

I  
Stand  
Corrected  
More  
On  
Language

*from*  
WILLIAM  
SAFIRE

---

# I Stand Corrected

---

More On Language from  
**WILLIAM SAFIRE**



---

Published by TIMES BOOKS,  
The New York Times Book Co., Inc.  
130 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10011

Published simultaneously in Canada by  
Fitzhenry & Whiteside, Ltd., Toronto

Copyright © 1984 by William Safire

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced  
in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means,  
including information storage and retrieval systems,  
without permission in writing from the publisher,  
except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Safire, William, 1929-  
I stand corrected.

Includes index.

1. English language—Usage—Addresses, essays,  
lectures. I. Title.

PE1421.S22 1984 428'.00973 83-40090  
ISBN 0-8129-1097-4

Designed by Giorgetta Bell McRee/Early Birds

Manufactured in the United States of America

84 85 86 87 88 5 4 3 2 1

# INTRODUCTION

---

## Who elected you?

---

"Who in this country decides on what is and what is not correct in English usage?" asks Olga Marx of New York. "Who, for instance, gave his blessing to omitting the *m* in the accusative form of *who*? Who shortens *looking out of the window* to *looking out the window*? Who approves of *It looks like it's going to rain*?"

Miss Marx, who is 89, observes that it was Prof. Brander Matthews of Columbia University who taught her that *It's me* should be accepted, because it fulfilled the function of the French *C'est moi*. "Incidentally, he wouldn't let me audit his course, not so much because he didn't like women, but because—so he explained to me—he couldn't lecture properly unless he tilted back his chair and put his feet on the table or desk in front of him, and that—he'd been taught—was an impolite way to confront females."

With that aside aside, Miss Marx confronts the issue: "In France, it is the Académie française who (that?) regulates usage; in Germany, the accepted German both in form and pronunciation is that spoken on the stage: *Bühnendeutsch*. Who or what is our arbiter of what is or is not acceptable in English?"

I am tempted to respond with a cool "Me." Or, if you prefer, "I am." (I do not have to point out that, in rhetoric, pointing something out while denying you are pointing it out is called "paraleipsis," "preterition," or "apophasis.") But her question is serious and better phrased than the usual "Who the hell elected you King of English?" protests in my file marked "Final Authority."

For centuries, a titanic tug-of-war has been going on among users of English. The struggle is between the prescriptivists (those who say *tug-of-war* is the proper name of the game) and the descriptivists (those who say *tug-o'-war* better describes the way the name is spoken by most people). The first group, called Language Snobs, insists that the language of the past is correct and should be followed, and the second group, or Language Slobs, wallows in solecism and holds that any language used today is destined to be the brave new word of the future. English teachers are generally in the prescriptivist bunch and see themselves as

clinging to the ramparts in heroic defense of the rules of clarity and precision in the native tongue, while lexicographers are usually in the descriptivist crowd, portraying themselves as scientific recorders of the reality of the living, growing language.

As Mort Sahl used to say, "Is there anybody I haven't offended?" Ordinarily, my trick in portraying both sides in this debate as crazed extremists is to position myself as the voice of sweet reason; however, in this case, my purpose in setting the two sides at each other's throats is to sharpen and intensify the argument.

Because it is essential that the titanic struggle go on. (Avoid sentence fragments.) The purpose of language is understanding between person/person, person/animal, person/machine, and machine/machine. (I knew I'd find a use for the virgule.) To accomplish that purpose of communication, the Slobs have to win a few. "Mistakes" have to become "correct" through wide usage and general acceptance, as the users of lingo do their thing. *I could care less* is a shortening of *I could not care any less*, which seems to be the opposite; yet the short form is understood and the long form would be regarded as the sort of thing a visiting Martian might say. Thus, the short form has become colloquially correct, and I could care less what mail comes in about it. In this instance, the Slobs seem to have won; but I do not hear the phrase used this year as much as last, and in the long run—if the phrase atrophies from disuse—the Snobs will triumph.

