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## Me and Jennifer Went to the Mall: A Defence of Bad English, Sort of

*Dear Sir,*

*The date today is november 21 and that means that  
i have my philosophy test today on 2.1 - 2.4.*

*! I missed it!*

*I am currently trying to get abold of Dalbousie  
university right now, but i keep getting a busy  
stgnal for the registers office.*

*What happend;*

*My grandfather died 2:00 am on saturday morn-  
ing, and i was on an emergency flight home to To-  
ronto, saturday evening (receipt available)*

*The family visitation was sunday, regular visita-  
tion was monday, and we laid bim to rest tuesday,  
I am in Waterloo Ontario, about to leave for To-  
ronto I currentely am scedualed to fly back home  
to Halifax at 6:55 am thursday morning, but the  
bopes of that look glim.*

*I am very much sorry but I would like to see if I can  
still write the philosophy test as i am in need of the  
marks, is it possible to meet.*

WE UNIVERSITY TEACHERS MOAN a lot about the quality of the English spoken and written by our undergraduates. We react to student-English such as that in the real e-mail quoted on the previous page with dismay and, let's say, a certain diminution of respect for its author. We spend a lot of effort, and not just in English composition classes, trying to improve students' writing. But I've been wondering whether this expense is worth it. There's the problem that our efforts have so little effect. But my question is whether improvement would be a good thing, if we could accomplish it. Is it better for students to write and speak good English?

### *The Rules*

Most philosophers of language share the view that language behaviour is behaviour governed by rules—that language is a rule-constituted activity. This immediately suggests an answer to my question. If an activity is rule-constituted, then to perform that activity, you have to follow the rules, right? If you want to tell somebody that the cat is on the mat, you can't say *The dog is on the log*, for the same sort of reason that you can't score a touchdown when the other team has the ball. So students need to learn the rules of English.

But it's questionable whether language is a rule-constituted or governed at all. Compare a paradigm of a rule-constituted activity: football. In football, but not in language, there is an official set of written-down rules, produced by an official agency, and considered binding because it was proclaimed by that agency. Football rules state penalties for infractions, ranging from a five-yard setback to forfeit of the game. Learning to play football involves explicit instruction in the rules, but one learns one's first language almost exclusively by imitation and correction. Learning a language is more like learning to wear your baseball-cap backwards than like learning football. Is there a rule about how to wear your baseball cap? Never mind: I'll just accept the assumption that language is rule-based, but insist on the most important difference, for my purposes, between football and language: the rules of football are *created*, whereas the rules of real language, if they are properly so-called at all, are *discovered*.

Consider the rules that the word *dog* designates canine and not feline animals; that plurals are usually formed by adding *s*; and so on. These constitute a theory of actual language behaviour. The

task of specifying these rules, one of the things linguists do, is descriptive and theoretical. As in any science, if generalizations or theories do not match well-established observed data, the generalizations or theories are scrapped. There can be behaviour contrary to the real rules of the language, but what shows this is not that the behaviour disobeys some rule-specification. It's (roughly) that most ordinary speakers of the language would count that behaviour as defective—weird or puzzling or incomprehensible. What they accept cannot be contrary to the real rules, since the real rules are just the ones that would show up in the best theory of what they accept.

Now look at List 1, a small sample of bits of English we teachers try to stop our students from saying and writing. Those (not you, of course) who don't see the more rarefied mistakes here should check the footnotes (which also give some sources).

## LIST 1:

*I seen it**where she's at**not too good of a**groued**irregardless**alright**who would of thought**a ways to go**as best as we can**besides the point<sup>1</sup>**I'm presently out of the office<sup>2</sup>**that's bow come it doesn't work**flaunt convention**rather unique; most unique**Then she's, like, "Jason is sooo gross!"*

Pronunciations: *liberry*, *beighb*, *excape*, *acrost*, *Febuary*,  
*nuculer*, *miscbevious*

<sup>1</sup> Fowler (second edition) thinks that *beside* means *by the side of*, but *besides* (as a preposition) means *in addition to*, *except*.

<sup>2</sup> According to the *OED* (second edition), *presently* meaning *at present* (rather than *soon*) became obsolete in formal written English in the seventeenth century, but never disappeared from most spoken dialects, and is now enjoying a revival in formal contexts.

