

ROBIN FOX: THE HUMAN RIGHTS CHARADE

# HARPER'S

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## TENSE PRESENT

Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage

*By David Foster Wallace*

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## STAR OF JUSTICE

On the Job with America's Toughest Sheriff

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"Save up to 50%—and More!" Between you and I. On accident. Somewhat of a. Kustom Kar Kare Autowash. "The cause was due to numerous factors." "Orange Crush—A Taste That's All It's Own." "Vigorex: Helping men conquer sexual issues." "Equal numbers of both men and women oppose the amendment." Feedback. "As drinking water becomes more and more in short supply." "IMATION—Borne of 3M Innovation." Point in time. Time frame. "At this point in time, the individual in question was observed, and subsequently apprehended by authorities." Here for you, there for you. *Fail to comply with or violate.* Comprised of. From whence. *Quote for quotation. Nauseous for nauseated.* Besides the point. To mentor, to parent. To partner. To critique. *Indicated for said. Parameters for limits and options for choices and viable options for options and workable solution for solution.* In point of fact. Prior to this time. As of this point in the time frame. Serves to. Tends to be. *Convince for persuade. Append for attach, portion for part.* Commence, cease. Expedite. *Request for ask.*

*Eventuate for happen.* Subsequent to this time. Productive. Facilitate. Aid in. Utilize. Detrimental. Equates with. In regards **Between you and I?** to. Tragic, tragedy. *Grow as transitive. Keep for stay.* "To demonstrate the power of Epson's new Stylus Color Inkjet Printer with 1440 d.p.i., just listen!" Could care less. Issues, core issues. Fellow colleagues. Goal-orientated. Resources. Unproductive. Feelings. *Share for speak.* Nurture, empower, recover. *Valid for true.* Authentic. Productive, unproductive. "I choose to view my opponent's negative attacks as unproductive to the real issues facing the citizens of this campaign." Incumbent upon. Mandate. Plurality. *Per anum.* Conjunctive adverbs in general. Instantaneous. *Quality as adj.* Proactive. Proactive Mission-Statement. Positive feedback. A positive role-model. Compensation. Validation. As for example. True facts are often impactful. "Call now for your free gift!" I only wish. Not too good of a. Pay the consequences of. At this juncture. "Third-leading cause of death of both American men and women." To reference. To process. Process. The process of. The healing process. The grieving process. "Processing of feelings is a major component of the grieving process." Commensurate. "Till the stars fall from the sky/For you and I." Working together. Efficacious, effectual. Lifestyle. This phenomena, these criterion. Irregardless. *If for whether.* "Both sides are working together to achieve a workable consensus." Functional, dysfunctional. Family of origin. S.O. To nest. Relationship. Merge together. **KEEP IN LANE.** Whomever wants it. "My wife and myself wish to express our gratitude and thanks to you for being here to support us at this difficult time in our life." Eventuate. Diversity. Quality time. Values, family values. To conference. "French provincial twin bed with canape and box spring, \$150." Take a wait-and-see attitude. Cum-N-Go Quik Mart. Travelodge. Self-confessed. Precise estimate.



"Travel-times on the expressways are reflective of its still being bad out there." Budgetel. **EZPAY. RENT2OWN. MENS' ROOM. LADY'S ROOM.** *Individual for person. Whom for who, that for who.* "The accident equated to a lot of damage." *Ipse dixit.* Falderol. "Waiting on" is a dialectical locution on the rise and splitting its meaning. "Staunch the flow. A.M. in the morning. *Forté as 'forté.'*" Advisement. Most especially. Sum total. Final totals. Complete dearth. "You can donate your used car or truck in any condition." "DiBlasi's work shows how sex can bring people together and pull them apart." "Come in and take advantage of our knowledgeable staff." "We get the job done, not make excuses." "Chances of rain are prevalent." National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Rule and Regulation Amendment Task Force. *Further for farther.* "The Fred Pryor Seminar has opened my eyes to better time management techniques. Also it has given real life situations and how to deal with them effectively." Hands-on, can-do. "Each of the variants indicated in boldface type count as an entry." Visualization. "Insert and tighten metric calibrated hexscrews (K) into arc (C) comprised of intersecting vertical pieces (A) along transverse section of Structure. (see Diagram for # (3-4inv.)) Creative, creativity. To message, to send a message, to bring our message to. To reach out to. Context. Straightlaced. A factor, a decisive factor. Myriads of decisive factors. "It is a federal requirement to comply with all safety regulations on this flight." In this context, of this context. On a ly basis. From the standpoint of. Contextualization. Within the parameters of this context. Decontextualization. Defamiliarize. Orientated. "The artist's employment of a radical visual idiom serves to decontextualize both conventional modes of representation and the patriarchal contexts on which such traditional hegemonic notions as representation, tradition, and even conventional contextualization have come to be seen as depending for their privileged status as aestheto-interpretive mechanisms." I don't feel well and hope I recoup. "As parents, the responsibility of talking to your kids about drugs is up to you." Who would of thought? Last and final call. As to. Achieve. Achievement. Competitive. Challenge, challenged, challenges. Excellence. Pursuit of a standard of total excellence. An astute observance. *Misrepresent for lie.* A longstanding tradition of achievement in the arena of excellence. "All copier stores are not the same." Visible to the eye. *Which for that, I for me.* That which. In regards to. *Data as singular, media as singular, graffiti as singular. Remain for stay.* On-task. *Escalate as transitive.* Closure. Community. "Iran must realize that it cannot flaunt with impunity the expressed will and law of the world community." Community support. Community-based. Broad appeal. Rally support. Outpourings of support. "Tried to lay the cause at the feet of Congress." Epidemic proportions. Proportionate response. Feasibility. "This anguishing national ordeal." Bipartisan, non-partisan. Widespread outbreaks. To appeal to. To impact. Author's Foreward. Hew and cry. From this aspect. Hayday. Appropriate, inappropriate. Contingency. Contingent upon. Every possible contingency. Audible to the ear. *As for since.* Palpably. "The enormity of his accomplishment." Frigid temperatures. Loud volume. Surrounded on all sides, my workable options are at this time few in number. Chaise lounge, nucular, deep-seeded, bedroom suit, reek havoc. Her ten-year rein atop the competition. The reason is because she still continues to hie to the basic fundamentals. Ouster. Lucrative salaries, expensive prices. *Forebear for forebear; forgo for forego.* Breach of conduct. Award for meretricious service. Substantiate, unsubstantiated, substantial. Re-elected to another term. Fulsome praise. Service. Public service. "A tradition of servicing your needs." A commitment to accountability in a lifetime of public service. As best as we can. **WAVE ALL INTEREST FOR 90 DAYS** "But I also want to have—be the president that protects the rights of, of people to, to have arms. And that—so you don't go so far that the legitimate rights on some legislation are, are, you know, impinged on." "Dr. Charles Frieses." Conflict. Conflict-resolution. The mutual advantage of both sides in this widespread conflict. "We will make a determination in terms of an appropriate response." Future plans. Don't go there! **PLEASE WAIT HERE UNTIL NEXT AVAILABLE CLERK.** I thought to, myself. Fellow countrymen. "Your efforts to recover from the experience of growing up in an alcoholic family may be very difficult and threatening for your family to hear about and accept, especially if they are still in the midst of their own survival." *Misappropriate for steal.* Nortorious. I'll be there momentarily. At some later point in time. I'm not adverse to that. "Hello-o?" Have a good one. Luv Ya. :)

# Tense Present

## Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage

BY DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

### Not too good of a

"Tried to lay the cause at the feet of Congress." Epidemic proportions. Proportionate response. Feasibility. "This anguishing national ordeal." Bipartisan, non-partisan. Widespread outbreaks. To appeal to. To impact. Author's Foreward. Hew and cry. From this aspect. Hayday. Appropriate, inappropriate. Contingency. Contingent upon. Every possible contingency. Audible to the ear. *As for since.* Palpably. "The enormity of his accomplishment." Frigid temperatures. Loud volume. Surrounded on all sides, my workable options are at this time few in number. Chaise lounge, nucular, deep-seeded, bedroom suit, reek havoc. Her ten-year rein atop the competition. The reason is because she still continues to hie to the basic fundamentals. Ouster. Lucrative salaries, expensive prices. *Forebear for forebear; forgo for forego.* Breach of conduct. Award for meretricious service. Substantiate, unsubstantiated, substantial. Re-elected to another term. Fulsome praise. Service. Public service. "A tradition of servicing your needs." A commitment to accountability in a lifetime of public service. As best as we can. **WAVE ALL INTEREST FOR 90 DAYS** "But I also want to have—be the president that protects the rights of, of people to, to have arms. And that—so you don't go so far that the legitimate rights on some legislation are, are, you know, impinged on." "Dr. Charles Frieses." Conflict. Conflict-resolution. The mutual advantage of both sides in this widespread conflict. "We will make a determination in terms of an appropriate response." Future plans. Don't go there! **PLEASE WAIT HERE UNTIL NEXT AVAILABLE CLERK.** I thought to, myself. Fellow countrymen. "Your efforts to recover from the experience of growing up in an alcoholic family may be very difficult and threatening for your family to hear about and accept, especially if they are still in the midst of their own survival." *Misappropriate for steal.* Nortorious. I'll be there momentarily. At some later point in time. I'm not adverse to that. "Hello-o?" Have a good one. Luv Ya. :)

David Foster Wallace is a contributing editor to Harper's Magazine and the author of the novel *Infinite Jest* and other works. His most recent piece for this magazine, "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men," appeared in the October 1998 issue.



Discussed in this essay:

- A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, by Bryan A. Garner. Oxford University Press, 1998. 723 pages. \$35.
- A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, by H. W. Fowler. Oxford University Press, 1926. Rev. by Sir Ernest Gowers, 1965. 725 pages.
- The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, by Steven Pinker. William Morrow and Company, 1994. 494 pages.
- Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, E. W. Gilman, ed. Merriam-Webster Inc., 1989. 978 pages.
- Usage and Abusage: A Guide to Good English*, by Eric Partridge. Hamish Hamilton, 1957. 392 pages.
- Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, Philip Gove, ed. G. & C. Merriam Company, 1961. 2,662 pages.

*Dilige et quod vis fac.*  
—ST. AUGUSTINE

**D**id you know that probing the seamy underbelly of U.S. lexicography reveals ideological strife and controversy and intrigue and nastiness and fervor on a nearly hanging-chad scale? For instance, did you know that some modern dictionaries are notoriously liberal and others notoriously conservative, and that certain conservative dictionaries were actually conceived and designed as corrective responses to the "corruption" and "permissiveness" of certain liberal dictionaries? That the oligarchic device of having a special "Distinguished Usage Panel . . . of outstanding professional speakers and writers" is an attempted compromise between the forces of egalitarianism and traditionalism in English, but that most linguistic liberals dismiss the Usage Panel as mere sham-populism?

Did you know that U.S. lexicography even had a seamy underbelly?

**T**he occasion for this article is Oxford University Press's semi-recent release of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*. The fact of the matter is that Garner's

dictionary is extremely good, certainly the most comprehensive usage guide since E. W. Gilman's *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, now a decade out of date.<sup>1</sup> Its format, like that of Gilman and the handful of other great American usage guides of the last century, includes entries on individual words and phrases and expository small-cap MINI-ESSAYS on any issue broad enough to warrant more general discussion. But the really distinctive and ingenious features of *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* involve issues of rhetoric and ideology and style, and it is impossible to describe why these issues are important and why Garner's management of them borders on genius without talking about the historical context<sup>2</sup> in which ADMAU appears, and this context turns out to be a veritable hurricane of controversies involving everything from technical linguistics to public education to political ideology, and these controversies take a certain amount of time to unpack before their relation to what makes Garner's usage guide so eminently worth your hard-earned reference-book dollar can even be established; and in fact there's no way even to begin the whole harrowing polymeric discussion without taking a moment to establish and define the highly colloquial term SNOOT.

