Ideology, Power, and Linguistic Theory[*]

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My aim in this paper is to discuss an intensely complex cluster of interlinked concepts involving distinctions between (i) descriptive and prescriptive grammar, (ii) constitutive and regulative rules, (iii) conservative and liberal attitudes, and (iv) standard and non-standard dialects. I cannot hope to be comprehensive, but I will try to be clear.

Sometimes it seems to me that the issues we are dealing with here have been mired in the same controversies for a good forty years. Other times it seems more like a hundred and forty. There are few signs of any knowledge about grammar dating from after 1900 having become known to a broad cross-section of the general public or having had an impact on education. Perhaps it is time to attempt to understand the situation better, rather than simply to deplore it.

Correctness conditions

I begin by taking it for granted that there are conditions we might call **correctness conditions** for natural languages. (Whether they are standard languages, non-standard dialects, or undescribed tribal languages of preliterate peoples does not matter: all have correctness conditions.) And I will also assume that it is possible in principle to be perfectly explicit about such conditions. In terms of the distinction drawn familiar thirty-five years ago by John Searle,[1] They are **constitutive**, not **regulative**. They do not regulate the use of the language, in the sense that one could use it either in ways that comply or in ways that don't; they constitute the language, in the sense that not respecting them amounts to not using it at all but doing something else instead.

Modern descriptive linguists try to figure out from the available evidence the principles that constitute the language being described, and to give explicit, and potentially falsifiable, formulations of them. Linguists often make little effort to distinguish the conditions themselves (the subject matter under study, the conditions as they truly are) from proposed statements of the conditions (hypotheses about the grammatical structure of expressions in the language). They often rely on a 'systematic ambiguity' that lets such terms as 'the grammar of English' refer either to the conditions that actually do constitute English or to the linguist's current effort at making a statement of them, whichever the context may call for. But the difference is important. For one thing, arbitrarily many different strongly equivalent statements of the correctness conditions for English could be given, but that doesn't imply that there are arbitrarily many different objects of study.

[1]John Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

Suppose a linguist states it as a condition that in Standard English an independent declarative clause beginning with a preposed negative adjunct must have a tensed auxiliary before the subject:

(1) a.   *Never before <u>had</u> I seen such a thing.*

 b.   **Never before I <u>had</u> seen such a thing.*

(2) a.   *At no time <u>did</u> he leave the room.*

 b.   **At no time he left the room.*

The claim being made is not that speakers of Standard English OUGHT to position subjects of independent clauses before the tensed auxiliaries when there is no preposed negative adjunct, as in the (a) examples; the claim is that they actually DO position them thus (setting aside unintentional failures like typing or editing errors that sometimes prevent people from doing what they intended). This of course implies that you would be well advised to position them thus if you want to be regarded as using Standard English; but no one is telling you that you SHOULD speak Standard English.

The correctness conditions of a language, by definition, provide full justification for any true claim to the effect that some expression is or is not well formed in the language. But it's important that justification of a quite different sort is needed for the higher-level claim by a linguist that a certain set of statements captures the RIGHT correctness conditions for a given language. The linguist can be wrong about whether some proposed statement of conditions is accurate for some language, even when it is the language that the linguist speaks natively. Hence the phrase 'potentially falsifiable' above.

It should be obvious that different dialects have (at least slightly) different correctness conditions. If an elderly British speaker says *Have you a pen?* and a young American speaker could never say that (but would say *Do you have a pen?* instead), it is not sensible to assume there is just one answer to the question of what is grammatical, and one of the two speakers is wrong. The American and British varieties of English exhibit a very close similarity, but they are not quite the same. They differ very slightly in what correctness conditions hold.

This claim on its own is quite enough to spark controversy in some circles. William Labov pointed out to linguists forty years ago that it can be applied, and should be applied, to African American Vernacular English (henceforth, AAVE). When a linguist says that in AAVE a tensed auxiliary may begin a declarative clause if that auxiliary is marked with the negative suffix (like *ain't*, in sentences like *Ain't nobody gonna tell me what to do*), the claim is not that if you speak AAVE you OUGHT to position your negative auxiliaries before your subjects, but that if you speak AAVE you often DO position them thus. The expressions defined as grammatical in AAVE are not the same as the ones defined as grammatical in Standard English.

It really didn't take any more than a restatement of that observation to prod the world's press into excoriating the governing board of the Oakland Unified School District when it made its infamous declaration of December 1996 concerning the distinctness of AAVE from Standard English and the appropriateness of using AAVE in the classroom. The furore will be recollected by most professionals in the fields of language and education (though we should keep in mind that it was long enough ago that many of our students will not even have heard of it). The most striking thing about it the furore in my view was that the excoriation of the school board proceeded in the absence of any real understanding of what the dialect under fire was like as a language, or what the school board had actually intended to propose as a matter of linguistic policy.

It isn't irrational to propose teaching AAVE speakers how to use Standard English. But it is irrational to go into paroxysms of fury about the very idea of taking AAVE seriously as a separate linguistic system with its own somewhat different syntactic correctness conditions. And anyone who thinks that is not what

the press commentators did simply hasn't read the press cuttings from late 1996 and early 1997. Eldridge Cleaver, in the *Los Angeles Times*, compared acceptance of AAVE to condoning cannibalism.[2]

Grammar and style

Grammar — the principles constituting the syntactically and morphologically permissible expressions of a language — is not at all the same thing as style. Style involves skill. It involves making choices between alternatives that the grammar makes available. Those choices can make the difference between using the language brilliantly or using it ploddingly. This is the sort of domain in which the notion of **regulative** rules makes sense. Indeed, what are known as 'house style' guides issued by publishers of books, journals, and newspapers may lay down rules that are in effect mandatory (there can be job-related consequences if the rules are not followed). But other sources (language teachers; writing tutors; books on how to write) offer discretionary advice. When a style guide or writing tutor tells you that adjuncts are not placed between *to* and the head verb of an infinitival clause, the claim is not that this never happens in Standard English prose. Far from it: the matter would not be worth mentioning unless people often placed adjuncts in that position! Rather, the claim is that you are doing wrong if you position adjuncts thus: you are doing something that you shouldn't.