*this begs the question* [when taken to mean: this raises the question]  
*For now, she wants to enjoy the enormity of the moment.*<sup>3</sup>  
*U.S. was reticent to help, Taliban says*<sup>4</sup>  
*Do you mean not use the Conrad quote or simply not put Conrad's name to it?*<sup>5</sup>  
*Charlie had never fallen in love, but was anxious to do so on the first opportunity.*<sup>6</sup>  
*the youngest of the two daughters*<sup>7</sup>  
*All debts are cleared between you and I.*<sup>8</sup>  
*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.*<sup>9</sup>

Each of these obeys the Real Rules of a language some people actually speak (or spoke). The rules they violate are those that used to be taught in schools, and that nowadays we're supposed to teach in university. I'll call them the School Rules. They are the rules of what I'll call Standard English, a dialect that is not the first language of ordinary English speakers. School Rules are, in Paul Ziff's words, "laid down to inhibit the speakers of the language from speaking in a way they in fact speak."<sup>10</sup>

This does not mean, however, that speakers never make mistakes. A mistake is a bit of language which violates the Real Rules of their language. List 2 contains usages I take to be such mistakes:

<sup>3</sup> *Newsweek*.

<sup>4</sup> Headline in *The Globe and Mail* 10 June 2002. Reticence is reluctance to speak, not just any kind of reluctance.

<sup>5</sup> T.S. Eliot, letter to Ezra Pound. Fowler (second edition) calls the noun use of *quote* a colloquialism, a curtailed form of *quotation* "much used by gossip columnists for statements extracted by them from interviewees."

<sup>6</sup> Kipling, "The Finest Story in the World." *Anxious* officially means *worried and strained—full of anxiety, not eager*.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*, chapter 1.

<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* 3.2.321.

<sup>9</sup> King James Bible, Psalm 121.1. What's supposed to be wrong here is that *whence* means *from where*, so *from* is redundant.

<sup>10</sup> *Semantic Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1960) 36.

## LIST 2:

*French provincial bed with canape*

*I don't feel well and I hope I recoup*

*wave all interest for 90 days*

*cheques and balances*

*chaise lounge*

*to all intensive purposes*

*deep-seeded*

*bedroom suit*

*reek havoc*

*his four-year rein as president*

*The Soviet stance mitigates against any real disarmament.*

*Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address while traveling*

*from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope.*

*The conviction carries a penalty of one to ten years in Alabama.*

*Mr. and Mrs. Fred Schmidlap request your presents at the marriage of their daughter*

The distinction I've been aiming at between the two lists is that List 1 is supposed to contain regular conventional usages that people learn by imitating others; whereas on List 2 I have put items I take to be idiosyncratic deviations from conventional rules. All items on both lists are "mistakes" according to your high school English teacher, but usages on the first list are fully in accord with the rules of widespread actual language.

List 2 items are, then, genuine mistakes—violations of the Real Rules; but we don't spend much time correcting them. Because they are idiosyncratic, not conventional, they tend to be rare. (But some of them are contagious, and are already well on their way toward List 1.) Many will go by unnoticed, because they involve homonyms or near-homonyms, and will be readily detectable only in writing, which (we academics should remind ourselves) makes up a fairly small and relatively unimportant fraction of linguistic activity in the Real World. Even when detected, they tend to be unimportant; in every case on my List 2, it's quite easy to figure out what the speaker must have meant, because the literal meaning of the utterance is absurd, and what's said is quite close in some way to something we'd immediately suspect must have

been meant. There's not much point worrying about these near-misses, because communication succeeds anyway.

But there are, of course, cases where violation of Real Rules produces problems:

*The dog is on the log* (when what is meant is that the cat is on the mat)

*Fred gave Arnold's keys to his brother.* (to whose brother? Fred's or Arnold's?)

*Car the on what.*

But these sorts of errors will tend to be self-correcting. When language users frequently enough meet with misunderstanding or incomprehension, and this produces some genuine difficulty, they will be motivated to correct their linguistic practices, even without formal instruction. I speculate that there might be operating here a sort of invisible-hand principle of the economy of language-correction: when and only when a mistake is frequent and bothersome enough to justify the effort of correction, language-users will fix their own habits.

And even if it were important to teach people Real Rules, sometimes the rules are so complicated that learning and using them would be almost impossible for most people—especially for those people who were linguistically challenged enough not to have learned them in the usual immersion/imitation way. And sometimes linguists haven't a full account of what the rules are.

I've been assuming so far that there's one language that everyone actually speaks, "Real English," in which everything in List 1 is acceptable; but school teachers try to make us speak and write a different language, "Standard English," built of a large number of rules which some people try to follow in class, but nobody follows in the real world. One way this picture is oversimplified is that out-of-school Real English is actually, of course, a huge number of dialects corresponding to different regions and different social classes, differing in large or small degrees from each other and from Standard English. But another oversimplification is the implication that Standard English is not actually spoken or written except in school contexts. To some extent, Standard English is a dialect like the others: learned by infants at home by immersion/imitation, and used by its practitioners in all contexts. My parents said *I don't have any* instead of *I ain't got none*, and so did I.

