



Attitudes toward Usage: Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

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Attitudes toward Usage: Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

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In the United States two distinct trends can be identified in respect of language attitudes, as in many other parts of the world. One trend is *prescriptive* and the other is *descriptive*. It seems that the conflict between the two trends are more bitter than in England and other European countries. This may be because (1) the United States lacks a hereditary upper class whose language the general public are expected to depend on for their standard of correctness and (2) attempts to control usage through an organized agency have never been received with enthusiasm. For lack of the codified standard, they are, it is said, plagued with a sense of linguistic insecurity. They therefore seek for other agreed and established norms of standard, and to cater to such demands, there has emerged a group of "usage critics" or "usage commentators" who they themselves believe are, though not officially sanctioned, authoritative enough to be custodians of language. Strongly opposed to them are those who contend that it is usage that governs correctness and that "no book, no academy, no group of any chosen few has the power to dictate."

In this paper we will look briefly at the controversies between the two camps and discuss the types of divided usage and criteria the usage critics depend on for their judgments. It will be pointed out that it is important for EFL speakers to have a knowledge of the facts of ENL speakers' usage and the (educated) ENL speakers'

attitudes to them, because in EFL countries, where there exists no educationally-acceptable localized form of English, the presumed standard is that of ENL speakers (cf. Strevens 1985).

1. Prescriptivism vs. Descriptivism

As mentioned above, there are two groups which are on opposite sides in respect of attitudes to usage, specifically divided (or disputed) usage. One group consist of those who call themselves "word watchers," or "language custodians," represented by E. Newman, J. Simon, J. Harris, R. Mitchell and many others. With a few exceptions, they are mostly writers, columnists, critics and editors.⁽¹⁾ Their media are therefore television talk shows and language columns in such periodicals as *The New York Times*, *Esquire*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Saturday Review*. Some are authors of custodian books on usage: Newman: *Strictly Speaking* (1978)/*A Civil Tongue* (1976), Mitchell: *Less Than Words Can Say*, Simon: *Paradigms Lost* (1980) and Safire: *On Language* (1980).

Since (1) they are concerned with laying down rules of correctness as to how English should be used, depending on such criteria as purity, logic, history, economy or literary excellence and (2) the norms of usage they insist on are mostly based on what seems to be a caprice of taste and prejudice rather than the facts of usage, they are often jokingly called "usageesters"⁽²⁾ (Algeo: 1982), "pop grammarians" (Quinn: 1980), "shamans" (Bolinger: 1984), "gatekeepers of language" (Baron: 1982), "dedicated tiders-up of language" (Pyles: 1975) "vigilant knights in search of dragon" (Penelope: 1985)

(1) It is since about 1975 that these modern usage commentators entered the stage as language custodians (cf. Douglass: 1982). Before that the custodial duty was performed by schoolmarms generally known as *Miss Fidditch* and *Miss Thistlebottom*.

(2) Originally used by Tom Clark

and so forth. To borrow Safire's (1980), terms they are "activists for clarity, prescribing the usage that helps a string of words make more sense." The activists are of two types: the *traditional activist* who resists change in language and the *libertarian activist* who cheers on one usage if it appeals to his own taste, but hoots at it if it does not.

The other group is comprised of such linguistic specialists as lexicographers, philologists, grammarians and dialectologists, most of whom are active members of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and American Dialect Society (ADS). Their papers usually appear in such periodicals as *College English (CE)*, *College Composition and Communication (CCC)* and *American Speech (AS)*. Recently Greenbaum (1985) carried several papers which criticize the prescriptive views some usage critics take to language.⁽⁴⁾ It is interesting to note that, in contrast to the flourishing "popular usage industry" (see p. 53), there have been surprisingly few numbers

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- (3) Other pejorative terms sometimes used are "usage dictator," "word wizard," "language maven," "nit-picking pedant," "purist busybody" etc. Mitchell (1979) calls himself *the underground grammarian* and Safire (1980) *The Great Permitter*. Though not recorded in any dictionaries, *usagian* and *usagist* are sometimes used in the neutral sense (cf. Laird : 1981).
- (4) In the 1940's and 1950's structural linguists such as Fries, Hill, Francis and many others advocated descriptivism, denouncing school (or traditional) grammar as *prescientific*. Their papers are assembled in the following linguistic readers : E. M. Kerr & R. M. Aderman (eds) *Aspects of American English* (Harcourt, Brace & World : 1971²), H. B. Allen (ed.) *Readings in Applied English Linguistics* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), V. P. Clark, P. A. Eschholz & A. F. Rosa (eds.) *Language* (St Martin's, 1977²), B. Kottler & M. Light (eds.); *The World of Words* (Houghton Mifflin, 1967), W. L. Anderson & N. C. Stageberg (eds.) : *Introductory Readings on Language* (Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1970³), L. F. Dean, G. Gibson & K. J. Wilson (eds.) : *The Play of Language* (OUP, 1971), D. L. Shores (ed.) : *Contemporary English : Change and Variation* (J. B. Lippincott, 1972), W. L. Anderson & N. C. Stageberg (eds.) : *Introductory Readings in Language* (Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1975⁴)

