

ATTITUDES TOWARD ENGLISH USAGE

THE
HISTORY
OF A
WAR OF
WORDS

Edward Finegan

Attitudes toward English Usage

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A WAR OF WORDS

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FOR MY FATHER AND MOTHER

Acknowledgments

THIS STUDY HAS been a long time in process, and I am indebted to scholars and friends alike for aid and encouragement. Robert T. Roe suggested the topic and guided me through the early research on several chapters. Allan Casson, Thomas M. Cofer, J. J. Lamberts, the late Albert H. Marckwardt, and several anonymous reviewers provided thoughtful suggestions to aid readability and accuracy. Robert J. Baumgardner, Richard H. Brown, James T. Heringer, and Carol Lord commented usefully on sections of chapters seven or eight. Laura Whitehall has been an invaluable editor of the whole.

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It is customary to absolve from the failures due to one's own limitations those generous people who have helped one write a book; certainly in this work what faults remain are mine.

Foreword

by *Charlton Laird*

AMONG THE ENDURING SATISFACTIONS are those that grow from the opportunity to say publicly that a good book is a good book. This one is, and it will long endure for the audiences to whom it is addressed. I envisage for it at least three sorts of readers: linguistic scholars, especially the analysts of American English; teachers of English and related subjects; and the literate public, many of whom love language and some of whom hate what they conceive to be “bad grammar.”

The first group, the professional students of language, will not need me to tell them that *Attitudes toward English Usage* is required reading. They know that until now we have had no scholarly, detailed history of English usage; and whereas they may be less intrigued by usage than they are by syntax, phonology, semiology, or some other linguistic manifestation, they do know that it is important and that it is their business.

Many linguists double as teachers, for two-hattedness is not uncommon among scholars, who may wish to pursue language as a true love but find they must teach it if they are to live by it. Likewise, many teachers who do not profess linguistics are professionally involved with language. To these latter—as to the interested reader at large—one might make two observations: first, the history of learning is to a considerable degree the evolution of plausible error, and thus no book on a learned subject can be trusted implicitly and forever. Second, this particular volume is probably as trustworthy as such a study can be. Finegan knows his subject, and he has been faithful in his undertaking. Much remains to be learned about the history of usage, but our author has used the available literature with diligence and due caution—and also with an eye to cogent and curious exemplars.

The third group is the largest. The literate public that will read this book includes (one hopes) a host of people who are interested in language and in learning something new that will enhance their understanding and enjoyment and use of the English language in particular. Many of these people have no particular axe to grind. But some of them represent one side of the “war” chronicled by Finegan.

The antagonist group numbers among its adherents a relatively silent majority who assume that “English” is *mainly* usage, a set of rules that govern oral and especially written conduct, that is, how to use the native

tongue and not be "wrong." But the group comprises also various commentators who are anything but silent! Some of them may not know much about language, but they trust they know what is right and believe that in usage the "right" should triumph. They include a few writers, many journalists and editors, some administrators and executives, and numerous other conscientious and highly placed persons—some admirably learned and accomplished. They incline to believe that their own usage is the only possible correct one, because it is presumed to be universal, grammatical, traditional, or logical, or to possess some other immutable virtue; whereas they accuse the usagists of having *no* standards, of believing that in usage "anything goes." They may fear quite genuinely that without the triumph of their convictions the native tongue will decline and become extinct; and they are baffled to know why linguistic scholars, who are surely a learned lot and should be well-meaning, do not aid and abet them.

Usagists generally do not support purist positions. They believe that all language has its uses, and hence all of it is precious. They doubt that puristic animadversions will much alter usage: no number of singers intoning "Rain, rain, go away" has ever brought on a drought; and speech, like precipitation, has its own laws of conduct. They deny that if one locution is undeniably right, in the sense that many native speakers prefer it, all alternative locutions must *per se* be wrong. They generally do agree with purists that even the native language needs to be taught and that standards should be upheld; but they tend to recognize language levels and to use terms like *appropriate* and *inappropriate* and to restrict the concepts of *correct* and *incorrect*. They doubt that "bad grammar" is killing the language; all bodies of speech have been used crudely by stupid or careless people, but among the thousands of tongues that have died none has been exterminated by the blunders of its users. As for American English, they find it thriving, at home and abroad, and they surmise that Mother Tongue is more self-reliant than some of her defenders understand.