Nevertheless, there are important differences between Standard English and all the other dialects, which I'm collectively calling Real English. Standard English alone has manuals explicitly giving the rules that distinguish it from other dialects.<sup>11</sup> Because these rules are explicit and official, it's possible that some of them are followed by very few users of that dialect. By contrast, the rules of any dialect of Real English are only implicit; and since they are merely the summary of actual language behaviour, they are necessarily followed by almost all its users. While Real English dialects are transmitted exclusively by immersion/imitation, Standard English is to a fairly large extent transmitted by explicit education in the rules, in schools—or at least, there's an attempt made to transmit it—or at least there used to be. Because it's uniquely constituted by explicit rules, it alone can survive failure of transmission. When the immersion/imitation transmission method of Real English fails to transmit a feature of a dialect, when that feature gets replaced by something different, it ceases to be a characteristic of the dialect. But rules of Standard English can survive in authoritative textbooks and schoolroom instruction even if almost nobody talks or writes that way. And last, Standard English is "Good English"—the privileged dialect—the one teachers tell us we're supposed to speak and write.

There was no Standard dialect for English till the eighteenth century, when a London dialect was honoured with this designation, and the idea arose that speakers of other dialects should learn how to talk Standard. To teach this dialect, it was necessary to discover its real rules, and to make them explicit. The intent here was to change the language of users of non-standard English, but uncovering these rules had a prescriptive effect also on the London dialect itself, for several reasons. For one thing, many of the rules the primitive linguists of the time thought they had discovered in the designated Standard dialect were mistakes: the real speakers of the designated Standard dialect just did not speak that way; but soon these rules were being taught in schools to reform—

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<sup>11</sup> This is not completely true. There is, for example, the hugely enjoyable *English as a Second F\*cking Language* (subtitled *How to Swear Effectively with Numerous Examples Taken from Everyday Life*) by Sterling Johnson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996). And, of course, there are rulebooks for the rules common to Real and Standard English; these are useful mostly for those for whom English is not the first language.

"correct"—their language too. For another, even when these rules at first correctly described the Standard Dialect, the rules stayed frozen as the language drifted, and the rules no longer prescribed what Standard speakers spoke. So these rules were then used to tell even Standard speakers to speak in ways they didn't. And, third, once Standard English had a prescriptive rule-book, linguistic reformers began to invent new rules, additional ones, which they supposed would improve the language, and these rules again told people not to speak the way they in fact did. Thus Standard English was quite different in its history from the other dialects. The other ones just evolved naturally and unconsciously; but Standard English was taught by imposition of explicitly formulated rules.

### *What's So Good about Standard English?*

I'll now turn to a variety of attempts to answer this question.

Frequently those who criticize colloquial usage do so merely out of conservatism. A dictionary of etymologies tells us that *fastidious* (deriving from a Latin word meaning *disgusting*) means *squeamish, over-nice, hard to please*; it "does not mean dainty or over-neat or careful about your grooming or choosy about your food, though most people use it in these ways."<sup>12</sup> The interesting distinction here—between the real meaning of a term and how most people now use it—is one language conservatives often rely on to prohibit a usage that's already progressed from a mistake to a convention, or to prescribe a usage that's already progressed from conventional to obsolete. The absurdity of this approach is revealed, for example, in the dictionary's entry for *crescent*: the word derives from Latin, *crescere*, to grow, and, "since the crescent moon meant the growing or waxing moon, English transferred the lunar shape to the adjective"; but "There is nothing in the word *crescent* to indicate new-moon shaped." Oh please. It goes on: "You could say, logically, 'a crescent figure,' 'a crescent boy,' or 'a crescent debt.'"<sup>13</sup> No you couldn't: *crescent* meaning *growing* is now obsolete, not logical.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret S. Ernst, *In a Word* (New York: Harper, 1960) 98. Some dictionaries (including the new *OED*) don't recognize the second meaning for this word, though many (including the *American Heritage Dictionary* and the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*) do.

<sup>13</sup> Ernst, *In a Word* 72.



Another linguistic conservative, Michael Dummett, writes in his *School-Rule-Book*:

The objection may be raised to this book that it attempts to impose rules that held for the English of fifty years ago, but do not hold for the English of today; the language has irrevocably changed. The answer is that the changes in question are *not* irrevocable.<sup>14</sup>

But Dummett is worried about being thought merely an old poop who objects to change just because it's change, and he gives reasons why he thinks it's a good idea to try to retard linguistic evolution. One of his reasons is that older writing becomes less intelligible over time as linguistic conventions drift. Dummett is upset that his students are unable to understand the English of writers of the past—that they have difficulty understanding eighteenth- and even nineteenth-century writers. “This is pure loss, and a sure sign that some people’s use of English is changing much *too* fast.”<sup>15</sup> This criticism is noteworthy because its author is an extremely distinguished and important philosopher of language, formerly Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford; not because it’s any good.