of books ever published in the area of scholastic usage studies. The recent publications in the 1970's and 1980's are limited to the following: J. J. Lamberts: *A Short Introduction to English Usage* (1972), R. E. Morsburger: *Commonsense Grammar and Style* (1972), J. Crueswell: *Usage in Dictionaries and Dictionaries of Usage* (1975), Finnegan: *Attitudes toward English Usage* (1980), Baron: *Grammar and Taste* (1982). To these can be added two more books, *Language—The Loaded Weapon* (1980) by D. Bolinger, who is, as pointed out by Baron (1982:239), “one of the few professional linguists to enter the discussion of present-day language abuse,” and *American Tongue and Cheek* (1980) by Jim Quinn. Though he is not a linguist but a poet, satirist and food columnist, he expresses his distaste to the dogmatic attitudes of the “usage experts” more strongly than anyone else.

(5) Works on usage in the United States can be further classified into three types: (1) scholarly studies of actual usage (e.g. M. Bryant: *Current American Usage* (1962)/C. C. Fries: *American English Grammar* (1940)/*The Brown University Corpus of American English* (1962). The project of *Survey of American English Usage*, comparable to the London Survey of English Usage, is discussed in *PADS* 71. (2) surveys of language attitudes by means of questionnaires (e.g. J. L. Hill, *English Usage* (1971)/S. A. Leonard: *English Usage* (1932)/*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1969)/*Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* (1975, 1985²)). Small-scale surveys are very common. Two of them will be cited here: E. Anderson (1981) “Language and success” (*College English* 43) and M. Hairston (1981) “Not all errors are created equal. Nonacademic readers in the professions respond to lapses in usage” (*College English* 43). Anderson interviewed 35 potential and actual employers and asked them to listen to the tapes of standard and non-standard English to find out whether a particular dialect or a particular use of language is necessary for the functions of the jobs or whether the employer wants the employes to use standard English only for reasons of prestige or because the employer shares certain stereotypical assumptions about the competence of people who use nonstandard English. Hairston submitted 66 items of controversial usage to 84 people with hiring capacities to find how those people respond to those who use particular usages. (3) popular guidebooks on usage (see p. 53).

Since they emphasize the importance of a descriptively accurate study of usage and take a view that usage governs correctness, this view often leads to the assumption that any pronunciation and expression people use become automatically right and acceptable, no matter how they may deviate from the conventional norms of standard. They are therefore often mockingly referred to by their adverse critics as advocates of “a hands-off, anything-goes laxity,” or “whatever-is-is-right approach.” To these accusations, the descriptive linguists counter that any pronunciation and linguistic form are good or right as long as it is appropriate at a given speech level—appropriate to the occasion, the purpose and the audience involved. This concept of appropriateness advocated by those under the influence of structural linguistics in the 1950's and 1960's in the United States seems to have much in common with recent notions of “communicative competence”, more specifically ⁽⁶⁾ “appropriacy” and ⁽⁷⁾ “social competence”. Let's look at the definition of “good English” Pooley (1946) gives :

Good English is that form of speech which is appropriate to the purpose of the speaker, true to the language as it is, and comfortable to speaker and hearer. It is the product of custom neither cramped by rule nor freed from all restraints: it is never fixed but changes with the organic life of the language.

Pooley asserts that “badness” or “goodness” is not absolutely or inherently in language itself, but it depends entirely on the purpose of communication and the occasion and the audience. He proposes relativism as the doctrine of usage against prescriptivism which claims that there is an absolute standard of correctness and that any

(6) H. C. Widdowson (1979) : *Teaching Language as Communication* (OUP), p. 2.

(7) W. Edmondson (1981) : *Spoken Discourse* (Longman), pp. 7-8

expression that does not conform to that standard is wrong. *Communicative competence* was originally proposed by Hymes (1970)⁽⁸⁾ and Campbell & Wales (1970)⁽⁹⁾ in the arguments for extending the concept of “grammatical competence’ to cover the ability to use language to communicative effects.

