

LIN 02. Watch Your Language!  
Spring Quarter 2004. M 7-9:50 p.m.

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office hours: 2:30-3:30 Fridays, but I can be available at many other times;

just talk to me or e-mail me to set up a time

**What this course is and is not.** The course is about (some of) the advice literature on the English language – all that material that aims to tell you what's grammatical English and what's effective writing. Who are the advice givers, where does their authority come from, why are they giving you advice, why might you want it, and why might you take it (or not)? We'll look at a sampling of advice on grammar and usage, reading with a critical eye, looking for hidden assumptions, and comparing this advice to the actual practice of good writers. It turns out that authorities often disagree, sometimes savagely; we'll try to figure out what's at issue in these exchanges, and we'll do some data-gathering on our own.

What this course does *not* propose to do is improve your writing or your speech. It's a course *about* advice, not a course *of* advice.

**Course materials.** We will rely a lot on *Merrriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989), which surveys most of the advice literature and evaluates it by reference to research on the actual practice of good writers. I'll expect you to buy this book.

I'll hand out copies of much more stuff – some of it handouts of my own creation (like this syllabus), some of it extracts from published works. The handouts of my own creation will also be available, in .pdf format, on the following Prescriptivism and Usage website:

<http://www-csl.stanford.edu/~zwicky/usage.html>

This site will contain material for both this course and the Sophomore Dialogue (Linguistics 12Q, You Can't Say That!) that I'm teaching this quarter.

**Collecting fortuitous data.** One aim of this course is to get you to attend to the language used around you. Keep a notepad or notebook with you. Use it to write down examples of usages you're looking for; these can be things you hear or read, or for that matter, things you say or write yourself. If it's something you heard or said, try to record as much of the utterance as possible, along with any information about the context of speech you think might be relevant. (Your friends will eventually get used to this strange habit of yours. Well, mine have.) For spoken stuff, also record information about when it was said, by whom, and in what kind of situation (friendly conversation, class lecture, news report on radio or tv, etc.). For written stuff, record information about where it appeared.

To show you what the results of such collection might look like, I'll give you a copy of the first few pages of an article of mine, "I Wonder What Kind of Construction That This Example Illustrates" (2002).

When in doubt, write it down anyway. Puzzling examples are often the most valuable.

Don't edit to make it "better" or "cleaner". I'm unshockable.

Don't try to drive and write down examples at the same time. Safety first.

**Useful reference works.** I will, eventually, provide you with a (highly selective) list of useful reference works – dictionaries, English reference grammars, usage manuals, and the like.

**Linguistic concepts and terminology.** There's no way to talk about English grammar and usage without assuming a conceptual framework and terminology to go along with it. Some of this body of ideas and vocabulary comes from a long Western tradition (going back, like so many things, to the ancient Greeks and Romans), and it is (to some degree) taught in schools today and is assumed in the advice literature. Unfortunately, this "traditional" framework is inadequate and flawed in lots of ways (and, anyway, not everyone follows the same traditions); the linguistics of the past (roughly) hundred years has attempted to improve on this situation.

So you're going to be seeing some some technical terms, and you're going to see different terminology used by different writers, and we're going to have to dispute some of the assumptions the advice givers make. All of

this is vexing, but I'll do my best to help you through the thickets. To this end, I'll ask you to flag problematic or unfamiliar terminology for me (during class, in conversation outside of class, in e-mail, whatever); we'll keep a running inventory, and I'll do my best to clarify things, on the spot or after some reflection.

The basic thing to keep in mind here is that the point is not to *declare* what the "right" terms are and what they "really" mean, but rather to *discover* what conceptual distinctions we need to make and then to pick useful, or at least consistent, terminology for these concepts.

**Assignments and grading.** There will be a general reading assignment and a project assignment for each week. The first of these is given below; other assignments will wait until I've assessed the background and interests of the students in the course.

Everyone enrolled in the course is invited to hand in the project assignments and get some comments back from me. People taking the course for some sort of credit (whether CR/NC or letter grade) are *expected* to hand in these assignments and will get an evaluation (A: very good, B: good, C: fair, D: unacceptable) as well as comments. The final grade is the average of these evaluations, with the lowest evaluation thrown out.

#### **Assignment for Monday 5 April:**

General reading: the introductory material in MWDEU (pp. 4a-11a), the introductory material in Huddleston & Pullum, *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (pp. 2-13; I'll hand this out), and "Making Peace in the Grammar Wars", from *Garner's Modern American Usage* (pp. xxxi-xlv; I'll hand this out too).

Project assignment: read MWDEU on "dangling modifiers". Collect as many examples as you can, and assemble them into a list that you can hand in (hard copy only). Then write a couple of pages of discussion (which you'll also hand in): Do you see any common threads? Are some of your examples just plain inadvertent errors, things that the speaker/writer really didn't intend to produce and would alter if given a chance? Do all of your examples seem equally (un)acceptable to you? Explain. (Caution: This is *not* an exercise in getting a "right answer". It's an exploration, an attempt to see what's out there and what it might mean.)

#### **CLASS MEETINGS**

1. 29 March. Overview. Case study: the Possessive Antecedent Proscription.
2. 5 April. Case study: dangling modifiers.
3. 12 April. Puzzling proscriptions: split infinitives and stranded prepositions.
4. 19 April. The strategy of prescriptivism. The PAP again.
5. 26 April. "Mistakes", vernacular language, conversational style, innovative forms, regional dialects, non-standard varieties.
6. 3 May. Studying the varieties of English.
7. 10 May. The concepts and terminology of linguistics.
8. 17 May. Request day I: nominate your favorite topics.
9. 24 May. The ideology and politics of prescriptivism.  
(No class Memorial Day, 31 May.)
10. 7 June. Request day II. Wrap-up.