One problem with this argument is that most School Rules represent an attempt not to stabilize and conserve the language, but rather to change and reform it. In any case, however, his point has very little force. We can agree that language change makes old writing difficult to understand; but how substantial a cost is this? You don’t have to speak eighteenth-century English in order to be able to read it. You can understand Hume’s English fine with a bit of effort and some help from a dictionary. So retarding linguistic change wouldn’t bring a whole lot of benefit even for students of the history of philosophy—but (another reminder to my colleagues) outside academia almost nobody reads anything more than a few decades old. Now consider the cost of the attempt to hold back

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<sup>14</sup> *Grammar & Style For Examination Candidates and Others* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1993) 113. My friend Sheldon Wein remarked to me that what makes this book so amazing is that it’s a textbook on how to write written by someone who is a terrible writer himself.

<sup>15</sup> *Grammar & Style* 9.

language change: years of torture for high school students at the hands of their English teachers.

Another argument is based on the value of standardization of English usage from place to place. The web-site of a publisher of business-skills books points out that English is used very widely around the world as the official or conventional language for international commerce and transport, multi-national organizations, and so on. "For all this to work—for every English speaker to clearly understand every other English speaker wherever they are—everyone must follow the same rules of grammar and definition of terms."<sup>16</sup>

Cross-dialect communication has been connected with the designation of a Standard English from its very beginning in the eighteenth century, an era of enormous growth of commerce between regions of Britain. The arrival of traders from distant regions would have resulted in what may have been a new idea to some: that there were significant differences in regional dialects. Then the new question could have arisen about which dialect was "correct." It seems, however, that the designation of London English as the standard dialect was not the result of any great difficulties in inter-dialect comprehension. It was rather the result of the power and prestige of the speakers of that dialect: in an era of greatly increased social mobility, yuppies who wanted to demonstrate how cultivated they were had to speak London. The same thing happens nowadays, when my colleagues who have spent a short time at Oxbridge come back sounding like Alistair Cooke.

It's true that English is nowadays the international language. This makes it important for many non-English speakers to learn it as a second language;<sup>17</sup> but my question is about the utility of imposing School Rules on native English speakers. The idea here is that this training would facilitate communication between, say, Australians and Canadians. But understanding contemporary Australians is usually easier for other English speakers than understanding Hume; so this is even less worth the costly cure than the problem Dummett spoke of. And in circumstances when very clear communication between speakers of very different dialects of English is necessary, effective special conventions evolve, for example, the pidgin used uniformly internationally for radio contact

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.topskills.com/grammar.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> And, of course, ESL is extremely important for the welfare of allophone immigrants in anglophone areas.

between pilots and flight control. When uniformity of the language becomes important, special conventions are evolved. This is a cost-beneficial way to adjust the language for special communication needs. Trying to teach every high school student how to use the apostrophe is not.

Neither does the mastery of Standard English facilitate communication with folks around here. No native English speaker will fail to understand a single item in List 1. *Who would have thought* communicates no better than *who would of thought*. If grammarians were serious about picking a dialect everyone would understand, Real English is a far better choice than Standard English.

I find these standardization arguments obviously foolish. A more promising rationale for teaching School Rules, and one more often encountered, is that Standard English is superior to colloquial dialects as an instrument for expression and communication.

Sometimes it's supposed that Standard English is more logical than Real English. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammarians often thought that the new usage rules they were inventing made the language more logical, more scientific.

But it's hard to find any examples of illogic that are fixed by the School Rules. One supposed example often trotted out is the double negative. When Mick Jagger claims that he can't get no satisfaction, since two negatives logically cancel each other out, what Sir Mick is actually supposed to be saying is that the lack of satisfaction is unavailable to him: that he's plenty satisfied. The double negative then is a logical confusion, and should be avoided. But, as Pinker explains, the idea that the double negative is a logical mistake is a consequence of poor linguistic analysis of real language. The *no* in the context of the negative verb functions exactly as the negative element *pas* does in *Je ne sais pas*; it's a correlate of the negative verb, and does not cancel it out. Pinker asks us to compare *any*, *even*, and *at all* in *I didn't buy any lottery tickets. I didn't eat even a single french fry. I didn't eat fried food at all today.* "What these words are doing is exactly what *no* is doing in nonstandard American English—agreeing with the negated verb.... The slim difference is that nonstandard English co-opted the word *no* as the agreement element, whereas standard English co-opted the word *any*."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: Morrow, 1994) 376.

