Good English and the grammarian

SIDNEY GREENBAUM

University College London
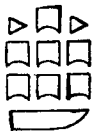
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Foreword

When we apply the adjectives *good* and *bad* to solidly physical things (eggs, say), we can be reasonably sure that we are implicitly invoking criteria of such objectivity as to guarantee acceptance of our judgment by others. Applied to abstracts, however (taste or table manners or pronunciation or linguistic usage more generally), the labels are far less obviously objective. Good is what we like, bad is what we dislike, and a good deal depends on just who 'we' are. Moreover, even coming from a single observer, the comment 'Their English is bad' may be based on sharply different criteria according to the English that is being judged. It may refer to the imperfect English of people for whom it is a foreign language. It may refer to a social or regional variety of English that the speaker regards with distaste. It may be a judgment on the muddled or obscure use of an English the speaker would otherwise regard as perfectly 'good'.

But in whatever sense a form of English is said to be 'good' or 'bad', the English concerned is a perfectly valid object for a grammarian to study – as indeed are the bases for the judgments themselves. It therefore follows that there is no necessary connection between the work of a grammarian and the English 'we' might regard as 'good'. Some of the most valuable studies by linguists have in fact been directed to dialects, pidgins, creoles, legal jargon, and the usage of the uneducated – any of which might receive (if not earn) the label 'bad'.

Nonetheless, it is highly appropriate that a grammarian's skills and insights should also be directed at the qualities and characteristics of the English that is consensually adjudged good. And Professor Greenbaum is admirably equipped to address such a task. For twenty years, his research has had as its goal the exploration of contemporary English grammar as it is reflected in the speech and writing of mature native speakers of the language, in Britain and

the United States. After breaking new ground with his studies on English adverbials while working at the Survey of English Usage in the 1960s, he went to America, where – especially at the University of Wisconsin – his research resulted in numerous important publications. Now, back in London as Quain Professor and Director of the Survey, he has developed further his study of what constitutes – for various purposes and in various contexts – good English.

In the present volume, he brings together for our convenience a number of papers concerned with several aspects of grammar and the grammarian's role, not least in the description of a major international language. His book thus adds richly to the series in which it appears. As English has increasingly come into world-wide use, there has arisen a need for ever more information on the language. The English Language Series has striven since the mid 1960s to meet this need and to play a part in further stimulating the study and teaching of English. The series comprises an impressive range, providing as it does up-to-date and scholarly treatments of topics most relevant to present-day English – including its history and traditions, its sound patterns, its grammar, style, lexicology; its rich and functionally oriented variety in speech and writing; and its standards in Britain, the USA, and the other principal areas where the language is a major medium of daily communication.

University College London · Randolph Quirk
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Preface

The head of a London primary school felt sufficiently moved to write to the London newspaper *The Times* (15 March 1986) to quote an example of the English spoken by one of her students:

> . . . I couldn't help being impressed with the succinctness of the reply of an eight-year-old when I remarked that I thought she was leaving, as her family had moved.
> 'We was, but we never,' she said.

The child's reply was direct, perfectly intelligible, and agreeably concise. And yet, like the head, readers of *The Times* would notice the failure to make the verb agree in number with the plural subject pronoun: *We were*. What might be considered cute in an eight-year-old's speech in this pithy reply would be rejected as bad English by the readers of *The Times* in other contexts.

In the dialect of this child, *was* is apparently the invariable form for the past tense of *be*. Over the centuries English has lost most of its verb inflections. Standard English, the usage of educated speakers, has merely one form in the past tense for all verbs except *be*, where *were* is the plural form – though illogically *were* is also used with *you* even when it refers to just one person. In the child's variety of nonstandard English, the process has been carried further, to include the verb *be*.

The retention of the distinction between *was* and *were* confers no advantage on standard English. Speakers of standard English could manage equally well with one past form; they feel no disability in having the one form for the past of all other verbs. Nevertheless, *we were* is correct and *we was* is incorrect in standard varieties of present-day English throughout the world. *We was* is incorrect in standard English because those who use standard English consider it to be so.