From one perspective, a certain irony attends the publication of any good new book on American usage. It is that the people who are going to be interested in such a book are also the people who are least going to need it, i.e., that offering counsel on the finer points of U.S. English is Preaching to the Choir. The relevant Choir here comprises that small percentage of American citizens who actually care about the current status of double modals and ergative verbs. The same sorts of people who watched *Story of English* on PBS (twice) and read W. Safire's column with their half-caff every Sunday. The sorts of people who feel that special blend of wincing despair and sneering superiority when they see EXPRESS LANE—10 ITEMS OR LESS or hear *dialogue* used as a verb or realize that the founders of the Super 8 motel chain must surely have been ignorant of the meaning

Precise estimate

<sup>1</sup> With the advent of online databases, Garner has access to far more examples of actual usage than did Gilman, and he deploys them to great effect. (FYI, Oxford's 1996 *New Fowler's Modern English Usage* is also extremely

comprehensive and good, but its emphasis is on British usage.)

<sup>2</sup> Sorry about this phrase; I hate this phrase, too. This happens to be one of those very rare times when "historical context" is the phrase to use and there is no

equivalent phrase that isn't even worse. (I actually tried "lexico-temporal backdrop" in one of the middle drafts, which I think you'll agree is not preferable.)

INTERPOLATION

The above ¶ is motivated by

the fact that this reviewer almost always sneers and/or winces when he sees "historical context" deployed in a piece of writing and thus hopes to head off any potential sneers/winces from the reader here, especially in an article about felicitous usage.



of *suppurate*. There are lots of epithets for people like this—Grammar Nazis, Usage Nerds, Syntax Snobs, the Language Police. The term I was raised with is *SNOOT*.<sup>3</sup> The word might be slightly self-mocking, but those other terms are outright dysphemisms. A *SNOOT* can be defined as somebody who knows what *dysphemism* means and doesn't mind letting you know it.

I submit that we *SNOOTS* are just about the last remaining kind of truly elitist nerd. There are, granted, plenty of nerd-species in today's America, and some of these are elitist within their own nerdy purview (e.g., the skinny, carbuncular, semi-autistic Computer Nerd moves instantly up on the totem pole of status when your screen freezes and now you need his help, and the bland condescension with which he performs the two occult keystrokes that unfreeze your screen is both elitist and situationally valid). But the *SNOOT*'s purview is interhuman social life itself. You don't, after all (despite withering cultural pressure), have to use a computer, but you can't escape language: Language is everything and everywhere; it's what lets us have anything to do with one another; it's what separates us from the animals; Genesis 11:7–10 and so on. And we *SNOOTS* know when and how to hyphenate phrasal adjectives and to keep participles from dangling, and we know that we know, and we know

how very few other Americans know this stuff or even care, and we judge them accordingly.

In ways that certain of us are uncomfortable about, *SNOOTS*' attitudes about contemporary usage resemble religious/political conservatives' attitudes about contemporary culture:<sup>4</sup> We combine a missionary zeal and a near-neural faith in our beliefs' importance with a curmudgeonly hell-in-a-handbasket despair at the way English is routinely manhandled and corrupted by supposedly educated people. The Evil is all around us: boners and clunkers and solecistic howlers and bursts of voguish linguistic methane that make any *SNOOT*'s cheek twitch and forehead darken. A fellow *SNOOT* I know likes to say that listening to most people's English feels like watching somebody use a Stradivarius to pound nails. We<sup>5</sup> are the Few, the Proud, the Appalled at Everyone Else.

#### THESIS STATEMENT FOR WHOLE ARTICLE

**I**ssues of tradition vs. egalitarianism in U.S. English are at root political issues and can be effectively addressed only in what this article hereby terms a "Democratic Spirit." A Democratic Spirit is one that combines rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus sedulous respect for

KEEP IN LANE

<sup>3</sup> *SNOOT* (n) (*highly colloq*) is this reviewer's nuclear family's nickname à clef for a really extreme usage fanatic, the sort of person whose idea of Sunday fun is to look for mistakes in Safire's column's prose itself. This reviewer's family is roughly 70 percent *SNOOT*, which term itself derives from an acronym, with the big historical family joke being that whether S.N.O.O.T. stood for "Sprachgefühl Necessitates Our Ongoing Tendence" or "Syntax Nudniks of Our Time" depended on whether or not you were one.

<sup>4</sup> This is true in my own case at any rate—plus also the "uncomfortable" part. I teach college English part-time—mostly Lit, not Comp. But I am also so pathologically anal about\* usage that every semester the same thing happens: The minute I have read my students' first set of papers, we immediately abandon the regular Lit syllabus and have a three-week Emergency Remedial Usage Unit, during which my demeanor

is basically that of somebody teaching HIV prevention to intravenous-drug users. When it emerges (as it does, every time) that 95 percent of these intelligent upscale college students have never been taught, e.g., what a clause is or why a misplaced *only* can make a sentence confusing, I all but pound my head on the blackboard; I exhort them to sue their hometown school boards. The kids end up scared, both of me and for me.

\**Editor's Note: Author insisted this phrase replace "obsessed with" and took umbrage at the suggestion that this change clearly demonstrated the very quality he wished to denigrate.*

<sup>5</sup> Please note that the strategically repeated I-P pronoun is meant to iterate and emphasize that this reviewer is very much one too, a *SNOOT*, plus to connote the nuclear family mentioned supra. *SNOOTitude* runs in families. In ADMAU's Preface, Bryan Garner mentions both his father and

grandfather and actually uses the word *genetic*, and it's probably true: 95 percent of the *SNOOTS* I know have at least one parent who is, by profession or temperament or both, a *SNOOT*. In my own case, my mom is a Comp teacher and has written remedial usage books and is a *SNOOT* of the most rabid and intractable sort. At least part of the reason I am a *SNOOT* is that for years Mom brainwashed us in all sorts of subtle ways. Here's an example. Family suppers often involved a game: If one of us children made a usage error, Mom would pretend to have a coughing fit that would go on and on until the relevant child had identified the relevant error and corrected it. It was all very self-ironic and lighthearted; but still, looking back, it seems a bit excessive to pretend that your child is actually *denying you oxygen* by speaking incorrectly. But the really chilling thing is that I now sometimes find myself playing this same "game" with my own students, complete with pretend pertussion.

#### INTERPOLATION

As something I'm all but sure Harper's will excise, I'll also insert that we even had a lighthearted but retrospectively chilling little family song that Mom and we little *SNOOTlets* would sing in the car on long trips while Dad silently rolled his eyes and drove (you have to remember the title theme of *Underdog* in order to follow the song):

*When idiots in this world appear  
And fail to be concise or clear  
And solecisms rend the ear  
The cry goes up both far and near  
For Blunder Dog  
Blunder Dog  
Blunder Dog  
Blunder Dog  
[etc.]\**

\* (Since this'll almost surely get cut, I'll admit that, yes, I, as a kid, was the actual author of this song. But by this time I'd been thoroughly brainwashed. And just about the whole car sang along. It was sort of our family's version of "100 Bottles . . . Wall.")



the convictions of others. As any American knows, this is a very difficult spirit to cultivate and maintain, particularly when it comes to issues you feel strongly about. Equally tough is a D.S.'s criterion of 100 percent intellectual integrity—you have to be willing to look honestly at yourself and your motives for believing what you believe, and to do it more or less continually.

This kind of stuff is advanced U.S. citizenship. A true Democratic Spirit is up there with religious faith and emotional maturity and all those other top-of-the-Maslow-Pyramid-type qualities people spend their whole lives working on. A Democratic Spirit's constituent rigor and humility and honesty are in fact so hard to maintain on certain issues that it's almost irresistibly tempting to fall in with some established dogmatic camp and to follow that camp's line on the issue and to let your position harden within the camp and become inflexible and

## Goal-orientated

to believe that any other camp is either evil or insane and to spend all your time and energy trying to shout over them.

I submit, then, that it is indisputably easier to be dogmatic than Democratic, especially about issues that are both vexed and highly charged. I submit further that the issues surrounding "correctness" in contemporary American usage are both vexed and highly charged, and that the fundamental questions they involve are ones whose answers have to be "worked out" instead of simply found.

A distinctive feature of *ADMAU* is that its author is willing to acknowledge that a usage dictionary is not a bible or even a textbook but rather just the record of one smart person's attempts to work out answers to certain very difficult questions. This willingness appears to me to be informed by a Democratic Spirit. The big question is whether such a spirit compromises Garner's ability to present himself as a genuine "authority" on issues of usage. Assessing Garner's book, then, involves trying to trace out the very weird and complicated relationship between Authority and Democracy in what we as a culture have decided is English. That relationship is, as many educated Americans would say, still in process at this time.

**A** *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* has no Editorial Staff or Distinguished Panel. It's conceived, researched, and written *ab ovo usque ad mala* by Bryan Garner. This is an interesting guy. He's both a lawyer and a lexicographer (which seems a bit like being both a narcotics dealer and a DEA agent). His 1987 *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage* is already a minor classic; now, instead of practicing law anymore, he goes around conducting writing seminars for J.D.'s and doing prose-consulting for various judicial bodies. Garner's also the founder of something called the H. W. Fowler Society,<sup>6</sup> a worldwide group of usage-Trekkies who like to send one another linguistic boners clipped from different periodicals. You get the idea. This Garner is one serious and very hard-core SNOOT.

The lucid, engaging, and extremely sneaky Preface to *ADMAU* serves to confirm Garner's SNOOTitude in fact while undercutting it in tone. For one thing, whereas the traditional usage pundit cultivates a sort of remote and imperial persona—the kind who uses *one* or *we* to refer to himself—Garner gives us an almost Waltonishly endearing sketch of his own background:

I realized early—at the age of 15<sup>7</sup>—that my primary intellectual interest was the use of the English language. . . . It became an all-consuming passion. . . . I read everything I could find on the subject. Then, on a wintry evening while visiting New Mexico at the age of 16, I discovered Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage*. I was enthralled. Never had I held a more exciting book. . . . Suffice it to say that by the time I was 18, I had committed to memory most of Fowler, Partridge, and their successors. . . .

Although this reviewer regrets the bio-sketch's failure to mention the rather significant social costs of being an adolescent whose overriding passion is English usage,<sup>8</sup> the critical hat is off to yet another personable section of the Preface, one that Garner entitles "First Principles": "Before going any further, I should explain my approach. That's an unusual thing for the author of a usage dictionary to do—unprecedented, as far as I know. But a guide to

<sup>6</sup> If Samuel Johnson is the Shakespeare of English usage, think of Henry Watson Fowler as the Eliot or Joyce. His 1926 *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is the granddaddy of modern usage guides, and its dusty wit and bluish imperiousness have been models for every

subsequent classic in the field, from Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage* to Theodore Bernstein's *The Careful Writer* to Wilson Follett's *Modern American Usage* to Gilman's '89 *Webster's*.

<sup>7</sup> (Garner prescribes spelling out only numbers under ten. I was

taught that this rule applies just to Business Writing and that in all other modes you spell out one through nineteen and start using cardinals at 20. \* *De gustibus non est disputandum.*)

\* *Editor's Note: The Harper's style manual prescribes spelling out all numbers up to 100.*

<sup>8</sup> From personal experience, I can assure you that any kid like this is going to be at best marginalized and at worst savagely and repeatedly Wedgied.

**Could care less**



good writing is only as good as the principles on which it's based. And users should be naturally interested in those principles. So, in the interests of full disclosure . . ."<sup>9</sup>

The "unprecedented" and "full disclosure" here are actually good-natured digs at Garner's Fowlerite predecessors, and a subtle nod to one camp in the wars that have raged in both lexicography and education ever since the notoriously liberal *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* came out in 1961 and included such terms as *heighth* and *irregardless* without any monitory labels on them. You can think of *Webster's Third* as sort of the Fort Sumter of the contemporary Usage Wars. These Wars are both the context and the target of a very subtle rhetorical strategy in *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, and without talking about them it's impossible to explain why Garner's book is both so good and so sneaky.