Many School Rules were motivated by the rather batty idea that Standard English should be modelled on Latin, which the grammarians supposed to be a more rational language. Thus for instance, the rule against splitting an infinitive (which is one word in Latin, and thus can't be split); so for example, you're not supposed to say *to boldly go*—you have to say *boldly to go* instead (which would get you laughed right off the starship *Enterprise*). Thus for another instance the stubborn maintenance of the vestigial declension of *who/whom*. (Latin needed declensions, because subject and object couldn't be identified by word order. English doesn't.)

Sometimes the claim is made that Standard English is more "logical" than Real English because it's more regularly systematic. But it isn't. In many cases, where there's a disagreement between Standard and Real English, the latter is more regular. For example, Real English sometimes conjugates verbs regularly when Standard English does not: *foaled, growed*. The notorious *ain't* is a contraction created from *am not* by regular analogy of the creation of *aren't* and *isn't*.

It's often argued that Standard English is superior because it makes subtle distinctions when Real English dialects do not, thus permitting greater clarity or efficiency of expression. S. Michael McMillen (described as a "conservative columnist") writes:

Poor grammar is a dull blade incapable of the subtle differentiations, qualifications and nuances that the human mind is able to conceive of. For instance, one who grasps the proper sequence of tenses can express fine temporal distinctions that a person unschooled in grammar either ignores or trots out in a mess of twisted, overlapping verbiage.<sup>19</sup>

School Rules that make fine distinctions are easy to find. The Rule about *shall* and *will*, for example, allows writers to distinguish between simple futurity (*I shall go there, you/be will go there*) and determination, promise, obligation, command, compulsion, permission, or inevitability (*I will go there, you/be shall go there*). An-

<sup>19</sup> "Good Grammar and Good Taste" <http://wwwcsif.cs.ucdavis.edu/~roy/edit1097.html>.

other Rule distinguishes *that* and *which*, as introducing restrictive and non-restrictive clauses, respectively. There are hundreds more distinctions made in Standard English and ignored in Real English: between *continuously* and *continually*, between *disinterested* and *uninterested*, and on and on.

But are these real gains? I've been trying hard (and failing) to imagine real contexts in which observation of the *which/that* distinction would result in better communication. If there are any, then these small gains would hardly justify the effort involved in teaching and following this difficult rule. The history of this rule is revealing. Apparently it was invented by the brothers Henry and Francis Fowler for their 1906 book *The King's English*, an ancestor of Henry's more famous *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. According to Joseph M. Williams, the Fowlers "thought that the random variation between *that* and *which* in restrictive clauses was messy, so they simply asserted that henceforth writers should (with some exceptions) limit *which* to nonrestrictive clauses."<sup>20</sup> Williams is delicately suggesting that the distinction was introduced merely because of the Fowlers' neurotic compulsion to make things rule-bound and tidy. Pinker also argues that communicative superiority was not the reason for the proliferation of such rules. According to him, the eighteenth-century craze for sounding cultivated resulted in "a demand for handbooks and style manuals, which were soon shaped by market forces: the manuals tried to outdo one-another by including greater numbers of increasingly fastidious rules that no refined person could afford to ignore."<sup>21</sup>

Williams reports that the *which/that* rule did not reflect usage prior to its introduction, and never really caught on afterwards. I suspect that the reason it was a flop is that it doesn't serve much purpose. Were there really frequent linguistic ambiguities for which this was the only cure, then Real English would have adopted this rule (or some other equivalent one). Often the subtle distinctions made by School Rules are not really worth making, or are easy to make in other ways. Again I appeal to the magic Invisible Hand of language use: if there's something we need to say, our language will evolve a way to say it.

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<sup>20</sup> *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, 6th ed. (New York: Longman, 2000) 24–25.

<sup>21</sup> *Language Instinct* 373.

Consider the subtle distinction allowed by the *shall/will* rule, between simple futurity and determination. This distinction is sometimes worth making. But notice in this case that it's perfectly easy to make using the tools of Real English:

I'm gonna stay home tonight.  
I'm *really* gonna stay home tonight.

"Grammatical rules help to make intended meaning clear," claims Dummett. "If you show yourself indifferent to correct grammar, you will be unable to make your meaning plain without unwieldy periphrasis."<sup>22</sup> This is almost invariably false.

And it's important not to exaggerate the extent to which Standard English adds distinctions missing in Real English. Most Real English "mistakes" convey exactly the same meaning as their Standard English versions. When your daughter says *Me and Jennifer went to the mall* there is no subtle shade of meaning that she is ignoring but you are communicating when you say *Rosenberg and I went to the seminar*.