At the same time, the Snobs must win a few. For example, the mixing together of words of different languages in a single phrase is incorrect (just as *mixing together* is redundant). H. L. Mencken, the darling of American lexicographers and certainly no Snob in the study of what he called the American language, objected to the phrase *per year*. As Mencken put it, "Even Congress, which is an ass, always uses *per diem*, not *per day*." If you like Latin, you should say "*per annum*"; if you prefer English, say "a year." I shall take that to heart when shelling out three dollars an hour, or *per horam*, to my own kin for mowing the lawn.

The Slob has his role to play in this struggle: testing the perimeter with *parameter*, enriching and enlivening the vocabulary with new slang, stretching the grammatical rules with a more natural "It's me." The Snob has the opposite role with equal billing: resisting change that obfuscates and "befuzzes," holding fast to the orderly structures that make the language easier to learn, forcing the new to earn its way into the dictionaries by running a gantlet of ridicule and puckered faces. (The Slobs run a *gantlet*, which is a glove.)

The sensible Slob knows when to quit: Farewell, *I could care less*. The sensible Snob knows when to flee the ramparts: Hail to thee, *contact* as a verb for "get in touch with."

*The New York Times* has for several years referred to the government of Nicaragua as "Sandinist." Recently, this directive went out to editors: "Starting immediately, let's please use the Spanish form of the word *Sandinista(s)*, no longer the English form *Sandinist(s)*. This is an exception to our usual practice of using English forms for the names of political parties and movements. In this case, the exception reflects widespread popular and diplomatic usage." The

bearers of standards fought the good fight, but there comes a moment when the *prescriptivista* becomes the *descriptivista*.

To those middle linebackers of linguistics who grimly warn that "Winning is the only thing," the lover of language replies, "Playing is the only thing." The healthy growth of English needs the laxity of the Slob and the rigidity of the Snob. Vogue words and innovative usage will win or lose in the marketplace of the living tongue; Al Haig is winning with the adjective *nuanced* and losing with his nonce verb in "Let me *caveat* you on that, Senator."

Now to Miss Marx's question: Who decides who wins? The answer is not universal, but personal. For myself, I decide. I look at the challenging usage, check around to see what the other usage mavens have said, apply my own standards, put it on a back burner, stir it now and then, and come forth with my decision. In the eternal tug-of(o')-war, I grab the rope in the position of round-heeled prescriptivist, happy to stand on the burning deck but not after all the others have fled. I am my own Final Authority; the Académie américaine, *c'est moi*.

You don't accept that? You prefer to think it through yourself, do your own research, arrive at your own conclusion about whether it should be *out the window* or *out of the window*? Wonderful! You have just become your own Final Authority. Write a column; astound your friends; correct your associates who say "data is," and enjoy your newfound solitude. If you care about the language you use and are moved to influence others to write or speak more clearly or colorfully, you are eligible to join either side of the rope in the game between the Keepers of the Flame and the Worshipers of the Native Speaker. Welcome; we can use a few more players.

You will find yourself leading the life of the open mind. Pushing 90, Olga Marx knows how to keep the language vital: "Write about Black English sometime, a fountain of youth for our language. *If I'da knowed then what I knows now, I wouldn't have did what I done and fixin' to bloom and You can't never guess a man and mosying along and runnin' her big mouth as usual and calls herself makin' a soup and a spate of delightful etceteras.*"

**I Stand  
Corrected**





---

---

**absent, see the present absent**

---

---

## **accent on the Caribbean**

---



The scene is the Roosevelt Room of the White House, filled with pictures and plaques of the two Presidents Roosevelt, across the hall from the Oval Office. It used to be called the Fish Room, after Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, but visitors kept looking for the aquarium, so the name was changed during the Nixon administration.

Hunched around the long table are a passel of pundits, being briefed on the President's "Caribbean Basin Initiative" by Special Trade Representative William Brock, Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders, and a little guy from the National Security Council whose name I missed.

