

Authority and American Usage

Or, why “Politics and the English Language” is redundant

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Dilige et quod vis fac.

—AUGUSTINE

DID YOU KNOW that probing the seamy underbelly of US lexicography reveals ideological strife and controversy and intrigue and nastiness and fervor on a near-Lewinskian scale? For instance, did you know that some modern dictionaries are notoriously liberal and others notoriously conservative, and that certain conservative dictionaries were actually conceived and designed as corrective responses to the “corruption” and “permissiveness” of certain liberal dictionaries? That the oligarchic device of having a special “Distinguished Usage Panel...of outstanding professional speakers and writers” is some dictionaries’ attempt at a compromise between the forces of egalitarianism and traditionalism in English, but that most linguistic liberals dismiss the Usage Panel device as mere sham-populism, as in e.g. “Calling upon the opinions of the elite, it claims to be a democratic guide”?

Did you know that US lexicography even *had* a seamy underbelly?

The occasion for this article is Oxford University Press’s recent release of Mr. Bryan A. Garner’s *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, a book that Oxford is marketing aggressively and that it is my assigned function to review. It turns out to be a complicated assignment. In today’s US, a typical book review is driven by market logic and implicitly casts the reader in the role of consumer. Rhetorically, its whole project is informed by a question that’s too crass ever to mention up front: “Should you buy this book?” And because Bryan A. Garner’s usage dictionary belongs to a particular subgenre of a reference genre that is itself highly specialized and particular, and because at least a dozen major usage guides have been published in the last couple years and some of them have been quite good indeed,¹ the central unmentionable question here appends the prepositional comparative “...rather than *that* book?” to the main clause and so entails a discussion of whether and how ADMAU is different from other recent specialty-products of its kind.

The fact of the matter is that Garner’s dictionary is extremely good; certainly the most comprehensive usage guide since E. W. Gilman’s *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage*, now a decade out of date.² But the really salient and ingenious features of *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* involve issues of rhetoric and ideology and style, and it is impossible to describe why these issues are important and why Garner’s management of them borders on genius without talking about the historical context³ in which ADMAU appears, and this context turns out to

¹(The best and most substantial of these being *The American Heritage Book of English Usage*, Jean Eggenschwiler’s *Writing: Grammar, Usage, and Style*, and Oxford/Clarendon’s own *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage*.)

²*The New Fowler’s* is also extremely comprehensive and fine, but its emphasis is on British usage.

³Sorry about this phrase; I hate this phrase, too. This happens to be one of those very rare times when “historical context” is the phrase to use and there is no equivalent phrase that isn’t even worse (I actually tried “lexico-temporal backdrop” in one of the middle drafts, which I think you’ll agree is not preferable).

INTERPOLATION

The above ¶ is motivated by the fact that this reviewer nearly always sneers and/or winces when he sees a phrase like “historical context” deployed in a piece of writing and thus hopes to head off any potential sneers/winces from the reader here, especially in an article about felicitous usage. One of the little personal lessons I’ve learned in working on this essay is that being chronically inclined to sneer/ wince at other people’s usage tends to make me chronically anxious about other people’s sneering/wincing at my usage. It is, of course, possible that this bivalence is news to nobody but me; it may be just a straight- forward instance of Matt. 7:1’s thing about ‘Judge not lest ye be judged.’ In any case, the anxiety seems worth acknowledging up front.

be a veritable hurricane of controversies involving everything from technical linguistics and public education to political ideology,⁴ and these controversies take a certain amount of time to unpack before their relation to what makes Garner’s dictionary so eminently worth your hard-earned reference-book dollar can even be established; and in fact there’s no way even to begin the whole harrowing polymeric discussion without first taking a moment to establish and define the highly colloquial term SNOOT.

From one perspective, a certain irony attends the publication of any good new book on American usage. It is that the people who are going to be interested in such a book are also the people who are least going to need it—i.e., that offering counsel on the finer points of US English is preaching to the choir. The relevant choir here comprises that small percentage of American citizens who actually care about the current status of double modals and ergative verbs. The same sorts of people who watched *The Story of English* on PBS (twice) and read Safire’s column with their half-caff every Sunday. The sorts of people who feel that special blend of wincing despair and sneering superiority when they see EXPRESS LANE—10 ITEMS OR LESS or hear *dialogue* used as a verb or realize that the founders of the Super 8 Motel chain must surely have been ignorant of the meaning of *suppurate*. There are lots of epithets for people like this—Grammar Nazis, Usage Nerds, Syntax Snobs, the Grammar Battalion, the Language Police. The term I was raised with is SNOOT.⁵ The word might be slightly self-mocking, but those other terms are outright dysphemisms. A SNOOT can be loosely defined as somebody who knows what *dysphemism* means and doesn’t mind letting you know it.

I submit that we SNOOTs are just about the last remaining kind of truly elitist nerd. There are, granted, plenty of nerd-species in today’s America, and some of these are elitist within their own nerdy purview (e.g., the skinny, carbuncular, semi-autistic Computer Nerd moves instantly up on the totem pole of status when your screen freezes and now you need his help, and the bland condescension with which he performs the two occult keystrokes that unfreeze your screen is both elitist and situationally valid). But the SNOOT’s purview is interhuman life itself. You don’t, after all (despite withering cultural pressure), have to use a computer, but you can’t escape language: language is everything and everywhere; it’s what lets us have anything to do with one another; it’s what separates us from animals; Genesis 11:7-10 and so on. And we SNOOTs know when and how to hyphenate phrasal adjectives and to keep participles from dangling, and we know that we know, and we know how very few other Americans know this stuff or even care, and we judge them accordingly.

In ways that certain of us are uncomfortable with, SNOOTs’ attitudes about contemporary usage resemble religious/political conservatives’ attitudes about contemporary culture.⁶ We combine a missionary zeal and a near-neural faith in our beliefs’ importance with a curmudgeonly hell-in-a-handbasket despair at the way English is routinely defiled by supposedly literate adults.⁷ Plus a dash of the elitism of, say, Billy Zane in *Titanic*—a fellow

⁴One of the claim-clusters I’m going to spend a lot of both our time arguing over is that issues of English usage are fundamentally and inescapably political, and that putatively disinterested linguistic authorities like dictionaries are always the products of certain ideologies, and that as authorities they are accountable to the same basic standards of sanity and honesty and fairness as our political authorities

⁵SNOOT (n) (highly colloq.) is this reviewer’s nuclear family’s nickname a clef for a really extreme usage fanatic, the sort of person whose idea of Sunday fun is to hunt for mistakes in the very prose of Safire’s column. This reviewer’s family is roughly 70 percent SNOOT, which tenn itself derives from an acronym, with the big historical family joke being that whether S.N.O.O.T. stood for “Sprachgefühl Necessitates Our Ongoing Tendence” or “Syntax Nudniks Of Our Time” depended on whether or not you were one.

⁶This is true in my own case, at any rate—plus also the “uncomfortable” part. I teach college English part-time. Mostly Lit, not Composition. But I am so pathologically obsessed with usage that every semester the same thing happens: once I’ve had to read my students’ first set of papers, we immediately abandon the regular Lit syllabus and have a three-week Emergency Remedial Usage and Grammar Unit, during which my demeanor is basically that of somebody teaching HIV prevention to intravenous-drug users. When it emerges (as it does, every term) that 95 percent of these intelligent upscale college students have never been taught, e.g., what a clause is or why a misplaced only can make a sentence confusing or why you don’t just automatically stick in a comma after a long noun phrase, I all but pound my head on the blackboard; I get angry and self-righteous; I tell them they should sue their hometown school boards, and mean it. The kids end up scared, both of me and for me. Every August I vow silently to *chill about usage* this year, and then by Labor Day there’s foam on my chin. I can’t seem to help it. The truth is that I’m not even an especially good or dedicated teacher; I don’t have this kind of fervor in class about anything else, and I know it’s not a very productive fervor, nor a healthy one—it’s got elements of fanaticism and rage to it, plus a snobbishness that I know I’d be mortified to display about anything else.

⁷N.B. that this article’s own title page features blocks of the typical sorts of contemporary boners and clunkers and oxymorons and solecistic howlers and bursts of voguish linguistic methane that tend to make a SNOOT’s cheek twitch and forehead darken. (N.B. further that it took only about a week of semi-attentive listening and note-taking to assemble these blocks—the Evil is all around us.)

SNOOT I know likes to say that listening to most people's public English feels like watching somebody use a Stradivarius to pound nails. We⁸ are the Few, the Proud, the More Or Less Constantly Appalled at Everyone Else.

THESIS STATEMENT FOR WHOLE ARTICLE

Issues of tradition vs. egalitarianism in US English are at root political issues and can be effectively addressed only in what this article hereby terms a "Democratic Spirit." A Democratic Spirit is one that combines rigor and humility. i.e., passionate conviction plus a sedulous respect for the convictions of others. As any American knows, this is a difficult spirit to cultivate and maintain, particularly when it comes to issues you feel strongly about. Equally tough is a DS's criterion of 100 percent intellectual integrity - you have to be willing to look honestly at yourself and at your motives for believing what you believe, and to do it more or less continually.

This kind of stuff is advanced US citizenship. A true Democratic Spirit is up there with religious faith and emotional maturity and all those other top-of-the-Maslow-Pyramid-type qualities that people spend their whole lives working on. A Democratic Spirit's constituent rigor and humility and self-honesty are, in fact, so hard to maintain on certain issues that it's almost irresistibly tempting to fall in with some established dogmatic camp and to follow that camp's line on the issue and to let your position harden within the camp and become inflexible and to believe that the other camps⁹ are either evil or insane and to spend all your time and energy trying to shout over them.

I submit, then, that it is indisputably easier to be Dogmatic than Democratic, especially about issues that are both vexed and highly charged. I submit further that the issues surrounding "correctness" in contemporary American

⁸Please note that the strategically repeated I-P pronoun is meant to iterate and emphasize that this reviewer is very much one too, a SNOOT, plus to connote the nuclear family mentioned *supra*: SNOOTitude runs in families. In ADMAU's preface, Bryan Garner mentions both his father and grandfather and actually uses the word genetic, and it's probably true: 90 percent of the SNOOTs I know have at least one parent who is, by profession or temperament or both, a SNOOT. In my own case, my mom is a Comp teacher and has written remedial usage books and is a SNOOT of the most rabid and intractable sort. At least part of the reason I am a SNOOT is that for years my mom brainwashed us in all sorts of subtle ways. Here's an example. Family suppers often involved a game: if one of us children made a usage error, Mom would pretend to have a coughing fit that would go on and on until the relevant child had identified the relevant error and corrected it. It was all very self-ironic and lighthearted; but still, looking back, it seems a bit excessive to pretend that your small child is actually *denying you oxygen* by speaking incorrectly. The really chilling thing, though, is that I now sometimes find myself playing this same "game" with my own students, complete with pretend pertussion.

