W. H. MITTINS
MARY SALU
MARY EDMINSON
SHEILA COYNE

LANGUAGE and LANGUAGE LEARNING

Attitudes to English Usage

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An Enquiry by the
University of Newcastle upon Tyne
Institute of Education English Research Group

W. H. MITTINS
MARY SALU
MARY EDMINSON
SHEILA COYNE

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ITEMS DISCUSSED SEPARATELY:

1

The purpose of the enquiry

The territory of English-teaching has long been something of a battlefield. Among the many issues now being fought out is that between 'prescriptive' and 'descriptive' attitudes to usage. The prescriptive, normative, authoritarian attitude is supported by a long tradition of 'rules', a tradition especially strong since the eighteenth century. Within this tradition, grammarians have shown considerable ingenuity in finding reasons for insisting on their preferred usages. Various criteria have been invoked to suit varying linguistic circumstances. One of the commonest appeals has been to the Latin model, as—for instance—when Landor dismissed '*under* the circumstances' as improper on the ground that one can't be under what is around (Latin 'circum'). A different etymology is still sometimes adduced in the attempt—as vain as such things invariably are—to limit the reference of *between* to two items, on the strength of derivation from *bi-twain*. Another criterion—that of grammatical accuracy—is still sometimes said to require '*much* pleased' instead of '*very* pleased' or, by association with Latin, '*their* (not *them*) being found out'. Different again is the insistence on 'go slow*ly*' rather than 'go slow', where the force of analogy allows the frequency of adverbs in *-ly* (from Old English *-lic*) to cast doubt on an equally legitimate alternative derived from an O.E. form in *-e*. It is usually logic that is called in to condemn 'try *and* come' and the dangling participle. On the other hand, meaning—'essential' meaning—is said to require '*becoming* angry', not '*getting* angry'. The character of these various authorities is often questionable and no more conclusive than the myths and linguistic folklore that generate what Fitzedward Hall called 'ipsedixitisms'.[1] In the 1870s, for example, the 'rule' that demanded '*down* to this time' instead of '*up* to this time' asserted with a grand arbitrariness that time was reckoned *up* to the dawn of history but *down* thereafter.[2]

At the opposite extreme to traditional prescriptive forces stands the

[1] From Latin 'ipse dixit' = 'he himself said it'. Hence, a dogmatic assertion unsupported by evidence or reasoning.

[2] Letter in *Notes and Queries*, 5th Series, Vol. VII, 1877, p. 137.

objective descriptive approach characteristic of modern linguistic science. For the modern 'linguistician' (or modern 'linguist', as we shall hereafter call him, since no question of mastery of foreign languages is involved in our enquiry) 'correctness' of usage is a misleading notion that should give way to concepts of acceptability and appropriateness. Even if 'correct' were deemed in the social situation to be more or less equivalent to 'acceptable' (in the same sense as 'correct' dress and 'correct' table-manners), from a purely linguistic angle the two notions need to be dissociated. American linguists have often given the distinction a sharp edge. Thus C. C. Fries (1940) asserts that 'there can never be in grammar an error that is both very bad and very common'; and R. A. Hall (1964) contends that 'the only time we can call any usage totally incorrect is when it would never be used by any native speaker of the language, no matter what his social or intellectual standing'. In an earlier book (1960), Hall in fact claimed to be looking forward to a time, doubtless far distant, when 'a claim to dispensing "correct" speech will be treated as being equal in fraudulence to a claim to dispensing a cure-all in medicine'.

One must not, of course, assume unquestioningly that authority necessarily resides with the modern linguists any more than with the traditional supporters of 'correctness'. There are those, indeed, who argue quite the reverse. The American Follett (1966), for example, sees the opposition as between, on the one hand, a large and sensible majority that includes 'everybody from the proverbial plain man to the professional writer', and on the other hand 'an embattled minority, who make up for their small number by their great learning and their place of authority in the school system and the world of scholarship'. The former, in Follett's view very properly, take it for granted that 'there is a right way to use words and construct sentences, and many wrong ways. The right way is believed to be clearer, more logical, and hence more likely to prevent error and confusion.' Contrariwise, the latter 'deny that there is such a thing as correctness . . . their governing principle is epitomized in the title of a speech by a distinguished member of the profession: "Can Native Speakers of a Language Make Mistakes?".' If there were any doubt which side Follett is on, it would be dispelled by his demand for 'the increasingly obvious and imperative reform—a resumption in our schools of the teaching of grammar and the reading of books'. (This final requirement is perhaps more relevant to the American than to the British scene, but in any case is not strictly pertinent to this enquiry.)