This is what is meant by a **prescriptive** rule. Construed as having descriptive intent, prescriptive rules seem hopelessly silly, easily refuted hypotheses about the correctness conditions. They seem less worthy of being taken seriously than the absurdly obvious warnings printed on the packaging of nearly every kind of tool or other consumer durable you can buy in America. I swear I purchased a folding windshield-sized cardboard screen for protecting the inside of my car from getting overheated in the hot California summer sun, and on the back were the words "Do not drive with screen in place."

But at least that is advice that everyone seems to follow (I certainly do), and a good thing too. Prescriptive rules seem even dopier than that, because they warn against doing things which (a) everybody does all the time, and (b) are not harmful or inadvisable anyway.

But of course prescriptive rules are not intended to be constitutive. They are intended to be regulative. English is assumed to be already defined in some other way, or not to need any definition. The prescriptivist's rules are deliberately making recommendations about the ways in which you are recommended to use it or not to use it.

The received view of AAVE appears to be that it is just glaringly in contravention of prescriptive rules: it is bad Standard English, sullied and impaired by ignorant mistakes. This is not a defensible view. It makes a readily testable claim: that white English speakers should be able to do convincing impressions of AAVE speakers simply by injecting random mistakes. They should be able to write scripts for AAVE speakers in films, for example. Try it. You won't do well as a scriptwriter for films with young urban African American characters. There are well described systematic features of the syntax and morphology of AAVE that you would need to learn if you wanted to pass as yourself off as knowing it.

Some African Americans seem to think there is no possibility of your succeeding at the task, incidentally. I gave some examples of a few elementary rules of AAVE syntax during a lecture to teachers in Santa Clara County, California, and later a black teacher came up to me and explained that there aren't really any constitutive correctness conditions for AAVE: it's entirely a matter of personal style, intuitive rather than governed by constraints; rather like jazz. It's a black thing, he wanted me to understand.

Of course, in one respect the suggestion he made actually goes beyond the received view: by saying

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[2]See my 'Language that dare not speak its name' (*Nature* **386**, 27 March 1997, 321-322, for a brief commentary. I give a fuller discussion in 'African American Vernacular English is not Standard English with mistakes,' in *The Workings of Language: From Prescriptions to Perspectives*, ed. by Rebecca S. Wheeler, 39–58 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999).

that a special improvisational skill is involved, and tying it to the ethnic identity, culture, and even musical ability of African Americans, he did offer a tentative explanation for the inability of white speakers to create convincing AAVE dialog simply by injecting errors. But as it happens I have evidence of the falsity of that tentative explanation.

William Raspberry, the distinguished African American columnist for the *Washington Post*, published a column of mockery attacking the Oakland school board ('To Throw in a Lot of 'Bes,' or not? A conversation on Ebonics'; *Washington Post*, December 26, 1996), and included some invented dialect in AAVE. I wrote to him[3] to point out that within the 32 words of dialogue he had crafted there were at least four clear errors of AAVE grammar, and he had also included a false claim about the phonology. I got no reply. Even for an African American, the notion that AAVE might have rules, so you might get things wrong, is an idea that lies beneath the realm of comment or even acknowledgment.

Raspberry tried to simulate AAVE by injecting a few cases of *be* where *am* or *is* would be appropriate in Standard English, using *ain't* a couple of times, and leaving the *g* off the ends of some words. The attempt is painfully silly to those who have even a trivial amount of knowledge about AAVE. He got nowhere close. The reason is that there is nothing random about it. Merely being acquainted since birth with African-American style and culture (Raspberry was born black in a Mississippi town that I assume was rigidly segregated by race) will not equip you to construct even trivial-sized utterances in it with any conviction; to speak AAVE or write it you have to have to have an up-to-date active acqaintance with its correctness conditions. Raspberry either never knew them or had forgotten them.

What has to be understood about AAVE is that it does have its own correctness conditions, sharply different from those of Standard English. But to say that is not the same as saying it is in any way standard, or that it should be. It is a non-standard dialect of English. I happen to (mostly) understand it, and enjoy hearing it spoken; I don't regard it as having anything wrong with it. But I recommend against using it in an interview for a job in a bank. In many jobs employees are expected to use Standard English. That is just a social fact, and railing against it will not change it. It is entirely orthogonal to the linguistic fact that Eddie Murphy does know how to speak AAVE and William Raspberry apparently does not.

Privileged dialects

In complex societies it is common for there to be a **privileged dialect**, privileged over others in the sense of being more prestigious or more widely admired or more generally employed for public communication or perhaps religion. Certainly this is true of the Anglophone world, where although phonology (accent) and lexicon (words) differ regionally quite a bit, there is a dialect known to linguists as Standard English that has a remarkably stable and consistent syntax worldwide.

Saying which of a selection of dialects is the prestige one is, of course, no part of what is done by either constitutive rules of grammar or regulative rules of style. We formulate statements of those for application to a dialect of English we identify independently.