I went straight for the jugular, pointing to an obvious dichotomy in the administration's approach: How come the S.T.R. pronounced it "Cari-BE-an" and State said "Ca-RIB-ean"?

"Both are correct," said Secretary Enders instantly, taking the classic State Department position, which always holds that no disagreement exists and nothing ever represents a change from the previous statement.

"Tomorrow I get to say 'Ca-RIB-ean,' and he has to say 'Cari-BE-an,'" replied Mr. Brock, more relaxed and capable of greater political insight under severe questioning.

Although both are correct—even the State Department gets it right now and then—the preferred pronunciation is "Cari-BE-an." The word comes from an Indian people—the Caribs—with the accent on the first syllable, sounding much like "Arabs." In the fifteenth century, members of the Cariban tribes dominated

northern Brazil and the north coast of South America, and were in the process of taking over the Greater Antilles when the Spaniards arrived and intervened.

Christopher Columbus heard them called *carib* in Haiti and *caniba* in Cuba; their propensity for eating their enemies led to the word *cannibal*. In both cases, the accent was on the first syllable; later, the Caribs were also called the Caribbees, making a great case for preferring "Cari-BE-an." (Curiously, *cannibal* has always had its first syllable accented, although it seems to me that *caNIBbling* would be a more graphic verb than *CANnibalizing*.)

Having caused so much confusion at the briefing, I did not feel up to questioning the term *initiative*. That word was chosen by Mr. Enders because its meaning was narrow enough to fit into a more comprehensive approach to be labeled later. The diplomat evidently preferred *initiative* to the mundane *plan*, the tentative *proposal*, or the already-used *beginning*. And surely for this reason, too: The only adjectives that go with *initiative* are *bold* and *new*. Who ever heard of a timid old initiative?

*Regarding the accent's placement in "Caribbean," the comparison of "Carib" to "Arab" seems not to show what you want it to. Observe:*

AR-ab	Ar-AB-i-an
CAR-ib	Car-IB-be-an

*which leaves CAR-ib-BE-an more or less in limbo. (Whoever heard of the AR-a-BI-an Desert?)*

*I think Car-IB-be-an is more mellifluous (and I don't mean MELL-i-FLU-ous.)*

George A. Brewster  
Queens Village, New York

*I was surprised to learn that the Nixon administration changed the name of the Fish Room in the White House because people kept looking for an aquarium. I suspect that the real reason was that President Nixon is, as everyone knows, a cod-fearing American.*

Marshall E. Bernstein  
Roslyn, New York

*If "Caribs" sounds much like "Arabs," why doesn't "Caribbean" sound much like "Arabian"?*

Linda E. Soloway  
New York, New York

*I was pleased to see that you took on the great CariBEan vs. CaRIBBean controversy. This is a question to which I devoted no small amount of time when I came into this job a year and a half ago, and it continues to come up. Let me add that pronunciation of place names in that area is a constant problem. How many people up here know that newly independent Antigua is pronounced as if it has no "u" or that the island of Nevis is spoken of using a long "ee"? Not to mention the constant confusion between the Dominican Republic and the island nation of Dominica (Do-mi-NEE-ca).*

*But to get back to the point, I must tell you that the preferred pronunciation you gave for Caribbean is not, based on my experience, the one used by most West Indians (not "Caribbeans," please). A local example of someone using the CaRIB-Bean option is the Barbadian envoy here, Ambassador Skeete. The question we come down to, then, is whether we base our pronunciations on the norm in the country or the area we are pronouncing, or whether we go our own way. When the area in question is populated by fellow English speakers, this is indeed a problem. One I will leave you wordsmiths to ponder.*

David P. Wagner  
Country Affairs Officer/The Caribbean  
International Communication Agency  
Washington, D.C.

