THE EDITOR'S DEPARTMENT

Editing, prescriptivism, and free speech

All my life as a linguist, I have been a rabid descriptivist and have actively inveighed against prescriptivism when I have taught students in introductory classes or have had the opportunity to speak in similar forums (or is it *fora*?).[1] Inextricably linked to this is my longtime intense belief in the importance of free speech, the right of people to express themselves freely and without fetters from governmental action.

While descriptivism and free speech strike me as entirely compatible and interrelated notions, being an editor is increasingly striking me as being consistent with neither. As an editor, I see myself playing a highly prescriptive role and in some cases encroaching on an author's free exercise of expression. This is not necessarily bad, as writing involves making choices for the sake of effective communication, rhetorical effect, even euphony on occasion, and editors inevitably have to do some rewriting of text that they accept for publication.[2] In many instances, such rewriting is clearly beneficial, as when meaning obscured by turgid prose gushes forth as if liberated from a rewritten sentence,[3] and it can also be relatively benign, as when one corrects misspellings[4] or clarifies terminological misuses, or even alters the use and/or placement of commas.[5]

In many cases, moreover, descriptivism can rule, and usage can overturn prescriptivism. Using prepositions to end sentences with, for instance, has become a relatively common practice in most types of written English, including (some) academic prose.[6] Sometimes, even, preposing (pied piping) the preposition sounds downright clumsy and awkward (cf.[7] *Dr. Bagoze wrote a book against the publication of which our*

[1] Dictionaries of English (e.g. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000)) actually allow both forms in contemporary usage.

[2] Indeed, even my prose in this journal is not exempt from editorial scrutiny and rewriting at the hands of the copyeditor and the journal's editorial assistants; while I could in principle overrule them, to date virtually all of their suggestions have been useful, even necessary, and certainly welcome!

[3] Clearly a passage itself desperately in need of some serious rewriting.

[4] I count as 'misspellings' here the correct but geographically inappropriate cases where I ask authors to use American norms for spelling, e.g. *color* for British (and elsewhere) *colour*, reasoning that this is the journal of the Linguistic Society of AMERICA, after all.

[5] Though see Geoffrey K. Pullum's 1984 article (Punctuation and human freedom, Natural Language and Linguistic Theory 4.419–25) for a scathing (and characteristically witty and insightful) reassessment of copyeditors' punctuation practices.

[6] Although I have yet to find an example in a recent issue of *Language*, I am fairly sure I would not change a sentence with a stranded preposition, even if it were one that there was a suitable alternative to (though our copyeditor and proofreader, as well as my editorial assistants, undoubtedly would). I would, however, resist any urge or argument to allow to stand the not infrequent doubled preposition, such as the multiple *in*s in the line from Paul McCartney's song 'Live and Let Die': 'But if this ever changing world in which we live in makes you give in and cry . . . '. See Michael Montgomery and Guy Bailey 1991 (*In Which*: A new form in written English?, *American Speech* 66.2.147–63) for discussion of this interesting and apparently innovative use of prepositions in relativization.

[7] The use of *cf.* is an instructive case in point concerning issues of usage versus prescriptivism and precedence of one guiding principle over another. I quote here from a note about *cf.* found in the introduction ('On language, change, and language change') that Richard Janda and I wrote to the *Handbook of Historical Linguistics* (Blackwell Publishing, 2003, 133, n. 4):

> partly for convenience (and welcome variety), but also in order to provide an iconic illustration of language change at work in a work on language change, we follow the growing practice of using *cf.* to mean 'confer, see'—taking it to abbreviate English (finally-stressed) *conférr*—even though its etymon,

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committee now stands united vs. *Dr. Bagoze wrote a book which our committee now stands united against the publication of*), thus violating another tenet of good writing that editors aspire to (even if authors don't always): clarity. When constraints clash, clarity must surely rank as the most highly valued. And at any rate, sometimes the preposition must be stranded, unless there is DRASTIC rewriting, as in *Linguists are always easy to listen to* vs. **Linguists are always easy with whom to listen* or **Linguists are always easy to listen to them*; or in *This article has been tampered with* vs. **With this article (it) has been tampered.*

Editors who engage in such practices do so for all sorts of reasons, not just with prescriptivist motivations. Whatever the basis, editors can go too far in their rewriting zeal, sometimes to the detriment of the author or even the truth. In E. Annie Proulx's 1993 novel *The Shipping News*, the main character, Quoyle, who writes a column on shipping news for a small Newfoundland newspaper, has his entire opinion column on potential problems with old oil tankers (e.g. oil spills) rewritten by his editor into a brief statement extolling the virtues of tankers and the oil industry for Newfoundland. The rewriting here was politically motivated, since the editor favored the development of the oil industry for the economic well-being of the area, yet the editor justified his changes by saying, in authoritarian fashion, 'As long as I'm managing editor . . . I've the right to change anything I don't think fit to run in [the paper]'.