To be more accurate, it is “the native speaker’s ability to produce and understand sentences which are appropriate to the context in which they occur—what he needs to know in order to communicate effectively in socially distinct settings.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Although there is no evidence to point to a line from Pooley to modern linguists, it is interesting to be noted, the two concepts are much the same in that they regard appropriateness as an essential part of communication.

The controversy between the two camps reached its peak in the furor over the publication of *Webster’s Third New International* (1962), which is exclusively concerned with describing the facts of usage as they are. It caused vehement reactions among the members of the first group who believe that a dictionary is not a mere record of language but it should be an authority on it. They mounted attacks on *Webster’s Third* in newspaper editorials and magazine articles. These reactions against the “permissive policy” triggered a publication of series of usage handbooks designed deliberately to counteract the “pernicious liberalism” of *Webster’s Third*. The uproar and indignation did not subside even in the 1970’s and 1980’s and the publication of popular guidebooks of usage continued:⁽¹¹⁾

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- (8) D. Hymes (1970): “On communicative competence,” In J. Lyons (ed.) (1970): *New Horizon in Linguistics* (Penguin)
- (9) R. Campbell & R. Wales (1970): “The study of language acquisition,” in J. B. Pride & J. Holms (eds.): *Sociolinguistics; Selected Readings* (Penguin) (1972)
- (10) The definition is from D. Crystal (1985): *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (Blackwell), p. 59.
- (11) *Webster’s Third* also had great impact on lexicography (→).

N. M. Mager & S. K. Mager : *Encyclopedic Dictionary of English Usage* (1974), H. Shaw : *Say it Right* (1971)/*Dictionary of Problem Words and Expressions* (1975), P. Martin : *Word Watcher's Handbook* (1977), T. M. Bernstein : *Miss Thistlebottom's Hobgoblins* (1971)/*Dos, Don'ts & Maybes of English Usage*, J. B. Bremner : *Words on Words* (1980) and R. H. Copperud : *American Usage and Style ; The Consensus* (1980)

To crown them all were *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1966) with about 600 usage notes on "how to use the language, prepared with assistance of more than a hundred of America's most notable writers, editors, and public speakers,"⁽¹²⁾ *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* (1975) with "piercing, perceptive and witty comments from 136 outstanding writers and editors from Auden and Asimov to Tuchman, Viort and Wouk," and the Revised Edition of *HDCU* (1985) including "piercing, perceptive

(→) Various problems concerning dictionaries are discussed in J. S. Sledd & W. Ebbitt (eds.) : *Dictionaries and That Dictionary* (Scott, Foresman, 1962), J. C. Gray (ed.) : *Words, Wrods and Words about Dictionaries* (Chandler, 1963), P. B. Gove (ed.) : *The Role of the Dictionary* (Bobbs Merrill, 1967), H. D. Weinbrot (ed.) : *New Aspects of Lexicography* (Southern Illinois UP, 1972) and R. I. McDavid & A. R. Duckert (eds.) : *Lxicography in English* (New York Academy of Sciences, 1973). For arguments for and against *Webster's Third*, see especially Sledd & Ebbitt (1962) and Gray (1963).

(12) It is pointed out by some linguists that the composition of the Usage Panel is biased. A third of the Panel is said to be those known to be prescriptive in their attitudes to language (cf. Ryan : 1970) and the average age of the Panel is 64 (Wolk : 1972). The Panel contains only four linguists, M. W. Bloomfield, C. Watkins, B. Bishop and Mario Pei, none of whom have been, according to Ryan, active to a notable extent in the area of popular usage. As far as I know, Bloomfield wrote two papers in the area of popular usage : "The problem of fact and valence in the teaching of English" (*College English* 15 (1953)) and "The question of correctness" in Greenbaum (ed.). In the latter paper, he proposes a "sensible prescriptivism" along the lines explored by G. Numberg. Bloomfield can be identified as what Safire calls "libertarian activist."

and witty comments from a distinguished panel of language experts—166 outstanding writers, editors, news broadcasters and others concerned with our language and how we use it, from Jane Alexander and Isaac Asimov to Barbara Tuchman and William Zinsser.”