*i disliked your glib reference to cannibalism. aren't you familiar with w. arens' the man-eating myth (oxford u. press, 1979)? he finds no acceptable substantiation for any account alluding to cannibalism. what does emerge clearly is the usefulness to the imperium the attribution of subhuman traits to a conquered people can have. the perpetuation of such slander can only be considered racist: as we contemplate a caribbean policy, harboring the intellectual fantasy of anthropophagy can hardly be appropriate.*

sunny salibian  
cambridge, massachusetts

*I haven't gone back to Fernández de Oviedo or any other of the Spanish chroniclers to see if they say anything about how the Caribs themselves pronounced their moniker—the testimony would most likely be imprecise at best. However, those who brought the word into the European languages were Spanish-speakers, and I doubt very much that they pronounced it like "Arabs." As you know, the Spanish form of the word is "ca-RI-be," so, if we are going back to origins, to determine pronunciation, I think that "Ca-RIB-ean" would be more defensible. Note that the Spanish form of the word's other principal derivative also stresses the middle syllable—caníbal.*

*But I'm afraid there is little logic in the way foreign words pass into English,*

even without the complication of an American aboriginal language. (That's why it doesn't distress me to have to say, or try to, "Cari-BE-an.") The whimsy, or maybe perversity, of the transferral process is well illustrated by the French lingerie and femme. The former, which ought to have a palatal a sound (even if not nasal) is pronounced "LAHN-ger-y," whereas femme, which ought to have the AH, is pronounced with a palatal a.

I will be glad to support your support of "caNIBBling," but if we can't lick "finalize," what can we hope to do with "cannibalize"?

Frank M. Duffey  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

---

## acuity vacuity

---

President Reagan's personal physician, neurosurgeon Daniel Ruge (pronounced "roo-gee"), can out-jargon any jargonaut among the Reaganauts.

After examining the President recently, he issued what most journalists called "a clean bill of health," but included this sentence to befuddle the layman: "Previously documented decrement in auditory acuity and visual refractive error corrected with contact lenses were evaluated and found to be stable."

I'd hate to be a druggist trying to read his passive prescriptions. That translates as: "As I noted before, the President is hard of hearing and needs glasses, but neither of these ailments is getting worse."

*Decrement* is not a dirty word; it means "decrease." Its use enables some doctors to be able to be understood less and charge more.

*I think the main problem with President Reagan is that his personal physician is attempting to correct the decrement in auditory acuity with contact lenses.*

Abraham L. Halpern, M.D.  
Port Chester, New York

You wrote: "Its use enables some doctors to be able to be understood less and charge more." The words "to be able" can surely be eliminated from that sentence, as they duplicate the meaning of "enables."

The sentence is awkward and, worse, wastes valuable copy space. As a newspaper reporter, I am all too aware of how much at a premium such space is.

*When you are redundant, not only do you repeat yourself but you say the same thing twice, as I'm sure you know.*

*Dan Holly  
New Brunswick, New Jersey*

*You can't be in the vanguard of language usage if you insist on remaining in the rearguard of pharmacolingo! The word druggist went out years ago, along with the soda fountain. The current word is pharmacist.*

*Thelma C. Hilibrand  
Cherry Hill, New Jersey*

---

**advertising, see bloopie awards**

---

**airlinese, see winged words**

---

**all that jazz**

---

The word *jazz* is probably the greatest contribution of American slang to the world's languages. Where did it come from and what did it originally mean?

"One lady asked me if I danced the jazz," goes a 1909 gramophone record, cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement*. The word in its earliest printed citations also meant a form of syncopated dance music, or the ragtime music associated with American blacks.

Another theory exists. In a 1927 issue of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, a social scientist suggested: "The word *jazz* . . . used both as a verb and as a noun to denote the sex act . . . has long been common vulgarity." Three years before, a music magazine, *Etude*, had hinted at it: "If the truth were known about the origin of the word 'Jazz' it would never be mentioned in polite society. . . . The vulgar word 'Jazz' was in general currency in those dance halls 30 years or more ago."

That's the present state of the etymology. Now along comes Jill Shelley, of New Canaan, Connecticut: "May I share with you a very exciting discovery? This is an early reference (in 1831) to the word *jazz* used exactly as we might do today—and by no less a grandee than Lord Palmerston."