INTERPOLATION

As something I'm all but sure *Harper's* will excise, I will also insert that we even had a fun but retrospectively chilling little family *song* that Mom and we little SNOOTlets would sing in the car on long trips while Dad silently rolled his eyes and drove (you have to remember the theme to Underdog in order to follow the song):

When idiots in this world appear

And fail to be concise or clear

And solecisms rend the ear

The cry goes up both far and near

for Blunderdog

Blunderdog

Blunderdog

Blunderdog

Pen of iron, tongue of fire

Tightening the wid'ning gyre

Blunderdo-O-O-O-O ...

*(Since this'll almost surely get cut, I'll admit that, yes, I, as a kid, was in fact the author of this song. But by this time I'd been thoroughly brainwashed. It was sort of our family's version of "100 Bottles...Wall". My mother was the one responsible for the "wid'ning gyre" line in the refrain, which after much debate was finally substituted for a supposedly "forced" rhyme for *fire* in my own original lyrics—and again, years later, when I actually understood the apocalyptic thrust of that Yeats line I was, retrospectively, a bit chilled.)

⁹(It seems to be a natural law that camps form only in opposition to other camps and that there are always at least two w/r/t any difficult issue.)

usage are both vexed and highly charged, and that the fundamental questions they involve are ones whose answers have to be literally *worked out* instead of merely found.

A distinctive feature of ADMAU is that its author is willing to acknowledge that a usage dictionary is not a bible or even a textbook but rather just the record of one bright person's attempts to work out answers to certain very difficult questions. This willingness appears to me to be informed by a Democratic Spirit. The big question is whether such a spirit compromises Bryan Garner's ability to present himself as a genuine "authority" on issues of usage. Assessing Garner's book, then, requires us to trace out the very weird and complicated relationship between Authority and Democracy in what we as a culture have decided is English. That relationship is, as many educated Americans would say, still in process at this time.

A Dictionary of Modern American Usage has no Editorial Staff or Distinguished Panel. It's been conceived, researched, and written *ab ovo usque ad mala* by Mr. Bryan A. Garner. This Garner is an interesting guy. He's both a lawyer and a usage expert (which seems a bit like being both a narcotics wholesaler and a DEA agent). His 1987 *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage* is already a minor classic; and now, instead of practicing law anymore, he goes around conducting writing seminars for JDs and doing prose-consulting for various judicial bodies. Garner's also the founder of something called the H. W. Fowler Society,¹⁰ a worldwide group of usage Trekkies who like to send one another linguistic boners clipped from different periodicals. You get the idea. This Garner is one serious and very hard-core SNOOT.

The lucid, engaging, and extremely sneaky preface to ADMAU serves to confirm Garner's SNOOTitude in fact while undercutting it in tone. For one thing, whereas the traditional usage pundit cultivates a remote and imperial persona—the kind who uses *one* or *we* to refer to himself—Garner gives us an almost Waltonishly endearing sketch of his own background:

I realized early- at the age of 15¹¹—that my primary intellectual interest was the use of the English language It became an all-consuming passion I read everything I could find on the subject. Then, on a wintry evening while visiting New Mexico at the age of 16, I discovered Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage*. I was enthralled. Never had I held a more exciting book...Suffice it to say that by the time I was 18, I had committed to memory most of Fowler, Partridge, and their successors.

Although this reviewer regrets the bio-sketch's failure to mention the rather significant social costs of being an adolescent whose overriding passion is English usage,¹² the critical hat is off to yet another personable preface-section, one that Garner entitles "First Principles":

Before going any further, I should explain my approach. That's an unusual thing for the author of a usage dictionary to do—unprecedented, as far as I know. But a guide to good writing is only as good as the principles on which it's based. And users should be naturally interested in those principles. So, in the interests of full disclosure...¹³

The "unprecedented" and "full disclosure" here are actually good-natured digs at Garner's Fowlerite predecessors, and a slight nod to one camp in the wars that have raged in both lexicography and education ever since the notoriously liberal *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* came out in 1961 and included terms like *height* and *irregardless* without any monitory labels on them. You can think of *Webster's Third* as sort of the Fort Sumter

¹⁰If Samuel Johnson is the Shakespeare of English usage, think of Henry Watson Fowler as the Eliot or Joyce. His 1926 *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is the granddaddy of modern usage guides, and its dust-dry wit and blushless imperiousness have been models for every subsequent classic in the field, from Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage* to Theodore Bernstein's *The Careful Writer* to Wilson Follett's *Modern American Usage* to Gilman's '89 *Websters*.

¹¹(Garner prescribes spelling out only numbers under ten. I was taught that this rule applies just to Business Writing and that in all other modes you spell out one through nineteen and start using cardinals at 20. *De gustibus non est disputandum*.)

¹²From personal experience, I can assure you that any kid like this is going to be at best marginalized and at worst savagely and repeatedly Wedgied—see *sub*.

¹³What follow in the preface are "the ten critical points that, after years of working on usage problems, I've settled on." These points are too involved to treat separately, but a couple of them are slippery in the extreme—e.g., "10. Actual Usage. In the end, the actual usage of educated speakers and writers is the overarching criterion for correctness," of which both "educated" and "actual" would really require several pages of abstract clarification and qualification to shore up against Usage Wars-related attacks, but which Garner rather ingeniously elects to define and defend via their application in his dictionary itself. Garner's ability not only to stay out of certain arguments but to render them irrelevant ends up being very important—see much *sub*.

of the contemporary Usage Wars. These wars are both the context and the target of a very subtle rhetorical strategy in *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, and without talking about them it's impossible to explain why Garner's book is both so good and so sneaky.

We regular citizens tend to go to The Dictionary for authoritative guidance.¹⁴ Rarely, however, do we ask ourselves who exactly decides what gets in The Dictionary or what words or spellings or pronunciations get deemed substandard or incorrect. Whence the authority of dictionary-makers to decide what's OK and what isn't? Nobody elected them, after all. And simply appealing to precedent or tradition won't work, because what's considered correct changes over time. In the 1600s, for instance, the second-singular took a singular conjugation—'You is:' Earlier still, the standard 2-S pronoun wasn't *you* but *thou*. Huge numbers of now-acceptable words like *clever*, *fun*, *banter*, and *prestigious* entered English as what usage authorities considered errors or egregious slang. And not just usage conventions but English itself changes over time; if it didn't, we'd all still be talking like Chaucer. Who's to say which changes are natural and good and which are corruptions? And when Bryan Garner or E. Ward Gilman do in fact presume to say, why should we believe them?

These sorts of questions are not new, but they do now have a certain urgency. America is in the midst of a protracted Crisis of Authority in matters of language. In brief, the same sorts of political upheavals that produced everything from Kent State to Independent Counsels have produced an influential contra-SNOOT school for whom normative standards of English grammar and usage are functions of nothing but custom and the ovine docility of a populace that lets self-appointed language experts boss them around. See for example MIT's Steven Pinker in a famous *New Republic* article—"Once introduced, a prescriptive rule is very hard to eradicate, no matter how ridiculous. Inside the writing establishment, the rules survive by the same dynamic that perpetuates ritual genital mutilations"—or, at a somewhat lower emotional pitch, Bill Bryson in *Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way*:

Who sets down all those rules that we know about from childhood the idea that we must never end a sentence with a preposition or begin one with a conjunction, that we must use each other for two things and one another for more than two...? The answer, surprisingly often, is that no one does, that when you look into the background of these "rules" there is often little basis for them.

In ADMAU's preface, Garner himself addresses the Authority question with a Trumanesque simplicity and candor that simultaneously disguise the author's cunning and exemplify it:

As you might already suspect, I don't shy away from making judgments. I can't imagine that most readers would want me to. Linguists don't like it, of course, because judgment involves subjectivity.¹⁵ It isn't scientific. But rhetoric and usage, in the view of most professional writers,¹⁶ aren't scientific endeavors. You¹⁷ don't want dispassionate descriptions; you want sound guidance. And that requires judgment.

¹⁴There's no better indication of The Dictionary's authority than that we use it to settle wagers. My own father is still to this day living down the outcome of a high-stakes bet on the correct spelling of *meringue*, a bet made on 14 September 1978.

¹⁵This is a clever half-truth. Linguists compose only one part of the anti-judgment camp, and their objections to usage judgments involve way more than just "subjectivity."

¹⁶Notice, please, the subtle appeal here to the same "writing establishment" that Steven Pinker scorns. This isn't accidental; it's rhetorical.* What's crafty is that this is one of several places where Garner uses professional writers and editors as support for his claims, but in the preface he also treats these language pros as the primary audience for ADMAU; as in e.g. "The problem for professional writers and editors is that they can't wait idly to see what direction the language takes. Writers and editors, in fact, influence that direction: they must make decisions...That has traditionally been the Job of the usage dictionary: to help writers and editors solve editorial predicaments."

This is the same basic rhetorical move that President R.W. Reagan perfected in his televised Going-Over-Congress's-Head-to-the-People addresses, one that smart politicians ever since have imitated. It consists in citing the very audience you're addressing as the source of support for your proposals: "I'm pleased to announce tonight that we are taking the first steps toward implementing the policies that you elected me to implement," etc. The tactic is crafty because it (1) flatters the audience, (2) disguises the fact that the rhetor's purpose here is actually to persuade and rally support, not to inform or celebrate, and (3) preempts charges from the loyal opposition that the actual policy proposed is in any way contrary to the interests of the audience. I'm not suggesting that Bryan Garner has any particular political agenda, I'm simply pointing out that ADMAU's preface is fundamentally rhetorical in the same way that Reagan's little Chats With America were.

* (In case it's not totally obvious, be advised that this article is using the word *rhetoric* in its strict traditional sense, something like "the persuasive use of language to influence the thoughts and actions of an audience.")