The dialect known as Standard English originated during the last two to three hundred years, evolving out of a dialect used around London. Its syntax lacks the negative concord that was a feature of Middle English: negation is marked just once in a negated clause, either in the tensed auxiliary (verbal negation) or in the morphology of some nonverbal constituent of the clause (nonverbal negation):

(3) a. *People didn't like it.* [verbal negation]
     b. *Nobody liked it.* [nonverbal negation]

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[3]The text of the letter (slightly abridged) is archived on Language Log (see `http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000937.html`).

and indefinite NPs beginning with *some-* (like *someone* or *something*) are replaced by alternate versions beginning with *any-*:

(4) Standard English

    a.   *People didn't like anything.*

    b.   *Nobody liked anything.*

It is possible in Standard English to use both two distinct negations, but semantically they cancel out to none:

(5) Standard English

    a.   *People didn't like nothing.* [≡ "People did like some things."]

    b.   *Nobody liked nothing.* [≡ "Everybody liked something."]

To say (5a) is to deny that people liked nothing; to say (5b) is to claim that the set of people who had an empty set of things they liked is itself empty. This much is just a summary of some of the constitutive correctness conditions for Standard English. We can do likewise for some of the non-standard dialects.

In the dialects of English that retained negative concord (these include the dialects of most of the working classes in Britain and Australasia as well as AAVE and many white American dialects), a negated clause always has verbal negation (a negative auxiliary, or a use of *not* with a finite auxiliary) and in addition all the indefinite NPs with the initial element *some-* are replaced by their negative counterparts:

(6) Various non-standard English dialects

    a.   *He didn't like nothing* [≡ Standard English "He didn't like anything."]

    b.   *Nobody didn't like nothing.* [≡ Standard English "Nobody liked anything."]

In these dialects, the meanings of sentences with an even number of forms that have negative morphology may be the direct opposite of what the same word sequence means in Standard English. (A point that has hardly ever been made is that in cases with an odd number of negations the word sequences may come out with the SAME meanings as in Standard English, though the meanings may be extremely difficult to compute. For example, in Standard English, liking nothing means disliking everything; so (6b) means that nobody did other than dislike everything; which means that everyone disliked everything; in other words, nobody liked anything, which is the same meaning that we have more straightforwardly in the non-standard dialects.)

To say that the non-standard dialects have the meanings given in square brackets in (6) is just to summarize part of the relevant constitutive correctness conditions for those dialects.

Neither set of conditions says anything about the other dialect being WRONG. And certainly neither set of conditions can tell us which dialect is inherently fit to be accorded a prestige place in Anglophone society. As it happens, accidents of history accorded such prestige to a southern British dialect that had lost negative concord. But there is no reason things had to be that way. Modern Polish and modern Italian are standard languages that have negative concord. It is purely an accident that English developed in a way that had the dialect that lost negative concord eventually coming out on top and used in government.

Of course, in complex societies it is also usually the case that some people or classes of people have tangible power (e.g., political or economic) over others. Typically the prestige dialect is associated with such power. That might not be a necessary connection. (Think of a poverty-stricken British lecturer being admired for his accent by a Brooklyn-raised professor earning five times as much. Or think of a great

English-speaking country in which a politician given to the use of the informal register of a non-standard Texan dialect wins the White House.)

Nevertheless, it is a very natural association. When a linguist attempts to give a statement of the constitutive correctness conditions for Standard English, the project may be mistaken by some for a recommendation about how people should talk, because the advantages of learning to use Standard English are (for some purposes) fairly clear, it is taught in schools, and so on. One can see where this error comes from. But it is an error.

Prescriptive ideologues

The Anglophone world incorporates within its intelligentsia a very vocal class of people I will call **prescriptive ideologues** whose avocation, or even in some cases profession, is prescribing for others how they ought to write and speak, and lambasting the linguistic incorrectnesses and infelicities of those who do not follow the prescription. They do this, naturally enough, on behalf of the prestige dialect: there are no signs of prescriptive ideologues advocating for the non-standard dialects.

There is a link between the stance of the prescriptive ideologues and actual political conservativism. Geoff Nunberg has remarked that English grammatical usage "has become a flagship issue for the cultural right: the people who are most vociferous about grammatical correctness tend to be those most dismissive of the political variety." The question that concerns me is whether there is any other valid rationale for the connection. It is extraordinarily hard to locate one.

The prescriptive ideologues appear to be tacitly adopting some form of realism that grammarians generally do not endorse. Louis Menand (politically a liberal, by the way), expanding on what he meant by remarks in a review about how there should be more grammatical usage advice in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, stated in an email to my friend Arnold Zwicky that all regulative rules of usage "are fundamentally arbitrary, and thus sometimes feel as though they exist only to trip up even the most careful writer." Yet he made it clear that he felt they nonetheless defined solecisms for us, and were to be obeyed, since a writer should be careful to avoid solecisms. This is not just a common attitude; it is the standard one. A colleague of Zwicky's posted a remark to a newsgroup to the effect that violations of a certain prescriptive rule were indeed ungrammatical. Zwicky writes:[4] "I mailed him an example [that violated the rule] from his own writing" but all that happened was that "he was inclined to think that he should just be more vigilant." There is more than a hint in this of a realist attitude to regulative usage rules — as if they exist independently of us.

But what kind of realism could this be? It can hardly be moral realism, aesthetic realism, or scientific realism. Realism is the view that there are external, objective bases for assessing proposed theories, principles, judgments, etc. Thus, for example, moral realism claims that there is a fact of the matter about what really is morally right and good, independent of our practice in callling this right or that bad, and that proposed systems of moral principles can be assessed by how they stand in respect to that external fact of the matter. A realist stance on prescriptive rules for English would claim that there is an external, objective basis — external to the use actually made of the language — for saying what really is correct. What could that basis be? What external first principles could yield the correctness conditions for Standard English?