Miss Shelley enclosed a page from Jasper Ridley's life of Palmerston, Prime

Minister of England in the mid-nineteenth century, adding: "You've described the feeling when someone who loves words runs across a find like this, and you were right—it's intoxicating."

In a chapter on the Belgian crisis of 1831, historian Ridley quotes this private letter from Palmerston: "I am writing in the Conference, Matuszevic copying out a note for our signature, old Talley jazzing and telling stories. . . ."

Wow. I zipped the evidence off to Robert Burchfield, chief editor of the Oxford dictionaries, known to wordsmen as "Superlex." His reply: "Your Miss Shelley is the third person known to me who has wondered whether Lord Palmerston, inexplicably, knew about jazz . . . their wonderment is surely in vain."

"If Palmerston's word has been read correctly by Jasper Ridley," writes Mr. Burchfield—adding, parenthetically, "(historians can never be trusted in this respect in the end)," and, oh, will he hear from the historians—"it must be an isolated Anglicized spelling of French *jaser*, 'to chatter, to gossip.'"

The zesty lexicographer from New Zealand neither equivocates nor jazzes around: "The word *jazz* roared into written English near the beginning of the present century, not earlier (see Volume 2 of my *Supplement to the OED*). The handful of scholars qualified to investigate the matter say that its origin is either unknown or dirty, probably the latter."

And that's that. Maybe. (You may fire when you are ready, Ridley.)

*As a former teacher of French language and literature for 42 years, I was fascinated by the possible French origin of the word JAZZ from the French "jaser" to chatter—to "buzz buzz." I went to my old Albert DAUZAT, Dictionnaire étymologique (1938) which says:*

JASER (XIIe s. Adam) onom. V. GAZOUIER. Dér. jaseur, jaserie (XVIe s.)

*In other words an onomatopoeic word "to chatter" as we would say "buzz buzz" first used by medieval writer Adam de la Halle in a 12th century poem. It says "See gazouiller" which turns out to have first been used in 1316 by J. Maillard and which is a Normandy-Picardy form from the same root as "jaser."*

*My old H.L. Mencken, The American Language, 1937, p. 189, gives:*

*"Websters New International" says that jazz is a Creole word, and probably of African origin, but goes no further. The Oxford says that its origin is unknown, but that it is "generally said to be Negro."*

*Creole is a type of 16th and 17th century French of the Caribbean and of Louisiana. Perhaps there was some combination between the French Creole*

*"jaser" and some obscure African word the Black musicians of New Orleans put together to make jazz.*

*Elizabeth Maxfield-Miller (Mrs. Miller)  
Ph.D. Radcliffe-Harvard 1938  
Concord, Massachusetts*

*Although the origin of jazz seems not yet pinpointed, I was surprised you made no reference to Creoles, to Louisiana, to New Orleans, to nineteenth-century brothels there.*

*The Britannica World Language Dictionary, 1959 edition, refers to the Creole word jass, meaning coitus, suggesting its origin in the brothels of New Orleans. H. L. Mencken's The American Language also refers to the Creole word for sexual intercourse. The Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage, 1975 edition, defines the Creole word as "sexual motions involved in certain dances of African origin."*

*In light of the available information, I wondered why the emphasis was on Prime Minister Palmerston.*

*Milton Horowitz  
Jackson Heights, New York*

*It is to cry.*

*You read William Safire. He's talking about Jazz. Talking about jazz and not mentioning Scott. Can you imagine?*

*"The word jazz in its progress toward respectability has meant first sex, Then dancing, Then music." How's That for succinctness? That's what F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in "Echoes of the Jazz Age" in The Crack-up. Scott, the father of the Jazz Age. He gave it its name. It is to cry.*