Here, then, is the central issue of the book—a schism between usagists and purists, between "liberals" and traditionalists. Finegan, like most linguists, is a usagist—I am of course distinguishing here between "linguists" who study language *per se* and other persons, also called "linguists," who may be fluent in several languages but do not much study language as a phenomenon. Most linguists of the first sort are usagists because they feel that the facts of language force them to be, and anyhow they are delighted by variety in language. They believe that uniformity in speech would be dull—and is fortunately impossible. As a scholar, Finegan has his preferences, but he has striven hard to be objec-

tive and impartial—to see merit in both liberal and traditionalist views. I should say that he has succeeded as no one else has—that he has traced the growth of this schism through the centuries and has described it revealingly as it survives today.

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Prologue: Babel and Ivory— A Tale of Two Towers

SCIENTISTS PURSUE UNDERSTANDING of the physical world knowing that where contrariety is found, a higher generalization will bring harmony. No such assurance accompanies the social and cultural investigator. Human society is not only multifaceted but often contradictory. Wars flare up in the pursuit of peace. Voters turn politicians out of office whom pollsters predicted to be shoo-ins. Population figures soar as family planning units prosper.

If the physical world is opaque, the human world stubbornly resists categorization. If the facts of chemistry are complex, the phenomena of anthropology are recalcitrant. And, as if to make the road to insight more treacherous, cultural values are so near to us, so integral a part of our vision, that we easily overlook their pervasive influence on our general perceptive mechanisms. Only the most sophisticated grasp the relativity of world views. To one people, their religion is their truth, indeed God's truth, and other views seem aberrant if not perverse. Few adults choose their religious convictions after systematic weighing of alternative creeds. If we don't derive religion with the color of our eyes, we seem to absorb it at our mothers' breasts. Politics we ingest at every family meal. Moral and cultural values seem to reside in our marrow, and it requires Herculean strength of mind to see the relativity of these values, to recognize that not all those outside the shelter of our beliefs are perverse, while some allies within regrettably are. The more insulated we keep ourselves from other perspectives, the more confident we become of the accuracy of our perceptions. Once during a political contest I was persuaded that the pollsters must be fishing in the unstocked pond, for my views and those of my friends, bolstered by campaign acquaintances, predicted a whale of a victory for the candidate who ultimately lost.

Language, too, is a phenomenon intimately tied to our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions—to our inmost selves. We take for granted its nature and adequate functioning. But language is a cultural transaction, not a chemical process like breathing, and it is laden with social and cultural values. However complex the chemistry of breathing, understanding of it is shared by scientists around the world and taught to

pupils in essentially like ways. The same is not true of religion or politics or philosophy. Nor is it true of language. These are cultural enterprises; they vary from society to society and evolve over time. They are created by people as adaptations to a common biological heritage, but they are realized differently in different societies. Cultural enterprises are created rather than "natural," and they sort people into clusters that are separated one from another. Each culture represents achievement—successful accommodation to an environment; therefore each group has an obvious stake in ranking its own achievements high and perceiving its culture as being more in harmony with nature than others. Moreover, the human origins of cultural adaptation are frequently lost to history, and mythological or supernatural explanations for otherwise inexplicable states of affairs are evolved.

Language is special among cultural ventures. It is at once natural and created. Children must learn the peculiar linguistic system created by their culture; yet its acquisition seems natural to them. From our earliest utterances, language distinguishes us from the children of other nations in ways that skin color and eye slant fail to do.

In the realm of knowledge language is unique. No other human enterprise has so long a tradition of analysis. Like the universe itself, language has intrigued philosophers from the time of our earliest recorded speculations. We have Panini's analysis of Sanskrit from the fourth century B.C. and Aristotle's and Plato's reflections on Greek. Today, after these millennia of investigation, language has become the subject of a distinct discipline, whose practitioners acknowledge the limitations of their understanding despite contributions from logic, paleography, archaeology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, biology, neurology, psychology, and acoustics.