Grammar and good English are associated themes in this volume, though good English cannot be identified merely with grammatical

or correct English if by grammatical or correct we mean conforming to the rules of standard English. For it is possible to write grammatically yet badly, for example by employing a style that is obscure to the listener or reader or a style that is inappropriate for the occasion. The first essay reflects on good English generally, and the other essays look at grammars of the standard language and the research that goes into writing them.

Chapter 1 explores from a historical perspective the notion of good English. I examine complaints about the state of the language and the charge that it is deteriorating. It is right to be concerned about the proliferation of mistakes in language, about changes that obliterate useful distinctions, about obscure or clumsy writing, about unethical abuses through language. At the same time, we should acknowledge – and indeed welcome – the diversity in English. Nonstandard dialects have their rightful place within the communities that speak them; standard varieties differ to some extent among the many English-speaking countries and regionally within those countries; and within any standard variety there will be some variation. Innovations sometimes provoke objections, but change is natural in language. While we may oppose changes that we feel to be harmful we should recognize when an innovation has become firmly established and it has become pointless to oppose it.

There are frequent complaints from employers that school-leavers – and even graduates from universities – write badly. Many employers and parents believe that writing standards would be improved if schools devoted time – or more time – to the teaching of grammar. In Chapter 2 I explain the various ways in which the word *grammar* is used and advocate the teaching of language in schools, including grammatical analysis, for reasons that go beyond its value in improving writing. What should be taught and how it should be taught must depend on the age, ability, and needs of the children. Much the best teaching will no doubt develop from discussions of the language used by the pupils and others.

The work of scholarly grammarians – those who do research into grammar – has implications for education, for popular attitudes to variation in English, and for public uses of the language. Like other scholars, grammarians have a responsibility to ensure that the public understand those aspects of their research that have general relevance. Chapter 3 argues that grammarians should address the public on matters of language prescription.

A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (Quirk *et al.* 1985), a large grammar on which I collaborated, is intended to be a comprehensive reference work on modern English syntax. I describe in Chapter 4 how this intention is manifested in the published work and what decisions we made during the years we spent in writing our grammar. In Chapter 5 I describe and justify the treatment of clause and sentence in our grammar. The distinctions we make in the grammar are reflected in the terms we use and in the ways we use those terms. I propose a few further elaborations in terminology that would be helpful in analysing clause and sentence relations.

A somewhat different approach to English grammar is evaluated in Chapter 6. C. C. Fries was an American structural linguist whose writings on English in the middle of this century have greatly influenced the teaching of English to both native and foreign learners. His two grammars were not intended as comprehensive grammars of English, but as the basis for teaching material in the schools. His model of grammar may prove useful in the computational analysis and processing of language texts.

Grammarians make use of various types of data for their descriptions: a corpus of samples of the language, their own knowledge of the language, and experiments that elicit the use of particular language features and judgments on the features. In Chapter 7 I explain how grammarians may interrelate the three types of data in the course of their analyses.

The following four chapters are concerned with elicitation experiments. For some linguists judgments on whether a construction is acceptable or not constitute the primary data for linguistic analysis, though they may rely solely on their own judgments. In Chapter 8 I present arguments for the significance in linguistics of judgments of syntactic frequency and I provide experimental evidence for the relationship between judgments of syntactic frequency and judgments of syntactic acceptability. Chapter 9 reports on experiments eliciting collocations – words or phrases that co-occur frequently – and compares results from American and British informants. In Chapter 10 I examine in great detail the results of four interrelated elicitation tests on the acceptability of coordinating two sentences by *but*. The analysis reveals the kinds of information that can be obtained from elicitation experiments. The results of elicitation experiments may be confounded by faults in experimental design.

As Chapter 11 demonstrates, the context in which experimental items are presented may influence the judgments of informants.

Most of the chapters in this volume are adapted from papers that were published elsewhere, but Chapter 4 appears in print here for the first time. In both Chapters 6 and 7 earlier versions of two papers have been combined. All the previous work has been revised, in some cases heavily.

I am grateful for the advice I have received from Randolph Quirk in the preparation of this book. More generally, I am indebted to him for introducing me to the study of modern English language and for over twenty years of collaboration and friendship.

