

Prescriptivism and Usage. Spring 2004. Handout 6.

1. Sixth assignment.

For SIS course, for 12 May: Submit a short proposal for a final paper, to be delivered orally at our last class meeting and then in print afterwards.

For CSP course, for 10 May: Give me advice (in a couple of pages) about phenomena, issues, ideas, writers, etc. that you would like to see covered in the remainder of the course. Be as specific as you can be. (This assignment will not be letter-graded.)

Handouts this week: Rosenthal column on punctuation, from the NYT of 5/3/04; AMZ comments on Rosenthal's 8/18/02 column; handout on some reference sources.

2. Big bouquets of attitudes and beliefs from the advice literature, along with catch phrases for some of them. Additions welcome.

- 2.1.
 1. A sense of threat. The Barbarians Are At the Gates.
 2. A perception of decline. To Hell In a Handbasket.
 3. A drive towards absolute uniformity. Zero Tolerance.
 4. Why Zero Tolerance? Because variation impedes or confuses communication.
 5. The language has been codified; innovations are not welcome. The Gates Are Closed.
 6. Codification happened by negotiation (as in law-making) or appeal to higher authorities (as in religious revelation).
 7. Features of the standard variety are standard because they're best. Might Makes Right.
 8. Non-standard features are mostly errors of ignorance (ignorance of the standard variety) and/or laziness. The Proles Are Stupid And Lazy.
- 2.2.
 1. If it's sometimes inappropriate, it's always unacceptable. Just Say No.
 2. Bad usage is bad grammar. Upping the Offense.
(Dangling modifiers are "not English"; *irregardless* is "not an English word".)
 3. Dismissal of citations, even from respected writers. Even Homer Nods.
 4. The rules of grammar follow from logic or the definitions of grammatical terms. It Has To Be So.
- 2.3.
 1. Little sense of proportion, little setting of priorities. Everything Is Equally Important.
 2. Violations of proscriptions are "mistakes" analogous to slips of the tongue or typos.
 3. What's good for formal writing is good everywhere. Bad is Bad.
 4. I'm doing this for your own good. Father Knows Best.
 5. If it's not expressly forbidden, it's permitted; therefore, it has to be expressly forbidden.
 6. Tendency to value idiosyncrasy and irregularity.

3. From Mark Liberman's posting to LanguageLog, 4/13/04, "A Field Guide to Prescriptivists":

Like everyone interested in language, we here at Language Log spend a lot of time countering bad advice about usage... Not all language advice is bad -- the many usage notes in the American Heritage Dictionary are generally excellent, for instance -- but many prescriptive strictures about

language are "logically incoherent, factually wrong and promptly disobeyed by the prescriber", as I put it recently.

...Like bacteria transferring genes, prescriptivists -- whether sensible or idiotic -- mix and match ideas about usage. The resulting distribution is far from random: different prescriptive memes are more or less compatible with one another, and with other aspects of critical morphology, ideological metabolism and intellectual history. However, the result is not a nice Linnaean taxonomic tree either.

I don't think anyone can yet plausibly claim to have found memetic DNA, if such a thing is even possible. However, we can identify some key elements of prescriptivist metabolism, in terms of five different motivations that may be given for strictures about usage:

1. Tradition -- how our forebears talked. Innovation is degeneration.
2. Fashion-- how an admired group talks. Deviation is alienation.
3. Universal grammar -- how one ought ideally to talk. Inconsistency is illogical.
4. Standards -- how we should agree to talk. Variation confuses communication.
5. Revelation -- how God taught us to talk. Alteration is transgression.

Particular cases are usually a mixture of these. Such metabolic processes may cooperate or conflict depending on details -- thus an appeal to fashion may point in the same direction as an appeal to tradition, or in the opposite direction, depending on whether the prescriptivist admires the old ways or prefers the latest thing.

Not all classificatory features of the ideological metabolism of prescriptivism deal with justification. Some have to do with ideas about the nature of human nature and human history, which usually come in superficially inconsistent pairs:

1. Linguistic original sin: Natural behavior is irretrievably incoherent and lawless. Only by careful adherence to explicit rules, explicitly learned, can well-ordered speech and writing be approached.
2. The noble linguistic savage: Unmonitored vernacular speech is ipso facto correct and appropriate. Formal language is artificial, inconsistent and rife with hypercorrections.
3. The Four Ages (Gold, Silver, Brass, Iron/Clay). There are historical peaks and valleys in the quality of culture, including language. People who express this meme usually think that the recent historical direction has been downwards, so that their own time is a valley.
4. The march of progress. Like everything else, language and its use in communication get better over time, due to cultural innovation, competition and technology.