¹⁷See?

Whole monographs could be written just on the masterful rhetoric of this passage. Besides the FN 16 stuff, note for example the ingenious equivocation of *judgment* (which in “I don’t shy away from making judgments” means actual rulings (and thus invites questions about Authority), but in “And that requires judgment” refers instead to perspicacity, discernment, reason. As the body of ADMAU makes clear, part of Garner’s overall strategy is to collapse these two different senses of judgment, or rather to use the second sense as a justification for the first. The big things to recognize here are (1) that Garner wouldn’t be doing any of this if he weren’t keenly aware of the Authority Crisis in modern usage, and (2) that his response to this crisis is—in the best Democratic Spirit—rhetorical.

So ...

COROLLARY TO THESIS STATEMENT FOR WHOLE ARTICLE

The most salient and timely feature of Bryan A. Garner’s dictionary is that its project is both lexicographical and rhetorical. Its main strategy involves what is known in classical rhetoric as the Ethical Appeal. Here the adjective, derived from the Greek *ethos* doesn’t mean quite what we usually mean by ethical. But there are affinities. What the Ethical Appeal amounts to is a complex and sophisticated “Trust me.” It’s the boldest, most ambitious, and also most democratic of rhetorical Appeals because it requires the rhetor to convince us not just of his intellectual acuity or technical competence but of his basic decency and fairness and sensitivity to the audience’s own hopes and fears.¹⁸

These latter are not qualities one associates with the traditional SNOOT usage-authority, a figure who for many Americans exemplifies snobbishness and anality, and one whose modern image is not helped by stuff like *The American Heritage Dictionary’s* Distinguished Usage Panelist Morris Bishop’s “The arrant solecisms of the ignoramus are here often omitted entirely, ‘irregardless’ of how he may feel about this neglect” or critic John Simon’s “The English language is being treated nowadays exactly as slave traders once handled their merchandise.” Compare those lines’ authorial personas with Garner’s in, e.g., “English usage is so challenging that even experienced writers need guidance now and then.”

The thrust here is going to be that *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* earns Garner pretty much all the trust his Ethical Appeal asks us for. What’s interesting is that this trust derives not so much from the book’s lexicographical quality as from the authorial persona and spirit it cultivates. ADMAU is a feel-good usage dictionary in the very best sense of *feel-good*. The book’s spirit marries rigor and humility in such a way as to let Garner be extremely prescriptive without any appearance of evangelism or elitist put-down. This is an extraordinary accomplishment. Understanding why it’s basically a *rhetorical* accomplishment, and why this is both historically significant and (in this reviewer’s opinion) politically redemptive, requires a more detailed look at the Usage Wars.

You’d definitely know that lexicography had an underbelly if you read the different little introductory essays in modern dictionaries—pieces like *Webster’s DEU’s* “A Brief History of English Usage” or *Webster’s Third’s* “Linguistic Advances and Lexicography” or *AHD-2’s* “Good Usage, Bad Usage, and Usage” or *AHD-3’s* “Usage in the Dictionary: The Place of Criticism.” But almost nobody ever bothers with these little intros, and it’s not just their six-point type or the fact that dictionaries tend to be hard on the lap. It’s that these intros aren’t actually written for you or me or the average citizen who goes to The Dictionary just to see how to spell (for instance) *meringue*. They’re written for other lexicographers and critics; and in fact they’re not really introductory at all, but polemical. They’re salvos in the Usage Wars that have been underway ever since editor Philip Gove first sought to apply the value-neutral principles of structural linguistics to lexicography in *Webster’s Third*. Gove’s now famous response to conservatives who howled¹⁹ when *W3* endorsed OK and described *ain’t* as “used colloquially

¹⁸In this last respect, recall for example W. J. Clinton’s “I feel your pain,” which was a blatant if not especially deft Ethical Appeal.

¹⁹Really, *howled*: Blistering reviews and outraged editorials from across the country—from the *Times* and *The New Yorker* and the *National Review* and good old *Life*, or see e.g. this from the January ’62 *Atlantic Monthly*: “We have seen a novel dictionary formula improvised, in great part, out of snap judgments and the sort of theoretical improvement that in practice impairs; and we have seen the gates propped wide open in enthusiastic hospitality to miscellaneous confusions and corruptions. In fine, the anxiously awaited* work that was to have crowned cisatlantic linguistic scholarship with a particular glory turns out to be a scandal and a disaster”

by educated speakers in many regions of the United States” was this: “A dictionary should have no truck with artificial notions of correctness or superiority. It should be descriptive and not prescriptive.” Gove’s terms stuck and turned epithetic, and linguistic conservatives are now formally known as Prescriptivists and linguistic liberals as Descriptivists.

The former are better known, though not because of dictionaries’ prologues or scholarly Fowlerites. When you read the columns of William Safire or Morton Freeman or books like Edwin Newman’s *Strictly Speaking* or John Simon’s *Paradigms Lost*, you’re actually reading Popular Prescriptivism, a genre sideline of certain journalists (mostly older males, the majority of whom actually do wear bow ties²⁰) whose bemused irony often masks a Colonel Blimp’s rage at the way the beloved English of their youth is being trashed in the decadent present. Some Pop Prescriptivism is funny and smart, though much of it just sounds like old men grumbling about the vulgarity of modern mores.²¹ And some PP is offensively small-minded and knuckle-dragging, such as *Paradigms Lost*’s simplistic dismissal of Standard Black English: “As for ‘I be,’ ‘you be,’ ‘he be,’ etc., which should give us all the heebie-jeebies, these may indeed be comprehensible, but they go against all accepted classical and modern grammars and are the product not of a language with its roots in history but of ignorance of how a language works.” But what’s really interesting is that the plutocratic tone and styptic wit of Newman and Safire and the best of the Pop Prescriptivists are modeled after the mandarin-Brit personas of Eric Partridge and H. W. Fowler, the same twin towers of scholarly Prescriptivism whom Garner talks about revering as a kid.²²

Descriptivists, on the other hand, don’t have weekly columns in the Times. These guys tend to be hard-core academics, mostly linguists or Comp theorists. Loosely organized under the banner of structural (or “descriptive”) linguistics, they are doctrinaire positivists who have their intellectual roots in Comte and Saussure and L. Bloomfield²³ and their ideological roots firmly in the US Sixties. The brief explicit mention Garner’s preface gives this crew —

Somewhere along the line, though, usage dictionaries got hijacked by the descriptive linguists,²⁴ who observe language scientifically. For the pure descriptivist, it’s impermissible to say that one form of language is any better than another: as long as a native speaker says it, it’s OK—and anyone who takes a contrary stand is a dunderhead Essentially, descriptivists and prescriptivists are approaching different problems. Descriptivists want to record language as it’s actually used, and they perform a useful function—although their audience is generally limited to those willing to pore through vast tomes of dry-as-dust research.²⁵

*(*Sic*—should obviously be “eagerly awaited”. *Nemo mortalium omnibus horis sapit.*)

²⁰It’s true: Newman, Simon, Freeman, James J. Kilpatrick...can George F. Will’s bestseller on usage be long in coming?

²¹Even Edwin Newman, the most thoughtful and least hemorrhoidal of the pop SNOOTs, sometimes lets his Colonel B. poke out, as in e.g. “I have no wish to dress as many younger people do nowadays...I have no wish to impair my hearing by listening to their music, and a communication gap between an electronic rock group and me is something I devotedly cherish and would hate to see disappear.”

²²Note for instance the mordant pith (and royal we) of this random snippet from Partridge’s *Usage and Abuse*:

anxious of. ‘I am not hopeless of our future. But I am profoundly anxious of it,’ Beverley Nichols, *News of England*, 1938: which made us profoundly anxious *for* (or *about*)—not *of*—Mr. Nichols’s literary future.

Or observe the near Himalayan condescension of Fowler, here on some people’s habit of using words like *viable* or *verbal* to mean things the words don’t really mean:

slipshod extension...is especially likely to occur when some accident gives currency among the uneducated to words of learned origin, & the more if they are isolated or have few relatives in the vernacular...The original meaning of *feasible* is simply doable (L. *facere* do); but to the unlearned it is a mere token, of which he has to infer the value from the contexts in which he hears it used, because such relatives as it has in English—*feat*, *feature*, *faction*, &c.—either fail to show the obvious family likeness to which he is accustomed among families of indigenous words, or are (like *malfeasance*) outside his range.

²³FYI, Leonard Bloomfield’s 1933 *Language* pretty much founded descriptive linguistics by claiming that the proper object of study was not language but something called “language behavior.”

²⁴Utter bushwa: As ADMAUs body makes clear, Garner knows precisely where along the line the Descriptivists started influencing usage guides.

²⁵His SNOOTier sentiments about linguists’ prose emerge in Garner’s preface via his recollection of studying under certain eminent Descriptivists in college: “The most bothersome thing was that they didn’t write well: their offerings were dreary gruel. If you doubt this, go pick up any journal of linguistics. Ask yourself whether the articles are well written. If you haven’t looked at one in a while, you’ll be shocked.”

INTERPOLATION

— is disingenuous in the extreme, especially the “approaching different problems” part, because it vastly underplays the Descriptivists’ influence on US culture. For one thing, Descriptivism so quickly and thoroughly took over English education in this country that just about everybody who started junior high after c. 1970 has been taught to write Descriptively—via “freewriting,” “brainstorming,” “Journaling”—a view of writing as self-exploratory and -expressive rather than as communicative, an abandonment of systematic grammar, usage, semantics, rhetoric, etymology. For another thing, the very language in which today’s socialist, feminist, minority, gay, and environmental movements frame their sides of political debates is informed by the Descriptivist belief that traditional English is conceived and perpetuated by Privileged WASP Males²⁶ and is thus inherently capitalist, sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, elitist: unfair. Think Ebonics. Think Proposition 227. Think of the involved contortions people undergo to avoid using *he* as a generic pronoun, or of the tense, deliberate way white males now adjust their vocabularies around non-w.m.’s. Think of the modern ubiquity of spin or of today’s endless rows over just the names of things—“Affirmative Action” vs. “Reverse Discrimination,” “Pro-Life” vs. “Pro-Choice,”** “Undocumented Worker” vs. “Illegal Alien,” “Perjury” vs. “Peccadillo,” and so on.

