Calling for a truce in the descriptivist-prescriptivist wars



BRYAN A. GARNER

A reply to Tom McArthur, 'Error, Editing, and World Standard English', *ET*65 (Jan 01)

> 'This battle between linguistic radicals and linguistic conservatives continues unabated.' *The English Language* (1985:6).
>
> Robert W. Burchfield

> 'We could end the battle, perhaps even the war.'
>
> Bryan A. Garner

TOM McARTHUR made an interesting point in his January article: that *English Today*, like every other reputable journal, is a "standardizing and prescriptive product." This assertion would have been unremarkable in 1901; in 2001 it probably looks fresh and maybe even startling to many readers. How the world has changed: occasionally we rediscover long-forgotten truths that our forebears knew well.

Truths of this kind could end the age-old debate between descriptivists and prescriptivists – if only both sides would acknowledge them. More about these truths in a moment.

As McArthur has observed, in one of my books, *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, I am a prescriptive linguist who uses descriptive methods. I don't doubt the value of descriptive linguistics – up to the point when descriptivists dogmatically refuse to acknowledge the value of prescriptivism. I think that each side in this 150-year-old debate should acknowledge the value of the other. But this, I think, could happen only if we agreed on three fundamental points.

Before stating them, though, I might draw attention to the danger of calling myself a prescriptivist. I may be playing into descriptivists' hands by adopting this inflammatory label. Maybe I should instead take a lesson from D. J. Enright: "[M]any people without the benefit (as they see it) of a decent education still want to know how to use words. And since prescriptivism is the only brake we have on the accelerating spread of chaos, let's find some other name for it, one less reminiscent of the National Health Service." Something like "good writing" or "careful language" might do. But it all amounts to the same thing – and changing the label probably won't change the reality.

Now to the fundamental principles.

Linguistically, both speech and writing matter

When modern linguists focus exclusively on speech, they're overreacting to their predecessors' preoccupation with writing. Descriptivists

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have a bias toward studying speech; prescriptivists have a bias toward studying writing.

Both are important. Speaking precedes writing. It's the essence of language. Yet writing is a form of language worth studying in its own right. For some reason, though, many linguists refuse to recognize this. As Roy Harris put it 21 years ago: "One of the sophistries of modern linguistics is to treat scriptism, which has probably dominated the concept of a language in literate societies for at least several thousand millennia, as some kind of theoretical heresy."

Writing helps stabilize the language. Universal literacy helps temper linguistic change. As more and more people become literate, the written and spoken forms of language influence each other – even while remaining distinct.

For the readers of this journal, which is devoted to English around the globe, a stable language is doubtless a desirable thing. Otherwise, the English language wouldn't be worth much as a lingua franca. Although Samuel Johnson sneered at the idea of "embalming" the language, no one seriously wants to halt all change in a living language. "It is not a question of banning all linguistic changes," as F.L. Lucas put it. "[S]ince language cannot stand still, the main thing for the public interest is that alterations in vocabulary and idiom should not become too rapid, reckless, and wanton… ."

The study of writing – like the very fact that writing exists – serves as a conservative, moderating influence.

Writing well is a hard-won skill that involves learning normative conventions

To educate people about the conventions of writing is good for them. Why? Because writing well requires disciplined thinking. Learning to write is an important part of anyone's education.

What are the normative conventions that aspiring writers need to learn? Among other things, those who write expository prose must learn to:

- Adopt a relaxed, natural tone.
- Synopsize complicated matter.
- Maintain a cohesive train of thought.
- Support ideas with adequate evidence.
- Vary sentence structure.
- Vary sentence length.
- Vary paragraph length.
- Connect ideas from sentence to sentence, and paragraph to paragraph.
- Omit unnecessary words.
- Observe recognized grammatical niceties (subject–verb agreement, no dangling participles, parallel phrasing with correlative conjunctions, and so on).
- Observe recognized distinctions between similar words that are easily confused, such as *ado* and *adieu*, *disinterested* and *uninterested*, and the like.

Only the last three, for some reason, seem to trouble most descriptive linguists, who like to characterize prescriptivists as insisting on such preposterous phrasings as *It's I* and *none is*, and as prohibiting all split infinitives, all prepositions as sentence-enders, and all conjunctions as sentence-starters. The truth is that informed prescriptivists didn't take those positions at any time in the 20th century.

Back to the main point: writing is a learned activity, just as hitting a golf ball or playing the piano is a learned activity. Some do it better than others. But there's no practical way to learn to write, hit a golf ball, or play the piano without guidance on large points and small – and large doses of practice.

It's possible to formulate practical advice on grammar and usage

Although 18th- and 19th-century grammarians' work was too often infected by whimsy and guesswork, their basic instincts were sound: we can indeed help writers on thorny questions of grammar and usage.