The work of teachers of English, and, incidentally, of teachers in general, involves them in the issues raised by the prescriptive/descriptive opposition. In practice, if not necessarily in theory, they must adopt some sort of attitude to usage. It seems unlikely that many would take a completely descriptive line; even if they tried to do so they would probably still exercise indirect and unintentional influence. Nor does total prescriptivism seem a reasonably tenable or realistic position for a teacher—or indeed anybody else—in a conspicuously permissive age. How, then, may teachers find a middle position that avoids on the one hand seeming abdication of responsibility ('anything goes'), on the other hand Canute-like insistence on linguistic practices not endorsed by contemporary society or even by colleagues? One obvious prerequisite for reasonable choice of stance is information about current usage and attitudes to usage.

Our main purpose was to add to the stock of such information. The immediate objective was an assessment of how acceptable a number of specific disputed usages were. To this end, we sought a sample of reactions to usages of this kind. Our sample allowed for a number of variables. The items themselves varied in verbal mode, i.e. speech or writing; the situations in which they were to be thought of varied in 'tone', i.e. formal or informal; and the respondents varied in age, occupation, and—within the 'educationist' category—in role (student, teacher, examiner, etc.).

Information from such a sampling is, in itself, of limited value, especially in the eyes of those who maintain that 'debatable' usages constitute a very small fraction of total language. We hoped, however, to infer from the particular results a notion of the general character and distribution of views on acceptability of usage. We were also interested in setting current attitudes and judgements in a historical context: to what extent, we wondered, were teachers and other educated adults sustaining a pre-scientific tradition? And in addition we wanted to satisfy our curiosity about an interesting area of linguistic behaviour.

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The form of the enquiry

No attempt was made to systematize the selection of particular usages. Most of the items chosen seemed to us to be currently subject to variation in practice and dispute in theory. A few others were included because, if not obviously contentious today, they had been sufficiently so in the past to have been used in earlier enquiries of this kind. One or two were of special interest to one or other of us.

Respondents were invited, not to record their own linguistic practice, but to estimate the favourableness or otherwise of their spontaneous reaction to each usage when encountered in four types of situation—Informal Speech, Informal Writing, Formal Speech, Formal Writing. To the main fifty items were added five which it was assumed—overhastily, as it proved—would not occur naturally in all four situations. We still feel justified in having restricted *onto* (No. 51) and *alright* (No. 54) to written contexts, since the alternative single-word and two-word forms are usually indistinguishable in speech, but the assumption that '*Who* was he looking for?' (No. 52) and 'Between you and *I*' (No. 55) were unthinkable in Formal Writing, now looks rash. (Our temerity was very properly corrected, at least for No. 52, by the distinguished linguist who insisted that he normally used and therefore accepted the 'Who . . . for?' pattern in the most formal circumstances.) The fifth item—'Go *slow*' (No. 53)—was even more unreasonably excluded by us from both formal situations (spoken and written), on the insufficient ground that the tone of the whole utterance (That's a dangerous curve; you'd better go slow) was clearly informal.

While realizing that a certain degree of arbitrariness was unavoidable, we spent some time considering how to maximize consensus in the interpretation of the four-situation framework. At one time it seemed that detailed exposition with examples might obviate demarcation disputes, but we concluded that it was impossible satisfactorily to define the four areas without overloading the prolegomena and inviting more argument than would be disposed of. Accordingly we limited the briefing to a note offering something like a standard

orientation towards the exercise without—we hoped—attracting undue attention to its arbitrary features. This explanatory note read:

> A debatable usage is one accepted by some people and not by others. Our object is to discover the nature and extent of agreement and of disagreement over certain usages of this kind in English.
>
> We are interested in varying attitudes to these usages in different situations. We are not seeking opinions on what is 'right' or 'wrong', nor are we asking about your own practice in speech or writing.
>
> Disregarding notions of 'correctness', then, please imagine that you hear or read each item in the situations indicated. Record your immediate reaction to the *underlined*[1] part as either acceptance or the contrary by making a tick or a cross in the appropriate place. If you find it quite impossible to decide, put a question mark. Items 51–55 are rather different in that not all four kinds of situation are likely to occur; some of the spaces are accordingly blocked out.
>
> The following quotation from the *English Journal* (Champaign, Illinois, February 1962) suggests what we are trying to do:
>
> 'Can an English teacher really maintain his position as a language policeman? The language has gone on "degenerating", all his million admonitions notwithstanding. In our secret heart we must all know that certain usages will come into prominence and others drop out, and there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. About all we can do for those easily intimidated by social shibboleths is to locate all the objective data available and say "In this area among these people at this time ..... is currently in vogue".'