2. Types of Divided Usage

The members of the first group are also called “death-of-English writers” (Stalker : 1985) or “Cassandras” (Howard : 1984), because they usually take a pessimistic view that English has been polluted or corrupted to the extent that it is on the verge of death. Unlike old-time purists, however, modern usage critics are willing to admit that change in language is inevitable, but unlike descriptive linguists, they tend to distinguish *malign* changes from *benign* ones, according to their taste and preference. One of the most remarkable linguistic changes taking place in present-day English is, according to Howard (1984 : 119ff), simplification—the loss of distinction between (pseudo-) synonyms or (near-)homonyms. The following disputable pairs are those submitted by William and Mary Morris to the *HDCU*² Usage Panel and treated with Usage Panel Question notes. Some are highly controversial and have been hotly debated (e.g. *ain’t*, *like*, *hopefully*); others are less controversial and less emotionally charged.

admittance/admission	hopefully/it is hoped
ain’t/isn’t etc.	host/co-host
all right/alright	human/human being
among/between	important/importantly
bad/badly	less/fewer
bimonthly/semimonthly	like/as
bring/take	masterful/masterly

bug/irritate	nauseated/nauseous
bug/wiretrap	not too good/not too bright
careen/career	number/routine/bit
convince/persuade	of/for ; we/us
could care less/could not care less	one/he
craft/create	over/more than
disinterested/uninterested	partially/partly
enormity/enormousness	precipitate/precipitous
ensure/insure	premiere/debut
farther/further	raise/rise
first two/two first	sensuous/sensual
flammable/inflammable	slow/slowly
flare/flair	spend/pass
flaunt/flout	that/which
fund/finance	Welsh rabbit/rarebit
graffiti/graffito	
groom/bridegroom	
hanged/hung	

To the usage commentators, the loss of semantic and syntactic distinction is for the most part *malign*, because it would lead to the loss of the number of shades of meaning and the hindrance to clarity, simplicity and discriminating taste. The loss of distinction is, according to Bush (1972), “an ugly debasement of our great heritage, partly because sloppy English is a symptom and agent of sloppy thinking and feeling and of sloppy communication and confusion.” Thus linguistic change is, it is to be noted, seen as mental or moral deterioration. In other words, deviation from the alleged norms is evidence of general cultural decay. This view may account for the

fact that usage critics are sometimes referred to as “self-ordained priest” (Stalker : 1985). In order to prevent this linguistic and moral corruption, they must preserve and nurture the niceties and fine distinctions that have been handed down. Those who are indifferent to the distinction between, say, *disinterested* and *uninterested* are, to borrow Simon’s (1980) terms, the sort of people who “destroy a beautiful old building just because it has decorative elements on its facade and replace it with a square box because it is a simpler box.”

To these charges, descriptivists would counter that words can cease to be used in the sense in which they have been used and that such changes neither weaken the language nor push it to the brink of death. In the case of the *disinterested* vs. *uninterested* dispute, the use of *disinterested* (=impartial) in the sense of *uninterested* (=unconcerned) would not cause any trouble at all, because English has plenty of alternative modes of expression which can substitute for *disinterested* in the original sense such as *objective*, *impartial*, *unprejudiced*, *neutral*, *unbiased*, *dispassionate*, *detached*, *impersonal*, *with open mind*, and many others (Creswell : 1982).

At this point, it would be worth noting that in recent years there has been much talk about “simplifying” or “tidying up” tendencies in English initiated by the users of the “outer circles” as well as those of the “inner circles”—tendencies for English to shed off many of the phonological, grammatical and lexical complexities that will make it difficult for EFL speakers to learn. Swan (1985), for instance, even predicts a possible loss of the distinction between the present perfect and the past tenses, and between *can*, *may* and *might*, *have to* and *must*. (See also Howard 1984 : 119ff).

As is evident from the discussion above, modern usage critics are fully qualified as members of what Bremner calls *the OMIOM Academy* (OMIOM=Original Meaning Is the Only Meaning). They

are therefore allergic to semantic extensions of words. For instance, they are not willing to accept the extended meaning of *alibi* on the ground that it is merely a pretentious and unneeded addition to the language. They cannot, of course, object to all changes in meaning. Their objections are more or less limited to those that have only recently taken place. The most conservative member of the OMIOM Academy, for instance, would not condemn the modern senses of *nice*. In such cases they give up fighting because the battle has already been lost. In the case of *alibi* in the extended sense, half of the HDCU² Usage Panel judges approve of it because “it has for so long been used in the meaning of ‘excuse’ that even we purists might as well admit defeat,” (P. McGinley), or because “the battle was lost before I could protest.” (E. Star). It is worthy of note that they approve of the semantic extension of *alibi* not because it is the fact of usage but because it is a lost cause. Let’s look at how the HDCU² Usage Panel members react to other cases where various semantic extensions occur. The figure in the rightmost column shows the percentage of the Panelists who approve of the use of the extended sense, mainly in the register of writing.