We regular citizens tend to go to The Dictionary for authoritative guidance.<sup>10</sup> Rarely, however, do we ask ourselves who decides what gets in The Dictionary or what words or spellings or pronunciations get deemed "substandard" or "incorrect." Whence the authority of dictionary-makers to decide what's OK<sup>11</sup> and what isn't? Nobody elected them, after all. And simply appealing to precedent or tradition won't work, because what's considered correct changes over time. In the 1600s, for instance, the second-singular pronoun took a singular conjugation—"You is." Earlier still, the standard 2-S pronoun wasn't *you* but *thou*. Huge numbers of now acceptable words like *clever*, *fun*, *banter*, and *prestigious* entered English as what usage authorities considered errors or egregious slang. And not just usage conventions but English itself changes over time; if it didn't, we'd all still be talking like Chaucer. Who's to say which changes are natural and which are corruptions? And when Bryan Garner or E. Ward Gilman do in fact presume to say, why should we believe them?

These sorts of questions are not new, but they do now have a certain urgency. America is in the midst of a protracted Crisis of Authority in matters of language. In brief, the same sorts of political upheavals that produced everything from

Kent State to Independent Counsels have produced an influential contra-SNOOT school for whom normative standards of English grammar and usage are functions of nothing but custom and superstition and the ovine docility of a populace that lets self-appointed language authorities boss them around. See for example MIT's Steven Pinker in a famous *New Republic* article—"Once introduced, a prescriptive rule is very hard to eradicate, no matter how ridiculous. Inside the writing establishment, the rules survive by the same dynamic that perpetuates ritual genital mutilations"—or, at a somewhat lower pitch, Bill Bryson in *Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*:

Who sets down all those rules that we all know about from childhood—the idea that we must never end a sentence with a preposition or begin one with a conjunction, that we must use *each other* for two things and *one another* for more than two . . .? The answer, surprisingly often, is that no one does, that when you look into the background of these "rules" there is often little basis for them.

In ADMAU's Preface, Garner himself addresses the Authority Question with a Trumanesque simplicity and candor that simultaneously disguise the author's cunning and exemplify it:

As you might already suspect, I don't shy away from making judgments. I can't imagine that most readers would want me to. Linguists don't like it, of course, because judgment involves subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> It isn't scientific. But rhetoric and usage, in the view of most professional writers, aren't scientific endeavors. You don't want dispassionate descriptions; you want sound guidance. And that requires judgment.

Whole monographs could be written just on the masterful rhetoric of this passage. Note for example the ingenious equivocation of *judgment* in "I don't shy away from making judgments" vs. "And that requires judgment." Suffice it to say that Garner is at all times *keenly* aware of the Authority Crisis in modern usage; and his response to this crisis is—in the best Democratic Spirit—rhetorical.

So . . .

<sup>9</sup> What follow in the Preface are "... the ten critical points that, after years of working on usage problems, I've settled on." These points are too involved to treat separately, but a couple of them are slippery in the extreme—e.g., "10. Actual Usage. In the end, the actual usage of educated speakers and writers is the over-

arching criterion for correctness," of which both "educated" and "actual" would require several pages of abstract clarification and qualification to shore up against Usage Wars-related attacks, but which Garner rather ingeniously elects to define and defend via their application in his dictionary itself.

<sup>10</sup> There's no better indication of The Dictionary's authority than that we use it to settle wagers. My own father is still to this day living down the outcome of a high-stakes bet on the correct spelling of *meringue*, a wager made on 14 September 1978.

<sup>11</sup> Editor's Note: The Harper's style manual prescribes okay.

<sup>12</sup> This is a clever half-truth. Linguists compose only one part of the anti-judgment camp, and their objections to usage judgments involve way more than just "subjectivity."



COROLLARY TO  
THESIS STATEMENT  
FOR WHOLE ARTICLE

**T**he most salient and timely feature of Garner's book is that it's both lexicographical and rhetorical. Its main strategy involves what is known in classical rhetoric as the Ethical Appeal. Here the adjective, derived from the Greek *ethos*, doesn't mean quite what we usually mean by *ethical*. But there are affinities. What the Ethical Appeal amounts to is a complex and sophisticated "Trust me." It's the boldest, most ambitious, and also most distinctively American of rhetorical Appeals, because it requires the rhetor to convince us not just of his intellectual acuity or technical competence but of his basic decency and fairness and sensitivity to the audience's own hopes and fears.<sup>13</sup>

These are not qualities one associates with the traditional SNOOT usage-authority, a figure who pretty much instantiates snobbishness and bow-tied anality, and one whose modern image is not improved by stuff like *American Heritage Dictionary Distinguished Usage Panelist Morris Bishop's* "The arrant solecisms of the ignoramus are here often omitted entirely, 'irregardless' of how he may feel about this neglect" or critic John Simon's "The English language is being treated nowadays exactly as slave traders once handled their merchandise. . . ." Compare those lines' authorial personas with Garner's in, e.g., "English usage is so challenging that even experienced writers need guidance now and then."

The thrust here is going to be that *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* earns Garner pretty much all the trust his Ethical Appeal asks us for. The book's "feel-good" spirit (in the very best sense of "feel-good") marries rigor and humility in such a way as to allow Garner to be extremely prescriptive without any appearance of evangelism or elitist put-down. This is an extraordinary accomplishment. Understanding why it's basically a *rhetorical* accomplishment, and why this is both historically significant and (in this reviewer's opinion) politically redemptive, requires a more detailed look at the Usage Wars.

**Y**ou'd sure know lexicography had an underbelly if you read the little introductory essays in modern dictionaries—pieces like *Webster's DEU's* "A Brief History of English Usage" or *Webster's Third's* "Linguistic Advances and Lexicography" or *AHD-3's* "Usage in the American Heritage Dictionary: The Place of Criticism." But almost nobody ever bothers with these little intros, and it's not just their six-point type or the fact that dictionaries tend to be hard on the lap. It's that these intros aren't actually written for you or me or the average citizen who goes to *The Dictionary* just to see how to spell (for instance) *meringue*. They're written for other lexicographers and critics, and in fact they're not really introductory at all but polemical. They're salvos in the Usage Wars that have been under way ever since editor Philip Gove first sought to apply the value-neutral principles of structural linguistics to lexicography in *Webster's Third*. Gove's famous response to conservatives who howled<sup>14</sup> when *Webster's Third* endorsed OK and described *ain't* as "used orally in most parts of the U.S. by many cultivated speakers [sic]" was

**I thought to myself**

this: "A dictionary should have no traffic with . . . artificial notions of correctness or superiority. It should be descriptive and not prescriptive." These terms stuck and turned epithetic, and linguistic conservatives are now formally known as Prescriptivists and linguistic liberals as Descriptivists.

The former are far better known. When you read the columns of William Safire or Morton Freeman or books like Edwin Newman's *Strictly Speaking* or John Simon's *Paradigms Lost*, you're actually reading Popular Prescriptivism, a genre sideline of certain journalists (mostly older ones, the vast majority of whom actually do wear bow ties) whose bemused irony often masks a Colonel Blimp's rage at the way the beloved English of their youth is being trashed in the decadent present. The plutocratic tone and styptic wit of Safire and Newman and the best of the Prescriptivists is often modeled after the mandarin-Brit personas of Eric Partridge and H. W. Fowler, the same Twin Towers of scholarly

<sup>13</sup> In this last respect, recall for example W. J. Clinton's famous "I feel your pain," which was a blatant if not particularly masterful Ethical Appeal.

<sup>14</sup> Really, *howled*: blistering reviews and outraged editorials from across the country—from the *Times* and *The New Yorker* and good old *Life*, or q.v. this from the January '62 *Atlantic*: "We have

seen a novel dictionary formula improvised, in great part, out of snap judgments and the sort of theoretical improvement that in practice impairs; and we have seen the gates propped wide open in enthusiastic hospitality to mis-

cellaneous confusions and corruptions. In fine, the anxiously awaited work that was to have crowned cisatlantic linguistic scholarship with a particular glory turns out to be a scandal and a disaster."



Prescriptivism whom Garner talks about revering as a kid.<sup>15</sup>

Descriptivists, on the other hand, don't have weekly columns in the *Times*. These guys tend to be hard-core academics, mostly linguists or Comp theorists. Loosely organized under the banner of structural (or "descriptive") linguistics, they are doctrinaire positivists who have their intellectual roots in the work of Auguste Comte and Ferdinand de Saussure and their ideological roots firmly in the U.S. sixties. The brief explicit mention Garner's Preface gives this crew—

Somewhere along the line, though, usage dictionaries got hijacked by the descriptive linguists,<sup>16</sup> who observe language scientifically. For the pure descriptivist, it's impermissible to say that one form of language is any better than another: as long as a native speaker says it, it's OK—and anyone who takes a contrary stand is a dunderhead. . . . Essentially, descriptivists and prescriptivists are approaching different problems. Descriptivists want to record language as it's actually used, and they perform a useful function—though their audience is generally limited to those willing to pore through vast tomes of dry-as-dust research.

—is disingenuous in the extreme, especially the "approaching different problems" part, because it vastly underplays the Descriptivists' influence on U.S. culture. For one thing, Descriptivism so quickly and thoroughly took over English education in this country that just about everybody who started junior high after c. 1970 has been taught to write Descriptively—via "freewriting," "brainstorming," "journaling," a view of writing as self-exploratory and -expressive rather than as communicative, an abandonment of systematic grammar, usage, semantics, rhetoric, etymology. For another thing, the very language in which today's socialist, feminist, minority, gay, and environmentalist movements frame their sides of political debates is informed by the Descriptivist belief that traditional English is conceived and perpetuated by Privileged WASP Males<sup>17</sup> and is thus inherently capitalist, sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, elitist: unfair. Think Ebonics. Think of the involved contortions

people undergo to avoid *he* as a generic pronoun, or of the tense deliberate way white males now adjust their vocabularies around non-w.m.'s. Think of today's endless battles over just the *names* of things—"Affirmative Action" vs. "Reverse Discrimination," "Pro-Life" vs. "Pro-Choice," "Undercount" vs. "Vote Fraud," etc.

The Descriptivist revolution takes a little time to unpack, but it's worth it. The structural linguists' rejection of conventional usage rules depends on two main arguments. The first is academic and methodological. In this age of technology, Descriptivists contend, it's the Scientific Method—clinically objective, value-neutral, based on direct observation and demonstrable hypothesis—that should determine both the content of dictionaries and the standards of "correct" English. Because language is constantly evolving, such standards will always be fluid. Gove's now classic introduction to *Webster's Third* outlines this type of Descriptivism's five basic edicts: "1—Language changes constantly; 2—Change is normal; 3—Spoken language is the language; 4—Correctness rests upon usage; 5—All usage is relative."

These principles look *prima facie* OK—commonsensical and couched in the bland simple s.-v.-o. prose of dispassionate Science—but in fact they're vague and muddled and it takes about three seconds to think of reasonable replies to each one of them, viz.:

1—OK, but how much and how fast?

2—Same thing. Is Heraclitean flux as normal or desirable as gradual change? Do some changes actually serve the language's overall pizzazz better than others? And how many people have to deviate from how many conventions before we say the language has actually changed? Fifty percent? Ten percent?

3—This is an old claim, at least as old as Plato's *Phaedrus*. And it's specious. If Derrida and the infamous Deconstructionists have done nothing else, they've debunked the idea that speech is language's primary instantiation.<sup>18</sup> Plus consider

*Hands-on,  
can-do*

<sup>15</sup> Note for example the mordant pith (and royal *we*) of this random snippet from Partridge's *Usage and Abuse*:

**anxious of.** 'I am not hopeless of our future. But I am profoundly anxious of it', Beverley Nichols, *News of England*, 1938: which made us profoundly anxious for (or about)—not of—Mr Nichols's literary future.