****INTERPOLATION: EXAMPLE OF THE APPLICATION OF WHAT THIS ARTICLE’S THESIS STATEMENT CALLS A DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT TO A HIGHLY CHARGED POLITICAL ISSUE, WHICH EXAMPLE IS MORE RELEVANT TO GARNER’S ADMAU THAN IT MAY INITIALLY APPEAR

In this reviewer’s opinion, the only really coherent position on the abortion issue is one that is both Pro-Life and Pro-Choice. Argument: As of 4 March 1999, the question of defining human life *in utero* is hopelessly vexed. That is, given our best present medical and philosophical understandings of what makes something not just a living organism but a person, there is no way to establish at just what point during gestation a fertilized ovum becomes a human being. This conundrum, together with the basically inarguable soundness of the principle “When in irresolvable doubt about whether something is a human being or not, it is better not to kill it,” appears to me to require any reasonable American to be Pro-Life. At the same time, however, the principle “When in irresolvable doubt about something, I have neither the legal nor the moral right to tell another person what to do about it, especially if that person feels that he is *not* in doubt” is an unassailable part of the Democratic pact we Americans all make with one another, a pact in which each adult citizen gets to be an autonomous moral agent; and this principle appears to me to require any reasonable American to be Pro-Choice.

This reviewer is thus, as a private citizen and an autonomous agent, both Pro-Life and Pro-Choice. It is not an easy or comfortable position to maintain. Every time someone I know decides to terminate a pregnancy, I am required to believe simultaneously that she is doing the wrong thing and that she has every right to do it. Plus, of course, I have both to believe that a Pro-Life + Pro-Choice stance is the only really coherent one and to restrain myself from trying to force that position on other people whose ideological or religious convictions seem (to me) to override reason and yield a (in my opinion) wacko dogmatic position. This restraint has to be maintained even when somebody’s (to me) wacko dogmatic position appears (to me) to reject the very Democratic tolerance that is keeping me from trying to force my position on him/her; it requires me not to press or argue or retaliate even when somebody calls me Satan’s Minion or Just Another Shithead Male, which forbearance represents the really outer and tooth-grinding limits of my own personal Democratic Spirit.

Whacko name-calling notwithstanding, I have encountered only one serious kind of objection to this Pro-Life + Pro-Choice position. But it is a powerful objection. It concerns not my position *per se* but certain facts about me, the person who’s developed and maintained it. If this sounds to you both murky and extremely remote from anything having to do with American usage, I promise that it becomes almost excruciatingly clear and relevant below.

Garner’s aside about linguists’ writing has wider applications, though ADMAU mostly keeps them implicit. The truth is that most US academic prose is appalling—pompous, abstruse, claustral, inflated, euphuistic, pleonastic, solecistic, sesquipedalian, Heliogabaline, occluded, obscure, jargon-ridden, empty: resplendently dead. See textual INTERPOLATION much below.

²⁶(which is in fact true)

The Descriptivist revolution takes a little time to unpack, but it's worth it. The structural linguists' rejection of conventional usage rules in English depends on two main kinds of argument. The first is academic and methodological. In this age of technology, some Descriptivists contend, it's the scientific method—clinically objective, value-neutral, based on direct observation and demonstrable hypothesis—that should determine both the content of dictionaries and the standards of “correct” English. Because language is constantly evolving, such standards will always be fluid. Philip Gove's now-classic introduction to *Webster's Third* outlines this type of Descriptivism's five basic edicts: “1—Language changes constantly; 2—Change is normal; 3—Spoken language *is* the language; 4—Correctness rests upon usage; 5—All usage is relative.”

These principles look *prima facie* OK—simple, commonsensical, and couched in the bland s.-v.-o. prose of dispassionate science—but in fact they're vague and muddled and it takes about three seconds to think of reasonable replies to each one of them, viz.:

1. All right, but how much and how fast?
2. Same thing. Is Hericlitean flux as normal or desirable as gradual change? Do some changes serve the language's overall pizzazz better than others? And how many people have to deviate from how many conventions before we say the language has actually changed? Fifty percent? Ten percent? Where do you draw the line? Who draws the line?
3. This is an old claim, at least as old as Plato's *Phaedrus*. And it's specious. If Derrida and the infamous Deconstructionists have done nothing else, they've successfully debunked the idea that speech is language's primary instantiation.²⁷ Plus consider the weird arrogance of Gove's (3) with respect to correctness. Only the most mullah-like Prescriptivists care all that much about spoken English; most Prescriptive usage guides concern Standard Written English.²⁸
4. Fine, but whose usage? Gove's (4) begs the whole question. What he wants to suggest here, I think, is a reversal of the traditional entailment-relation between abstract rules and concrete usage: instead of usage's ideally corresponding to a rigid set of regulations, the regulations ought to correspond to the way real people are actually using the language. Again, fine, but which people? Urban Latinos? Boston Brahmins? Rural Midwesterners? Appalachian Neogaelics?
5. *Huh?* If this means what it seems to mean, then it ends up biting Gove's whole argument in the ass. Principle (5) appears to imply that the correct answer to the above “which people?” is: All of them. And it's easy to show why this will not stand up as a lexicographical principle. The most obvious problem with it is that not everything can go in *The Dictionary*. Why not? Well, because you can't actually observe and record every last bit of every last native speaker's “language behavior,” and even if you could, the resultant dictionary would weigh four million pounds and need to be updated hourly.²⁹ The fact is that any real lexicographer is going to have to make choices about what gets in and what doesn't. And these choices are based on...what? And so we're right back where we started.

It is true that, as a SNOOT, I am naturally predisposed to look for flaws in Gove et al.'s methodological argument. But these flaws still seem awfully easy to find. Probably the biggest one is that the Descriptivists' “‘scientific’ lexicography”—under which, keep in mind, the ideal English dictionary is basically number-crunching: you somehow observe every linguistic act by every native/naturalized speaker of English and put the sum of all these acts

²⁷(Q.v. the “Pharmakon” stuff in Derrida's *La dissemination*—but you'd probably be better off just trusting me.)

²⁸Standard Written English (SWE) is sometimes called Standard English (SE) or Educated English, but the basic inditement-emphasis is the same. See for example *The Little, Brown Handbook's* definition of Standard English as “the English normally expected and used by educated readers and writers.”

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Plus let's note that Garner's preface explicitly characterizes his dictionary's intended audience as “writers and editors.”

And even the recent ads for ADMAU in organs like the *New York Review of Books* are built around the slogan “If you like to WRITE...Refer to us.”*

*(Your SNOOT reviewer cannot help observing, w/r/t this ad, that the opening *r* in its *Refer* shouldn't be capitalized after a dependent clause + ellipsis. *Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*.)

²⁹Granted, some sort of 100 percent compendious real-time Megadictionary might conceivably be possible online, though it would take a small army of lexical webmasters and a much larger army of *in situ* actual-use reporters and surveillance techs; plus it'd be GNP-level expensive (...plus what would be the point?).

between two covers and call it *The Dictionary*- involves an incredibly crude and outdated understanding of what *scientific* means. It requires a naive belief in scientific Objectivity, for one thing. Even in the physical sciences, everything from quantum mechanics to Information Theory has shown that an act of observation is itself part of the phenomenon observed and is analytically inseparable from it.

If you remember your old college English classes, there's an analogy here that points up the trouble scholars get into when they confuse observation with interpretation. It's the New Critics.³⁰ Recall their belief that literary criticism was best conceived as a "scientific" endeavor: the critic was a neutral, careful, unbiased, highly trained observer whose job was to find and objectively describe meanings that were right there, literally inside pieces of literature. Whether you know what happened to New Criticism's reputation depends on whether you took college English after c. 1975; suffice it to say that its star has dimmed. The New Critics had the same basic problem as Gove's Methodological Descriptivists: they believed that there was such a thing as unbiased observation. And that linguistic meanings could exist "Objectively," separate from any interpretive act.

The point of the analogy is that claims to Objectivity in language study are now the stuff of jokes and shudders. The positivist assumptions that underlie Methodological Descriptivism have been thoroughly confuted and displaced—in Lit by the rise of post-structuralism, Reader-Response Criticism, and Jaussian Reception Theory, in linguistics by the rise of Pragmatics—and it's now pretty much universally accepted that (a) meaning is inseparable from some act of interpretation and (b) an act of interpretation IS always somewhat biased, i.e., informed by the interpreter's particular ideology. And the consequence of (a)+(b) is that there's no way around it—decisions about what to put in *The Dictionary* and what to exclude are going to be based on a lexicographer's ideology. And every lexicographer's got one. To presume that dictionary making can somehow avoid or transcend ideology is simply to subscribe to a particular ideology, one that might aptly be called Unbelievably Naive Positivism.

There's an even more important way Descriptivists are wrong in thinking that the scientific method developed for use in chemistry and physics is equally appropriate to the study of language. This one doesn't depend on stuff about quantum uncertainty or any kind of postmodern relativism. Even if, as a thought experiment, we assume a kind of 19th-century scientific realism—in which, even though some scientists' interpretations of natural phenomena might be biased³¹ the natural phenomena themselves can be supposed to exist wholly independent of either observation or interpretation.- it's still true that no such realist supposition can be made about "language behavior," because such behavior is both *human* and fundamentally *normative*.

To understand why this is important, you have only to accept the proposition that language is by its very nature

³⁰*New Criticism* refers to T. S. Eliot and I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks and Wimsatt & Beardsley and the whole autotelic Close Reading school that dominated literary criticism from the Thirties to well into the Seventies.

³¹("EVIDENCE OF CANCER LINK REFUTED BY TOBACCO INSTITUTE RESEARCHERS")

public—i.e., that there is no such thing as a private language³²—and then to observe the way Descriptivists seem either ignorant of this fact or oblivious to its consequences, as in for example one Dr. Charles Fries’s introduction to an epigone of *Websters Third* called *The American College Dictionary*:

A dictionary can be an “authority” only in the sense in which a book of chemistry Or physics or of botany can be an “authority”—by the accuracy and the completeness of its record of the observed facts of the field examined, in accord with the latest principles and techniques of the particular science.