This example of editorial reworking is fictitious; however, unfortunate outcomes from editorial intervention are not restricted just to fiction. Two somewhat amusing examples from my own writing career, such as it has been, drive this point home. In a small piece I submitted to a journal in 1986, I had occasion to refer to the (South Pacific) island Bikini, but left the details of its whereabouts unspecified as immaterial to my point. The editor, bless his soul, rewrote my piece to make it far more interesting and compellingly written, condensing a bloated page and a half to a single crisp paragraph, and I had no objection (though I confess I found the extent of the rewriting rather startling). The editor saw fit, however, to add more information on the location of Bikini, giving it as 'Polynesian'. As many readers of *Language* no doubt know, this is erroneous, as Bikini is in Micronesia, in the Marshall Islands. The brief note was published in that form, but one alert reader caught the error and sent the editor a letter (ultimately never published) essentially saying that as a geographer, I was a good linguist. So also with a letter I sent to the *Columbus Dispatch* in 1983 concerning a bill before the Ohio legislature promoting English as the official language of the state: in the letter, to make clear my status as a professional linguist, I said (roughly) 'as a linguist (i.e., one interested in the scientific and objective study of language)'. The *Dispatch* printed my letter, but for the sake of its readership chose to expand my apparently opaque abbreviation *i.e.* to the incorrect 'for example', so that the resulting sentence in my letter ('as a linguist, for example one interested . . . ') turned out to be at best mildly incoherent, and certainly not what I intended.

In each case, the editor's changes ended up reflecting badly on me, and even if the letter telling the world of the mistake concerning the location of Bikini was not pub-

Latin (initially-stressed) *cónfer*, actually meant (among other things) 'collect, compare, contrast'. But we draw the line at this point, and so do not join those writers of Modern English who, by analogy to *i.e.* and *e.g.*, use *c.f.* as an alternative punctuation. In other disciplines, though, *cf.* retains adversative, even adversarial meaning, as Grafton 1997:8 [*The footnote: A curious history* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)] points out: 'Historians . . . often quietly set the subtle but deadly cf. ('compare') before . . . [a citation of a work; t]his indicates, at least to the expert reader, both that an alternate view appears in the cited work and that it is wrong'.

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lished, the error still stands for any future sharp-eyed reader to pick up on. The moral is that papers and letters and such come out under the name of the AUTHOR, and thus content as well as wording is forever attributed to the author, not to the editor. Authors are the ones held responsible, even if they were not the source of a particular locution or usage or statement of 'fact'.

So why do editors make changes? Partly, I guess, because we can, and partly because we do feel some responsibility to present readers with our own vision of how authors can best get their points across. I of all people should be sensitive to the potential ravages of editorial wills imposed on authors, yet nonetheless from my position here as editor, I DO exercise my prerogative and rewrite as I see fit, I DO endorse changes to authors' text made by *Language*'s copyeditors and editorial assistants, and I DO feel that I have the last word on whether a line should read *We show below* or *Below we show*. And, in that way, although I hate to admit it, I AM infringing on an author's free expression and AM imposing my own occasionally arbitrary and certainly prescriptivist views on what constitutes 'good' written English. At times, I DO let my descriptivist inclinations hold sway—I recognize, for instance, that modern English usage is split on whether *data* is a plural noun (*the data show*) or a singular (*the data shows*); here I readily accept an author's use of the singular, as long as the usage is consistent throughout the piece. My reasoning is that this is a legitimate expression of an author's preferences, presumably as a suitable reflection of the author's own usage, and does not violate any prevailing norms or any tenets of clarity.[8] Thus, it need not be subject to editorial intervention; a descriptivist approach here helps to strike a blow for free speech. At the same time, though, I recognize that it is just as prescriptively arbitrary for me to allow authorial freedom with this word but not, say, with other historically similar words where the norms of usage are quite different now and where I WOULD make corrective changes (e.g. *the criteria is* I would change to *the criterion is* or *the criteria are*, depending on what the author was trying to say, and *the agenda are* I would always change to *the agenda is*). Freedom of speech in *Language* is not absolute, I might be forced to admit.

Of course, *Language*, along with journals in general, is not a public entity in the same way a city council meeting or a city street corner is. Thus authors may not have the right, in the strictly technical sense, to free expression, whereas citizens appearing before the city council or standing on a street corner do and so can speak their minds freely. But *Language* does represent a large organization, the Linguistic Society of America, and in that sense offers an opportunity to members to speak their minds on linguistic matters, in their own words, before the rest of the society at large (i.e.[9] the readership of the journal). Authors can thus have a reasonable expectation that their words will not be altered beyond recognition and that their preferences will for the most part be honored.

So the real questions for editors in general, and for this editor in particular, are how far to go, how much to rewrite, and to what extent to respect authors' rights to state things in their own words? The DISCUSSION NOTE by Paul Postal in this issue about the LSA's guidelines for nonsexist usage raises for me the vexing but intriguing and certainly challenging question of the degree to which I would exercise my editorial author-

[8] My own preference—largely irrelevant here—is for this noun to be treated as a singular (contra prescriptivist usage).

[9] Meaning here, of course, 'that is'.

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ity to alter text, and even example sentences (where the content is typically not at issue), in the face of some person's or group's expressed desire for political correctness and nonoffensiveness in usage. Without (yet) having been placed in a situation where I have had to make such decisions, I cannot say for sure what I would do, but my inclination would be to suggest to the author that the use of certain modes of expression might undermine the thrust of his or her argument by distracting readers from the content; a key concern for me in such a case would be that surely science would not be well served if the form of a message rather than its meaning were to become the issue. Ultimately, in my view, serving the interests of our science—and not making political statements—is really the ideal to which *Language* is dedicated.

Brian D. Joseph
Columbus, Ohio
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