Alongside this scholarly endeavor, and often at odds with it, is the wisdom of a still older folk tradition. "In the beginning was the Word," the Evangelist relates. "And the Word was with God. And the Word was God." In Genesis we read that God called the light Day and the darkness Night, that he called the firmament Heaven and the dry land Earth and the waters that were gathered together Seas.

Genesis also provides an explanation for the multitude of tongues in the world. There was at first, after the earth had been populated, one language and one vocabulary. But when the inhabitants of the plain in the land of Shinar started to build a ziggurat "with its top in the heavens," the Lord said, "The people have all one language, . . . and now nothing will be restrained from them. . . . Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one

another's speech." And the city with its tower came to be called Babel, and from there the Lord scattered the people abroad.

Plato's *Cratylus* believed that there exists a right name for every creature, and that, given a right name, others can only be wrong. That view, taken a step further in modern times, sees rightness or wrongness inhering in particular morphological forms and syntactic collocations. Thus, beside right words and sentences there are deviations that mimic real words or are "wrongly" used: *irregardless* is a sham word, and *like* is misused when it masquerades as a conjunction in "like a cigarette should." By further extension of this view there are misspellings like *acomodate* (with a single *m*) and mispronunciations like "*real-a-tor*" (for *re-al-tor*) and grammatical errors like *between you and I*.

If we examine the attitudes of Americans toward their language we find contradictions. We are thought to be purists in our judgments but inelegant in our practice. Americans readily confess to knowing no grammar and sometimes to not speaking English well. Still, we are linguistic chauvinists and fare poorly in the multilingualism that confronts us on the Continent. There is a robustness to our language that Mencken described and celebrated. But there is also a pattern of inhibition, especially in matters of "grammar" and spelling. Linguistically we are an insecure nation, and, like the English and the French, we tend to rely heavily on dictionaries for definitive pronouncements about what is correct. Oddly enough, however, we also have a group of language professionals who insist that the school tradition which has influenced most of us was wrong-headed and has set unrealistic standards of language correctness. The basis for that school grammar, they say, largely ignored the nature of language and linguistic change. Although the views of these linguists have had considerable impact on scholarly opinion in the last seventy-five years, they are often challenged or disregarded by many of the influential people who are responsible for writing and selecting handbooks, discussing language in the popular media, and evaluating the literary output of American culture.

If we ask where American attitudes toward linguistic correctness have come from, we confront contradictory traditions. One is essentially the tradition that infuses the work of modern linguists and lexicographers. It sees language as a convention of society, devoid of inherent rightness or wrongness and governed by the requirements of communication between people. The other is folklorish and classical and perpetuates a view of language that contradicts Locke's analysis of it as a social convention. It envisages language as having an inherent correctness, much as *Cratylus* did, and it regards language change as corruption.

Teachers have been torn between the two approaches—the one descriptive, the other prescriptive, but both normative. Teachers have an obligation to teach what is known of a subject and they also have an obligation to honor the beliefs and evaluations of the society they are representing. In the matter of language, teachers have been accused of failing to meet adequately the demands of either tradition. Linguists have faulted them for propagating the myths of prescriptivism, and guardians of tradition have criticized them for failing to teach the arts of clear writing and eloquent speaking.

In this book I tell the story of a conflict that has been waged in America for over two hundred years, having erupted in England before that. In such a history of attitudes toward “correct English” or “good grammar” I explore a subject of vital interest to English teachers and prospective teachers; and I hope the material will be useful to them. I also hope to persuade the disputants themselves that the claims of neither side are as perversely motivated as has been charged and that both sides have some validity. Thus far, efforts to teach the art and science of the English language have too often been undermined by the obstinate intractability of influential people on both sides of the issues.

Perhaps mere familiarity with the long-standing dispute cannot moderate the views of zealots either conservative or liberal. But it may not be too much to hope that teachers will be more critical of the claims on both sides as a result of such familiarity. And this same perspective may help persuade a wider audience of Americans that if English teachers focus more on literature, effective composition, and language analysis than on particular items of usage, students will derive greater benefit from their English classes than many of us derived from our own.

