Linguistics 12Q. You Can’t Say That!
Instructor: Arnold M. Zwicky, Visiting Professor of Linguistics
zwicky@csl.stanford.edu
Stanford office: 460-124 (though I’m there only when I’m meeting students)
personal office: 2162 Staunton Ct., Palo Alto 94306 (843-0550)
home: 722 Ramona St., Palo Alto 94301 (323-0753)
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-csli.stanford.edu/~zwicky/usage.html
This site will contain material for both this course and the Continuing Studies (LIN 02, Watch Your Language!) 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. There will be a general reading assignment and a project assignment for each week (except the first and last), due at the Wednesday class meeting. 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.

On each project assignment I’ll give you comments and an evaluation (A: very good, B: good, C: fair, D: unacceptable).

Final presentation/paper: Each student will pick a specific point of usage as the subject of a course project; this can be one of the project topics, or it can be something we didn’t talk much, or at all, about in class. You should have a project topic by Monday 3 May (the beginning of the sixth week of the quarter) and a plan of research by Monday 10 May; I’ll need to discuss your plans with you individually.

You’ll do an oral presentation on Wednesday 2 June (the last class meeting). Written-up versions are due the following Wednesday (9 June, the last day of the exam period). Details to follow later.

Grades: 33% for the final paper (half for the presentation, half for the written version), 33% for weekly assignments (I’ll drop your lowest grade in calculating this), 33% for class participation.

Assignment for Wednesday 7 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. 31 March. Case study: the Possessive Antecedent Proscription.
2. 5 April. Some basic issues.
   7 April. Case study: dangling modifiers.
4. 19 April. 21 April. The strategy of prescriptivism. The PAP again.
5. 26 April. 28 April. “Mistakes”, vernacular language, conversational style, innovative forms, regional dialects, non-standard varieties.
6. 3 May. 5 May. Studying the varieties of English.
7. 10 May. 12 May. The concepts and terminology of linguistics.
8. 17 May. 19 May. Request day: nominate your favorite topics.
9. 24 May. The ideology and politics of prescriptivism.
   26 May. 10. (No class Memorial Day, 31 May.)
   2 June. Paper presentations.