Or see the near-Himalayan condensation of Fowler, here on some other people's use of words to mean things the words don't really mean:

**slipshod extension** . . . is especially likely to occur when some accident gives currency among the uneducated to words of learned origin, & the more if they are isolated or have few relatives in the vernacular. . . . The original meaning

of *feasible* is simply doable (L *facere* do); but to the unlearned it is a mere token, of which he has to infer the value from the contexts in which he hears it used, because such relatives as it has in English—*feat*, *feature*, *faction*, &c.—either fail to show the obvious family likeness to which he is accustomed among families of indigenous words, or are (like *malfeasance*) outside his range.

<sup>16</sup> Utter bushwa: As ADMAU's body makes clear, Garner knows exactly when the Descriptivists started influencing language guides.

<sup>17</sup> (which in fact is true)

<sup>18</sup> (Q.v. "The Pharmakon" in Derrida's *La dissémination*—but you'd probably be better off just trusting me.)



the weird arrogance of Gove's (3) w/r/t correctness. Only the most mullahlke Prescriptivists care very much about spoken English; most Prescriptive usage guides concern Standard *Written* English.<sup>19</sup>

4—Fine, but whose usage? Gove's (4) begs the whole question. What he wants to imply here, I think, is a reversal of the traditional entailment-relation between abstract rules and concrete usage: Instead of usage ideally corresponding to a rigid set of regulations, the regulations ought to correspond to the way real people are actually using the language. Again, fine, but which people? Urban Latinos? Boston Brahmins? Rural Midwesterners? Appalachian Neogaelics?

**"French provincial twin bed with canape and box spring, \$150."**

5—*Huh?* If this means what it seems to mean, then it ends up biting Gove's whole argument in the ass. (5) appears to imply that the correct answer to the above "which people?" is: "All of them!" And it's easy to show why this will not stand up as a lexicographical principle. The most obvious problem with it is that not everything can go in *The Dictionary*. Why not? Because you can't observe every last bit of every last native speaker's "language behavior," and even if you could, the resultant dictionary would weigh 4 million pounds and have to be updated hourly.<sup>20</sup> The fact is that any lexicographer is going to have to make choices about what gets in and what doesn't. And these choices are based on . . . what? And now we're right back where we started.

It is true that, as a SNOOT, I am probably neurologically predisposed to look for flaws in Gove et al.'s methodological argument. But these flaws seem awfully easy to find. Probably the biggest one is that the Descriptivists' "scientific lexicography"—under which, keep in mind, the ideal English dictionary is basically number-crunching; you somehow observe every linguistic act by every native/naturalized speaker of English and put the sum of all these acts between two covers and call it *The Dictionary*—involves an incredibly simplistic and outdated understanding of what *scientific* means. It requires a naive belief in scientific objectivi-

ty, for one thing. Even in the physical sciences, everything from quantum mechanics to Information Theory has shown that an act of observation is itself part of the phenomenon observed and is analytically inseparable from it.

If you remember your old college English classes, there's an analogy here that points up the trouble scholars get into when they confuse observation with interpretation. Recall the New Critics.<sup>21</sup> They believed that literary criticism was best conceived as a "scientific" endeavor: The critic was a neutral, careful, unbiased, highly trained observer whose job was to find and objectively describe meanings that were right there—literally inside—pieces of literature. Whether you know what happened to the New Criticism's reputation depends on whether you took college English after c. 1975; suffice it to say that its star has dimmed. The New Critics had the same basic problem as Gove's Methodological Descriptivists: They believed that *scientific* meant the same thing as *neutral* or *unbiased*. And that linguistic meanings could exist "objectively," separate from any interpretive act.

The point of the analogy is that claims to objectivity in language study are now the stuff of jokes and shudders. The epistemological assumptions that underlie Methodological Descriptivism have been thoroughly debunked and displaced—in Lit by the rise of post-structuralism, Reader-Response Criticism, and Jaussian Reception Theory; in linguistics by the rise of Pragmatics—and it's now pretty much universally accepted that (a) meaning is inseparable from some act of interpretation and (b) an act of interpretation is always somewhat biased, i.e., informed by the interpreter's particular ideology. And the consequence of (a) and (b) is that there's no way around it—decisions about what to put in *The Dictionary* and what to exclude are going to be based on a lexicographer's ideology. And every lexicographer's got one. To presume that dictionary-making can somehow avoid or transcend ideology is simply to subscribe to a particular ideology, one that might aptly be called Unbelievably Naive Positivism.

There's an even more important way Descriptivists are wrong in thinking that the Scientific Method is appropriate to the study of language:

<sup>19</sup> Standard Written English (SWE) is also sometimes called Standard English (SE) or Educated English, but the inditement-emphasis is the same.

SEMI-INTERPOLATION

Plus note that Garner's Preface explicitly names *ADMAU*'s

intended audience as "writers and editors." And even ads for the dictionary in such organs as *The New York Review of Books* are built around the slogan "If you like to WRITE . . . Refer to us."<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>(Yr. SNOOT rev. cannot help observing, w/r/t these ads, that the opening *r* in *Refer* here should not

be capitalized after a dependent clause + ellipsis—*Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus.*)

<sup>20</sup> True, some sort of 100 percent compendious real-time Megadictionary might be possible online, though it'd take a small army of lexical webmasters and a much larger army of *in situ* actual-use

reporters and surveillance techs; plus it'd be GNP-level expensive.

<sup>21</sup> *New Criticism* refers to T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks and Wimsatt & Beardsley and the whole "close reading" school that dominated literary criticism from WWI well into the seventies.



Even if, as a thought experiment, we assume a kind of nineteenth-century scientific realism—in which, even though some scientists' interpretations of natural phenomena might be biased,<sup>22</sup> the natural phenomena themselves can be supposed to exist wholly independent of either observation or interpretation—no such realist supposition can be made about “language behavior,” because this behavior is both *human* and fundamentally *normative*. To understand this, you have only to accept the proposition that language is by its very nature public—i.e., that there can be no such thing as a Private Language<sup>23</sup>—and then to observe the way Methodological Descriptivists seem either ignorant of this fact or oblivious to its consequences, as in for example one Charles Fries's introduction to an epigone of *Webster's Third* called *The American College Dictionary*:

A dictionary can be an “authority” only in the sense in which a book of chemistry or of physics or of botany can be an “authority”—by the accuracy and the completeness of its record of the observed facts of the field examined, in accord with the latest principles and techniques of the particular science.

This is so stupid it practically drools. An “authoritative” physics text presents the results of *physicists'* observations and *physicists'* theories about those observations. If a physics textbook operated on Descriptivist principles, the fact that some Americans believe that electricity flows

better downhill (based on the observed fact that power lines tend to run high above the homes they serve) would require the Electricity Flows Better Downhill Theory to be included as a “valid” theory in the textbook—just as, for Dr. Fries, if some Americans use *infer* for *imply*, the use becomes an ipso facto “valid” part of the language. Structural linguists like Gove and Fries are not, finally, scientists but census-takers who happen to misconstrue the importance of “observed facts.” It isn't scientific phenomena they're tabulating but rather a set of human behaviors, and a lot of human behaviors are—to be blunt—moronic. Try, for instance, to imagine an “authoritative” ethics textbook whose principles were based on what most people actually *do*.

Norm-wise, let's keep in mind that language didn't come into being because our hairy ancestors were sitting around the veldt with nothing better to do. Language was invented to serve certain specific purposes:<sup>24</sup> “That mushroom is poisonous”; “Knock these two rocks together and you can start a fire”; “This shelter is mine!” And so on. Clearly, as linguistic communities evolve over time, they discover that some ways of using language are “better” than others—meaning better with respect to the community's purposes. If we assume that one such purpose might be communicating which kinds of food are safe to eat, then you can see how, for example, a misplaced modifier might violate an important norm:

22 (“EVIDENCE OF CANCER LINK REFUTED BY TOBACCO INSTITUTE RESEARCHERS”)

23 This proposition is in fact true, as is interpolatively demonstrated below, and although the demonstration is extremely persuasive it is also, as you can see from the size of this FN, lengthy and involved and rather, umm, dense, so that again you'd probably be better off simply granting the truth of the proposition and forging on with the main text.

INTERPOLATIVE  
DEMONSTRATION OF  
THE FACT THAT THERE  
IS NO SUCH THING AS  
A PRIVATE LANGUAGE

It's sometimes tempting to imagine that there can be such a thing as a Private Language. Many of us are prone to lay-philosophizing about the weird privacy of our own mental states, for example, and from the fact that when my knee hurts only I can feel it, it's tempting to conclude that for me the word *pain* has a very

subjective internal meaning that only I can truly understand. This line of thinking is sort of like the adolescent pot-smoker's terror that his own inner experience is both private and unverifiable, a syndrome that is technically known as *Cannabic Solipsism*. Eating *Chips Ahoy!* and staring very intently at the television's network PGA event, for instance, the adolescent pot-smoker is struck by the ghastly possibility that, e.g., what he sees as the color green and what other people call “the color green” may in fact not be the same color experiences at all: The fact that both he and someone else call Pebble Beach's fairways green and a stoplight's GO signal green appears to guarantee only that there is a similar consistency in their color experience of fairways and GO lights, not that the actual subjective quality of those color experiences is the same; it could be that what the ad. pot-smoker experiences as green everyone else actually experiences as blue, and what we “mean” by the word *blue* is what he “means” by *green*, etc.,

etc., until the whole line of thinking gets so vexed and exhausting that the a.p.-s. ends up slumped crumb-strewn and paralyzed in his chair.

The point here is that the idea of a Private Language, like *Private Colors* and most of the other solipsistic conceits with which this particular reviewer has at various times been afflicted, is both deluded and demonstrably false.

In the case of *Private Language*, the delusion is usually based on the belief that a word such as *pain* has the meaning it does because it is somehow “connected” to a feeling in my knee. But as Mr. L. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* proved in the 1950s, words actually have the meanings they do because of certain rules and verification tests that are imposed on us from outside our own subjectivities, viz., by the community in which we have to get along and communicate with other people. Wittgenstein's argument, which is admittedly very complex and gnomic and opaque, basically centers on the

fact that a word like *pain* means what it does for me because of the way the community I'm part of has tacitly agreed to use *pain*.

If you're thinking that all this seems not only abstract but also pretty irrelevant to the Usage Wars or to anything you have any real interest in at all, you are very much mistaken. If words' meanings depend on transpersonal rules and these rules on community consensus, language is not only conceptually non-Private but also irreducibly *public*, *political*, and *ideological*. This means that questions about our national consensus on grammar and usage are actually bound up with every last social issue that millennial America's about—class, race, gender, morality, tolerance, pluralism, cohesion, equality, fairness, money: You name it.

24 Norms, after all, are just practices people have agreed on as optimal ways of doing things for certain purposes. They're not laws, but they're not *laissez-faire*, either.





"People who eat that kind of mushroom often get sick" confuses the recipient about whether he'll get sick only if he eats the mushroom frequently or whether he stands a good chance of getting sick the very first time he eats it. In other words, the community has a vested practical interest in excluding this kind of misplaced modifier from acceptable usage; and even if a certain percentage of tribesmen screw up and use them, this still doesn't make m.m.'s a good idea.

Maybe now the analogy between usage and ethics is clearer. Just because people sometimes lie, cheat on their taxes, or scream at their kids, this doesn't mean that they think those things are "good." The whole point of norms is to help us evaluate our actions (including utterances) according to what we as a community have decided our real interests and purposes are. Granted, this analysis is oversimplified; in practice it's incredibly hard to arrive at norms and to keep them at least minimally fair or sometimes even to agree on what they are (q.v. today's Culture Wars). But the Descriptivists' assumption that all usage norms are arbitrary and dispensable leads to—well, have a mushroom.