word	original meaning	extended meaning	rate
aggravate	make worse	exasperate, vex	43
awesome	inspiring awe	overwhelming (without reverential connotation)	44
bit	a small piece	speciality, distinctive behavior	32
burgeon	bud	mushroom, expand rapidly	39
cohort	one of the ten divisions of a Roman legion	comrade, associate	43
deja vu	the illusion of having at some time in the past experienced something that is actually happening for the first time	things known in the past and now rediscovered	36

diction	a choice of words	enunciation	61
dilemma	a choice between evenly balanced alternatives	acute problem	29
fulsome	(full, abundant →) offensive to good taste	full, abundant (without pejorative connotation)	16
gambit	“technical” (chess)	“non-technical” opening move	59
hectic	flushed, feverish (with medical connotation)	characterised by excitement, wild activity, confusion or haste	78
holocaust	a burnt offering → great destruction by fire	any destruction	37
illiterate	not able to read or write	ignorant, stupid	32
image	reflection	the concept of someone or something that is held by the public	28
incident	a minor or trivial occurrence	any event, happening	66
interface	“technical” (physics)	“non-technical” boundary	0
internecine	mutually destructive	of or relating to struggle within a group	64
luck out	become a causality in a military action	have a run of good luck	74
meaningful	full of meaning, significant	useful, fruitful, real	30
momentarily	(in a moment →) for a moment	in a moment	60
orchestrate	“technical” (music)	“non-technical” arrange, combine	40
parameter	“technical” (mathematics)	“non-technical” characteristic element	5
personality	aggregate of qualities that make a person an individual	celebrity	21
pinch hit	“technical” (baseball)	“non-technical” substitute for another in an emergency	70
prestigious	having prestige	dazzling	67

track record	“technical” (athletics)	“non-technical” any record of performance	51
traspire	everporate	perspire	23
underclass	the lowest societal stratum	(euphemism for) the poor	49

Functional shift and back-formation are also those linguistic phenomena which have drawn critic fire. As expected, the members of the OMIOM Academy do not like the use of nouns as verbs. As shown below, however, what governs the acceptability rate is not clear. At first sight, the rate is closely related with how further the new verbal use dates back, but this is not a decisive factor. According to *Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*, for instance, *critique* in the sense of *criticize* dates as far back as to 1751, but its acceptability rate is much lower than that of *parent* whose verbal use dates back only to 1963. Whether it is a significant addition to the language or a needless one seems depend wholly on the aesthetic and linguistic sense of the HDCU judges: *parent* is meaningful because it is sex-neutral and it therefore can do other than what the sex-specific *mother* and *father* can do. *Critique* is, on the other hand, needless because it is merely a synonym for *criticize* or *review* and has therefore nothing to do as a verb.

	yes (writing)	yes (speech)
contact	35	63
author	10	22
critique	7	13
impact	5	8
gift	5	
parent	39	
up	24	62

For the same reason, they are not willing to accept the functional shift from intransitive to transitive verbs and vice versa.

	yes (writing)	yes (speech)
boast	56	
cope	30	62
graduate	10	15

A similar observation could be made on their attitudes toward back-formation, derivation deviant from the derivational process which they believe is normal. As shown below, the majority of the HDCU² members accept *defenstrate* on the ground that there is no single verb which denotes ‘throw (a person or something) out of the window’ and it is therefore a meaningful addition to the language. *Commentate*, *incentivise* and *prioritize* are wholly rejected by the judges because they are, in the eye of the judges, merely “ugly” and “barbarous” synonyms for *comment*, *motivate* and *list* or *rate in order of priority* respectively. *Enthuse*, *finalize* and *mirandize* still linger at an stage of very low acceptability.

	yes (writing)	yes (speech)
commentate	0	0
defenstrate	63	
enthuse	14	24
finalize	14	26
mirandize	23	
incentivize	0	2
prioritize	1	

In choosing between foreign and English plural forms, the modern usage critics naturally prefer the original Latin or Greek

plurals to the Anglicized ones. However, they are, on the whole, tolerant to the loss of distinction. *Agenda*, for instance, originally a plural noun but now so fully established as a singular noun followed by a singular verb that the Morris did not take the trouble to submit it to the HDCU² Usage Panel to vote on it. *Data*, *insignia* and *media* as a singular, which are all submitted to the Panel, seems to have been following a similar path, though they still linger at an intermediate stage.

	yes (writing)	yes (speech)
data	49	65
insignia	68	
media	30	30

Data may deserve special mention. Meyers (1972) demonstrates the unstable status of this word quoting the following instances from the Brown University Corpus :

- (1) Another example of his very infrequent use of the large *amount of data*...He concludes that *these data*....
- (2) In contrast all *this primary data are* data of....