There are a number of candidates. Let me run through all those I can discern in the literature. (Don't take the labels seriously; they're just ad hoc one-word mnemonic pointers, not technical terms to look up in a dictionary.) Following each putative basis for justifying prescriptive claims I will try to give an

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[4]See `http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000030.html` for the Language Log post in question.

indication of what it appears to be designed to help us avoid.

- **Nostalgia.** Justificatory basis: The past glory of some vanished golden age, an imagined linguistic utopia in which people spoke correctly. To avoid: Change — decay and deterioration, either linguistic or social.

- **Classicism.** Justificatory basis: The standing of other higher-prestige languages such as Latin. To avoid: Adoption of an inferior form of human language.

- **Authoritarianism.** Justificatory basis: Subordination to the established authority of high-prestige masters of the language. To avoid: Social disgrace from using low-grade English.

- **Aestheticism.** Justificatory basis: Beauty and aesthetic responses. To avoid: Ugliness and awkwardness.

- **Coherentism.** Justificatory basis: Consistency and order of patterning. To avoid: Chaos, randomness, disorder.

- **Logicism.** Justificatory basis: Logic in the strict sense. To avoid: Irrationality.

- **Commonsensism.** Justificatory basis: Common sense. To avoid: Silliness.

- **Functionalism.** Justificatory basis: Efficiency of the communicative function. To avoid: Ambiguity, misunderstanding, redundancy, etc.

- **Asceticism.** Justificatory basis: Discipline and self-control. To avoid: Laziness and sloppiness.

Some of these may seem distinctly 19th-century. But in grammar the 19th century never really went away. Mott Media still markets Thomas Harvey's textbook under the title *Harvey's Revised English Grammar*,[5] Harvey was born in 1821, and his grammar was published soon after the Civil War (1868). It still treats English as having a number distinction in the second person pronouns (*thou* vs. *you*). But the massive home school industry to which Harvey's grammar and the McGuffey readers are still sold ignores little things like whether the textbook describes a language that nobody speaks any more.

And of course Strunk and White's toxic little compendium of bad grammatical advice, *The Elements of Style*,[6] is still a best-seller, despite the fact that for nearly a hundred years it has been treated as a holy text and only very slightly revised, even in 1957 when White's name was added to the by-line and the fifth chapter was added. Even the page breaks have stayed the same for decades. Both authors were already born when the 20th century began. Strunk was born seven years before Custer's last stand. The relevance is that Strunk's attitudes on usage and grammar and how to describe syntactic phenomena were formed long before the 19th century ended.

The Elements of Style sometimes illustrates all of the putative external bases for usage judgments I suggested above on a single page, or even within a single paragraph. Take this appallingly dogmatic entry , which actually does not stem from the 19th century like most of the book, but is due to White, who added it in his revision in 1957 (see page 48):

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[5]Thomas W. Harvey, *Harvey's Revised English Grammar*, ISBN 0-88062-042-0, $16.99.

[6]William Strunk, Jr., with revisions, an introduction, and a chapter on writing by E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, fourth edition. Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 2000. Earlier editions 1979, 1972, and 1959 by Macmillan. Based on *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and Edward A. Tenney, copyright 1935 by Oliver Strunk, and on an earlier version of 1918 privately published by Strunk in Ithaca, New York, possibly with earlier versions before that.

Hopefully. This once-useful adverb meaning "with hope" has been distorted and is now widely used to mean "I hope" or "it is to be hoped." Such use is not merely wrong, it is silly. To say, "Hopefully I'll leave on the noon plane" is nonsense. Do you mean you'll leave on the noon plane in a hopeful frame of mind? Or do you mean you hope you'll leave on the noon plane? Whichever you mean, you haven't said it clearly. Although the word in its new, free-floating capacity may be pleasurable and even useful to many, it offends the ear of many others, who do not like to see words dulled or eroded, particularly when the erosion leads to ambiguity, softness, or nonsense.

Look at the multitude of ways in which White justifies his wild hostility to the use of *hopefully* as a modal adjunct in clause structure.

He says the word has been "distorted" — an aesthetic judgment, apparently. He says the new use is "silly" — an appeal to common sense. He says that if you use it you will be talking "nonsense", which seems to appeal to logic — though in fact the appeal to logic is immediately forgotten, for the examples that follow do not illustrate contradiction, but merely the possibility of a word having two senses. For White, anyone who uses a word with two senses to say something hasn't "said it clearly" (he has strayed from logic to communicative efficiency.

But there is more. The suggestion that "the word in its new, free-floating capacity may be pleasurable" suggests a disdain for hedonism, and a favoring of discipline and self-control. The modal adjunct use may be "useful to many", but that makes no difference; after all, it may be useful to have an elevator, but the active man has the discipline to take the stairs — a hint of asceticism there.

But no (he changes his mind again), the real thing is, it "offends the ear" we're back to aesthetics. Or is it is that the original word has been "dulled" — like a misused knife blade — and "eroded" — like an unmaintained protective dyke? These kinds of damage are bad because may lead to "ambiguity" (communicative efficiency once more), or "softness" (masculine toughness is being favored here — being vague is just one way to be wimpy), or maybe "nonsense" (in his wild searching for terms of opprobrium White has cycled around and come upon this word a second time, heedless now of the Strunkian maxim he values so much, to "omit needless words").