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Sidney Greenbaum
November 1986

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Acknowledgments

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One

Good English

In an editorial heralding 1984, a year marked by Orwell's classic as inauspicious for the English language, *The Times* (31 Dec. 1983) alarmingly proclaimed:

> As we approach 1984 nobody can ignore the fact that we are on our way both by design and by default to a progressive and irrecoverable deterioration in the use of language.

The Times is by no means alone in its prognosis that English is suffering from a terminal disease. Laments emanate particularly frequently from American amateur writers on the language. One subtitles his best-selling book *Will America be the Death of English?*, offering his 'well-thought-out mature judgment' that it will (Newman 1975: 13). Others claim with evident relish:

> The common language is disappearing. It is slowly being crushed to death under the weight of a verbal conglomerate, a pseudospeech at once both pretentious and feeble, that is created daily by millions of blunders and inaccuracies in grammar, syntax, idiom, metaphor, logic, and common sense. (Tibbets & Tibbets 1978: 4)

It has long been customary to think of a language metaphorically as a living entity. We say that a language is dead when people no longer use it, in particular when they no longer speak it; we say that it is dying when the number of people who use it is dwindling or when the number of ways in which it is used is shrinking. In these established metaphorical senses, the reports of the impending death of English are surely exaggerated: English is in a better shape than it has ever been.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century a mere six million people spoke English, most of them confined within the borders of England. Today, English is spoken as a mother tongue by about 300 million people. The United Kingdom is now one of a dozen English-

speaking countries dispersed over several continents – and not the largest.

English is also used as a second language for various internal purposes. In some regions of the former British Empire, British settlers were too few to displace the indigenous languages with their own, but as the ruling elite they imposed their language as the medium for government, law, and higher education. English has retained these functions in many of the former British colonies and in former American colonies. As a second language, English is the sole official language or one of the official languages in twenty-five countries. Politically, it is a neutral language where several native languages are rivals and none is generally accepted; economically, it is the language of development, the medium through which Western technology can be imported. It has been estimated that the number of second-language users is at least 300 million and perhaps already exceeds the number of native speakers.

In addition to its roles in nearly forty countries as a mother tongue or as an official language, English is the primary foreign language in most other countries. It is by far the most important language for international communication: for commerce and tourism, for science and technology, for economic and military aid, for air-traffic control, and for communication at sea. The extent to which English functions as an international language is unique in world history.[1]

Another important measure of the vitality of a language is the range of functions it performs. Here too we have no need for concern: English has developed resources in vocabulary and syntax for virtually all language functions in the contemporary world: from prayer to news broadcasts, from philosophy to technical manuals. The potentiality of a language is displayed above all in its works of language creativity, written or spoken. Not every age can boast a Shakespeare or Milton, but our age has its share of works that are likely to become part of our literary heritage.

Clearly, English is alive and well if we count the number who use it and the range of its uses. Then why are language critics predicting its imminent degeneration or death?

The critics are claiming that constant misuses or abuses of the language are resulting in changes in the language that are permanently damaging it as an instrument for communication. Underlying such claims are several related assumptions: (1) that the critics

rightly identify misuses or abuses; (2) that such improper uses necessarily change the language; and (3) that the consequent changes are necessarily harmful.

Complaints about the state of the English language and the uses made of it are by no means new.[2] They first appeared five centuries ago, after English had displaced French as a respectable vernacular and as the instrument of law and administration, when English was beginning to compete with Latin as the medium for serious and scholarly writing. In the fifteenth century a national standard language was emerging that was based on the dialect of London, the political and judicial capital of the country, and also its commercial, social, and intellectual centre. To and from London travelled political and commercial leaders; to and from London passed administrative and legal documents. The London dialect of the educated drew on provincial dialects to form a supra-regional dialect. Then as now, the country needed a standard dialect that was not only generally intelligible but also, because of its neutrality, did not distract through its regional peculiarities from efficient communication between people of different parts of the country. But at the end of the fifteenth century the standard language was not yet stable or uniform, though the invention of printing was to hasten its development. One of the early critics of the English language, in fact, was the printer William Caxton. Writing towards the end of the fifteenth century, Caxton deplored the great extent of regional variation and the rapid changes in the language; they made it difficult to address or please a national readership. Worries about language change continued to be expressed in later periods.