This is so stupid it practically drools. An “authoritative” physics text presents the results of *physicists’* observations and *physicists’* theories about those observations. If a physics textbook operated on Descriptivist principles, the fact that some Americans believe electricity flows better downhill (based on the observed fact that power lines tend

³²This proposition is in fact true, as is interpolatively demonstrated just below, and although the demonstration is persuasive it is also, as you can see from the size of this FN, lengthy and involved and rather, umm, dense, so that once again you’d maybe be better off simply granting the truth of the proposition and forging on with the main text.

INTERPOLATIVE DEMONSTRATION OF THE FACT THAT THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A PRIVATE LANGUAGE

It is sometimes tempting to imagine that there can be such a thing as a private language. Many of us are prone to lay-philosophizing about the weird privacy of our own mental states, for example; and from the fact that when my knee hurts only I can feel it, it’s tempting to conclude that for me the word pain has a very subjective internal meaning that only I can truly understand. This line of thinking is sort of like the adolescent pot-smoker’s terror that his own inner experience is both private and unverifiable, a syndrome that is technically known as Cannabic Solipsism. Eating Chips Ahoy! and staring very intently at the television’s network PGA event, for instance, the adolescent pot-smoker is struck by the ghastly possibility that, e.g., what he sees as the color green and what other people call “the color green” may in fact not be the same color-experiences at all: the fact that both he and someone else call Pebble Beach’s fairways green and a stoplight’s GO signal green appears to guarantee only that there is a similar consistency in their color-experiences of fairways and GO lights, not that the actual subjective quality of those color-experiences is the same; it could be that what the ad. pot-smoker experiences as green everyone else actually experiences as blue, and that what we “mean” by the word *blue* what he “means” by *green*, etc. etc., until the whole line of thinking gets so vexed and exhausting that the a.-p.-s. ends up slumped crumb-strewn and paralyzed in his chair.

The point here is that the idea of a private language, like private colors and most of the other solipsistic conceits with which this reviewer has at various times been afflicted, is both deluded and demonstrably false.

In the case of private language, the delusion is usually based on the belief that a word like *pain* or *tree* has the meaning it does because it is somehow “connected” to a feeling in my knee or to a picture of a tree in my head. But as Mr. L Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* proved in the 1950s, words actually have the meanings they do because of certain rules and verification tests that are imposed on us from outside our own subjectivities, viz., by the community in which we have to get along and communicate with other people. Wittgenstein’s argument centers on the fact that a word like *tree* means what it does for me because of the way the community I’m part of has tacitly agreed to use *tree*. What makes this observation so powerful is that Wittgenstein can prove that it holds true even if I am an angst-ridden adolescent pot-smoker who believes that there’s no way I can verify that what I mean by *tree* is what anybody else means by *tree*. Wittgenstein’s argument is very technical but goes something like:

1. A word has no meaning apart from how it is actually used, and even if
2. “The question of whether my use agrees with others has been given up as a bad job,”* still,
3. The only way a word can be used meaningfully even to myself is if I use it “correctly,” with
4. *Correctly* here meaning “consistently with my own definition” (that is, if I use *tree* one time to mean a tree and then the next time turn around and use *tree* to mean a golf ball and then the next time willy-nilly use *tree* to mean a certain brand of high-cal corporate cookie, etc., then, even in my own little solipsistic universe, *tree* has ceased really to “mean” anything at all), but
5. The criterion of consistency-with-my-own-definition is satisfiable only if there exist certain rules that are independent of any one individual language-user (viz., in this case, me). Without the existence of these external rules, there is no difference between the statement “I am in fact using *tree* consistently with my own definition” and the statement “I happen to be under the impression that I am using *tree* consistently with my own definition.” Wittgenstein’s basic way of putting it is:

“Now how is it to be decided whether I have used the [privately defined] word consistently? What will be the difference between my having used it consistently and its *seeming* to me that I have? Or has this distinction vanished?...If the distinction between ‘correct’ and ‘seems correct’ has disappeared, then so has the concept *correct*. It follows that the ‘rules’ of my private language are only impressions of rules. My impression that I follow a rule does not confirm that I follow the rule, unless there can be something that will prove my impression correct. And that something cannot be another impression—for this would be as if someone were to buy several copies of the morning paper to assure himself that what it said was true.”

Step (5) is the real kicker; step (5) is what shows that even if the involuted adolescent decides that he has his own special private definition of *tree*, he himself cannot make up the “rules of consistency” via which he confirms that he’s using *tree*

to run high above the homes they serve) would require the Electricity Flows Better Downhill Hypothesis to be included as a “valid” theory in the textbook—just as, for Dr. Fries, if some Americans use *infer* for *imply* or *aspect* for *perspective*, these usages become *ipso facto* “valid” parts of the language. The truth is that structural linguists like Gove and Fries are not scientists at all; they’re pollsters who misconstrue the importance of the “facts”: they are recording. It isn’t scientific phenomena they’re observing and tabulating, but rather a set of human behaviors, and a lot of human behaviors are—to be blunt—moronic. Try, for instance, to imagine an “authoritative” ethics textbook whose principles were based on what most people actually *do*.

Grammar and usage conventions are, as it happens, a lot more like ethical principles than like scientific theories. The reason the Descriptivists can’t see this is the same reason they choose to regard the English language as the sum of all English utterances: they confuse mere regularities with *norms*.

Norms aren’t quite the same as rules, but they’re close. A norm can be defined here simply as something that people have agreed on as the optimal way to do things for certain purposes. Let’s keep in mind that language didn’t come into being because our hairy ancestors were sitting around the veldt with nothing better to do. Language was invented to serve certain very specific purposes—“That mushroom is poisonous”; “Knock these two rocks together and you can start a fire”; “This shelter is mine!” and so on. Clearly, as linguistic communities evolve over time, they discover that some ways of using language are better than others—not better *a priori*, but better with respect to the community’s purposes. If we assume that one such purpose might be communicating which kinds of food are safe to eat, then we can see how, for example, a misplaced modifier could violate an important norm: “People who eat that kind of mushroom often get sick” confuses the message’s recipient about whether he’ll get sick only if he eats the mushroom frequently or whether he stands a good chance of getting sick the very first time he eats it. In other words, the fungiphagic community has a vested practical interest in excluding this kind of misplaced modifier from acceptable usage; and, given the purposes the community uses language for, the fact that a certain percentage of tribesmen screw up and use misplaced modifiers to talk about food safety does not *eo ipso* make m.m.’s a good idea.

Maybe now the analogy between usage and ethics is clearer. Just because people sometimes lie, cheat on their

the way he privately defined it—i.e., “The proof that I am following a rule must appeal to something *independent* of my impression that I am.”

If you are thinking that all this seems not just hideously abstract but also irrelevant to the Usage Wars or to anything you have any interest in at all, I submit that you are mistaken. If words’ and phrases’ meanings depend on transpersonal rules and these rules on community consensus,† then language is not only non-private but also irreducibly *public*, *political*, and *ideological*. This means that questions about our national consensus on grammar and usage are actually bound up with every last social issue that millennial America’s about- class, race, sex, morality, tolerance, pluralism, cohesion, equality, fairness, money: you name it.

And if you at least provisionally grant that meaning is use and language public and communication impossible without consensus and rules, you’re going to see that the Descriptivist argument is open to the objection that its ultimate aim—the abandonment of “artificial” linguistic rules and conventions—would make language itself impossible. As in Genesis 11:1-10-grade impossible, a literal Babel. There have to be same rules and conventions, no? We have to agree that *tree* takes /e/s and not /u/s and denotes a large woody thing with branches and not a small plastic thing with dimples and TITELIST on it, right? And won’t this agreement automatically be “artificial,” since it’s human beings making it? Once you accept that at least some artificial conventions are necessary, then you can get to the really hard and interesting questions: which conventions are necessary? and when? and where? and who gets to decide? and whence their authority to do so? And because these are the very questions that Gove’s crew believes Dispassionate Science can transcend, their argument appears guilty of both *petitio principii* and *ignoratio elenchi*, and can pretty much be dismissed out of hand.

*Because /The Investigation/s’ prose is extremely gnomic and opaque and consists largely of Wittgenstein having weird little imaginary dialogues with himself, the quotations here are actually from Norman Malcolm’s definitive paraphrase of L.W.’s argument, in which paraphrase Dr. Malcolm uses single quotation marks for tone quotes and double quotation marks for when he’s actually quoting Wittgenstein—which when I myself am quoting Malcolm quoting Wittgenstein’s tone quotes, makes for a rather irksome surfeit of quotation marks, admittedly; but using Malcolm’s exegesis allows this interpolative demonstration to be about 60 percent shorter than it would be if we were to grapple with Wittgenstein directly.

† There’s a whole argument for this, but intuitively you can see that it makes sense: if the rules can’t be subjective, and if they’re not actually “out there” floating around in some kind of metaphysical hyperreality (a floating hyperreality that you can believe in if you wish, but you should know that people with beliefs like this usually get forced to take medication), then community consensus is really the only plausible option left.

taxes, or scream at their kids, this doesn't mean that they think those things are "good."³³ The whole point of establishing norms is to help us evaluate our actions (including utterances) according to what we—as a community have decided our real interests and purposes are. Granted, this analysis is oversimplified; in practice it's incredibly hard to arrive at norms and to keep them at least minimally fair or sometimes even to agree on what they are (see e.g. today's Culture Wars.) But the Descriptivists' assumption that all usage norms are arbitrary and dispensable leads to—well, have a mushroom.

The different connotations of arbitrary here are tricky, though—and this sort of segues into the second main kind of Descriptivist argument. There is a sense in which specific linguistic conventions really *are* arbitrary. For instance, there's no particular metaphysical reason why our word for a four-legged mammal that gives milk and goes moo is *cow* and not, say, *prttmpj*. The uptown term for this is "the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign,"³⁴ and it's used, along with certain principles of cognitive science and generative grammar, in a more philosophically sophisticated version of Descriptivism that holds the conventions of SWE to be more like the niceties of fashion than like actual norms. This "Philosophical Descriptivism" doesn't care much about dictionaries or method; its target is the standard SNOOT claim that prescriptive rules have their ultimate justification in the community's need to make its language meaningful and clear.