In (1) the use of *amount* rather than *number* indicates that the word *data* is analyzed as an uncountable mass noun. *These data* in the following sequence, however, contradicts this analysis. The plural demonstrative *these* shows that it is also analyzed by the same writer as a plural collective noun. In (2), it is to be noted, *data* occurs with the singular demonstrative *this* and is followed by the plural verb *are*.

It is also quite natural that they tend to condemn such a collocation as *very unique* as redundant because the original meaning of *unique* is "being the only one" and it is therefore non-gradable. This reasoning is very logical, but from a descriptive

point of view it seems unconvincing. According to *Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*, *unique* has acquired an extended meaning "unusual" beyond the original one. Descriptively, there is therefore no problem in the collocation of *unique* in the sense of *unusual* with such degree adverbs as *very*, *rather* and *most*. By the same logic the majority of the HDCU² Usage Panel members do not like *most unique* but, for some reason or other, they are not so critical of other "redundant" collocations, admitting that usage does not always follow logic.

	yes (writing)	yes (speech)
consensus of opinion	91	
completely destroyed	51	
(among the) foremost violinists	59	72
near-perfect	52	
most unique	11	24

As we have seen, divided usage is mostly concerned with vocabulary, but it is also concerned with some aspects of syntax. The hot grammatical issues in usage are *prepositions at the end of a sentence*, *split infinitives*, *dangling modifiers*, *double negatives* and *disagreement in number* (as in *Everybody took off their hats.*). All of these have had long battles, often lasting a century or so; some have gained acceptance and others have not. Of these constructions above, the first two have been criticized because they are inconsistent with the rules of Latin-based English grammar (cf. Sundby : 1985) and the last three have been stigmatized on the ground that they are illogical. Only two of them, prepositions at the end of a sentence and dangling modifiers, were submitted to the HDCU² Usage Panel. 80 percent of the members demonstrate their departure from "Latinized prescriptions of the nineteenth century" by

accepting the use of a preposition at the end of a sentence. As for the dangling modifier, 64 percent of the judges disapprove of such an “illogical” construction as;

“Distinguished public servant, exemplar for the United States Foreign Service, tireless seeker of peace, your work in arduous posts around the globe has repeatedly demonstrated.”

The other items were not submitted to the Panel. But this does not mean William and Mary Morris dismiss them as fully established. The double negative is described as “illiterate” and the disagreement in number (e.g. Everyone should stay in their seats.) is regarded as “inaccurate,” though the split infinitive receives almost full support from the Morris.

As pointed out above, the modern usage commentators tend to sniff decay in every shift of meaning or alternation of usage. Therefore they naturally object to the reforms advocated by Women Liberationists. To them, such reforms do nothing but “distort and corrupt further the language already savaged by the Establishment politicians” (Sisman : 1972). The feminist attack on words is “only another social crime—one against the means and the hope of communication.” (Kanfer : 1972). Strange enough, however, William and Mary Morris and the HDCU¹ Usage Panel members are descriptive rather than emotional in discussing this matter. The Morris submitted *Ms* to the Panel and solicited the following responses :

Panelist EAN STAFFORD reports that when she receives an enveloped addressed to her as *Ms*. she marks it, “Not acceptable to addressee. Return to sender”—after first checking to see if there is a check inside.

1. Do you share preference for the established forms of address for women?

Yes: 70%. No: 30%.

2. Do you use *Ms.* in correspondence?

Yes: 56%. No: 44%.

3. Solely to women whose marital status is unknown to you?

Yes: 45%. No: 55%.

4. To women regardless of marital status?

Yes: 21%. No: 79%.

5. Do you ever use *Ms.* (pronounced “Mizz”) as a spoken form of address?

Yes: 19%. No: 81%.

They also submitted it to the HDCU² Panel and obtained much the same responses as the first ones.

Do you regard *Ms.* as what *Vanity Fair* used to call “a candidate for oblivion”?

Yes: 48%. No: 52%.