During most of the sixteenth century, doubts were voiced about the adequacy of English for literacy. Various reasons were offered to show why it was inferior to Latin. As Caxton had earlier complained, it was unstable: writers could not agree on what was good English for spelling, vocabulary, grammar, or style. Latin was rule-governed, but English was ever-changing and open to variation. Secondly, English did not have the copiousness of vocabulary or the flexibility of syntax for learned discourse. English could not compete with Latin in its range of rhetorical and stylistic effects: it was judged to be an inelegant language. Writers bemoaned the absence from English prose of ornate words and rhetorical devices. Next, Latin was an international language of scholarship: writings in Latin enjoyed greater prestige than writings in the European vernaculars

and they could reach an international audience of scholars. And
finally, authors feared that their works would become increasingly
unintelligible if they were written in a language that was constantly
changing, a fear that induced Bacon to translate his *Advancement
of Learning* into Latin in the early part of the seventeenth century.

From the mid-sixteenth century onwards, learned writers strug-
gled to overcome the deficiences of English. Eager to re-establish
English as a fully literate language, they enriched the vocabulary
with massive borrowings from Latin and French and with a multi-
tude of new words created on native patterns; they laboured at
correcting the language. Not all the innovations and experiments
were received favourably. Writers debated the necessity or appro-
priateness of borrowings; many condemned the affectatious use of
learned new words ('inkhorn terms' as they were called). We are
likely to agree with the sixteenth-century courtier and man of
letters, Sir Philip Sidney, on the oddity of words that are for us rare
or obsolete: *pulchritude, sanguinolent, sandiferous.* But the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contributed numerous loan-
words that have established themselves in the language. We now
wonder why these were ridiculed by contemporary writers.
Sidney includes in his specimen of burlesque Latinism such
words as *contaminate, geometrical, segregated, integrated,* words
that seem to us useful and perfectly natural. Familiarity breeds
acceptance.

In the course of these debates there emerged the related concepts
of Pure English and Plain English. In reaction to excessive borrow-
ings, writers began to assert a patriotic preference for words of
native Anglo-Saxon stock; the importations were felt to pollute the
purity of the language. Writing in the mid-sixteenth century, the
scholarly Sir John Cheke was forthright:

> . . . our own tung should be written cleane and pure, vnmixt and
> vnmangeled with borrowing of other tunges. . . .[3]

The main objection to the exotic new words, however, was their
obscurity: their meanings were not transparent.

The Elizabethan and early Jacobean reigns were the great period
for English poetry and poetic drama, and the poets were credited
at the time with making the language elegant. To this period we also
owe the first works on rhetoric and on literary theory, the first
English dictionaries and books on the language, most of them

preoccupied with pronunciation and spelling, in particular the reform of the spelling system.

By the end of the seventeenth century, considerable progress had been made towards the standardization of the printed language in spelling, syntax, and vocabulary. It was agreed among the learned that English had reached in the recent past a near-perfect stage, having been purged of its impurities and inconsistencies. A major concern of eighteenth-century writers was to prevent further change, to preserve English largely as it then was, removing imperfections that they believed were creeping into the language in their own time. Any further changes, they feared, must be for the worse: the language must be protected from corruption. They also worried that just as changes in the language had made the writings of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and others increasingly difficult to read, so their own writings would become unintelligible to future generations.

In an attempt to fix the language, eighteenth-century writers discussed variants in the language and proposed criteria for choosing between them. They generally agreed that preference should be given to common usage, but by that they did not intend the practices of the people as a whole. Whose language should therefore represent the standard for English? In an influential book first published late in the eighteenth century, the rhetorician George Campbell (1801 vol 1: 290–308) formulated three principles for defining common usage and therefore deciding between disputed variants: preference should be given to reputable use, national use, and present use. By 'reputable use' Campbell meant the language used by authors who had the reputation of writing well. The practices of even reputable writers vary, and we might expect that in such instances Campbell would abide by the uses of the majority. But he rejected such objectivity, feeling free to accept usages supported by only a minority. 'National use' ruled out usages that were foreign or regional or restricted occupationally – for example, professional or business jargon. In his definition of 'present use', Campbell was decidedly conservative: it denoted language in use within the knowledge of anyone living; however, he excluded the usages of living authors, since their reputation might not endure. Campbell's principles have been accepted on the whole by later prescriptive writers on language, but the principles are vague enough to encourage contrary conclusions. For example, language

critics can support their views on specific usages by drawing on any reputable authors. In practice, when critics cite authors they generally do so not to display models to be emulated but errors to be avoided.