The connotations of *arbitrary* here are tricky, though, and this sort of segue into the second argument Descriptivists make. There is a sense in which specific linguistic conventions are arbitrary. For instance, there's no particular metaphysical reason why our word for a four-legged mammal that gives milk and goes Moo is *cow* and not, say, *prtmf*. The uptown phrase for this is "the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign," and it's used, along with certain principles of cognitive science and generative grammar, in a more philosophically sophisticated version of Descriptivism that holds the conventions of SWE to be more like the niceties of fashion than like actual norms. This "Philosophical Descriptivism" doesn't care much about dictionaries or method; its target is the standard SNOOT claim *supra*—that prescriptive rules have their ultimate justification in the community's need to make its language meaningful.

The argument goes like this. An English sentence's being *meaningful* is not the same as its being *grammatical*. That is, such clearly ill-formed constructions as "Did you seen the car keys of me?" or "The show was looked by many people" are nevertheless comprehensible; the sentences do, more or less, communicate the information they're trying to get across. Add to this the fact that

nobody who isn't damaged in some profound Oliver Sacksish way actually ever makes these sorts of very deep syntactic errors<sup>25</sup> and you get the basic proposition of Noam Chomsky's generative linguistics, which is that there exists a Universal Grammar beneath and common to all languages, plus that there is probably an actual part of the human brain that's imprinted with this Universal Grammar the same way birds' brains are imprinted with Fly South and dogs' with Sniff Genitals. There's all kinds of compelling evidence and support for these ideas, not least of which are the advances that linguists and cognitive scientists and A.I. researchers have been able to make with them, and the theories have a lot of credibility, and they are adduced by the Philosophical Descriptivists to show that since the really *important* rules of language are at birth already hardwired into people's neocortex, SWE prescriptions against dangling participles or mixed metaphors are basically

the linguistic equivalent of whalebone corsets and short forks for salad. As Descriptivist Steven Pinker puts it, "When a scientist considers all the high-tech mental machinery needed to order words into everyday sentences, prescriptive rules are, at best, inconsequential decorations."

This argument is not the barrel of drugged trout that Methodological Descriptivism was, but it's still vulnerable to some objections. The first one is easy. Even if it's true that we're all wired with a Universal Grammar, it simply doesn't follow that *all* prescriptive rules are superfluous. Some of these rules really do seem to serve clarity and precision. The injunction against two-way adverbs ("People who eat this often get sick") is an obvious example, as are rules about other kinds of misplaced modifiers ("There are many reasons why lawyers lie, some better than others") and about relative pronouns' proximity to the nouns they modify ("She's the mother of an infant daughter who works twelve hours a day").

Granted, the Philosophical Descriptivist can question just how absolutely necessary these rules are—it's quite likely that a recipient of clauses like the above could figure out what the sentences mean from the sentences on either side or from the "overall context" or whatever. A listener can usually figure out what I really mean when I misuse *infer* for *imply* or say *indicate* for *say*, too. But many of these solecisms require at least a couple extra nanoseconds of cognitive effort, a kind of rapid sift-and-discard process, before the recipi-



<sup>25</sup> In his *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*

(1994), Steven Pinker puts it this way: "No one, not even a valley girl, has to be told not to say

*Apples the eat boy or The child seems sleeping or Who did you meet John and?* or the vast, vast

majority of the millions of trillions of mathematically possible combinations of words."



ent gets it. Extra work. It's debatable just how much extra work, but it seems indisputable that we put *some* extra neural burden on the recipient when we fail to follow certain conventions. W/t/t confusing clauses like the above, it simply seems more "considerate" to follow the rules of correct SWE... just as it's more "considerate" to de-slob your home before entertaining guests or to brush your teeth before picking up a date. Not just more considerate but more *respectful* somehow—both of your listener and of what you're trying to get across. As we sometimes also say about elements of fashion and etiquette, the way you use English "Makes a Statement" or "Sends a Message"—even though these Statements/Messages often have nothing to do with the actual information you're trying to transmit.

We've now sort of bled into a more serious rejoinder to Philosophical Descriptivism: From the fact that linguistic communication is not strictly dependent on usage and grammar it does *not* necessarily follow that the traditional rules of usage and grammar are nothing but "inconsequential decorations." Another way to state the objection is that just because something is "decorative" does not necessarily make it "inconsequential." Rhetorically, Pinker's flip dismissal is bad tactics, for it invites the very question it begs: inconsequential to *whom*?

Take, for example, the Descriptivist claim that so-called correct English usages such as *brought* rather than *brung* and *felt* rather than *feeled* are arbitrary and restrictive and unfair and are supported only by custom and are (like irregular verbs in general) archaic and incommodious and an all-around pain in the ass. Let us concede for the moment that these objections are 100 percent reasonable. Then let's talk about pants. Trousers, slacks. I suggest to you that having the "correct" subthoracic clothing for U.S. males be pants instead of skirts is arbitrary (lots of other cultures let men wear skirts), restrictive and unfair (U.S. females get to wear pants), based solely on archaic custom (I think it's got something to do with certain traditions about gender and leg position, the same reasons girls' bikes don't have a crossbar), and in certain ways not only incommodious but illogical (skirts are more comfortable than pants; pants ride up; pants are hot; pants can squish the genitals and reduce fertility; over time pants chafe and erode irregular sections of men's

leg hair and give older men hideous half-denuded legs, etc. etc.). Let us grant—as a thought experiment if nothing else—that these are all reasonable and compelling objections to pants as an androsartorial norm. Let us in fact in our minds and hearts say yes—*shout* yes—to the skirt, the kilt, the toga, the sarong, the jupe. Let us dream of or even

*Wave all interest  
for 90 days!*

in our spare time work toward an America where nobody lays any arbitrary sumptuary prescriptions on anyone else and we can all go around as comfortable and aerated and unchafed and unsquished and motile as we want.

And yet the fact remains that, in the broad cultural mainstream of millennial America, men do not wear skirts. If you, the reader, are a U.S. male, and even if you share my personal objections to pants and dream as I do of a cool and genitally unsquishy American Tomorrow, the odds are still 99.9 percent that in 100 percent of public situations you wear pants/slacks/shorts/trunks. More to the point, if you are a U.S. male and also have a U.S. male child, and if that child were to come to you one evening and announce his desire/intention to wear a skirt rather than pants to school the next day, I am 100-percent confident that you are going to discourage him from doing so. *Strongly* discourage him. You could be a Molotov-tossing anti-pants radical or a kilt manufacturer or Steven Pinker himself—you're going to stand over your kid and be prescriptive about an arbitrary, archaic, uncomfortable, and inconsequentially decorative piece of clothing. Why? Well, because in modern America any little boy who comes to school in a skirt (even, say, a modest all-season midi) is going to get stared at and shunned and beaten up and called a Total Geekoid by a whole lot of people whose approval and acceptance are important to him.<sup>26</sup> In our culture, in other words, a boy who wears a skirt is Making a Statement that is going to have all kinds of gruesome social and emotional consequences.

You see where this is going. I'm going to describe the intended point of the pants analogy in terms I'm sure are simplistic—doubtless there are whole books in Pragmatics or psycholinguistics or something devoted to unpacking this point. The weird thing is that I've seen neither Descriptivists nor SNOOTS deploy it in the Wars.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> In the case of Steve Pinker Jr., those people are the boy's peers and teachers and crossing guards, etc. In the case of adult cross-dressers and drag queens who have jobs in the Straight World and

wear pants to those jobs, it's co-workers and clients and people on the subway. For the die-hard slob who nevertheless wears a coat and a tie to work, it's mostly his boss, who himself doesn't want his employee's clothes to send

clients "the wrong message." But of course it's all basically the same thing.

<sup>27</sup> In fact, the only time one ever hears the issue made explicit is in radio ads for tapes that promise

to improve people's vocabulary. These ads are extremely ominous and intimidating and always start out with "DID YOU KNOW PEOPLE JUDGE YOU BY THE WORDS YOU USE?"

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When I say or write something, there are actually a whole lot of different things I am communicating. The propositional content (the actual information I'm trying to convey) is only one part of it. Another part is stuff about me, the communicator. Everyone knows this. It's a function of the fact that there are uncountably many well-formed ways to say the same basic thing, from e.g. "I was attacked by a bear!" to "Goddamn bear tried to kill me!" to "That ursine juggernaut bethought to sup upon my person!" and so on. And different levels of diction and formality are only the simplest kinds of distinction; things get way more complicated in the sorts of interpersonal communication where social relations and feelings and moods come into play. Here's a familiar sort of example. Suppose that you and I are acquaintances and we're in my apartment having a conversation and that at some point I want to terminate the conversation and not have you be in my apartment anymore. Very delicate social moment. Think of all the different ways I can try to handle it: "Wow, look at the time"; "Could we finish this up later?"; "Could you please leave now?"; "Go"; "Get out"; "Get the hell out of here"; "Didn't you say you had to be someplace?"; "Time for you to hit the dusty trail, my friend"; "Off you go then, love"; or that sly old telephone-conversation ender: "Well, I'm going to let you go now"; etc.<sup>28</sup> And then think of all the different factors and implications of each option.

The point here is obvious. It concerns a phenomenon that SNOOTS blindly reinforce and that Descriptivists badly underestimate and that scary vocab-tape ads try to exploit. People really do "judge" one another according to their use of language. Constantly. Of course, people judge one another on the basis of all kinds of things—weight, scent, physiognomy, occupation, make of vehicle<sup>28</sup>—and, again, doubtless it's all terribly complicated and occupies whole battalions of sociolinguists. But it's clear that at least one component of all this interpersonal semantic judging involves *acceptance*, meaning not some touchy-feely emotional affirmation but actual acceptance or rejection of somebody's bid to be

regarded as a peer, a member of somebody else's collective or community or Group. Another way to come at this is to acknowledge something that in the Usage Wars gets mentioned only in very abstract terms: "Correct" English usage is, as a practical matter, a function of whom you're talking to and how you want that person to respond—not just to your utterance but also to *you*. In other words, a large part of the agenda of any communication is rhetorical and depends on what some rhet-scholars call "Audience" or "Discourse Community."<sup>29</sup> And the United States obviously has a huge number of such Dis-

course Communities, many of them regional and/or cultural dialects of English: Black English, Latino English, Rural Southern,

Urban Southern, Standard Upper-Midwest, Maine Yankee, East-Texas Bayou, Boston Blue-Collar, on and on. Everybody knows this. What not everyone knows—especially not certain Prescriptivists—is that many of these non-SWE dialects have their own highly developed and internally consistent grammars, and that some of these dialects' usage norms actually make more linguistic/aesthetic sense than do their Standard counterparts (see INTERPOLATION). Plus, of course, there are innumerable sub- and subdialects based on all sorts of things that have nothing to do with locale or ethnicity—Medical-School English, Peorians-Who-Follow-Pro-Wrestling-Closely English, Twelve-Year-Old-Males-Whose-Worldview-Is-Deeply-Informed-By-South-Park English—and that are nearly incomprehensible to anyone who isn't inside their very tight and specific Discourse Community (which of course is part of their function<sup>30</sup>).

#### INTERPOLATION:

EXAMPLE OF GRAMMATICAL ADVANTAGES OF A NON-STANDARD DIALECT THAT THIS REVIEWER ACTUALLY KNOWS ABOUT FIRSTHAND

This rev. happens to have two native English dialects—the SWE of my hypereducated parents and the hard-earned Rural Midwestern of most of my peers. When I'm talking to R.M.'s, I usually

### Who would of thought?

<sup>28</sup> (...not to mention color, gender, creed—you can see how fraught and charged all this is going to get)

<sup>29</sup> *Discourse Community* is an example of that rare kind of academic jargon that's actually a valuable addition to SWE because it

captures something at once very complex and very specific that no other English term quite can.\*

\*(The above is an obvious attempt to preempt readerly sneers/winces at the term's continued deployment in this article.)

