

In a guest On Language column (New York Times Sunday Magazine, 8/18/02, p. 14), John Rosenthal, the executive editor of The New York Times Almanac, celebrated the virtues of corpus linguistics: we now have a way to find out, on a massive scale, how people really talk and write. But first, Rosenthal sets the scene:

Linguists can generally be divided into two groups: prescriptivists, or those who hold that language is governed by fixed rules of grammar, and descriptivists, or those who believe that patterns of actual usage reflect the way the language is used. In extremely broad terms, if prescriptivists are anal retentive, the descriptivists are free-to-be-you-and-me.

Like Rosenthal, I think that corpus linguistics is a great idea. On the other hand, I think that the way Rosenthal frames the topic is disastrously bad: in part just factually wrong, and certainly misleading. I'll start by analyzing, virtually word by word, the way he establishes his frame of reference.

I'll put aside the strangely tautologous 'patterns of actual usage reflect the way the language is used', which I take to be a simple error of writing in haste against a deadline, or possibly of copy editing. Presumably, Rosenthal meant something like 'the grammar of a language reflects the way language is used', and that's the way I'll interpret him.

On to the wording of the first sentence, starting with the 'can' of 'Linguists can generally be divided into two groups: prescriptivists... and descriptivists'. Why assert merely that such a division is possible, rather than saying that it's in some way correct or appropriate? Why not say 'Linguists are divided into two groups'? After all, linguists *can* be divided into females and males, into age ranges by decades, into those who are foodies and those who scarcely notice what they eat, and so on. Surely Rosenthal is telling us that this particular division, and not the others, is especially important. He wants the effect of 'are' but uses the weaker 'can be' instead, and he wants to claim relevance.

Relevance is easy. If you mention one thing but not others, you suggest that that thing is relevant to the context, assuming that you are behaving cooperatively.

The strategy of using a weaker assertion to convey a stronger one is common and has been studied by scholars of pragmatics; 'I don't think I'll eat this' conveys 'I think I won't eat this', and that in turn conveys 'I won't eat this', which conveys not mere prediction of the future but actual refusal to eat whatever dubious substance you're confronted with. The weaker assertion can be seen as polite (you're not forcing your opinions on your audience), or as an evasion of responsibility (you're distancing yourself from the claims), which is the way I interpret Rosenthal. (I'm not claiming that Rosenthal consciously weighed the alternatives and chose this one deliberately. Even the most scrupulous writer can't canvass the vast array of

alternative wordings for an idea. Life is too short, you have to get the words out, so you make most of your choices without reflection.)

So I'll take Rosenthal as having conveyed something like 'Linguists are divided into two groups, prescriptivists and descriptivists, and this is important'. Now note the passive voice, which notoriously allows the writer to omit mention of any agent in an event--because the agent is unknown, because the identity of the agent is not important, because the writer wants to conceal the identity of the agent, because the writer wants to suggest that the agent is people in general, or for any number of other reasons. Rosenthal wouldn't have had to use the passive; he could, for instance, have said 'Linguists divide into two groups' or 'Linguists come in two types', using an active-voice construction. Those alternatives would have had the advantage of implicating no agent at all; they are assertions about the (intrinsic) nature of linguists, with no involvement of anyone who judges or assesses the nature of linguists. But your readers are going to assign responsibility to *someone* for judgments or claims, and if there are no other suspects then you, the writer, are going to get fingered.

The passive then allows Rosenthal to shift the responsibility off his own back and on to persons unnamed, presumably whoever the authorities on classifying linguists are (quite possibly linguists themselves). That is, 'Authorities divide linguists into two groups, prescriptivists and descriptivists, and this is important'. Now it might well be that nearly all dichotomous classifications--linguists are either formalists or functionalists, Chomskyans or non-Chomskyans, scholars of synchrony or diachrony, theorists or data-mongers, every boy and every girl is either a little liberal or else a little conservative, and so on--are drastically inadequate, in which case we have every right to be suspicious of this particular one, but I'll let that pass.

But you will probably have noticed that I've left out the word 'generally' in 'Linguists can generally be divided...' That's because it's ambiguous, and I'm not sure which interpretation Rosenthal intended. Two relevant interpretations are that it's linguists in general that authorities divide into two groups, or that it's authorities in general that divide linguists into two groups. The second reading is the one I got on my initial pass through the article, but later I saw the other possibility. In the end, it's not very important; Rosenthal threw in the 'generally' to reinforce some component of meaning in the sentence, rather than to make a fresh claim, so that we lose nothing by disregarding the 'generally'. Perhaps, given more time for editing, he would have edited it out himself, or strengthened it to something really powerful, like 'It is a truth universally acknowledged...'