(Campbell and others have proposed more specific criteria for correcting the language, selecting between variants, or evaluating innovations. There are three common criteria:

1. *Preference for earlier forms and meanings*. Established forms are preferred to newcomers: *non-professional*, it is suggested, should be rejected, since the language already has *unprofessional, lay,* and *amateur; finalize* is superfluous in the presence of *complete* and *conclude*. Newer meanings are similarly resisted: *alibi* should retain its etymological meaning and not be used as a synonym of *excuse* or *pretext; inferiority complex* has a specific use as a psychoanalytical term and is not to be used in its later popular meaning 'sense of inferiority'.

2. *Desirability of preserving and creating distinctions*. Prescriptive writers have deplored the loss of distinctions resulting from the tendency of *will* to displace *shall*, and of *verbal* to displace *oral*. They have objected to the use of *less* and *amount of* with count nouns (*less students, amount of people*) instead of *fewer* and *number of*, and to the use of *disinterested* as a synonym of *uninterested*. They have attempted to distinguish the commonly confused forms of the irregular verbs *lie* and *lay*. Some have welcomed the verb *contact* as a general term to cover communication by speech in face-to-face conversation, by conversation over the telephone, and by writing; the introduction of *non-employed* as marking a distinction from the established *unemployed*; and the creation of *disincentive* with a meaning distinct from *deterrent*.

3. *Appeal to logic*. Critics have argued that since two negatives make a positive in logic, double negation is wrong: contrary to the intention of speakers, *I didn't say nothing* must therefore mean *I said something*. Logic is said to prescribe that *only* must be juxtaposed to the phrase on which it focuses, and hence the error in *He only passed the written exam; the oral exam is still to come*. The appeal to logic is often an appeal to analogy with forms or processes found elsewhere: it is an attempt to regularize the language. *Between you and I* is incorrect because objective

me is usual in the complement of a preposition. *Like* is a preposition, and therefore should not be used as a conjunction.

These three criteria and others that have been proposed – such as euphony and elegance – sometimes conflict with each other or with the general principles of reputable, national. and present use. For example, *finalize* has been declared 'superfluous and ugly' but it has also been accepted as established usage. the more general sense of *alibi* is condemned as departing from its Latin etymology, but it has also been welcomed as conveying a new distinction, 'an invented excuse intended to transfer responsibility'. (Bernstein 1977: 31) In practice, prescriptive writers invoke principles and criteria to confirm their established intuitions on propriety and acceptability.

Some writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, among them Dryden and Swift, urged the establishment of a body that would function as the guardian of the language, an authority that would fix the language, scrutinize whether new words should be accepted, and promote good style. But who should be the guardians? Daniel Defoe, for one, would exclude from this authority academics, clergymen, physicians, and lawyers. Their English, he asserted, 'has been far from Polite, full of Stiffness and Affectation, hard Words, and long unusual Coupling of *Syllables* and Sentences' (1702: 234). Not all supported these proposals for an English Academy on the model of the existing Italian and French academies. Like others in later generations, Johnson objected to an academy as opposed to the 'spirit of English liberty'.[4] None of these or later proposals was successful.

The place of an English Academy has been taken by unofficial authorities, who depend for their status on public recognition. Present-day English dictionaries generally make no claim to legislate, but they are consulted as authorities on pronunciation and spelling, on the meanings of words, on style restrictions, and indeed on whether a word exists in the language. Samuel Johnson's dictionary, published in 1755, was recognized in his period as authoritative for English vocabulary and spelling, and was equated with the dictionaries of the Italian and French Academies. The most respected popular authority in our day on grammar, vocabulary, usage, and style remains Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, first published in 1926 and revised by Sir Ernest Gowers in 1965. Similar