<sup>30</sup> (Plus it's true that whether something gets called a "subdialect" or "jargon" seems to depend on how much it annoys people outside its Discourse Community. Garner himself has miniessays on AIRLINESE, COMPUTERESE, LEGALESE, and BUREAUCRATESE, and he more or less

calls all of them jargon. There is no ADMAU miniessay on DIALECTS, but there is one on JARGON, in which such is Garner's self-restraint that you can almost hear his tendons straining, as in "[Jargon] arises from the urge to save time and space—and occasionally to conceal meaning from the uninitiated.")



use, for example, the construction "Where's it at?" instead of "Where is it?" Part of this is a naked desire to fit in and not get rejected as an egghead or fag (see *sub*). But another part is that I, SNOOT or no, believe that this and other R.M.isms are in certain ways superior to their Standard equivalents.

For a dogmatic Prescriptivist, "Where's it at?" is double-damned as a sentence that not only ends with a preposition but whose final preposition forms a redundancy with *where* that's similar to the redundancy in "the reason is because" (which latter usage I'll admit makes me dig my nails into my palms). Rejoinder: First off, the avoid-terminal-prepositions rule is the invention of one Fr. R. Lowth, an eighteenth-century British preacher and indurate pedant who did things like spend scores of pages arguing for *hath* over the trendy and degenerate *has*. The a.-t.-p. rule is antiquated and stupid and only the most ayatolloid SNOOT takes it seriously. Garner himself calls the rule "stuffy" and lists all kinds of useful constructions like "the man you were listening to" that we'd have to discard or distort if we really enforced it.

Plus the apparent redundancy of "Where's it at?"<sup>31</sup> is offset by its metrical logic. What the *at* really does is license the contraction of *is* after the interrogative adverb. You can't say "Where's it?" So the choice is between "Where is it?" and "Where's it at?", and the latter, a strong anapest, is prettier and trips off the tongue better than "Where is it?", whose meter is either a clunky monosyllabic-foot + trochee or it's nothing at all.

This is probably the place for your SNOOT reviewer openly to concede that a certain number of traditional prescriptive rules really are stupid and that people who insist on them (like the legendary assistant to P.M. Margaret Thatcher who refused to read any memo with a split infinitive in it, or the jr.-high teacher I had who automatically graded you down if you started a sentence with *Hopefully*) are that very most pathetic and dangerous sort of SNOOT, the SNOOT Who Is Wrong. The injunction against split infinitives, for instance, is a consequence of the weird fact that English grammar is modeled

on Latin even though Latin is a synthetic language and English is an analytic language.<sup>32</sup> Latin infinitives consist of one word and are impossible to as it were split, and the earliest English Prescriptivists—so enthralled with Latin that their English usage guides were actually written in Latin<sup>33</sup>—decided that English infinitives shouldn't be split either. Garner himself takes out after the s.i. rule in both SPLIT INFINITIVES and SUPERSTITIONS.<sup>34</sup> And *Hopefully* at the beginning of a sentence, as a certain cheeky eighth-grader once pointed out to his everlasting social cost, actually functions not as a misplaced modal auxiliary or as a manner adverb like *quickly* or *angrily* but as a "sentence adverb" that indicates the speaker's attitude about the state of affairs described by the sentence (examples of perfectly OK sentence adverbs are *Clearly*, *Basically*, *Luckily*), and only SNOOTS educated in the high-pedantic years up to 1960 blindly proscribe it or grade it down.

The cases of split infinitives and *Hopefully* are in fact often trotted out by dogmatic Descriptivists as evidence that all SWE usage rules are arbitrary and stupid (which is a bit like pointing to Pat Buchanan as evidence that all Republicans are maniacs). Garner rejects *Hopefully's* knee-jerk proscription, too, albeit grudgingly, including the adverb in his miniessay on SKUNKED TERMS, which is his phrase for a usage that is "hotly disputed . . . any use of it is likely to distract some readers." (Garner also points out something I'd never quite realized, which is that *hopefully*, if misplaced/mispunctuated in the body of a sentence, can create some of the same two-way ambiguities as other adverbs, as in the clause "I will borrow your book and hopefully read it soon.")

Whether we're conscious of it or not, most of us are fluent in more than one major English dialect and in a large number of subdialects and are probably at least passable in countless others. Which dialect you choose to

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<sup>31</sup> (a redundancy that's a bit arbitrary, since "Where's it from?" isn't redundant [mainly because *whence* has vanished into semi-archaism])

<sup>32</sup> A synthetic language uses inflections to dictate syntax, whereas an analytic language uses word order. Latin, German, and Russian

are synthetic; English and Chinese, analytic.

<sup>33</sup> (Q.v. for example Sir Thomas Smith's cortex-withering *De Recta et Emendata Linguae Anglicae Scriptioe Dialogus* of 1568.)

<sup>34</sup> But note that he's sane about it. Some split infinitives really are clunky and hard to parse,

especially when there are a whole bunch of words between *to* and the verb—"We will attempt to swiftly and to the best of our ability respond to these charges"—which Garner calls "wide splits" and sensibly discourages. His overall verdict on s.i.'s—which is that some are "perfectly proper" and some iffy and some just totally bad news, and that no one wide

tidy dogmatic ukase can handle all s.i. cases, and thus that "knowing when to split an infinitive requires a good ear and a keen eye"—is a good example of the way Garner distinguishes sound and helpful Descriptivist objections from wacko or dogmatic objections and then incorporates the sound objections into a smarter and more flexible Prescriptivism.



use depends, of course, on whom you're addressing. More to the point, I submit that the dialect you use depends mostly on what sort of Group your listener is part of and whether you wish to present yourself as a fellow member of that Group. An obvious example is that traditional upper-class English has certain dialectal differences from lower-class English and that schools used to have courses in Elocution whose whole point was to teach people how to speak in an upper-class way. But usage-as-inclusion is about much more than class. Here's another thought experiment: A bunch of U.S. teenagers in clothes that look far too large for them are sitting together in the local mall's Food Court, and a 53-year-old man with a comber and clothes that fit comes over to them and says that he was scoping them and thinks they're totally rad and/or phat and is it cool if he just kicks it and does the hang here with them. The kids' reaction is going to be either scorn or embarrassment for the guy—most likely a mix of both. Q: Why? Or imagine that two hard-core urban black guys are standing there talking and I, who am resoundingly and in all ways white, come up and greet them with "Yo" and call them "Brothers" and ask "s'up, s'goin on," pronouncing on with that

## Cum-N-Go Quik Mart

NYCish  $\text{oo}-\delta$  diphthong that Young Urban Black English deploys for a standard  $\delta$ . Either these guys are going to be offended or they are going to think I am simply out of my mind. No other reaction is remotely foreseeable. Q: Why?

Why: A dialect of English is learned and used either because it's your native vernacular or because it's the dialect of a Group by which you wish (with some degree of plausibility) to be accepted. And although it is the major and arguably the most important one, SWE is only one dialect. And it is never, or at least hardly ever, anybody's only dialect. This is because there are—as you and I both know and yet no one in the Usage Wars ever seems to mention—situations in which faultlessly correct SWE is clearly not the appropriate dialect.

Childhood is full of such situations. This is one reason why SNOOTlets tend to have a very hard so-

cial time of it in school. A SNOOTlet is a little kid who's wildly, precociously fluent in SWE (he is often, recall, the offspring of SNOOTS). Just about every class has a SNOOTlet, so I know you've seen them—these are the sorts of six- to twelve-year-olds who use *whom* correctly and whose response to striking out in T-ball is to cry out "How incalculably dreadful!" etc. The elementary-school SNOOTlet is one of the earliest identifiable species of academic Geekoid and is duly despised by his peers and praised by his teachers. These teachers usually don't see the incredible amounts of punishment the SNOOTlet is receiving from his classmates, or if they do see it they blame the classmates and shake their heads sadly at the vicious and arbitrary cruelty of which children are capable.

But the other children's punishment of the SNOOTlet is not arbitrary at all. There are important things at stake. Little kids in school are learning about Group-inclusion and -exclusion and about the respective rewards and penalties of same and about the use of dialect and syntax and slang as signals of affinity and inclusion.<sup>35</sup> They're learning about Discourse Communities. Kids learn this stuff not in English or Social Studies but on the playground and at lunch and on the bus. When his peers are giving the SNOOTlet monstrous quadruple Wedgies or holding him down and taking turns spitting on him, there's serious learning going on . . . for everyone except the little SNOOT, who in fact is being punished for precisely his *failure* to learn. What neither he nor his teacher realizes is that the SNOOTlet is *deficient* in Language Arts. He has only one dialect. He cannot alter his vocabulary, usage, or grammar, cannot use slang or vulgarity; and it's these abilities that are really required for "peer rapport," which is just a fancy Elementary-Ed term for being accepted by the most important Group in the little kid's life.

This reviewer acknowledges that there seems to be some, umm, personal stuff getting dredged up and worked out here;<sup>36</sup> but the stuff is relevant. The point is that the little A+ SNOOTlet is actually in the same dialectal position as the class's "slow" kid who can't learn to stop using *ain't* or *bringed*. One is punished in class, the other on the playground, but both are deficient in the same linguistic skill—viz.,

<sup>35</sup> The SNOOTlet is, as it happens, an indispensable part of other kids' playground education. The kids are learning that a Group's identity depends as much on exclusion as inclusion. They are, in other words, starting to learn

about Us and Them, and about how an Us always needs a Them because being not-Them is essential to being Us. Because they're kids and it's school, the obvious Them is the teachers and all the values and appurtenances of the teacher world. This teacher-Them

helps the kids see how to start to be an Us, but the SNOOTlet completes the puzzle by providing the as it were missing link: He is the Traitor, the Us who is in fact not Us but Them.

In sum, the SNOOTlet is teaching his peers that the criteria for

membership in Us are not just age, station, inability to stay up past 9:00, etc.—that in fact Us is primarily a state of mind and a set of sensibilities. An ideology.

<sup>36</sup> (The skirt-in-school scenario was not personal stuff, FYI.)



the ability to move between various dialects and levels of "correctness," the ability to communicate one way with peers and another way with teachers and another with family and another with Little League coaches and so on. Most of these dialectal adjustments are made below the level of conscious awareness, and our ability to make them seems part psychological and part something else—perhaps something hardwired into the same motherboard as Universal Grammar—and in truth this ability is a far better indicator of a kid's "Verbal I.Q." than test scores or grades, since U.S. English classes do far more to retard dialectal talent than to cultivate it.

**W**ell-known fact: In neither K-12 nor college English are systematic SWE grammar and usage taught anymore. It's been this way for more than 20 years. The phenomenon drives Prescriptivists nuts, and it's one of the big things they cite as evidence of America's gradual murder of English. Descriptivists and English-Ed specialists counter that grammar and usage have been abandoned because scientific research proved that studying SWE grammar and usage simply doesn't help make kids better writers. Each side in the debate tends to regard the other as mentally ill or/and blinded by political ideology. Neither camp appears ever to have considered whether maybe the way prescriptive SWE was traditionally taught had something to do with its inutility.

By way here I'm referring not so much to actual method as to spirit or attitude. Most traditional teachers of English grammar have, of course, been dogmatic SNOOTS, and like most dogmatists they've been incredibly stupid about the rhetoric they used and the Audience they were addressing.<sup>37</sup> I refer specifically to their assumption that SWE is the sole appropriate English dialect and that the only reasons anyone could fail to see this are ignorance or amnesia or grave deficiencies in character. As rhetoric, this sort of attitude works only in sermons to the Choir, and as pedagogy it's just disastrous. The reality is that an average U.S. student is going to go to the trouble of mastering the difficult conventions of SWE only if he sees SWE's relevant Group or Discourse Community as one he'd like to be part of. And in the absence of any sort of argument for why the correct-SWE Group is a good or desirable one (an argument

that, recall, the traditional teacher hasn't given, because he's such a dogmatic SNOOT he sees no need to), the student is going to be reduced to evaluating the desirability of the SWE Group based on the one obvious member of the Group he's encountered, namely the SNOOTy teacher himself.