There is something distinctly parental about this outburst of hints, allegations, and redundant abuse. You're being *silly*, you're talking *nonsense*, you're *offending* the ear of your betters, you're being *sloppy*, you're acting *soft* like a girl — for goodness' sake pull your socks up!

And it is perhaps even more reminiscent of the vacillating motivations for old-fashioned sex advice to the young. Don't touch yourself down there, it's dirty, you'll go blind, it saps your strength, it'll ruin you for marriage, it's unhealthy, it's immature, it's immoral, it's forbidden in the Bible.

It is not a new observation that one can draw relevant parallels between the politics of language and the politics of sexual behavior. John Sherwood drew the parallel in a fascinating 1960 article in *College English*,[7] connecting traditional grammar ("the old grammar", as he terms it) to a whole slew of value-laden issues. The article appears to have been motivated by a reaction against Charles C. Fries's *The Structure of English* in 1952, [8] a very explicit representative of the tradition of American scientific structuralism, with its refusal to use terms like 'noun' or 'verb' (they stemmed from the bad old days of traditional grammar, and had to be replaced by category names like 'Class 1' and 'Class 2'), with the two Kinsey reports on sexual behavior (1948 and 1953) not very far in the past.

The "new grammar" — the modern 'scientific' linguistics represented to college English teachers in 1960 by Charles C. Fries — is a very different kettle of fish according to Sherwood (p. 277):

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[7]John C. Sherwood, 'Dr Kinsey and Professor Fries', *College English* **21**, (1960), 275–280.
[8]Charles C. Fries, *The Structure of English*. Harcourt Brace, New York, 1952.

As a *Sprachansschauung*, if not as a science, it stands for democracy; for spontaneity, self-expression, and permissiveness; for nominalism; for skepticism; for a social-scientific view of life; for progress and modernity; for nationalism and regionalism. It is "other-directed," seeing the proper standard of conduct as conformity to the mores of the group. It represents a linguistic Rousseauism, a belief that man's language is best and most real when most spontaneous and unpremeditated and that it is somehow tainted by the efforts of educational systems to order and regularize it. Just as the old grammar tried to take its values from above, the new tries to deduce them, in the manner of Dr Kinsey, from the facts.

It is hard not to see here the liberalism that was to become dominant in the sixties that lay ahead: democracy, spontaneity, self-expression, permissiveness, skepticism, social science, progress, and modernity. This is a list of just about all of the conservative's worst nightmares.

And as for the 'old grammar', once we separate the issue from structuralist claims to offer a "scientific" linguistics, Sherwood claims:

the old grammar is seen to stand for values that are often a good deal more defensible than their opposites. It stands for order, logic, and consistency; for the supremacy of the written language and of the literate classes and of the literate classes in setting linguistic standards; for continuity, tradition, and universality–for what is common to older and modern, British and American English, to the whole body of European languages rather than for what is local and singular; for discipline and self-control; for the practice of an art, a system developed by tradition and the authority of masters rather than statistical study. ...Loving logic and order, it opposes oddity and irregularity, and at times may have the coldness that goes with order and regularity. It is not resigned to the chaos of experience but wishes to impose its own order upon it; it believes, with Orwell, in man's power to master his linguistic environment...it attempts to raise the illiterate to the level of the literate, not to average everyone out to a common level. (Sherwood 1960: 276)

One could hardly miss the buzzwords of political conservatism here: order, continuity, tradition, discipline, self-control, authority — and the inherent supremacy of the literate classes. And it is also not hard to see allusions to a number of putative external bases for prescriptive regulative rules: at least coherentism, logicism, authoritarianism, classicism, and asceticism.

Failing justifications

Why do the prescriptive ideologues' various external criteria of justification fail? Because none of them have any foundation: the things they presuppose just are not so. Let's briefly run through the reasons, familiar though most of the objections are.

Nostalgia   There never was, of course, a golden age. The linguistic utopia of widespread proper usage never existed. In particular, many constructions that people imagine are banned by the laws of proper English grammar — preposition stranding, split infinitives, and ***they*** with singular antecedents, for example — have been attested in much admired English writing throughout the entire 700-year history of the language. Even if all change WERE decay and deterioration, use of these constructions has gone on since the earliest days of anything recognizable as English.

Classicism.   It might have been sensible in the 16th or even the 17th century to look to Latin, despite its typological dissimilarity to English, for a developed theoretical vocabulary for grammar and a literature in which complex thoughts were expressed with accuracy and conceptual rigor. But it is absurd today, when English has a far larger literature of careful scholarly and analytical writing than Latin ever had, and the tradition of writing grammars of English is some four hundred years old.

Authoritarianism   Respect to the established authority of high-prestige masters of the language is just fine, but subservience to the personal whims and hatreds of a self-anointed language controller is not. Notice, I am not undercutting the idea of standards for judging the use of the English language, because — let's not be coy about this — there can be no doubt that some people use the English language brilliantly and their writing gives us pleasure, while others use it abysmally and the ineptness of their fumbling phrases makes us wince. There is a difference between the writing skills of G. K. Chesterton and those of Dan Brown.

One common objection to linguistic authority as a basis for usage decisions is that it involves dependence on a selected canon, and too often canon selection has been done by near-dead white males selecting thoroughly-dead white males — the unspeakable in pursuit of the unreadable. I'm objecting to authoritarianism, but that isn't the right objection. The real trouble is that the prescriptive ideologues turn out not to know what even their favored canon really contains.