There's no denying the value of language that communicates clearly, efficiently, precisely, gracefully, concisely, and coherently; and it would be a good thing to teach this. Some modern textbooks concentrate on these useful matters,<sup>23</sup> but they characteristically give School Rules very short shrift before getting down to the real business of instruction in clarity and effectiveness.

I admit that people who have been trained in Standard English often communicate better than those who haven't. But it doesn't follow that Standard English is a better communication tool. This difference is probably due to other factors. The Educated Class are a talky bunch; and one might think that people who have had a lot of schooling, or who have been raised by educated parents, might have more complex things to talk about and a maybe even a tendency to be somewhat smarter than the rest of the population.

We academics don't often hear Real English being used. When our students talk in our classes, or to us, they often make an effort to speak Standard, and this distorts their ordinary Real speech habits. But I recommend paying attention to what's being said by those

<sup>22</sup> *Grammar & Style* 115.

<sup>23</sup> For example, the Williams book mentioned in footnote 20.

people chattering while blocking the aisle in the supermarket, or in the next chair in the barbershop. These conversations can be limited or boring, but this is because their purpose is not complex information exchange. But you will hear complex and subtle communication—in Real English.

### *Standard English as a Mark of Class Membership*

I have no idea how to prove my suspicion that if there's something to say, Real English is fully up to the task of saying it. One thing I do know is that claims of the superiority of one dialect over its relatives are deeply suspect. As a rule, the defenders of an 'official' dialect, associated with the mainstream, the majority, the rich and powerful, believe that the other dialects are degenerate and inferior. The views that Yiddish is inferior to High German and Black English to Standard certainly stem from bigotry rather than from real comparative linguistics. And a milder sort of class, national, race, or ethnic politics is a much more common source of the feeling that one's own dialect is better or worse than another. When another dialect seems finer than one's own, or coarser, that's the result of envy or disdain of the speakers of that dialect.

There's really nothing intrinsically significantly better about Standard English. Its desirability stems entirely from its association with a certain privileged group, the Educated Class. "Writing and speaking well are ... the insignia of membership in an exclusive club," says S. Michael McMillen, admiringly.<sup>24</sup> Uh-oh. We all know about external signs of membership in privileged or underprivileged groups: the Rolex watch, the old school tie, the Star of David armband, the colour of one's skin. All are used for telling who to include and who to exclude, who to envy and who to dismiss or despise.<sup>25</sup> Today's orthodoxy takes the sole significance of everything to be its role in social power-structures; but that kind of analysis appears actually to be appropriate in this case, because grammar really is centrally a mark of membership in a privileged and powerful class. So it's tempting to see Standard English as "just one more device invented by the ruling class to control the rest: a standard grammar helps them keep the underclasses under by stigmatizing their speech and blocking their social ambitions."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "Good Grammar and Good Taste" (see footnote 19).

<sup>25</sup> You will have noticed that I didn't say *arbom*.

<sup>26</sup> Quote from Williams, *Style* 16. He thinks this view is "correct, partly" (17).

But things are not at all as simple as this. There are significant differences between the Educated Class and your ordinary evil oppressive privileged class. For one thing, membership in the Educated Class is something that *justifies* a certain amount of pride, and any admiration or social status that results might not be not entirely misplaced. Education does (we hope) confer valuable abilities on its recipients; and membership in the Educated Class is normally the result of a good deal of hard work. The benefits of membership, such as they are, are thus to some extent earned and deserved. It's also noteworthy that the Educated Class is not "exclusive"—outsiders can get in. The Educated Class offers quite an unusual degree of mobility—in and, for that matter, out. Unlike any other privileged class, it maintains huge publicly funded institutions to confer entry. In general, maintenance of social class distinctions, and production of external signs of membership or non-membership, are nasty activities. But the Educated/Non-Educated class distinction is of a different sort from most. So our participation in the management and maintenance of this social class distinction and its signs is not so easily judged venal.

Competence in Standard English has, historically, tended to grant certain benefits: a certain degree of social status and respect, and, sometimes, a necessary condition for acceptance in some social institutions and certain jobs. The American Education Network Corporation, which identifies itself as "a non-profit organization building learning pathways to empower people" has a web-site which offers the following delightful rationale for learning grammar:

Why do top lawyers make as much as \$400 per hour? They know grammar rules; they speak and write with adherence to grammar rules so that they can communicate most effectively—to persuade judges and juries that their client's position is right. Why are TV celebrities like Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, and Barbara Walters paid multi-million dollar salaries—because they know grammar and how to use it to effectively communicate.... Without good grammar, we risk being misunderstood and not getting the best jobs available.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.aenc.org/TOC/AE-TOC-PS.html>.