The covering letter to respondents also included a request for personal particulars (mainly occupation and age) and an invitation to suggest further debatable items, with comment on them and any other relevant matter. These documents were sent out (or, in the case of students, delivered by hand) to over 500 people of various occupations. The 457 answers came from:

57 school teachers of English

35 external examiners of school English (e.g. General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.), Royal Society of Arts (R.S.A.))

[1] Italics have replaced the underlining used in the actual questionnaire. Particular words under discussion have also been italicized in some quotations.

30 school teachers of subjects other than English
37 university teachers
22 lecturers in colleges of education
41 lecturers in commercial and technical colleges
79 teacher-trainees in a university department of education
46 mature teacher-trainees in a college of education
50 teacher-trainees in a 'general' college of education
22 managerial staff in commerce and industry
5 salesmen, advertisers, or public relations officers
9 professional writers
11 administrators (e.g. Civil Service, National Coal Board, local government)
13 doctors, clergymen, solicitors, barristers

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Respondents belonging to more than one of these categories were assigned to the more restricted or specialized of their occupations. Thus, one or two dons with considerable reputations as novelists were counted as professional writers, and teacher-examiners were treated as examiners.

The actual questionnaire was as follows:

	Informal		*Formal*	
	Speech	*Writing*	*Speech*	*Writing*
1. He did not do *as* well as the experts had expected.				
2. The audience was *very* amused.				
3. The conservative-minded are averse *to* making any changes.				
4. Traditional and *contemporary* furniture do not go well together.				
5. The data *is* sufficient for our purpose.				
6. The members of the team laughed at *each other*.				

7. We *have got* to finish the job.

8. Young girls do not dress *the way* their grandmothers did.

9. *Under* these circumstances no-one should complain.

10. He is in London, but his family *are* in Bournemouth.

11. The agreement *between* the four powers was cancelled.

12. Answer *either* Question 1 *or* Question 2 *or* both.

13. It was not *all that* easy.

14. They will send the poultry *providing* the tax is low.

15. The performance ended early, *due to* illness among the players.

16. We *met up with* him at the Zoo.

17. The instruments were *pretty* reliable.

18. There were *less* road accidents this Christmas than last.

19. Competitors should try *and* arrive in good time.

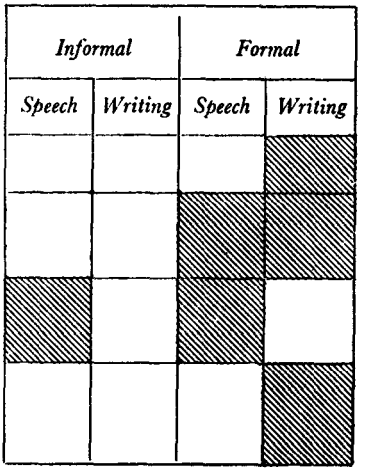
20. The process is *very unique*.

21. He is older than *me*.

Informal		*Formal*	
Speech	*Writing*	*Speech*	*Writing*

	Informal		*Formal*	
	Speech	*Writing*	*Speech*	*Writing*
22. They work *evenings* and *Sundays*.				
23. They behaved differently at school *than* they did at home.				
24. He *only had* one chapter to finish.				
25. His eyes were *literally* standing out of his head.				
26. They invited my friends and *myself*.				
27. What are the chances of *them* being found out?				
28. Intoxication is *when* the brain is affected by certain stimulants.				
29. Their success, his attitude *inferred*, was due to his own efforts.				
30. He refused *to even think* of it.				
31. They would accept this if it *was* offered.				
32. He did it *quicker* than he had ever done it before.				
33. He did not actually dislike football; he was just *disinterested*.				
34. Reference will be made to the *historic* development of mathematics.				
35. Neither author nor publisher *are* subject to censorship.				

	Informal		*Formal*	
	Speech	*Writing*	*Speech*	*Writing*
36. *One* rarely likes to do as *he* is told.				
37. Roller-skating is very different *to* ice-skating.				
38. *These sort of plays* need first-class acting.				
39. You will learn that *at university.*				
40. *Pulling the trigger,* the gun went off unexpectedly.				
41. He could write *as well or better than* most people.				
42. She told Charles and *I* the whole story.				
43. It was *us* who had been singing.				
44. Nowadays Sunday is not observed *like* it used to be.				
45. He told me the story and I *implied* a great deal from it.				
46. They bought some tomatoes *off* a barrow-boy.				
47. It looked *like* it would rain.				
48. I *will* be twenty-one tomorrow.				
49. Everyone has *their* off-days.				
50. They will *loan* you the glasses.				
51. He jumped *onto* the roof of the shed.				