On to the word 'linguists'. Unless Rosenthal is using this word in some idiosyncratic way, then surely the central members of the class of linguists are the people who identify themselves professionally as linguists, the sort of people who, in the United States, belong to the Linguistic Society of America. Finally, we have a testable claim, and it is almost surely false, although there is some room for debate as to who counts as an authority on categorizing linguists. Certainly *linguists* themselves, when asked what kind of linguist they are, do not describe themselves as being prescriptivists or descriptivists. For linguists, prescriptivism is not a kind of linguistics, but something else. As a result, linguists find Rosenthal's first sentence bizarre.

If we look for parallels in other fields of inquiry, we find hardly anything like the prescriptive vs. descriptive linguist dichotomy. Prescriptive entomology vs. descriptive entomology? Prescriptive geology vs. descriptive geology? Prescriptive cultural anthropology vs. descriptive cultural anthropology? Prescriptive developmental psychology vs. descriptive developmental psychology?

What we do find is people who tend to engage in rather different sorts of activities: a practical orientation, in which (put in the simplest terms) the point is to be helpful, by giving advice, making recommendations, or providing useful services; and a research orientation, in which (again in the simplest terms) the point is to find things out. This is very much not a simple dichotomy, since many people engage in a mixture of these activities, and other activities as well (in particular the activity of creating pleasurable experiences). Still, here we have engineering and technology vs. science, clinical medicine and surgery vs. medical research, clinical vs. experimental psychology, consulting geology (for, say, oil companies, environmental organizations, or architects) vs. geological research, and so on. There are all sorts of people engaged in practical linguistics: aphasiologists, teachers of writing, language planners, creators of practical orthographies, translators and interpreters, specialists in natural language processing, speech therapists, language teachers, and on and on.

(As a final comment on Rosenthal's first sentence, I'll point out that he orders 'prescriptive' before 'descriptive', a sequencing I've scrupulously preserved in my discussion, and will continue to do as I go on to talk about, well, practice and research. Ordering is not innocent: the more significant thing tends to be mentioned first, other things being equal. So by putting 'prescriptive' first, Rosenthal assigns it priority. Linguists would never do it that way, but it amuses me to mimic Rosenthal. In this case, I suspect his choice was intentional rather than subliminal, but of course I can't prove that.)

The relationship between practical and research activities is enormously complex. To start with, the 'fields' of activity don't match one-to-one; almost all practical work is related to several different research traditions. Aphasiologists, for instance, draw on experimental psychology, anatomy and physiology, and biochemistry as well as linguistics, and they rely on instrumentation developed by physicists, computer scientists, and many other specialists.

In addition, practical decisions always involve balancing conflicting considerations, many of which have little to do with the research fields involved, but instead concern 'human factors', cost, time span, available resources, ethics, aesthetics, administrative or political support, and the like, considerations that are often quite specific to the situation at hand and not easily generalizable. More often than not, there is no single best solution, only an assortment of possible decisions, each having its own advantages and disadvantages.

What we hope for is a congenial relationship between practice and research: research provides conceptualizations, data, and techniques that contribute to good practice, and practical needs suggest lines of research (though much research will be driven by the desire to solve puzzles and test theories, without evident practical benefits). Clinical medicine vs. medical research illustrates both the relatively smooth working of such a relationship and its limitations, in particular the inclination of practitioners to fall back on 'common sense', that is, unarticulated

folk theories, and personal experience. Physicians no longer diagnose and treat disease according to the doctrine of humors or the doctrine of signatures, and they do their best to keep up with research, but they do seem to favor diagnoses like the cases they've seen recently and, not surprisingly, to prescribe treatments like the ones they've recommended recently to other patients, regardless of any relevant research.

In other domains, things are murky indeed. Advice on diet and exercise often bears little if any connection to research, but instead reflects a variety of folk theories. I have seen a diet that sternly advised people not to eat any tropical fruits, ever, and I have an acquaintance who was on a diet that recommended nothing *but* tropical fruits, one for each day. Exercise regimens are absurdly specific, directing the person who wants better abdominals, say, to do these specific exercises, so many times, in so many sets, with this much weight, this fast, this many times a week. There is some relevant research, but it is nowhere near sufficient to the needs and desires of those who diet and work out, so the gap is filled by fanciful folk theories and the untested fruits (so to speak) of experience, most of which utterly fail to take into account huge differences in the way individual people respond to diet and exercise.

Much the same is true in the domain of behavior and relationships. When people look to experts for advice in these domains, they tend to turn to advice columnists, who provide common sense (that is, unarticulated folk theories again) about such matters, or even to horoscopes and astrologers (that is, to articulated but discredited theories). Even the presumptive professionals in this domain, psychologists and psychiatrists, are often only loosely connected to psychological research. (In fact, people probably glean most of their advice about behavior and relationships from family and friends and from the moral tales played out in movies and television.)