The grain of truth in this claim might be that mastery of Standard English is sometimes a job qualification. Is this merely a way of keeping the underclasses under? There's a big difference between hiring on the basis of the ability to produce Standard English, and on the basis of skin colour. I'm not saying that Standard English competence itself is likely to make someone a better employee. The idea that top lawyers, Oprah Winfrey, et al., make big bucks because they are so good at grammar is of course nutty, and the claim that Standard English makes for clearer communication is also false. Rather, I think, the ability to produce Standard English is an epiphenomenon—a sign that a job candidate is more likely to have other skills conferred by education that may be valuable in certain jobs, or at least sought by some employers. And also a sign that the candidate is somewhat more likely to have certain personal characteristics associated with educational achievement: intelligence, energy, responsibility, creativity, diligence, self-discipline, and obedience.<sup>28</sup>

Not much of this seems particularly socially vicious. But Williams points at a social use of Standard English that he does find objectionable:

Since our language seems to reflect our quality of mind ... it is easy for those inclined to look down on others to imagine that their grammatical "errors" signal mental or moral deficiency.... We must reject the notion that Standard English makes its speakers intellectually or morally superior. That belief is not just factually wrong: In a democracy, it is destructive.<sup>29</sup>

I think it's pretty obvious that Standard English speakers are not likely to be morally superior to others. But it's not "factually wrong" to suppose that Standard English is *some evidence* of intellectual superiority, is it? Look, I'm not claiming that every educated person is intellectually superior to every uneducated person. God knows I've been teaching at a university too long to claim that. Plenty of completely uneducated people, who show it by saying *I ain't got*

<sup>28</sup> Williams mentions the last three characteristics (*Style* 17).

<sup>29</sup> *Style* 19.

*none*, have considerably higher intelligence than many university graduates. But Standard English is *some evidence* of good intelligence. Not conclusive evidence, not even very reliable evidence, all by itself. But evidence. Is there something undemocratic about this thinking? Is it undemocratic to distinguish degrees of intellectual ability? Or to take a sign of successful education as some indication of good intellectual ability? What does any of this have to do with democracy? My point is that the social uses to which Standard English are put are not venal ones, so we can, with good conscience, participate in these institutions by continuing to provide instruction in it.

But we must be careful not to exaggerate the extent of the benefits conferred by competence in Standard English. The stigma of a non-standard dialect has diminished substantially over the past few decades (at least in the Real World; it's still fairly strong inside academia). It's clear that Standard English competence is not really an important job qualification any more, even for jobs in comparatively classy operations involving speaking or writing. Over the past decade there's been a startling increase in grammatical errors in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada's most pretentious national newspaper (a recent *Globe* headline: *Are they worth the paper their written on?*<sup>30</sup>). And on the CBC, as my wife can tell you, having had to put up with the hundreds of times I've gleefully, pedantically, tediously, pointed these out at the dinner table. You still have to be able to use an apostrophe to get a job in an English department, but where else?

As always, however, we should weigh the cost of Standard English training, not only to our schools, but to our students; learning a new dialect is very hard work. There are a couple of facts that suggest that the benefits are not worth the costs: high schools have just about ceased teaching Standard English altogether, without a great deal of objection from the public; and university students don't seem to be all that vitally interested in learning it either. If proficiency really conferred substantial benefit, I think things might be different.

The Japanese nobility, I'm told, traditionally learned and spoke a dialect used only in court. What a waste of effort! To distinguish them from everyone else, a specially-shaped hat would have saved

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<sup>30</sup> 5 Sept. 2002.

so much work. We learn and speak a special dialect to distinguish the educated from others. Assuming this is worth doing, couldn't it be done more easily? Maybe the school tie or the school ring would again become important. Maybe the display of a diploma on an office wall would no longer be considered gauche. Perhaps it's time for replacing this costly linguistic institution. Continuing to teach it keeps it alive—or, at least, prolongs its painful death.

### *Soft Prescriptivism*

The two sides of the battle I've waded into are sometimes called the Descriptivists and the Prescriptivists. Descriptivists are, of course, pot-smoking, Dr.-Spock-raised, hippy pinko anarchists, who think that, hey, everybody should do their own thing, and that the only job of linguists is to describe the things—with the emphasis on the plural—that are done. Prescriptivists are, naturally, right-wing fossilized rule-worshipping intolerant elitist oppressive class snobs, who think that any dialect other than Standard English is a mark of inferiority.