52. *Who* was he looking for?

53. That's a dangerous curve; you'd better go *slow*.

54. In spite of the delay, everything was *alright*.

55. Between you and *I*, she drinks heavily.

(Readers who were not consulted might find it interesting, before reading further, to note their own responses.)

3

Survey of responses

A. Items 1–50

With 457 respondents considering 50 items, each in four types of situation, the number of judgements totalled $457 \times 50 \times 4 = 91{,}400$.

The request not to resort to Doubtful (?) except when it was quite impossible to decide between Accept (✓) and Reject (X) was so readily acceded to that hardly more than 1 per cent of the responses were indeterminate.

The following table indicates the pattern of responses both in the four separate situations and compositely:

Table 1

	Total		Informal Speech		Informal Writing		Formal Speech		Formal Writing	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Accept (✓)	36,997	41	13,970	61	10,575	46	7,046	31	5,406	24
Reject (X)	53,183	58	8,611	38	11,989	53	15,487	68	17,096	75
Doubtful (?)	1,220	1	269	1	286	1	317	1	348	1
TOTAL	91,400	100	22,850	100	22,850	100	22,850	100	22,850	100

The table shows a general tendency, of the order of nearly 3 to 2 (58 to 41 per cent), towards rejection rather than acceptance. Only in the least stringent of the four settings—Informal Speech—was there a majority (61 per cent) of acceptances. Elsewhere, permissiveness fell from nearly half (46 per cent) in Informal Writing to under a third (31 per cent) in Formal Speech and less than a quarter (24 per cent) in Formal Writing. It is doubtful, of course, how much reliance can be placed on judgements made in experimental conditions. Some respondents, perhaps those most familiar with modern linguistics and its advocacy of descriptive as against prescriptive attitudes to usage, may unconsciously have represented themselves as *more* tolerant than they really are. But such cases would probably be easily outnumbered by those who,

consciously or unconsciously, were 'put on their mettle' by the test situation and expressed *less* tolerant reactions than their ordinary language behaviour warranted.

The predominance of censoriousness over permissiveness was reflected in correspondents' suggestions of additional items of debatable usage. The invitation to extend the list of debatable usages produced well over two hundred different new items, of which the great majority were explicitly or implicitly condemned. There were one or two pleas for tolerance (e.g. 'of such local habits of speech as "To get a hold of" ') and a few expressions of genuine uncertainty (e.g. five foot/feet high). But (incidentally, the initial use of *but* or *and* was included on the black list!) by far the commonest sentiments expressed were those of disapproval, irritation, shock and guilt. Alleged mis-usages were attributed to laziness, slovenliness, lack of discrimination, meaninglessness, confusion, inaccuracy, deterioration, degeneration and contamination. The offending items included traditional textbook 'errors' (e.g. *quite* a few), colloquialisms (especially *aggravate* for *annoy*), dialect (e.g. it is not his *blame*), and Americanisms actual (e.g. *stop off at*) and putative (e.g. *blown-up* for *enlarged*). Nearly always (another censored usage!) it was possible to infer the choice involved—however unrealistic or outdated or pedantic it might seem to some people—but a few usages seemed not only unobjectionable but irreplaceable. What, for instance, is the preferred alternative to *a modified version, as soon as possible*, or indeed *nearly always*? The 'witch-hunting' attitude which seems to develop so rapidly in the field of usage was perhaps well illustrated by the respondent who took us to task for using the plural verb in the instruction 'Please tick whichever of the following descriptions *fit* you'. Presumably in his zeal he overlooked the possibility that an individual might belong to more than one occupational category—teacher *and* examiner, professional writer *and* lecturer/doctor, etc. Or perhaps he would insist that 'whichever' can have only singular reference and that we should have said something like 'Tick such of the following descriptions as fit you'.

The presentation of the four 'situations' in the order Informal Speech through Informal Writing and Formal Speech to Formal Writing may have encouraged respondents to express their decline in toleration in that same sequence. But the very marked infrequency of departures from the left-to-right order suggests that at most the mode of presentation reinforced an already strong tendency. Though in general speech allows of more freedom in usage than writing, the mode