Steven Pinker's 1994 *The Language Instinct* is a good and fairly literate example of this second kind of Descriptivist argument, which, like the Gove-et-al. version, tends to deploy a jr.-high-filmstrip SCIENCE: POINTING THE WAY TO A BRIGHTER TOMORROW-type tone:

[T]he words "rule" and "grammar" have very different meanings to a scientist and a layperson. The rules people learn (or, more likely, fail to learn) in school are called "prescriptive" rules, prescribing how one ought to talk. Scientists studying language propose "descriptive" rules, describing how people *do* talk. Prescriptive and descriptive grammar are simply different things.³⁵

The point of this version of Descriptivism is to show that the descriptive rules are more fundamental and way more important than the prescriptive rules. The argument goes like this. An English sentence's being *meaningful* is not the same as its being *grammatical*. That is, such clearly ill-formed constructions as "Did you seen the car keys of me?" or "The show was looked by many people" are nevertheless comprehensible; the sentences do, more or less, communicate the information they're trying to get across. Add to this the fact that nobody who isn't damaged in some profound Oliver Sacksish way actually ever makes these sorts of very deep syntactic errors³⁶ and you get the basic proposition of N. Chomsky's generative linguistics, which is that there exists a Universal Grammar beneath and common to all languages, plus that there is probably an actual part of the human brain that's imprinted with this Universal Grammar the same way birds' brains are imprinted with Fly South and dogs' with Sniff Genitals. There's all kinds of compelling evidence and support for these ideas, not least of which are the advances that linguists and cognitive scientists and AI researchers have been able to make with them, and the theories have a lot of credibility, and they are adduced by the Philosophical Descriptivists to show that since the really *important* rules of language are at birth already hardwired into people's neocortex. SWE prescriptions against dangling participles or mixed metaphors are basically the linguistic equivalent of whalebone corsets and short forks for salad. As Steven Pinker puts it, "When a scientist considers all the high-tech mental machinery

³³In fact, the Methodological Descriptivists' reasoning is known in social philosophy as the "Well, Everybody Does It" fallacy—i.e., if a lot of people cheat on their taxes, that means it's somehow morally OK to cheat on your taxes. Ethics-wise, it takes only two or three deductive steps to get from there to the sort of State of Nature where everybody's hitting each other over the head and stealing their groceries.

³⁴This phrase is attributable to Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss philologist who more or less invented modern technical linguistics, separating the study of language as an abstract formal system from the historical and comparative emphases of 19th century philology. Suffice it to say that the Descriptivists like Saussure a lot. Suffice it also to say that they tend to misread him and take him out of context and distort his theories in all kinds of embarrassing ways—e.g., Saussure's "arbitrariness of the linguistic sign" means something other and far more complicated than just "There's no ultimate necessity to English speakers' saying cow." (Similarly, the structural linguists' distinction between "language behavior" and "language" is based on a simplistic misreading of Saussure's distinction between "*parole*" and "*langue*.")

³⁵(If that last line of Pinker's pourparler reminds you of Garner's "Essentially, descriptivists and prescriptivists are approaching different problems," be advised that the similarity is neither coincidence nor plagiarism. One of the many cunning things about ADMAU's preface is that Garner likes to take bits of Descriptivist rhetoric and use them for very different ends.)

³⁶Pinker puts it this way: "No one, not even a valley girl, has to be told not to say *Apples the eat boy* or *The child seems sleeping* or *Who did you meet John and?* or the vast, vast majority of the millions of trillions of mathematically possible combinations of words."

needed to order words into everyday sentences, prescriptive rules are, at best, inconsequential decorations.”

This argument is not the barrel of drugged trout that Methodological Descriptivism was, but it’s still vulnerable to objections. The first one is easy. Even if it’s true that we’re all wired with a Universal Grammar, it doesn’t follow that *all* prescriptive rules are superfluous. Some of these rules really do seem to serve clarity and precision. The injunction against two-way adverbs (“People who eat this often get sick”) is an obvious example, as are rules about other kinds of misplaced modifiers (“There are many reasons why lawyers lie, some better than others”) and about relative pronouns’ proximity to the nouns they modify (“She’s the mother of an infant daughter who works twelve hours a day”).

Granted, the Philosophical Descriptivist can question just how absolutely necessary these rules are: it’s quite likely that a recipient of clauses like the above could figure out what they mean from the sentences on either side or from the overall context or whatever.³⁷ A listener can usually figure out what I really mean when I misuse *infer* for *imply* or say *indicate* for *say*, too. But many of these solecisms—or even just clunky redundancies like “The door was rectangular in shape”—require at least a couple extra nanoseconds of cognitive effort, a kind of rapid sift-and-discard process, before the recipient gets it. Extra work. It’s debatable just how much extra work, but it seems indisputable that we put *some* extra interpretive burden on the recipient when we fail to honor certain conventions. W/r/t confusing clauses like the above, it simply seems more “considerate” to follow the rules of correct English...just as it’s more “considerate” to de-slob your home before entertaining guests or to brush your teeth before picking up a date. Not just more considerate but more respectful somehow—both of your listener/reader and of what you’re trying to get across. As we sometimes also say about elements of fashion and etiquette, the way you use English “makes a statement” or “sends a message”—even though these statements/messages often have nothing to do with the actual information you’re trying to communicate.

We’ve now sort of bled into a more serious rejoinder to Philosophical Descriptivism: from the fact that linguistic communication is not strictly dependent on usage and grammar it does *not* necessarily follow that the traditional rules of usage and grammar are nothing but “inconsequential decorations.” Another way to state this objection is that something’s being “decorative” does not necessarily make it “inconsequential.” Rhetoric-wise, Pinker’s flip dismissal is very bad tactics, for it invites precisely the question it’s begging: inconsequential *to whom?*

A key point here is that the resemblance between usage rules and certain conventions of etiquette or fashion is closer than the Philosophical Descriptivists know and far more important than they understand. Take, for example, the Descriptivist claim that so-called correct English usages like *brought* rather than *brung* and *felt* rather than *feeled* are arbitrary and restrictive and unfair and are supported only by custom and are (like irregular verbs in general) archaic and incommodious and an all-around pain in the ass. Let us concede for the moment that these claims are 100 percent reasonable. Then let’s talk about pants. Trousers, slacks. I suggest to you that having the so-called correct subthoracic clothing for US males be pants instead of skirts is arbitrary (lots of other cultures let men wear skirts), restrictive and unfair (US females get to wear either skirts or pants), based solely on archaic custom (I think it’s got to do with certain traditions about gender and leg-position, the same reasons women were supposed to ride sidesaddle and girls’ bikes don’t have a crossbar), and in certain ways not only incommodious but illogical (skirts are more comfortable than pants;³⁸ pants ride up; pants are hot; pants can squish the ’nads and reduce fertility; over time pants chafe and erode irregular sections of men’s leg-hair and give older men hideous half-denuded legs; etc. etc.). Let us grant—as a thought experiment if nothing else—that these are all sensible and compelling objections to pants as an androsartorial norm. Let us, in fact, in our minds and hearts say yes—*shout* yes—to the skirt, the kilt, the toga, the sarong, the jupe. Let us dream of or even in our spare time work toward an America where nobody lays any arbitrary sumptuary prescriptions on anyone else and we can all go around as comfortable and aerated and unchafed and motile as we want.

And yet the fact remains that in the broad cultural mainstream of millennial America, men do not wear skirts. If you, the reader, are a US male, and even if you share my personal objections to pants and dream as I do of a cool and genitally unsquishy American Tomorrow, the odds are still 99.9 percent that in 100 percent of public situations you wear pants/slacks/shorts/trunks. More to the point, if you are a US male and also have a US male

³⁷(FYI, there happens to be a whole subdiscipline of linguistics called Pragmatics that essentially studies the way statements’ meanings are created by various contexts.)

³⁸(presumably)

child, and if that child might happen to come to you one evening and announce his desire/intention to wear a skirt rather than pants to school the next day, I am 100 percent confident that you are going to discourage him from doing so. *Strongly* discourage him. You could be a Molotov-tossing anti-pants radical or a kilt manufacturer or Dr. Steven Pinker himself—you're going to stand over your kid and be prescriptive about an arbitrary, archaic, uncomfortable, and inconsequentially decorative piece of clothing. Why? Well, because in modern America any little boy who comes to school in a skirt (even, say, a modest all-season midi) is going to get stared at and shunned and beaten up and called a total geekoid by a whole lot of people whose approval and acceptance are important to him.³⁹ In our present culture, in other words, a boy who wears a skirt is “making a statement” that is going to have all kinds of gruesome social and emotional consequences for him.

You can probably see where this is headed. I'm going to describe the intended point of the pants analogy in terms that I'm sure are simplistic—doubtless there are whole books in Pragmatics or psycholinguistics or something devoted to unpacking this point. The weird thing is that I've seen neither Descriptivists nor SNOOTs deploy it in the Wars.^{40, 41}

When I say or write something, there are actually a whole lot of different things I am communicating. The propositional content (i.e., the verbal information I'm trying to convey) is only one part of it. Another part is stuff about me, the communicator. Everyone knows this. It's a function of the fact that there are so many different well-formed ways to say the same basic thing, from e.g. “I was attacked by a bear!” to “Goddamn bear tried to kill me!” to “That ursine juggernaut did essay to sup upon my person!” and so on. Add the Saussurian/Chomskian consideration that many grammatically ill-formed sentences can also get the propositional content across—“Bear attack Tonto, Tonto heap scared!”—and the number of subliminal options we're scanning/sorting/interpreting as we communicate with one another goes transfinite very quickly. And different levels of diction and formality are only the simplest kinds of distinction; things get way more complicated in the sorts of interpersonal communication where social relations and feelings and moods come into play. Here's a familiar kind of example. Suppose that you and I are acquaintances and we're in my apartment having a conversation and that at some point I want to terminate the conversation and not have you be in my apartment anymore. Very delicate social moment. Think of all the different ways I can try to handle it: “Wow, look at the time”; “Could we finish this up later?”; “Could you please leave now?”; “Go”; “Get out”; “Get the hell out of here”; “Didn't you say you had to be someplace?”; “Time for you to hit the dusty trail, my friend”; “Off you go then, love”; or that sly old telephone-conversation-ender; “Well, I'm going to let you go now”; etc. etc. And then think of all the different factors and implications of each option.⁴²

The point here is obvious. It concerns a phenomenon that SNOOTs blindly reinforce and that Descriptivists badly underestimate and that scary vocab-tape ads try to exploit. People really do judge one another according to their use of language. Constantly. Of course, people are constantly judging one another on the basis of all kinds of things—height, weight, scent, physiognomy, accent, occupation, make of vehicle⁴³—and, again, doubtless it's all terribly complicated and occupies whole battalions of sociolinguists. But it's clear that at least one component of

³⁹In the case of little Steve Pinker Jr., these people are the boy's peers and teachers and crossing guards. In the case of adult cross-dressers and drag queens who have jobs in the straight world and wear pants to those jobs, it's bosses and coworkers and customers and people on the subway. For the diehard slob who nevertheless wears a coat and tie to work, it's mostly his boss, who doesn't want his employees' clothes to send clients “the wrong message.” But it's all basically the same thing.