Do you feel that it has become established as valuable for use in business correspondence? Yes: 88%. No: 42%.

In social correspondence? Yes: 29%. No: 71%.

What form of address do you use when writing to a woman whose marital status is unknown to you? Please check your preference: Dear Ms. Doe: 42%. Dear Miss Doe: 16%. Dear Jane Doe: 42%. Or do you have some other solution to the salutation problem?

For no obvious reasons, W and M Morris did not submit to the Panel *chairperson* and other sex-neutral substitutes for the words ending in *-man* proposed during the feminist movement of the 1970s.

Under *chair/chairman/chairwoman/chairperson*, they only say:

Until the growth of the Women’s Movement, the word *chairman* was used as a matter of course to designate anyone who is in charge of a meeting or a committee, although the term *chairwoman* was not unknown. Because of the protests of feminists to

the use of *chairman* for both men and women, many publications adopted the term *chairperson* when the sex was unknown and used *chairman* only when appropriate.

With the feeling that *chairperson* is an awkward word, we suggest the use of the simple word *chair* to cover all situations.

It may be worth noting that, though consistent in their opposition to the use of *they* as a singular pronoun to refer to such indefinite pronouns as *everybody* and *somebody*, W and M Morris are not consistent in their attitude to the sex-indefinite substitutes for *they*. Under *everyone/everybody*, they suggest the use of the masculine-biased pronoun *his* (seat) for *their* (seats) in "*Everyone* should stay in *their seats*" or recasting it into "All persons should stay in their seats." Under *anybody/anyone*, however, they claim that *thier* in "*Anyone* who tries to descend the Grand Canyon on foot must be out of *their* mind" should be singular "his" or "her". Here, it is to be noted, they recommend either *his* or *her*, not *his or her*. Under *he/she/him/his/her*, they change their attitude again. In "*Anyone* who cross that road on foot takes *his* life into *his* hands," the only solution to date is, they say, to use "his or her" or "he or she". Here they recommend the clumsy, but sex-indefinite form.⁽¹³⁾

(13) Many proposals have been made for sex-neutral pro-forms; *co/E/et* (a combination of *e* of *he* and *she* and *t* of *it*)/*hesh* (a combination of *he* and *she*)/*hir/Jhe/na/person/thon/hey* (a reduction of *they*)/*mef* (a combination of *m* for *male* and *f* for *female*)/*ze/s/he/w/*. The last one (whose objective case is *wm* and the possessive *ws* and the reflexive *uself*) is proposed by J. B. Sykes (cf. *ET* 1 and *ET* 3). As pointed out by the Morris, however, even the feminists themselves have failed to come up with a single word which satisfies their need. They seek for another solution by attaching provisos in their writing such as; "The reader should be advised that when I use the word "man" or the masculine pronouns "he" or "him," I am referring to all human beings, both male and female, not just males. I do not always use "he" and "him" instead of "he and she" or "him and her," my choice of which

The final issue we are going to discuss is jargon. Simon (1979) speaks of two types of pressures which cause linguistic changes—the pressure from below and the pressure from above. The changes we have so far discussed—simplification, semantic extension, back-formation and functional shift—can be classified as those brought about by the pressure from below. In this area of usage, the two groups are mostly on opposite sides. The descriptive group emphasizes the “development function” of the language while the prescriptive group stresses the “maintenance function” (Stalker, 1985). In respect of the changes from above, the spread and proliferation of jargon, however, the two camps seem to share much in common. There is no doubt that anyone, whether his attitude to language is prescriptive or descriptive, will prefer plain and intelligible locutions to wordy, pretentious and unintelligible ones. As suggested by Bush (1972) anyone would prefer Nelson’s encouraging remarks “England expect that every man will do his duty” to the gibberish version “England anticipates that as regards the current emergency, persons will face up to the issues and exercise appropriately the functions allocated to their respective occupation groups.” However the situation would radically change with the users of jargon such as

to use in a given sentence being determined solely by stylistic considerations.” [M. J. Adler (1983) : *How to Speak : How to Listen*. p. 8.] “A word about the use in this book of “he” as a neuter pronoun. Some linguists and feminist writers have alleged that, in many cases of actual usage, *he* or *him*, used with ostensible neutrality, in fact refers to men only. They are right. Although I do not agree that the motive is deliberately to exclude women from notice, it certainly does perform this function. The real causes are tradition, as well as ignorance or indifference on the part of most writers, whether male or female. For example, here is an instance in which the masculine pronoun is presumptively neutral but clearly implies gender: ‘This interesting and growing phenomenon permits a teacher to construct his course materials to his liking without having to depend on the approach of another man’s textbook.’”¹ [S. I. Landau (1984) : *Dictionaries : The Art and Craft of Lexicography*. p. 3.]