Stanley Fish wrote a column in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* attacking President Larry Summers of Harvard for a remark allegedly couched in poor English. The remark was this:

(7)   *I regret any faculty member leaving a conversation feeling they are not respected.*

One of the two alleged syntactic errors was a non-genitive subject of a gerund clause (Fish thought it should have been *any faculty member's leaving*); Fish appears not to know that it is the genitive subject (as in *I regret his doing that*) that is the innovation, and it took a while to achieve its present status of being an acceptable alternative in most but not all contexts. The other is a case of ***they*** with a singular antecedent. But Fish, though a Milton scholar, was apparently not aware that even Milton uses ***they*** with singular antecedents.

Such cases could be multiplied arbitrarily, as *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*[9] will confirm. So the point is that if you actually take a look at what the great masters of English literature write, you will find that the dicta of the prescriptive ideologues are simply not confirmed as trustworthy guides to good style. Generally acknowledged fine writing does exemplify gerund-participial clauses with accusative subjects, and ***they*** with distributive singular antecedents; clauses do end in prepositions in great literature; infinitives do get split.

Aestheticism.   The adage that beauty is in the eye of the beholder is surely more applicable in the area of linguistic beauty than anywhere else. White says that *hopefully* is "distorted" and "offends the ear" if it is used as a modal clause adjunct. How could it be? *Moby Dick* contains an instance of the clause *other leviathans might be hopefully pursued*, where *hopefully* is a manner adjunct. If we shift the adverb one word to the left we get *other leviathans might hopefully be pursued*, where *hopefully* is today more naturally interpretable as a modal adjunct (that is, we can imagine it meaning *it is to be hoped that other leviathans might be pursued*). How could that be so much uglier that it would offend the ear? The whole appeal to offense of a generic ear (which White appeals to repeatedly in his contributions) is disingenuous. White should simply have said, "I don't like this usage." To which the obvious answer

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[9]*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, Merriam-Webster, Springfield MA, 1994. See also *Merriam-Webster's Concise Dictionary of English Usage*, 2002, for an updated and slightly more concise book.

is, then don't use it. What is going on here is a dishonest attempt to universalize one's personal taste without admitting to having done that.

Coherentism. It is really remarkable to see Sherwood proposing that traditional grammar champions order, logic, and consistency, "opposes oddity and irregularity," and aims to "impose its own order" on "the chaos of experience." English is not ordered, logical, or consistent; and willing it to be cannot make it so. *The Cambridge Grammar* offers thousands of pages of evidence. Let me summarize just a snippet or two.

— English has nearly two hundred verbs that are inflectionally irregular in a variety of ways (Swahili, by the way, has none). There are verbs with one, two, three, four, and five inflectional shapes, and one extraordinary one (**be**) with twelve.

— There are two functional types of relative clauses, integrated and supplementary, and while the integrated ones can be bare (*anyone you like*), or introduced by the subordinator *that* (*anyone that you like*) or a pronoun (*anyone who likes you*) or a preposition phrase (*those to whom it is important*) or a noun phrase with *whose* as determiner (*anyone whose car is stolen*), other noun phrases are not permitted (**anything the wrapping of which is damaged*). The supplementary ones, on the other hand, can be introduced by a pronoun (*Bob, who likes you*), a noun phrase with *whose* as determiner (*Bob, whose car was stolen*), or other kinds of noun phrase (*a gift, the wrapping of which was damaged*), but they cannot be bare (**I've invited Bob, you like*) or introduced by a subordinator (**I've invited Bob, that you said you liked*). Where's the consistency?

— The relativized element in a relative clause can be the subject with any of the above types, except for one: the bare relative. So we get *Anyone who* (*/that*, */whose partner*) *wants to come is welcome*, but not **Anyone wants to come is welcome.*

— In interrogatives, the words *who*, *which*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* can all be used as interrogative words. In relatives, the words *who*, *which*, *where*, *when*, and *why*, can all be relative words, but *how* and *whose* on its own cannot (**the way how you do it* is non-standard).

— The word *whose* can have a non-human antecedent in a relative clause (*a card table whose legs are wobbly*) but not in an interrogative clause (**I left repairing the tables to you because I didn't know whose legs were wobbly*), and can be used without a following head noun in an interrogative clause (*Whose is this?*) but not in a relative clause (**the man whose was stolen*).

— There are nine reflexive pronouns in Standard English, all compounds formed with the suffix ·***self***, and two are based on accusative forms (*himself*, *themselves*), two are based on plain case forms (*itself*, *oneself*), and all the others are based on genitive forms (*myself*, *yourself*, *herself*, *ourselves*, *yourselves*). Dialects that regularize this to the genitive throughout (*hisself, *theirselves) are regarded as non-standard.

One could list any number of such examples. No one who had worked over English carefully could possibly think that there was order, logic, or consistency to be found amongst the vast array of exceptions and puzzles found in the English language.[10] Despite all the system and regularity that makes it possible for us to learn, it is riddled with disorder, illogic, inconsistency, oddity, irregularity, and chaos — everything Sherwood says traditional grammar stands against. And I'm referring to Standard English, the kind the prescriptivists wish to prescribe. This part of his thesis has no foundation at all. If you seek regularity and consistency, good luck, but neither descriptive correctness conditions nor prescriptive rules for Standard English can help you.

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[10]For further evidence, consult almost any section of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum et al., Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Logicism.   Very similar remarks can be made about basing grammatical principles on logic. I will not dwell on the point for long, since it is so familiar, but consider one small illustrative point. There is disagreement about the preposition that should head the preposition-phrase complement of the adjective *different*. The most frequent is *different from*; second ranked is *different than*; and least popular but still very commmon is *different to*. *Different than* has been criticized for centuries, and American usage books say that *different to* is restricted to British. And perhaps one could imagine developing an argument that differentness is a matter of separation, not convergence, so that *from* is more logical than *to*: difference is the opposite of similarity, and we say *similar to*, so it should be *different from*.