⁴⁰Even Garner scarcely mentions it, and just once in his dictionary's miniessay on CLASS DISTINCTIONS: “[M]any linguistic pratfalls can be seen as class indicators—even in a so-called classless society such as the United States.” And when Bryan A. Garner uses a clunky passive like “can be seen” as to distance himself from an issue, you know something's in the air.

⁴¹In fact, pretty much the only time one ever hears the issue made wholly explicit is in radio ads for tapes that promise to improve people's vocabularies. These ads tend to be extremely ominous and intimidating and always start out with “DID YOU KNOW PEOPLE JUDGE YOU BY THE WORDS YOU USE?”

⁴²To be honest, the example here has a special personal resonance for this reviewer because in real life I always seem to have a hard time winding up a conversation or asking somebody to leave, and sometimes the moment becomes so delicate and fraught with social complexity that I'll get overwhelmed trying to sort out all the different possible ways of saying it and all the different implications of each option and will just sort of blank out and do it totally straight- “I want to terminate the conversation and not have you be in my apartment anymore”—which evidently makes me look either as if I'm very rude and abrupt or as if I'm semi-autistic and have no sense of how to wind up a conversation gracefully. Somehow, in other words, my reducing the statement to its bare propositional content “sends a message” that is itself scanned, sifted, interpreted, and judged by my auditor, who then sometimes never comes back. I've actually lost friends this way.

⁴³(...not to mention color, gender, ethnicity—you can see how fraught and charged all this is going to get)

all this interpersonal semantic judging involves *acceptance*, meaning not some touchy-feely emotional affirmation but actual acceptance or rejection of someone's bid to be regarded as a peer, a member of somebody else's collective or community or Group. Another way to come at this is to acknowledge something that in the Usage Wars gets mentioned only in very abstract terms: "correct" English usage is, as a practical matter, a function of whom you're talking to and of how you want that person to respond—not just to your utterance but also to you. In other words, a large part of the project of any communication is rhetorical and depends on what some rhet-scholars call "Audience" or "Discourse Community."⁴⁴ It is the present existence in the United States of an enormous number of different Discourse Communities, plus the fact that both people's use of English and their interpretations of others' use are influenced by rhetorical assumptions, that are central to understanding why the Usage Wars are so politically charged and to appreciating why Bryan Garner's ADMAU is so totally sneaky and brilliant and modern.

Fact: There are all sorts of cultural/geographical dialects of American English - Black English, Latino English, Rural Southern, Urban Southern, Standard Upper-Midwest, Maine Yankee, East-Texas Bayou, Boston Blue-Collar, on and on. Everybody knows this. What not everyone knows—especially not certain Prescriptivists—is that many of these non-SWE-type dialects have their own highly developed and internally consistent grammars, and that some of these dialects' usage norms actually make more linguistic/aesthetic sense than do their Standard counterparts.**** Plus, of course, there are also innumerable sub- and subsubdialects⁴⁵ based on all sorts of things that have nothing to do with locale or ethnicity—Medical-School English, Twelve-Year-Old-Males-Whose-Worldview-Is-Deeply-Informed-by-South-Park English - that are nearly incomprehensible to anyone who isn't inside their very tight and specific Discourse Community (which of course is part of their function⁴⁶).

****INTERPOLATION: POTENTIALLY DESCRIPTIVIST-LOOKING EXAMPLE OF SOME GRAMMATICAL ADVANTAGES OF A NON-STANDARD DIALECT THAT THIS REVIEWER ACTUALLY KNOWS ABOUT FIRSTHAND

I happen to have two native English dialects—the SWE of my hypereducated parents and the hard-earned Rural Midwestern of most of my peers. When I'm talking to RMs, I tend to use constructions like "Where's it at?" for "Where is it?" and sometimes "He don't" instead of "He doesn't." Part of this is a naked desire to fit in and not get rejected as an egghead or fag (see *sub*). But another part is that I, SNOOT or no, believe that these RMisms are in certain ways superior to their Standard equivalents.

For a dogmatic Prescriptivist, "Where's it at?" is double-damned as a sentence that not only ends with a preposition but whose final preposition forms a redundancy with *where* that's similar to the redundancy in "the reason is because" (which latter usage I'll admit makes me dig my nails into my palms). Rejoinder: First off, the avoid-terminal-prepositions rule is the invention of one Fr. R. Lowth, an 18th-century British preacher and indurate pedant who did things like spend scores of pages arguing for *hath* over the trendy and degenerate *has*. The a.-t.-p. rule is antiquated and stupid and only the most ayotolloid SNOOT takes it seriously. Garner himself calls the rule "stuff" and lists all kinds of useful constructions like "a person I have great respect for" and "the man I was listening to" that we'd have to discard or distort if we really enforced it. Plus, the apparent redundancy of "Where's it at?"⁴⁷ is offset by its metrical logic: what the *at* really does is license the contraction of *is* after

⁴⁴ *Discourse Community* is a rare example of academic jargon that's actually a valuable addition to SWE because it captures something at once very complex and very specific that no other English term quite can.*

*(The above, while true, is an obvious attempt to preempt readerly sneers/winces at the term's continued deployment in this article.)

⁴⁵ Just how tiny and restricted a subdialect can get and still be called a subdialect isn't clear; there might be very firm linguistic definitions of what's a dialect and what's a subdialect and what's a subsub-, etc. Because I don't know any better and am betting you don't either, I'm going to use *subdialect* in a loose inclusive way that covers idiolects as distinctive as Peorians-Who-Follow-Pro-Wrestling-Closely or Geneticists-Who-Specialize-in- Hardy-Weinberg-Equilibrium. *Dialect* should probably be reserved for major players like Standard Black English et al.

⁴⁶ (Plus it's true that whether something gets called a "subdialect" or "jargon" seems to depend on how much it annoys people outside its Discourse Community. Garner himself has miniessays on AIRPLANESE, COMPUTERESE, LEGALESE, and BUREAUCRATESE, and he more or less calls all of them jargon. There is no ADMAU miniessay on DIALECTS, but there is one on JARGON, in which such is Garner's self-restraint that you can almost hear his tendons straining, as in "[jargon] arises from the urge to save time and space—and, occasionally to conceal meaning from the uninitiated.")

⁴⁷ (a redundancy that's a bit arbitrary, since "Where's it from?" isn't redundant (mainly because *whence* has receded into semi-archaism))

the interrogative adverb. You can't say "Where's it?" So the choice is between "Where is it?" and "Where's it at?", and the latter, a strong anapest, is prettier and trips off the tongue better than "Where is it?", whose meter is either a clunky monosyllabic foot+trochee or it's nothing at all.

Using "He don't" makes me a little more uncomfortable; I admit that its logic isn't quite as compelling. Nevertheless, a clear trend in the evolution of English from Middle to Modern has been the gradual regularizing of irregular present-tense verbs,⁴⁸ a trend justified by the fact that irregulars are hard to learn and to keep straight and have nothing but history going for them. By this reasoning, Standard Black English is way out on the cutting edge of English with its abandonment of the 3-S present in to do and to go and to say and its marvelously streamlined six identical present-tense inflections of to be. (Granted, the conjugation "he be" always sounds odd to me, but then SBE is not one of my dialects.)

This is probably the place for your SNOOT reviewer openly to concede that a certain number of traditional prescriptive rules really are stupid and that people who insist on them (like the legendary assistant to Margaret Thatcher who refused to read any memo with a split infinitive in it, or the jr.-high teacher I had who automatically graded you down if you started a sentence with Hopefully) are that very most contemptible and dangerous kind of SNOOT, the SNOOT Who Is Wrong. The injunction against split infinitives, for instance, is a consequence of the weird fact that English grammar is modeled on Latin even though Latin is a synthetic language and English is an analytic language.⁴⁹ Latin infinitives consist of one word and are impossible to as it were split, and the earliest English Prescriptivists—so enthralled with Latin that their English usage guides were actually written in Latin⁵⁰—decided that English infinitives shouldn't be split either. Garner himself takes out after the s.i. rule in his miniessays on both SPLIT INFINITIVES and SUPERSTITIONS.⁵¹ And Hopefully at the beginning of a sentence, as a certain cheeky eighth-grader once (to his everlasting social cost) pointed out in class, actually functions not as a misplaced modal auxiliary or as a manner adverb like *quickly* or *angrily* but as a sentence adverb (i.e., as a special kind of "veiled reflexive" that indicates the speaker's attitude about the state of affairs described by the rest of the sentence—examples of perfectly OK sentence adverbs are *clearly*, *basically*, *luckily*), and only SNOOTs educated in the high-pedantic years 1940-1960 blindly proscribe it or grade it down.

The cases of split infinitives and *hopefully* are in fact often trotted out by dogmatic Descriptivists as evidence that all SWE usage rules are arbitrary and dumb (which is a bit like pointing to Pat Buchanan as evidence that all Republicans are maniacs). FYI, Garner rejects *hopefully's* kneejerk proscription, too, albeit grudgingly, saying "the battle is lost" and including the adverb in his miniessay on SKUNKED TERMS, which is his phrase for a usage that is "hotly disputed...any use of it is likely to distract some readers." (Garner also points out something I'd never quite realized, which is that *hopefully*, if misplaced/ mispunctuated in the body of a sentence, can create some of the same two-way ambiguities as other adverbs, as in e.g. "I will borrow your book and hopefully read it soon.")