Usage and style are more important in writing than in speech. In oral communication, inflection and body language and interaction help convey meaning. And a speaker can perceive cues that invite immediate clarifications. But in writing, these aids to communication are absent: one relies exclusively on the words represented on the page. A writer rarely gets a second chance to communicate effectively. So clear writing requires much more forethought. It's no wonder that publishers produce thousands of books designed to teach people how to improve their writing.

Authorities on writing echo each other in stressing how difficult good writing is. Consider what William Zinsser says: "Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first

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time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard." Writers must learn to have a point, to deliver it efficiently, to cut the extra words that inevitably appear in any first draft, and to maintain a clean narrative line, among many other skills. These things trouble even professionals.

Prescriptive usage guides deal with many of the small points that writers grapple with. They are pedagogical books, intended to be browsed in as much as to be consulted. In my book on American usage, for example, many entries deal with emerging problems in diction, documented errors that threaten to spread: *disburse* for *disperse*, *expatriot* for *expatriate*, *fruit melody* for *fruit medley*, *heart-rendering* for *heart-rending*, *inclimate* for *inclement*, *keep tract of* for *keep track of*, *marshal arts* for *martial arts*, *presumptious* for *presumptuous*, *reign in* for *rein in*. Others deal with plural forms that, for the time being, most writers who think about the subject prefer to maintain as plural, such as *criteria*, *paparazzi*, and *phenomena*. Still others urge wider acceptance of disputed usages such as the singular *media*.

The focus is on the particular: these are the words and phrases that writers and editors must make considered choices about – and make them daily. There aren't just a few dozen trouble spots in the language, nor even a few hundred. There are several thousand of them. Given the critical acumen of many readers, remaining unconscious of these pitfalls and writing whatever sounds close enough will lead inevitably to a lessening of a writer's credibility. In short, intelligibility isn't the touchstone; good usage is.

As a field of study, usage doesn't hold much interest for modern linguists. This is probably understandable, considering that linguistics has moved more and more toward quantitative psychology and theory. It's not so very surprising that the leading theorist today, Noam Chomsky, would acknowledge the pedagogical irrelevance of modern linguistics: "I am, frankly, rather skeptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology." Or, as F.W. Bateson said just a few years later: "[T]he professional linguist has very little to contribute to style considered as the best words in the best order." If you want to learn how to use the English language skillfully and gracefully, the modern grammars won't help you much.

Yet people want normative rules of language. Linguistic relativism, though valuable on some levels, has its limitations. True, it's probably helpful for students to hear insights such as this one from Charlton Laird: "Nothing in language is essentially vulgar or genteel, barbarous or elegant, right or wrong, except as the users of the language want to feel that the locutions have those qualities." But the exception there is every bit as important as the rule: people do tend to feel that locutions have right and wrong qualities. In a given social setting, those widely shared views matter enormously. And Laird – who certainly belonged in the descriptivist camp – recognized this:

> [W]e must have standards. After all, who makes the language? You and I and everybody make the language. And what does this hydra-headed language-manufacturer want in his product? Obviously, he wants a number of things; he wants flexibility and versatility, but he also wants standards. He may not know just what standards he wants, nor how rigidly he wants them applied, but he does want them in spelling, in punctuation, in diction, in usage, in all aspects of language, and on the whole he relies on people of our sort [English teachers] to inform him which are the best standards and what he should do about them. We had better be prepared to tell him, and to know what we are talking about when we do so.

Despite the decades-old campaign to convince the public that no uses of language are inherently better than others, literate people continue to yearn for guidance on linguistic questions. With surprising acuity back in 1952, an English teacher – Louis Salomon – characterized what remains the current state of affairs:

> [T]he public may not care whether English teachers eat or not, but if there is any sentiment in favor of feeding them I'm willing to bet that the idea is to keep them alive as English teachers, that is, as a kind of traffic cop to tell the average person when to stop and when to move on, where he may park and where he may not. If English teachers don't want to be traffic cops – if they just want to stand on the corner and count the cars that try to beat the red light – then they might as well turn in their badges. Because sooner or later the taxpayers will (a) begin to wonder why the accident rate keeps going up, and (b) discover that a machine with an electric eye can do the counting more cheaply and more efficiently.

In my earlier article, I cited several linguists

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who assert, essentially, that there is no right and wrong in language. (I'm talking about what native speakers do, not nonsense such as *House black built is*.) This is an extreme position that some of the better theorists in the mid-20th century rejected. Here, for example, is what Max Black said:

> [T]his extreme position [i.e., that "there is no such thing as good and bad (or correct and incorrect, grammatical and ungrammatical, right and wrong) in language"] . . . involves a confusion between investigating rules (or standards, norms) and prescribing or laying down such rules. Let us grant that a linguist, qua theoretical and dispassionate scientist, is not in the business of telling people how to talk; it by no means follows that the speakers he is studying are free from rules which ought to be recorded in any faithful and accurate report of their practices. A student of law is not a legislator; but it would be a gross fallacy to argue that therefore there can be no right or wrong in legal matters.