*Franklin Mason  
Baltimore, Maryland*

*Dear Bill,*

*A quibble on jazz, which I believe is somewhat older than your column suggested. The Dictionary of Americanisms refers to a 1926 article in American Speech saying Lafcadio Hearn found the word in use in New Orleans in the late 1870s or early 1880s (Hearn was living in New Orleans from 1878-1887). I don't have the complete works of Lafcadio Hearn in front of me (and doubt if all his newspaper pieces have been collected), but that's one possible indication of an earlier date, if indeed the cite exists. Also Jelly Roll Morton said he used the word*

jazz as early as 1902 (in Alan Lomax's *Mr. Jelly Roll*, taken from tapes at the Library of Congress): again this recollection may not be true, but is a second hint of an early date. Also jazz music is supposed to have started with poor blacks teaching themselves to play on band instruments left behind by the Civil War (i.e., 1864) winners and losers—that's one major theory, though no one has ever explained to me why those army marching bands left their instruments behind! The word first definitely seems to have meant "to speed up, make or become more frenetic," then spread to sexual use, and from there to the music use (in the whorehouses where jazzing went on in the rooms above and also at the piano or on the bandstand below)—in fact, some believe that white Chicago musicians called the music jazz purposely, in order to give it connotations of the whorehouse, as music not fit for decent white ears.

The interesting difference between the expressions all that jazz and all that jive (both meaning nonsense, bunk, lies, exaggeration) is that jazz meant music before it meant nonsense but jive meant nonsense before it meant music. Jive, meaning nonsense, seems to have appeared in Chicago around 1921 (as a black term) and then in 1928 two jazz records appeared using jive in their titles: Cow Cow Davenport's *State Street Jive* and Louis Armstrong's *Don't Jive Me*, the word jive then slowly becoming associated with a form of jazz and coming to mean swing music by 1937. Thus jazz music came before jazz talk, but jive talk came before jive music. (We all say that jazz probably has African origins, but no one has ever found an African word that is similar; jive may simply have been a pronunciation of jibe.)

Regards,  
Stuart [Stuart Berg Flexner]  
Editor in Chief, Reference Department  
Random House, Inc.  
New York, New York

Dear Bill,

The correspondence about Palmerston fascinated me and I write to tell you that Burchfield is quite certainly right. Indeed I'm surprised that what he wrote you was so tentative.

Members of the more privileged sector of the English upper class of Palmerston's time reached their young manhood while the French court was still in existence. Palmerston was also a Whig, and until the Revolution, the French were fashionable among the kind of Londoners who revolved around Devonshire House. The ladies of Devonshire House, particularly, had a way of scattering French words through their conversation, and even converting French words into English words. You can see the kind of thing I mean in the volumes of Greville's diary dating before he and England were both Victorianized; for



Greville commonly used a whole series of words like Palmerston's "jazzing" for "jasant."

*I haven't time to do the necessary research this morning, but if you look at the diary, you will find a good many of these old conversions. Offhand, however, I only remember a description of life at the country house of the Duke of York, whose racing horses were trained by Greville. Among other things, Greville noted "the ton is polisson, and the talk tends towards polissonerie." I'm not quite certain I've quoted correctly; but this is near enough. It means that in the Duke's house, lewdness was acceptable and lewd jokes were common conversational currency.*

Yours ever,  
Joe [Joseph Wright Alsop]  
Washington, D.C.

*Note: Now that I have looked up my sources, I find that I made a foolish mistake. Palmerston was a "Canningite Tory" (that is, "liberal Tory" in modern jargon) rather than a Whig; and he only left the Tory party when the Canningite wing of the Cabinet broke with the Duke of Wellington in 1828. I thought him a Whig because he acted with the Whigs thereafter; and also because he spent a good part of his early mature life with the Whig grandees. Then, too, he had a Whig grandee's wife (and the sister of Lord Melbourne), Lady Cowper, first as his mistress of many years and then as his wife for many more years.*

*Greville's exact quotation about the atmosphere in the Duke of York's set in the early 19th century, which I have now looked up, was: "The men with whom he lives most are très-polissons, and la polissonnerie is the ton of his society."*

J.A.