politicians, bureaucrats and public figures, because it can be a useful means “to conceal a lack of ideas or give thin ones impressive authority,” (Bush : 1972) It can be used as “a mask of limited ability in the technique of discursive thought.” It can “paper over an unpalatable truth” and “advance the career of the speaker (or the issue, cause or product he is an agent for) by a kind of verbal sleight of hand, a one-upmanship of which the reader or listener is victim.” Sissman (1972) coins the term *plastic English* : since English is made of plastic it can be easily “deformed continuously and permanently in any direction. In spite of the plain English movement (cf. Redich : 1985), this plastic deformation of English is, according to Sissman, *pandemic* now. Various terms have been coined and used to describe and criticize the proliferation of jargon both in the United States and England : “Deseased English” by K. Hudson (1976) : *The Dcitionary of Deseased English* and (1983) : *The Dictionary of Even More Deseased English*, “Doublespeak” by W. Lambdin (1979) : *Doublespeak Dictionary*, “Weasel word” by Mario Pei (1978) : *Weseal Words/P*. Howard (1978) : *Weseal Wrods*, “Gobbledygook” by J. O’Hayre (1980) : *Gobbledygook Has Gotta Go*, “Doubletalk” by H. Rawson (1983) : *A Dictionary of Euphemisms & Other Doubletalk* and “Newspeak” by G. Orwell (1949) : *Nineteen Eighty-Four*/J. Green (1984) : *Newspeak : A Dictionary of Jargon*.

Conclusion

So far we have looked at the categories of “errors” and discussed the criteria the usage critics depend on for their acceptance or rejection of these “errors.” In the eye of descriptive linguists, these criteria are of course far from scientific or systematic. There will be nothing problematic if the usage commentators concentrate on their own usage and try to control it based on their own

linguistic taste. The fact is, however, that they believe that they are authoritative enough to control others' usage. Furthermore, they seem to believe that, by correcting other people's usage, they can also correct their character and intelligence.

As pointed out above, what the general public—literate middle class—are interested in is not how language is used but how it should be used. This feeling of linguistic insecurity is nothing new. It is said to have been with them since the colonial times and it is as strong today as ever in the United States where, with no hereditary upper class norms in existence, language plays a very important part in social life and serves as a means of gaining higher social status. To be free from the constant worry about their error and concern for correctness, they must be kept informed of the attitudes the educated speakers take toward particular usages, and this mania for correctness will often result in hypercorrection—another source of error and another source of linguistic insecurity.

The situation would differ with EFL speakers. If they make “errors”, they tend to be less condemned because they are, as it were, heathens who have never heard “a gospel.” (Bolinger 1981: 301). For EFL speakers as heathens, it would be important to take a neutral view of the controversies between the two camps and grasp a deep understanding of the actual state of language and the language attitudes as an indispensable part of the linguistic reality so that they can make their own choice based on sound information. We should keep it in mind that too much attention to the usage experts' opinions will interfere with the task of developing communicative competence whereas total ignorance of their opinions will cause some trouble in communicative interaction, especially in formal written communication. It would also be important to have a historical knowledge of English. It will make us aware that some

of the "incorrect" usages today were altogether acceptable at other stages in the history and that some were, in fact, more "logical" than the corresponding forms which are "correct" today.

We should be also aware of the variation between prescribed and spontaneous usages, to put it another way, the difference between opinion and practice: people do not always write the way they think they write, even people as aware of language as the editors of dictionaries. William Morris, the editor-in-chief of AHD whom, we have often referred to in the forgoing discussion, is not an exception. In praise of the great OED, he wrote:

The reason such a job won't be done again is simply because nobody can afford it...[Morris 1969]

The sequence *the reason is because* is one of the hottest issues in English usage and Morris himself warns in his HDCU² that "a sentence beginning with *the reason* should be completed with a noun clause introduced by *that*."

Finally it should be noted that with its global expansion, English is now undergoing changes historically unprecedented. Two conflicting forces, centrifugal forces pulling English apart and central forces making English the world language, are making the traditional dichotomy of *native* and *non-native* users irrelevant. It would be essential to reconsider the traditional concept of *correctness* in terms of new perspectives for linguistic norms of the users of 'the expanding circle.'

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