CHAPTER I

Introduction: Popular and Scholarly Views of “Good English”

“Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should.”

“As, damn it!”—A FIRST-GRADE BOY

“. . . anyone who complains that its use as a conjunction is a corruption introduced by Winston cigarettes ought, in all fairness, to explain how Shakespeare, Keats, and the translators of the Authorized Version of the Bible came to be in the employ of the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company.”

—BERGEN EVANS, 1960

AT ITS PEAK of popularity in the mid-sixties, the advertising slogan “Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should” was denounced by *Saturday Review* magazine. *SR*’s communications editor claimed that, despite its frequent occurrence, *like* “still offends us” when used as a conjunction. The passing of a few weeks saw the editor’s words pale beside the flushed enthusiasm in the applauding letters that swamped his desk. For months afterwards readers wrote in to condemn detested expressions like “Drive Slow” and “I’ll try and go.” Their sentiments ranged from plain gratitude to ecstatic “love” over *Saturday Review*’s “good grammar” campaign.^{1*}

Readers called Winston’s jingle “a cause of shame to its creator,” “an abiding object of scorn,” “a constant reproach,” even a “sin.” A woman from Florida wrote that “Our educable young people need not be demoralized at every turn.” And abstainers found Winston’s grammar “as irritating as tobacco smoke.” It was reported with obvious approval that a posse of vigilantes had torn down and destroyed a *Drive Slow* sign in one American town, while grammatical guardians all across the country were boycotting both Winstons and Tareytons (“Us Tareyton smokers would rather fight than switch”). Some extremists even claimed to have quit smoking altogether—not because of the Surgeon General’s

*Numbered reference notes are gathered at ends of chapters.

hazard warning on every pack, but to punish the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company for flaunting bad grammar!

Some sixty years earlier a similar flood of letters had inundated the American press with objections to Rudyard Kipling's "Recessional"; grammatical sensibilities were aroused by the poet's use of a singular verb with a compound subject: "The tumult and the shouting dies!"² Across the Atlantic, earlier still, the British government in certain treaty negotiations with the United States made concessions on weighty matters like the Alabama claims and the Canadian fisheries but "telegraphed that in the wording of the treaty it would under no circumstances endure the insertion of an adverb between the preposition *to*, the sign of the infinitive, and the verb."³ The faded might of the split infinitive has yielded to the intemperate wrath aroused by *like* as a conjunction. When polled for his opinion on this point of grammar, *New York Times* writer John Kieran replied, "Such things . . . persuade me that the death penalty should be retained."⁴ And poet John Ciardi confessed that he'd rather hear his first-grade son swearing "*As*, damn it!" than using *like* as a conjunction.⁵ More recently, *hopefully* (in the sense "I hope that . . .") has drawn fire from writers in *Newsweek* (February 13, 1978) and *Time* (January 1, 1979) and from Edwin Newman on NBC's "Today" show (November 17, 1978). And *Time* reported on March 26, 1979, that three grammatical hot lines were available to Americans troubled about particular points of usage. (Ironically, only the Arkansas dial-a-grammarian scored a perfect 3 on *Time*'s disguised quiz. The other two hot lines—one of which is provided toll free to Kansans—disappointed *Time*'s reporter with "wrong" answers!) Thus the sometimes sanctimonious support that readers gave to *SR*'s grammatical campaign reflects a common conviction among English speakers on both sides of the Atlantic that of the several ways to say a thing, there is only one right way—and that the wrong ways can be sinfully bad.

Speakers of English have been preoccupied with correct linguistic usage since before our earliest grammars and dictionaries were composed. Some of them call to mind Shakespeare's pedant Holofernes, who railed against pronouncing *doubt* and *debt* as if they had no *b*: "I abhor such fanatical phantasies, such insociable and point-device companions; such rackers of orthography. . . . This is abominable—which he would call abbominable" (*Love's Labour's Lost*, V, i).

Holofernes first uttered his futile detestations a decade before America had its earliest permanent English settlement. Four centuries later, on this side of the Atlantic, a truly extraordinary reaction against "fanatical phantasies" burst forth, and it shook the literate world. In 1961, shortly after the G. & C. Merriam Company published *Webster's Third New*