlikely that impassioned prescriptivists would give up their online soapboxes, nor would they lack for like-minded readers. So let the Grammar Wars continue – in cyberspace! ■

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual Popular Culture Association Conference, New Orleans, April 8–11, 2009.

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