One might have thought that this no-right-and-no-wrong fallacy had long since been laid to rest. But it's very much with us still – not in the world of affairs, but in the academy.

Conclusion

Why not let prescriptivists advocate a realistic level of linguistic tidiness, even as the descriptivists nonjudgmentally describe the mess all around them? And if the prescriptivists have moderate success, then why can't the descriptivists simply describe those successes? Education entailing normative values has always been a part of literate society. Why should it suddenly stop merely because descriptive linguists see this kind of education as meddling with natural forces?

Meanwhile, prescriptivists need to be realistic. We can't expect perfection, and we must bow to universal usage. But when an expression is in transition – when only part of the population has adopted a new usage that seems genuinely undesirable – prescriptivists should be allowed, within reason, to stigmatize it. There's no reason to tolerate *wreckless driving* in place of *reckless driving*. Or *wasteband* in place of *waistband*. Or *corollary* when misused for *correlation*. There are legitimate objections to the slippage.

As one noted linguist, Roy Harris, has said: "[T]here is no reason why prescriptive linguistics should not be 'scientific,' just as there is no

Good at finding weak points

In his *Notes in the Margin* column in *The Linguist*,the journal of the Institute of Linguists, London (39:6, 2000), ANDREW DALBY adds a comment on an earlier response to Tom McArthur by Bryan Garner.

In a recent issue of *English Today* the editor, Tom McArthur, wrote a long – and fairly abrasive – review of a new guide to good English writing, Bryan A. Garner's *Dictionary of Modern American Usage*. There was apparently also a fierce review (which I haven't seen) by the descriptive linguist Richard A. Bailey in the American journal *Dictionaries*. Now, in *English Today* for October 2000, Garner replies to both of them. A square-jawed Texan lawyer, he is professionally good at finding weak points in an opponent's argument, and this he does in both cases. McArthur escapes with a minor flesh wound. Bailey is shot down, trapped by his own unpleasant anti-Texan innuendo.

Garner's best point is made on a single page (on which he quotes silly generalisations made by descriptive linguists Robert A. Hall and John McWhorter). The point is recapitulated thus in his conclusion: 'Why can't descriptive and prescriptive approaches coexist peacefully?' He's right: we need them both. Hall's assertion 'There is no such thing as … correct and incorrect … in language', if Hall himself really believed it, would have disqualified this fairly venerable scholar from language teaching. To learn to use any language, whether you began as an infant or not, you need to learn its words and its rules. There's no particular time when you stop learning. Language teachers, and authors like Garner, actually help.

But it's a pity that 'modern American usage', as we are to understand it from Garner's book and his title, is so predominantly the usage of journalists, lawyers and other specialists. Who'll write the *Le Bon Usage* of American English?

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reason why prescriptive medicine should not be." Harris went even further, denouncing the antiprescriptive doctrine as resulting from naiveté:

> [T]wentieth-century linguists, anxious to claim "scientific" status for their new synchronic discipline, were glad enough to retain the old nineteenth-century whipping-boy of prescriptivism, in order thereby to distinguish their own concerns as "descriptive," not "prescriptive." When the history of twentieth-century linguistics comes to be written, a naive, unquestioning faith in the validity of this distinction will doubtless be seen as one of the main factors in the academic sociology of the subject.

Other linguists have explained the reason for this failing. In 1959, C.A. Ferguson suggested that linguists too often take a blinkered look at the language, without understanding its social import: "Descriptive linguists in their understandable zeal to describe the internal structure of the language they are studying often fail to provide even the most elementary data about the socio-cultural setting in which the language functions."

Maybe this is because linguistic investigations tend to be highly theoretical – and divorced from most people's immediate interests in language. Barbara Wallraff, a prescriptivist, puts it in a self-deprecating way: "I am not an academic linguist or an etymologist. Linguistics and what I do stand in something like the relation between anthropology and cooking ethnic food, or between the history of art and art restoration." Other analogies might be equally apt, such as musicologists vis-à-vis musicians, or sociologists vis-à-vis ethicists.

To my knowledge, anthropologists don't denounce ethnic food, and art historians don't denounce art restorers – especially not when the cooks and the artisans know a thing or two about the material they're dealing with. Musicologists don't censure musicians who teach others how to produce a vibrato. Sociologists don't look askance at ethicists who aim to guide human behavior. Maybe those who study language could learn something from these other fields – something about balance and civility. ■

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SNIPPETS 1

The Internet numbers game

Ten years ago only 100,000 computers were connected to the Internet. Today, it is believed 150 million people regularly go on-line. By the year 2001, it is predicted that more than 700 million will be using the net.

— *The Reporter*, Italy, March 2000

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