*Please Wait Here Until  
Next Available Clerk*

I'm not suggesting here that an effective SWE pedagogy would require teachers to wear sunglasses and call students "Dude." What I am suggesting is that the rhetorical situation of an English class—a class composed wholly of young people whose Group identity is rooted in defiance of Adult-Establishment values, plus also composed partly of minorities whose primary dialects are different from SWE—requires the teacher to come up with overt, honest, compelling arguments for why SWE is a dialect worth learning.

These arguments are hard to make—not intellectually but emotionally, politically. Because they are baldly elitist.<sup>38</sup> The real truth, of course, is that SWE is the dialect of the American elite. That it was invented, codified, and promulgated by Privileged WASP Males and is perpetuated as "Standard" by same. That it is the shibboleth of the Establishment and an instrument of political power and class division and racial discrimination and all manner of social inequity. These are shall we say rather delicate subjects to bring up in an English class, especially in the service of a pro-SWE argument, and extra-especially if you yourself are both a Privileged WASP Male and the Teacher and thus pretty much a walking symbol of the Adult Establishment. This reviewer's opinion, though, is that both students and SWE are better served if the teacher makes his premises explicit and his argument overt, presenting himself as an advocate of SWE's utility rather than as a prophet of its innate superiority.

Because this argument is both most delicate and (I believe) most important with respect to students of color, here is one version of a spiel I've given in private conference<sup>39</sup> with certain black students who were (a) bright and inquisitive and (b) deficient in what U.S. higher education considers written English facility:

I don't know whether anybody's told you this or not, but when you're in a college English class you're basically studying a foreign dialect. This

37 There are still some of these teachers around, at least here in the Midwest. You know the type:

lipless, tweedy, cancrine—Old Maids of both genders. If you had one (as I did, 1976-77), you surely remember him.

38 (Or rather the arguments require us openly to acknowledge and talk about elitism, whereas a

dogmatic SNOOT's pedagogy is merely elitism in action.)

39 (I'm not a total idiot.)



dialect is called Standard Written English. [Brief overview of major U.S. dialects à la p. 50.] From talking with you and reading your essays, I've concluded that your own primary dialect is [one of three variants of SBE common to our region]. Now, let me spell something out in my official Teacher-voice: The SBE you're fluent in is different from SWE in all kinds of important ways. Some of these differences are grammatical—for example, double negatives are OK in Standard Black English but not in SWE, and SBE and SWE conjugate certain verbs in totally different ways. Other differences have more to do with style—for instance, Standard Written English tends to use a lot more subordinate clauses in the early parts of sentences, and it sets off most of these early subordinates with commas, and, under SWE rules, writing that doesn't do this is "choppy." There are tons of differences like that. How much of this stuff do you already know? [STANDARD RESPONSE: some variation on "I know from the grades and comments on my papers that English profs don't think I'm a good writer."] Well, I've got good news and bad news. There are some

## CALL NOW FOR YOUR FREE GIFT!

otherwise smart English profs who aren't very aware that there are real dialects of English other than SWE, so when they're reading your papers they'll put, like, "Incorrect conjugation" or "Comma needed" instead of "SWE conjugates this verb differently" or "SWE calls for a comma here." That's the good news—it's not that you're a bad writer, it's that you haven't learned the special rules of the dialect they want you to write in. Maybe that's not such good news, that they were grading you down for mistakes in a foreign language you didn't even know was a foreign language. That they won't let you write in SBE. Maybe it seems unfair. If it does, you're not going to like this news: I'm not going to let you write in SBE either. In my class, you have to learn and write in SWE. If you want to study your own dialect and its rules and history and how it's different from SWE, fine—there are some great books by scholars of Black English, and I'll help you find some and talk about them with you if you want. But that will be outside class. In class—in my English class—you will have to master and write in Standard Written English, which we might just as well call "Standard White English," because it was developed by white people and is used by white people, especially educated, powerful white people. [RESPONSES by this point vary too widely to standardize.] I'm respecting you enough here to give you what I believe is the straight truth. In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is How It Is. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can believe it's racist and unjust and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something: If you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them

in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our country uses to talk to itself. African Americans who've become successful and important in U.S. culture know this; that's why King's and X's and Jackson's speeches are in SWE, and why Morrison's and Angelou's and Baldwin's and Wideman's and West's books are full of totally ass-kicking SWE, and why black judges and politicians and journalists and doctors and teachers communicate professionally in SWE. Some of these people grew up in homes and communities where SWE was the native dialect, and these black people had it much easier in school, but the ones who didn't grow up with SWE realized at some point that they had to learn it and become able to write in it, and so they did. And [INSERT NAME HERE], you're going to learn to use it, too, because I am going to make you.

I should note here that a couple of the students I've said this stuff to were offended—one lodged an Official Complaint—and that I have had more than one colleague profess to find my spiel "racially insensitive." Perhaps you do, too. My own humble opinion is that some of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair, and that pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever actually changing them. Such pussyfooting has of course now achieved the status of a dialect—one powerful enough to have turned the normal politics of the Usage Wars sort of inside out.

I refer here to Politically Correct English (PCE), under whose conventions failing students become "high-potential" students and poor people "economically disadvantaged" and people in wheelchairs "differently abled" and a sentence like "White English and Black English are different and you better learn White English if you don't want to flunk" is not blunt but "insensitive." Although it's common to make jokes about PCE (referring to ugly people as "aesthetically challenged" and so on), be advised that Politically Correct English's various pre- and proscriptions are taken very seriously *indeed* by colleges and corporations and government agencies, whose own institutional dialects now evolve under the beady scrutiny of a whole new kind of Language Police.

From one perspective, the history of PCE evinces a kind of Lenin-to-Stalinesque irony. That is, the same ideological principles that informed the original Descriptivist revolution—namely, the sixties-era rejections of traditional authority and traditional inequality—have now actually produced a far more inflexible Prescriptivism, one unencumbered by tradition or complexity and backed by the threat of real-world sanctions (termination, litigation) for those who fail to conform. This is sort of funny in a dark way, maybe, and most



criticism of PCE seems to consist in making fun of its trendiness or vapidness. This reviewer's own opinion is that prescriptive PCE is not just silly but confused and dangerous.

Usage is always political, of course, but it's complexly political. With respect, for instance, to political change, usage conventions can function in two ways: On the one hand they can be a *reflection* of political change, and on the other they can be an *instrument* of political change. These two functions are different and have to be kept straight. Confusing them—in particular, mistaking for political efficacy what is really just a language's political symbolism—enables the bizarre conviction that America ceases to be elitist or unfair simply because Americans stop using certain vocabulary that is historically associated with elitism and unfairness. This is PCE's central fallacy—that a society's mode of expression is productive of its attitudes—and of course it's nothing but the obverse of the politically conservative SNOOT's delusion that social change can be retarded by restricting change in standard usage.<sup>40</sup>

Forget Stalinization or Logic 101—level equivocations, though. There's a grosser irony about Politically Correct English. This is that PCE purports to be the dialect of progressive reform but is in fact—in its Orwellian substitution of the euphemisms of social equality for social equality itself—of vastly more help to conservatives and the U.S. status quo than traditional SNOOT prescriptions ever were. Were I, for instance, a political conservative who opposed taxation as a means of redistributing national wealth, I would be delighted to watch PCE progressives spend their time and energy arguing over whether a poor person should be described as “low-income” or “economically disadvantaged” or “pre-prosperous” rather than constructing effective public arguments for redistributive legislation or higher marginal tax rates on corporations. (Not to mention that strict codes of egalitarian euphemism serve to burke the sorts of painful, unpretty, and sometimes offensive discourse that in a pluralistic democracy leads to actual political change rather than symbolic political change. In other

words, PCE functions as a form of censorship, and censorship always serves the status quo.)

As a practical matter, I strongly doubt whether a guy who has four small kids and makes \$12,000 a year feels more empowered or less ill-used by a society that carefully refers to him as “economically disadvantaged” rather than “poor.” Were I he, in fact, I'd probably find the PCE term insulting—not just because it's patronizing but because it's hypocritical and self-serving. Like many forms of Vogue Usage,<sup>41</sup> PCE functions primarily to signal and congratulate certain virtues in the speaker—scrupulous egalitarianism, concern for the dignity of all people, sophistication about the political implications of language—and so serves the selfish interests of the PC far more than it serves any of the persons or groups renamed.

## CLOSURE

INTERPOLATION ON A RELATED ISSUE IN  
THE FACE OF WHOSE GHASTLY MALIGNANCY  
THIS REVIEWER'S DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT JUST  
GIVES OUT ALTOGETHER, ADMITTEDLY

• This issue is Academic English, a cancer that has metastasized now to afflict both scholarly writing—

If such a sublime cyborg would insinuate the future as post-Fordist subject, his palpably masochistic locations as ecstatic agent of the sublime superstate need to be decoded as the “now all-but-unreadable DNA” of the fast industrializing Detroit, just as his Robocop-like strategy of carceral negotiation and street control remains the tirelessly American one of inflicting regeneration through violence upon the racially heteroglossic wilds and others of the inner city.<sup>42</sup>

—and prose as mainstream as *The Village Voice*'s:

At first encounter, the poems' distanced cerebral surfaces can be daunting, evading physical location or straightforward emotional arc. But this seeming remoteness quickly reveals a very real passion, centered in the speaker's struggle to define his evolving self-construction.

Maybe it's a combination of my SNOOTitude

<sup>40</sup> E.g., this is the reasoning behind many Pop Prescriptivists' complaint that shoddy usage signifies the Decline of Western Civilization.

<sup>41</sup> A *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* includes a miniesay on VOGUE WORDS, but it's a disappointing one in that Garner does

little more than list VW's that bug him and say that “vogue words have such a grip on the popular mind that they come to be used in contexts in which they serve little purpose.” This is one of the rare places in *ADMAU* where Garner is simply wrong. The real problem is that every sentence blends and balances at least two different communicative functions—one the

transmission of raw info, the other the transmission of certain stuff about the speaker—and Vogue Usage throws this balance off. Garner's “serve little purpose” is exactly incorrect; vogue words serve *too much* the purpose of presenting the speaker in a certain light (even if this is merely as with-it or hip), and people's subliminal B.S.-antennae pick this imbalance up,

and that's why even nonSNOOTS often find Vogue Usage irritating and creepy.

<sup>42</sup> FYI, this passage, which appears in *ADMAU*'s entry on OBSCURITY, is quoted from a 1997 *Sacramento Bee* article entitled “No Contest: English Professors Are Worst Writers on Campus.”



and the fact that I end up having to read a lot of it for my job, but I'm afraid I regard Academic English not as a dialectal variation but as a grotesque debasement of SWE, and loathe it even more than the stilted incoherences of Presidential English ("This is the best and only way to uncover, destroy, and prevent Iraq from reengineering weapons of mass destruction") or the mangled pieties of BusinessSpeak ("Our Mission: to proactively search and provide the optimum networking skills and resources to meet the needs of your growing business"); and in support of this utter contempt and intolerance I cite no less an authority than Mr. G. Orwell, who 50 years ago had AE pegged as a "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence" in which "it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning."<sup>43</sup>

It probably isn't the whole explanation, but, as with the voguish hypocrisy of PCE, the obscurity and pretension of Academic English can be attributed in part to a disruption in the delicate rhetorical balance between language as a vector of meaning and language as a vector of the writer's own résumé. In other words, it is when a scholar's vanity/insecurity leads him to write *primarily* to communicate and reinforce his own status as an Intellectual that his English is deformed by pleonasm and pretentious diction (whose function is to signal the writer's erudition) and by opaque abstraction (whose function is to keep anybody from pinning the writer down to a definite assertion that can maybe be refuted or shown to be silly). The latter characteristic, a level of obscurity that often makes it just about impossible to figure out what an AE sentence is really saying, so closely resembles political and corporate doublespeak ("revenue enhancement," "downsizing," "pre-owned," "proactive resource-allocation restructuring") that it's tempting to think AE's real purpose is concealment and its real motivation fear.