The position I've been arguing for is neither Descriptivist nor purely Prescriptivist. I'd allow grammar to issue prescriptions; but I disagree with the Prescriptivists who think that School Rules, defining *good* English, should be understood as (what we philosophers call) categorical imperatives: *Never do this; that is permitted; always do this*. Those who violate categorical rules are simply doing what they shouldn't; so violation elicits horror, dismay, and something like moral condemnation. All my English teachers presented School Rules this way, as do older grammar books. I'm suggesting that these Rules should be understood as hypothetical, of this form: *If you're interested in being identified as a member of the Educated Class, then you should/shouldn't/may do this/that/the other*. Someone who violates a hypothetical rule might be imprudent, but is not simply doing what one shouldn't.

When grammar teachers tell people that they are making stupid mistakes when they speak their real language, they insult these people, they treat them with disrespect. The Ebonics movement goes too far, I think, when it suggests that teaching black people Standard English is always colonialist oppression; but they are absolutely right in condemning the damage to self-respect that results from being convinced by grammarians that the language one speaks is defective.

A second change I'd suggest is this. If the only purpose of Standard English is to distinguish the Educated Class, language educators should pay attention to those School Rules that educated people actually use, and whose violation people who care actually notice. Some School Rules found widely in grammar/style books are violated regularly by just about everyone; they're ones you can ignore with very little danger of being thought to belong to the Uneducated:

- Never begin a sentence with *and*, *but*, or *because*.
- Use *fewer* with count-nouns, *less* otherwise.
- Use *that* in a restrictive clause, and *which* in a non-restrictive.

Next are examples of rules whose violations very fastidious<sup>31</sup> readers might notice and care about; but which can be safely violated in many contexts:

- Do not split infinitives.
- Use *shall*, not *will*, for first-person simple futurity.
- Use *whom* as the object of a verb or preposition.
- Never end a sentence with a preposition.
- Use the singular with *none* and *any*.

But the following violations will invariably exclude you from the Elect:

- You was here before me.*
- I don't know nothing about that.*<sup>32</sup>

My grammar teachers told me simply that I must obey all School Rules, but it would be more useful to students to distinguish for them those School Rules that they might benefit from obeying.

These two proposals are based on the idea that linguistic acts are done for a purpose—more exactly, for a wide variety of purposes—and just as good carpenters choose tools to suit the task at hand, the language we produce depends on what we're trying to do. The old-style prescriptive grammarians I've had a

<sup>31</sup> Ha ha!

<sup>32</sup> This distinction and these examples are from Williams, *Style* 19ff.

look at rarely consider purposes at all, and when they do, the purposes they consider are almost invariably of a very narrow sort. Dummett, for example, wrote his picky grammar book originally for the benefit of Oxford students preparing for final examinations. They no doubt need this training; but do the rest of us? I suppose that it's because they're mostly academics that grammarians so often concentrate on the purposes of writing and conversing inside academia, where you may offend, may not be taken seriously, if you violate School Rules. But not every rule, and not always. Sometimes inside my university I actually say, and *should* say, *Who are you looking for?* And I've heard it claimed that there is some sort of life going on in the world outside the university.

Another narrowness that typifies grammarians' assumptions about the context and purposes for language is their taking expository prose and information-giving speech as the linguistic paradigm. Thus the emphasis on univocality, concision, clarity, and on regularity and rule-following. Paul Ziff writes:

A deviation from the regularities to be found in ... language may on occasion interfere with communication. But the importance of communication is usually exaggerated.... If it were not possible to say nothing at length, diplomacy between nations or individuals would be impossible and cocktail parties could not be given.<sup>35</sup>

On first reading, I took this passage to be merely a cute wisecrack; but now I think it should be taken seriously. If you pay attention to actual language use, you'll notice that information-communicating declarative sentences are fairly rare. Most language has other primary purposes; consider why someone might say:

*How do you do?*

*I had a pleasant time.*

*My heart in biding / Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!*<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Semantic Analysis* 36.

<sup>36</sup> Ziff's examples; the poetry is from G.M. Hopkins' "The Windhover."

Even when what is said or written is purely declarative, much more is invariably going on than mere communication of information.

At last, and in conclusion, I suggest a tiny tie-in with my academic discipline, philosophy. Plato is the villain here. He set the tone for millennia to come by placing exclusive emphasis on the truth-telling function of language, condemning the wider rhetorical concerns of the Sophists, and banning poetry from his ideal state. And it's no coincidence that he also insisted on the categorical nature of prescriptions. One of the reasons philosophy of language (until Wittgenstein) was so inadequate was its narrow concentration on linguistic information-giving. Grammarians, even when they do give token consideration to rhetoric, to the purposes of language, have often shared this blinkered view of what we do linguistically, and what we should do. How you should talk varies greatly with where and who you are, and what you want to do. School Grammar might be a more useful subject if it paid more attention to these diversities.