

Prescriptivism and Usage. Spring 2004. Handout 1.

1. Two basic values:

Variety: It's a good thing for there to be lots of ways of saying/writing the same thing.
[This value favors **innovation**. In political terms, this value is fostered by **liberty**.]

Uniformity: It's a good thing for everyone to say/write things the same way.
[This value favors **conservatism**. In political terms, this value is fostered by **authority**.]

Both of these values are "right", but they're in direct conflict. How to balance them?

2. Some specific "communicative values", useful qualities in language:

a. Ease/brevity:

Reduce number and complexity of articulatory gestures

a col' day in hell

Reduce redundancy

use *who* instead of *whom*

Omit material that can be supplied from context

Saw Sammie last night.

b. Clarity/transparency:

Avoid ambiguity

I saw only/even a dog. instead of *I only/even saw a dog.*

Supply redundancy

She is happy. vs. *They are happy.*

Supply explicit marks of structure

I know (that) pigs can't fly.

Parcel out separate bits of meaning in separate bits of form

I (will) leave at dawn. I saw nine or ten dogs. vs. *I saw nine, ten dogs.*

c. Politeness, especially via indirection

Would you mind leaving now?

d. Expressiveness, especially via metaphors and metonymies

My baboon of a brother thinks he's sliced bread.

The New York Times is in Times Square.

e. Regularity/analogy/systematicity

hisself and *theirselves*

f. Euphony, e.g. shorter before longer

Tom and Jerry, law and order

g. Iconicity, e.g. reflect temporal or spatial order in linguistic ordering;

mention the more (culturally) significant item first

Join the Army and see the world.

boys and girls

Again, these qualities are often in conflict. You can't have it all.

3. Some central facts about language and how it's acquired and passed on:

Central fact 1: Language, both spoken and written, is mind-bogglingly complex.
[vocabulary; pronunciation; grammar -- syntax and morphology.]

Central fact 2: Language is produced and comprehended in very brief periods of time, almost entirely without conscious reflection.

Central fact 3: In every language, there is enormous variation, both within the speech/writing of one person, and between those of different people.

Central fact 4: You go on what you hear/read (nobody has direct access to the linguistic systems of other people).

Central fact 5: Communicatively useful stuff is tenacious.

Central fact 6: Language is acquired, and maintained, in a "local" community.

Central fact 7: Socially meaningful stuff is tenacious.

7a. Display your social group memberships via language:

Talk like people you think are like you,
and avoid talking like people you think are not like you.

7b. Use linguistic choices to display aspects of your personality,
your immediate interactional goals, etc.

4. Where does language live?

Exteriority: Language exists separate from, and outside of, individual people and groups.

Language in Heaven: We learn about the "true" language by revelation, and/or by reasoning from first principles.

Language by Legislation: The "true" language is articulated by experts, who function not unlike legislators or judges.

Interiority: Languages exist only in individuals and in social groups. We learn about what a language is like by observing what variants people use in what contexts and what effects those choices have on hearers/readers.

The "folk ideology" of language takes exteriority as a given; professional linguists almost universally assume interiority.

5. The literature of analysis: dictionaries, scholarly reference grammars (the Jespersen tradition), descriptions of particular varieties, descriptions of particular features

The literature of advice: complaints (don't do this!), authoritative usage advice (the Fowler tradition), grammar and usage manuals for students, style manuals for authors and editors, advice on effective writing and/or speaking.