But consider the word *dissimilar*. It too is an antonym of *similar*. But it is also derived from *similar*. Should it follow the derivational morphology, yielding *dissimilar to*? Or should it follow the sense, yielding *dissimilar from*? How can logic settle such a question? It does not, of course: *Webster's Third* gives two examples with *dissimilar* followed by a preposition phrase complement: one has *from* and the other has *to*. Take your pick. Current Google statistics show about 8,000 pages in the **.edu** domain (which perhaps reflects prevailing American academic usage) with uses of *dissimilar from*, and about 20,000 with *dissimilar to*. Use that as a guide if you like, but logic won't help you. In logic, dissimilarity and difference are the same, but *dissimilar* is tending to get its syntactic selectional behavior more from its derivational origin than its truth conditions.

Commonsensism.   The appeal to common sense (often put by White in terms of using one's "ear") is a pervasive feature of *The Elements of Style*. But if anything is silly, it is imagining that one's notions of silliness are objective and independent of one's spatiotemporal location.

A 1937 *New Yorker* cartoon of two American women shopping in London has one of them saying:

"I have to do all the buying, because George won't say tuppence ha'penny. He says it's silly."

This on its own should be enough to remind us of the parochiality of silliness judgments: in 1970 it did not seem silly to any British English speaker to say *tuppence ha'penny*. A year later, with decimalization, it became strictly meaningless, and by 1980 British teenagers didn't even understand it. Of course what is not current will often sound silly. But that is an argument for sticking to what's current as a matter of today's common usage whatever it is; it's the opposite of what the prescriptive ideologues actually seek.

Functionalism.   Efficiency of the communicative function is perhaps the commonest putatively external and objective justification offered by the prescriptive ideologues, but it is also one of the easiest to rebut. Take ambiguity. To begin with, the fact that ambiguity might arise if some grammatical feature were this way rather than that way cannot possibly be parlayed into a reason why the grammar should or must be that way. Losing the distinction between *thou wouldst* and *you would* has led to ambiguity between 2nd singular and 2nd plural, but that doesn't mean that use of *you* with singular reference is wrong. The sentence *We saw her duck* is profoundly ambiguous, but that doesn't mean either that the verb **duck** or the noun **duck** has been wrongly used.

Allegations about what will lead to ambiguity are often thinly supported if supported at all, and sometimes are demonstrably false. It is asserted that use of phrases like *any museum which charges an entrance fee* will lead to ambiguity because we don't know if we are to interpret the relative clause as integrated or supplementary; but that is not true here: the determiner and head noun tell us it cannot be supplementary, and the lack of a comma before the relative clause also tells us that. One can look through dozens and dozens of relative clauses without finding a single one where ambiguity would arise from use of *which* rather than *that*.

The same is true of choosing *that* rather than *who* when the referent is a human being, something else that is banned by many English teachers. And the same is true of the non-temporal use of *since*, banned by the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* on grounds that it could lead to misunderstanding. Examine real texts to see whether ambiguity is a threat. It hardly ever is.

Similar remarks can be made about misunderstanding, redundancy, and the other things that are cited in connection with problems for communication. It just is not true for most points insisted on by the prescriptive ideologues that communication is at risk unless their prescriptions are followed.

Asceticism. We come finally to discipline and self-control. And here I think we might be a little closer to some important genuine connections between the grammatical and the political.

At first sight it seems fantastic that Sherwood can think he sees a link between grammatically correct writing and self-discipline. Has he no knowledge at all of the biographies of great literary figures who have written classics in Standard English? Coleridge, the opium addict? Wilde, with his addiction to Bosie and his pathological inability to pay his bills? Fitzgerald and his disastrous love affair with alcohol? One can hardly think that the ability to write great and memorable Standard English goes along with jogging before breakfast, a clean life, avoidance of addictions, and disciplined control over one's own evil or debauched urges.

But of course, what's more relevant is Sherwood's references to descriptive structural linguistics as allied with democracy, spontaneity, self-expression, and permissiveness. The notion is that left to ourselves, we would naturally all want a share of power; we would all want to do whatever we felt like whenever we felt like it; we would all want to do things our way, linguistically and in every other sphere of life; and we would indulge in all sorts of naughty stuff. In language we would be just the same: we would each be in control of our own language; we would alter syntax unwisely and idiosyncratically, collapse meaning distinctions, slur pronunciations, and invent ugly and unintelligible jargon; it would be anything goes. Wanna ignore verb agreement? Have another doughnut. Fancy using the accusative instead of the nominative in one context, and the nominative instead of the accusative in another? We're cool with that. If it feels good, do it.

The role of traditional grammar, as Sherwood seems to imagine it, is to keep us in check, to rein in our unseemly impulses. Yet it does it only by providing a code that we can follow if we choose. The ones who follow that code will be the ones who have the discipline and self-control to do so. The ones who don't will be the ones whose self-expression combines with their permissiveness to yield bad results like double negatives and failure of verb agreement. Average over them, and you will have something we do not want to set up as the model for the linguistic behavior of the young. That is what Sherwood seems to be suggesting.

All I can do is bluntly disagree. Just as people in general do not always do wicked things just because they can, it simply isn't true that human languages fall apart if not defended through the analogue of vigorous training, constant maintenance, and regular cold baths. Human language is systematic and stable to a degree that is quite astonishing.