The insecurity that drives AE, PCE, and vocab-tape ads is far from groundless, though. These are tense linguistic times. Blame it on Heisenbergian Uncertainty or postmodern rela-

tivism or Image Over Substance or the ubiquity of advertising and P.R. or the rise of Identity Politics or whatever you will—we live in an era of terrible preoccupation with presentation and interpretation. In rhetorical terms, certain long-held distinctions between the Ethical Appeal, Logical Appeal (= an argument's plausibility or soundness), and Pathetic Appeal (= an argument's emotional impact) have now pretty much collapsed—or rather the different sorts of Appeals now affect and are affected by one another in ways that make it almost impossible to advance an argument on "reason" alone.

A vividly concrete illustration here concerns the Official Complaint a black undergraduate filed against this rev. after one of my little *in camera* spiels described on pages 53–54. The complainant was (I opine) wrong, but she was not crazy or stupid; and I was able later to see that I did bear some responsibility for the whole nasty administrative swivet. My culpability lay in gross rhetorical naïveté. I'd seen my speech's primary Appeal as Logical: The aim was to make a conspicuously blunt, honest argument for SWE's utility. It wasn't pretty, maybe, but it was true, plus so manifestly bullshit-free that I think I anticipated not just acquiescence but gratitude for my candor.<sup>44</sup> The problem I failed to see, of course, lay not with the argument *per se* but with the person making it—namely me, a Privileged WASP Male in a position of power, thus someone whose statements about the primacy and utility of the Privileged WASP Male dialect appeared not candid/hortatory/authoritative/true but elitist/high-handed/authoritarian/racist. Rhetoric-wise, what happened was that I allowed the substance and style of my Logical Appeal to completely torpedo my Ethical Appeal: What the student heard was just another PWM rationalizing why his Group and his English were top dog and ought "logically" to stay that way (plus, worse, trying to use his academic power over her to coerce her assent<sup>45</sup>).

If for any reason you happen to find yourself sharing this particular student's perceptions and

## *A Taste That's All It's Own!*

<sup>43</sup> This was in his 1946 "Politics and the English Language," an essay that despite its date (and its title's basic redundancy) remains the definitive SNOOT statement on Academese. Orwell's famous AE translation of the gorgeous "I

saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift" in Ecclesiastes as "Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate ca-

capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account" should be tattooed on the left wrist of every grad student in the anglophone world.

<sup>44</sup> Please just don't even say it.

<sup>45</sup> (She professed to have been especially traumatized by the climactic "I am going to make you," which in retrospect was indeed a mammoth rhetorical boner.)



reaction,<sup>46</sup> I would ask that you bracket your feelings long enough to recognize that the PWM instructor's very modern rhetorical dilemma in that office was really no different from the dilemma faced by a male who makes a Pro-Life argument, or an atheist who argues against Creation Science, or a Caucasian who opposes Affirmative Action, or an African American who decries Racial Profiling, or anyone over eighteen who tries to make a case for raising the legal driving age to eighteen, etc. The dilemma has nothing to do with whether the arguments themselves are plausible or right or even sane, because the debate rarely gets that far—any opponent with sufficiently strong feelings or a dogmatic bent can discredit the arguments and pretty much foreclose all further discussion with a single, terribly familiar rejoinder: "Of course *you'd* say that"; "Easy for *you* to say"; "What right do *you* have . . . ?"

Now (still bracketing) consider the situation of any reasonably intelligent and well-meaning SNOOT who sits down to prepare a prescriptive usage guide. It's the millennium, post-Everything: Whence the authority to make any sort of credible Appeal for SWE at all?

ARTICLE'S CRUX:  
WHY BRYAN A. GARNER  
IS A GENIUS, THOUGH OF A  
RATHER PARTICULAR KIND

It isn't that *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is perfect. It doesn't seem to cover *conversant in vs. conversant with*, for example, or *abstruse vs. obtuse*, or to have anything on *hereby* and *herewith* (which I tend to use interchangeably but always have the uneasy feeling I'm screwing up). Garner's got a good discussion of *used to* but nothing on *supposed to*. Nor does he give any examples to help explain irregular participles and transitivity ("The light shone" vs. "I shined the light," etc.), and these would seem to be more important than, say, the correct spelling of *huzzah* or the plural of *animalculum*, both of which get discussed. Plus there's the VOGUE WORDS snafu and the absence of a pro-

nunciation entry on *trough*.<sup>47</sup> In other words, a SNOOT is going to be able to find stuff to quibble about in any usage dictionary, and ADMAU is no exception.

But it's still really, really good—and not just lexicographically but rhetorically, politically (if it even makes sense to distinguish these any more). As a collection of judgments, ADMAU is in no way Descriptivist, but Garner structures his judgments very carefully to avoid the elitism and anality of traditional SNOOTitude. He does not deploy irony or scorn or caustic wit, nor tropes or colloquialisms or contractions . . . or really any sort of verbal style at all. In fact, even though Garner talks openly about himself and uses the I-S pronoun throughout the whole dictionary, his personality is oddly effaced, neutralized. It's like he's so bland he's barely there. E.g., as this reviewer was finishing the book's final entry,<sup>48</sup> it struck me that I had no idea whether Bryan Garner was black or white, gay or straight, Democrat or Dittohead. What was even more striking was that I hadn't once wondered about any of this up to now; something about Garner's lexical persona kept me ever from asking where the guy was coming from or what particular agendas or ideologies were informing what he had admitted right up front were "value judgments."

Bryan Garner is a genius because *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* pretty much resolves the Usage Wars' Crisis of Authority. Garner manages to control the compresence of rhetorical Appeals so cleverly that he appears able to transcend both Usage Wars camps and simply tell the truth, and in a way that does not torpedo his own credibility but actually enhances it. His argumentative strategy is totally brilliant and totally sneaky, and part of both qualities is that it usually doesn't seem like there's even an argument going on at all.

Garner recognizes something that neither of the dogmatic camps appears to get: Given 40 years of the Usage Wars, "authority" is no longer something a lexicographer can just presume *ex officio*. In fact, a large part of the project of any contemporary usage dictionary will consist in establishing this authority. If that

<sup>46</sup> (The Dept. head and Dean did not, as it happens, share her reaction . . . though it would be disingenuous not to tell you that they happened also to be PWM's, which fact did not go unremarked by the complainant, such that the whole proceeding got pretty darn tense, indeed, before it was all over.)

<sup>47</sup> To be honest, I noticed this omission only because midway through working on this article I happened to use the word *trough* in front of the same SNOOT friend who likes to compare public English to violin-hammering, and he fell sideways out of his chair,

and it emerged that I have somehow all my life misheard *trough* as ending with a *th* instead of an *f* and thus have publicly mispronounced it God knows how many scores of times, and I all but burned rubber getting home to see whether perhaps the error was so common and human and

understandable that Garner himself had a good-natured entry on it, but no such luck, which in fairness I don't suppose I can really blame Garner for.

<sup>48</sup> (on *zwieback* vs. *zweiback*)



seems rather obvious, be apprised that nobody before Garner seems to have figured it out—that the lexicographer's challenge now is to be not just accurate and comprehensive but *credible*. That in the absence of unquestioned Authority in language, the reader must now be moved or persuaded to *grant* a dictionary its authority, freely and for what appear to be good reasons.

Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is thus both a collection of information and a piece of Democratic rhetoric.<sup>49</sup> Its goal is to recast the Prescriptivist's persona: The author presents himself as an authority not in an *autocratic* sense but in a *technocratic* sense. And the technocrat is not only a thoroughly modern and palatable image of Authority but also immune to the charges of elitism/classism that have hobbled traditional Prescriptivism.

Of course, Garner really is a technocrat. He's a lawyer, recall, and in *ADMAU* he consciously projects a sort of wise juridical persona: knowledgeable, dispassionate, fair, with an almost Enlightenment-grade passion for reason. His judgments about usage tend to be rendered like legal

## on accident

opinions—exhaustive citation of precedent (other dictionaries' judgments, published examples of actual usage) combined with clear, logical reasoning that's always informed by the larger consensual purposes *SWE* is meant to serve.

Also thoroughgoingly technocratic is Garner's approach to the issue of whether anybody's even going to be interested in his 700 pages of fine-pointed counsel. Like any specialist, he simply presumes that there are practical reasons why some people choose to concern themselves with *SWE* usage; and his attitude about the fact that most Americans "could care less" isn't scorn or disapproval but the phlegmatic resignation of a doctor or lawyer who realizes that he can give good advice but can't make you take it:

The reality I care about most is that some people still want to use the language well.<sup>50</sup> They want to write effectively; they want to speak effectively. They want their language to be graceful at times and powerful at times. They want to understand how to use words well, how to manipulate sentences, and how to move about in the language without seeming to flail. They want good grammar, but they want more: they want

rhetoric<sup>51</sup> in the traditional sense. That is, they want to use the language deftly so that it's fit for their purposes.

It's now possible to see that all the autobiographical stuff in *ADMAU*'s Preface does more than just humanize Mr. Bryan A. Garner. It also serves to detail the early and enduring passion that helps make someone a credible technocrat—we tend to like and trust experts whose expertise is born of a real love for their specialty instead of just a desire to be expert at something. In fact, it turns out that *ADMAU*'s Preface quietly and steadily invests Garner with every single qualification of modern technocratic Authority: passionate devotion, reason, and accountability (recall "in the interests of full disclosure, here are the ten critical points . . ."), experience ("that, after years of working on usage problems, I've settled on"), exhaustive and tech-savvy research ("For contemporary usage, the files of our greatest dictionary makers pale in comparison with the full-text search capabilities now provided by NEXIS and WESTLAW"), an even and judicious temperament (see e.g. this from *HYPERCORRECTION*: "Sometimes people strive to abide by the strictest etiquette, but in the process behave inappropriately"<sup>52</sup>), and the sort of humble integrity (for instance, including in one of the entries a past published usage-error of his own) that not only renders Garner likable but transmits the same kind of reverence for English that good jurists have for the law, both of which are bigger and more important than any one person.

Probably the most attractive thing about *ADMAU*'s Ethical Appeal, though, is Garner's scrupulous consideration of the reader's concern about his (or her) *own* linguistic authority and rhetorical persona and ability to convince an Audience that he cares. Again and again, Garner frames his prescriptions in rhetorical terms, e.g.: "To the writer or speaker for whom credibility is important, it's a good idea to avoid distracting *any* readers or listeners." *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*'s real thesis, in other words, is that the purposes of the expert authority and the purposes of the lay reader are identical, and identically rhetorical—which I submit is about as Democratic these days as you're going to get. ■

<sup>49</sup> (meaning *literally* Democratic—it Wants Your Vote)

<sup>50</sup> The last two words of this sentence, of course, are what the Usage Wars are about—whose "language" and whose "well"? The

most remarkable thing about this sentence is that coming from Garner it doesn't sound naive or obnoxious but just . . . reasonable.

<sup>51</sup> Did you think I was kidding?

<sup>52</sup> (Here this reviewer's indwelling and ever-vigilant SNOOT can't help but question why Garner uses a comma before the conjunction in this sentence, since what follows the conjunction is neither an independent clause nor any

kind of plausible complement for *strive to*. But respectful disagreement between people of goodwill is of course Democratically natural and healthy and, when you come right down to it, kind of fun.)