Negative concord provides an excellent example. It was clearly present in early Middle English (there is evidence in Chaucer). It has survived to this day among millions of speakers all over the world despite the fact that their dialects are not just recognized as non-standard but often condemned as sub-standard. Think how robust the negative concord phenomenon must be to last 700 years and spread among working people all over the world in defiance of the authority of the high-prestige speakers of the standard dialect.

Standard English will of course be even more robust. It is represented in more permanent media — millions of books, newspapers, and magazines. It is spoken by prestige speakers at NPR, the BBC, Buckingham Palace, MLA meetings. It is taught to billions of people in schools and language classes

around the world. It is in absolutely no danger of deterioration whatever. Don't worry; be happy: Standard English will survive.

So the issue regarding purported rules like the one saying that a pronoun can never have a genitive antecedent is not about whether we ought to find the discipline to sustain obedience to it. It is about whether we have the intelligence to recognize that it never was one of the correctness conditions of Standard English, and never will be, and the time spent on teaching it, and testing that it has been properly learned, is time utterly wasted.

Conclusion

It is a complete caricature of linguists' attitudes to usage that they think anything goes and regard everything that occurs as grammatical. They don't. Quite to the contrary, they insist that there are constitutive correctness conditions for natural languages, conditions that define the difference between right (grammatical) and wrong (ungrammatical) for individual languages. Grammaticality is not to be confused with choice of formal style, though: informal style is grammatical too.

Correctness conditions provide sufficient justification for saying that something is grammatical or ungrammatical, provided they are the correct conditions; but they need their own justification. Linguists seek to justify formal statements of proposed sets of correctness conditions by means of a basically scientific investigative methodology — it based on attention to evidence.

Prescriptive ideologues tacitly take the descriptive work to be already done (they do not spend any time on order of subject and predicate or preposing of relative pronouns, where there is no disagreement); their concern is solely with a superstratum of particular points on which usage is controversial and they have a view to present.

The regulative rules that the prescriptive ideologues advocate need their own justification, if they are to have any force. If the justification offered were to be simple compatibility with the facts of usage in uncontroversially admirable exemplars of good English prose, the prescriptivist project would collapse with that of the linguists, so that is never the justification cited. Instead an array of external sources of justification are vaguely alluded to.

These are very diverse, but what is clear is that none of them can be taken seriously. The prescriptive ideologues do not know what is found in the texts they take to illustrate good usage; they do not even know what their own usage is. Jacques Barzun, for example, recommends using only *that* for integrated relative clauses on one page of his book *Simple and Direct* (1975), and then opens a paragraph on the next page by using one with *which*. E. B. White does not even get through the second paragraph of his *Stuart Little* without using an integrated relative with *which*, which in *The Elements of Style* he deprecates.[11]

Unjustified and perhaps unjustifiable, the rules of the prescriptive ideologues, dimly grasped and often misunderstood, nonetheless form the backbone of what the general public understands and believes about English grammar.

The clearest fact about the spirit of the regulative rules the prescriptive ideologues advance is that they are genuinely linked to conservative ideology: the mistrust of ordinary people and the pessimism about what they would get up to if left to their own devices is palpable. This makes it not so surprising

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[11]Jan Freeman of the *Boston Globe* (see her column 'Frankenstrunk' in *The Boston Sunday Globe*, October 23, 2005) discovered a very interesting thing about the disingenuity this deprecation of *which*. It was not mentioned in the book Strunk originally wrote, the "Little Book" that White was required to buy when he took a course with Strunk at Cornell in 1919. The alleged rule could not have been mentioned there, because it was not promulgated until Fowler produced the first edition of his *Modern English Usage* in 1926. But White not only added the rule to the content of the book when he revised it; he also went back over Strunk's prose and changed *which* to *that* as necessary to make it seem that Strunk had always followed the rule! He neglected, though, to fix up *Stuart Little* or his other works.

that, as Geoff Nunberg has observed, attention to grammatical correctness correlates to some extent with contempt for liberal-style political correctness.

It is a familiar pattern for people to reify an unjustifiable set of regulative rules that are supported mainly by the taste of the person making the proposal, to treat them as if they were the constitutive correctness conditions for some language that people do not speak but should, and to call that language English.

As long as asking for justification of the proposed rules is treated as some kind of radical crankery or impudent challenge to power, and proposing that the rules lack justification and are not defining features of English can be portrayed as "lowering standards," irrationality will prevail in this area. And matters like the attitude adopted by the press and public to the Oakland school board's policy on 'Ebonics' can hardly be treated rationally at all. Even Standard English is not being treated rationally. It is hard to imagine anything in the field of linguistics being clearer than the fact that Standard English, the prestige syntactic dialect of the whole global family of English dialects, has preposition stranding, singular-antecedent uses of *they*, infinitival constructions with an adjunct between *to* and the verb, and so on — and has had them for literally hundreds of years. Yet people pointing that out are treated as if they were proposing that masturbation should be taught in the public schools.

We see all this writ large in the application to the strikingly divergent African American Vernacular dialect with its unusual syntactic features. People wildly confuse constitutive correctness conditions for a specific non-standard dialect with regulative rules for appropriate usage in the standard, and confuse slang with the linguistic system of which it forms a tiny subpart, and dishonestly express hostility toward black people and their way of speaking as if it were defense of the language that we all speak . . . It all makes the Oakland 'Ebonics' brouhaha one of the worst and most tangled instances I have ever seen of the confusions that I have been trying to disentangle here.