Whether we're conscious of it or not, most of us are fluent in more than one major English dialect and in several subdialects and are probably at least passable in countless others. Which dialect you choose to use depends, of course, on whom you're addressing. More to the point, I submit that the dialect you use depends mostly on what sort of Group your listener is part of and on whether you wish to present yourself as a fellow member of that Group. An obvious example is that traditional upper-class English has certain dialectal differences from

⁴⁸E.g., for a long time English had a special 2-S present conjugation—"thou lovest," "thou sayest"—that now survives only in certain past tenses (and in the present of *to be*, where it consists simply in giving the 2-S a plural inflection).

⁴⁹A synthetic language uses grammatical inflections to dictate syntax, whereas an analytic language uses word order. Latin, German, and Russian are synthetic; English and Chinese are analytic.

⁵⁰(Q.v. for example Sir Thomas Smith's cortex-withering *De Recta et Emendata Linguae Anglicae Scriptone Dialogus* of 1568.)

⁵¹N.B., though, that he's sane about it. Some split infinitives really are clunky and hard to parse, especially when there are a lot of words between *to* and the verb ("We will attempt to swiftly and to the best of our ability respond to these charges"), which Garner calls "wide splits" and sensibly discourages. His overall verdict on split infinitives—which is that some are "perfectly proper" and some iffy and some just totally bad news, and that no one wide tidy dogmatic use case can handle all s.i. cases, and thus that "knowing when to split an infinitive requires a good ear and a keen eye"—is a fine example of the way Garner distinguishes sound and helpful Descriptivist objections from wacko or dogmatic objections and then incorporates the sound objections into a smarter and more flexible Prescriptivism.

lower-class English and that schools used to have courses in elocution whose whole *raison* was to teach people how to speak in an upper-class way. But usage-as-inclusion is about much more than class. Try another sort of thought experiment: A bunch of US teenagers in clothes that look several sizes too large for them are sitting together in the local mall's food court, and imagine that a 53-year-old man with jowls, a comb-over, and clothes that fit perfectly comes over to them and says he was scoping them and thinks they're totally rad and/or phat and asks is it cool if he just kicks it and chills with them here at their table. The kids' reaction is going to be either scorn or embarrassment for the guy—most likely a mix of both. Q: Why? Or imagine that two hard-core young urban black guys are standing there talking and I, who am resoundingly and in all ways white, come up and greet them with “Yo” and address one or both as “Brother” and ask “s’up, s’goin’ on,” pronouncing *on* with that NYCish oo-o diphthong that Young Urban Black English deploys for a standard o. Either these guys are going to think that I am mocking them and be offended or they are going to think I am simply out of my mind. No other reaction is remotely foreseeable. Q: Why?

Why: A dialect of English is learned and used either because it's your native vernacular or because it's the dialect of a Group by which you wish (with some degree of plausibility) to be accepted. And although it is a major and vitally important one, SWE is only one dialect. And it is never, or at least hardly ever⁵²—anybody's only dialect. This is because there are—as you and I both know and yet no one in the Usage Wars ever seems to mention—situations in which faultlessly correct SWE is *not* the appropriate dialect.

Childhood is full of such situations. This is one reason why SNOOTlets tend to have such a hard social time of it in school. A SNOOTlet is a little kid who's wildly, precociously fluent in SWE (he is often, recall, the offspring of SNOOTs). Just about every class has a SNOOTlet, so I know you've seen them - these are the sorts of six-to-twelve-year-olds who use *whom* correctly and whose response to striking out in T-ball is to shout “How incalculably dreadful!” The elementary-school SNOOTlet is one of the earliest identifiable species of academic geekoid and is duly despised by his peers and praised by his teachers. These teachers usually don't see the incredible amounts of punishment the SNOOTlet is receiving from his classmates, or if they do see it they blame the classmates and shake their heads sadly at the vicious and arbitrary cruelty of which children are capable.

Teachers who do this are dumb. The truth is that his peers' punishment of the SNOOTlet is not arbitrary at all. There are important things at stake. Little kids in school are learning about Group-inclusion and -exclusion and about the respective rewards and penalties of same and about the use of dialect and syntax and slang as signals of affinity and inclusion. They're learning about Discourse Communities. Little kids learn this stuff not in Language Arts or Social Studies but on the playground and the bus and at lunch. When his peers are ostracizing the SNOOTlet or giving him monstrous quadruple Wedgies or holding him down and taking turns spitting on him, there's serious learning going on. Everybody here is learning except the little SNOOT⁵³—in fact, what

⁵²(It is, admittedly, difficult to imagine William F. Buckley using or perhaps even being aware of anything besides SWE.)

⁵³AMATEUR DEVELOPMENTAL-SOCIOLINGUISTIC INTERPOLATION #1

The SNOOTlet is, as it happens, an indispensable part of the other children's playground education. School and peers are kids' first socialization outside the family. In learning about Groups and Group tectonics, the kids are naturally learning that a Group's identity depends as much on exclusion as inclusion. They are, in other words, starting to learn about Us and Them, and about how an Us always needs a Them because being not-Them is essential to being Us. Because they're little children and it's school, the obvious Them is the teachers and all the values and appurtenances of the teacher-world.* This teacher-Them helps the kids see how to start to be an Us, but the SNOOTlet completes the puzzle by providing a kind of missing link: he is the traitor, the Us who is in fact not Us but *Them*. The SNOOTlet, who at first appears to be one of Us because like Us he's three feet tall and runny-nosed and eats paste, nevertheless speaks an erudite SWE that signals membership not in Us but in Them, which since Us is defined as not-Them is equivalent to a rejection of Us that is also a *betrayal* of Us precisely because the SNOOTlet is a kid, i.e., one of Us*.

Point: The SNOOTlet is teaching his peers that the criteria for membership in Us are not just age, height, paste-ingestion, etc., that in fact Us is primarily a state of mind and a set of sensibilities. An ideology. The SNOOTlet is also teaching the kids that Us has to be extremely vigilant about persons who may at first appear to be Us but are in truth not Us and may need to be identified and excluded at a moment's notice. The SNOOTlet is not the only type of child who can serve as traitor: the Teacher's Pet, the Tattletale, the Brown-Noser, and the Mama's Boy can also do nicely...just as the Damaged and Deformed and Fat and Generally Troubled children all help the nascent mainstream Us-Groups refine the criteria for in- and exclusion. In these crude and fluid formations of ideological Groupthink lies American kids' real socialization. We all learn early that community and Discourse Community are the same thing, and a fearsome thing indeed. It helps to know where We come from.

*(Plus, because the teacher-Them are tall humorless punishers/rewarders, they come to stand for all adults and — in a shadowy, inchoate way—for the Parents, whose gradual shift from composing Us to defining Them is probably the biggest

the SNOOTlet is being punished for is precisely his *failure* to learn. And his Language Arts teacher—whose own Elementary Education training prizes “linguistic facility” as one of the “social skills” that ensure children’s “developmentally appropriate peer rapport,”⁵⁴ but who does not or cannot consider the possibility that linguistic facility might involve more than lapidary SWE—is unable to see that her beloved SNOOTlet is actually *deficient* in Language Arts. He has only one dialect. He cannot alter his vocabulary, usage, or grammar, cannot use slang or vulgarity; and it’s these abilities that are really required for “peer rapport,” which is just a fancy academic term for being accepted by the second-most-important Group in the little kid’s life.⁵⁵ If he is sufficiently in thrall to his teachers and those teachers are sufficiently clueless, it may take years and unbelievable amounts of punishment before the SNOOTlet learns that you need more than one dialect to get along in school.

This reviewer acknowledges that there seems to be some, umm, personal stuff getting dredged up and worked out here;⁵⁶ but the stuff is germane. The point is that the little A+ SNOOTlet is actually in the same dialectal position as the class’s “slow” kid who can’t learn to stop using *ain’t* or *bringed*. Exactly the same position. One is punished in class, the other on the playground, but both are deficient in the same linguistic skill—viz., the ability to move between various dialects and levels of “correctness,” the ability to communicate one way with peers and another way with teachers and another with family and another with T-ball coaches and so on. Most of these dialectal adjustments are made below the level of conscious awareness, and our ability to make them seems part psychological and part something else—perhaps something hardwired into the same motherboard as Universal Grammar—and in truth this ability is a much better indicator of a kid’s raw “verbal IQ” than test scores or grades, since US English classes do far more to retard dialectal talent than to cultivate it.

EXAMPLE OF HOW CONCEPTS OF RHETORIC AND DIALECT AND GROUP-INCLUSION CAN HELP MAKE SENSE OF SOME OF THE USAGE WARS’ CONSTITUENT BATTLES

Well-known fact: In neither K-12 nor college English are systematic SWE grammar and usage much taught anymore. It’s been this way for more than 20 years, and the phenomenon drives Prescriptivists nuts; it’s one of the big things they cite as evidence of America’s gradual murder of English. Descriptivists and English-Ed specialists counter that grammar and usage have been abandoned because scientific research has proved that studying SWE conventions doesn’t help make kids better writers.⁵⁷ Each side in the debate tends to regard the other as mentally ill or/and blinded by ideology. Neither camp appears ever to have considered whether maybe the *way* prescriptive SWE was traditionally taught had something to do with its inutility.

By “way” here I’m referring not so much to actual method as to spirit or attitude. Most traditional teachers of English grammar have, of course, been dogmatic SNOOTs, and like most dogmatists they’ve been extremely stupid about the rhetoric they used and the audience they were addressing. I refer specifically to these teachers,⁵⁸

ideological adjustment of childhood.)

⁵⁴(Elementary Ed professors really do talk this way.)

⁵⁵AMATEUR DEVELOPMENTAL-SOCIOLINGUISTIC INTERPOLATION #2

And by the time the SNOOTlet hits adolescence it’ll have supplanted the family to become the *most* important Group. And it will be a Group that depends for its definition on a rejection of traditional Authority.* And because it is the recognized dialect of mainstream adult society, there is no better symbol of traditional Authority than SWE. It is not an accident that adolescence is the time when slang and code and subdialects of subdialects explode all over the place and parents begin to complain that they can hardly even understand their kids’ language. Nor are lyrics like “I can’t get no / Satisfaction” an accident or any kind of sad commentary on the British educational system. Jagger et al. aren’t stupid; they’re rhetoricians, and they know their audience.

*(That is, the teacher/parent-They becomes the Establishment, Society—They becomes THEM.)

⁵⁶(The skirt-in-school scenario was not personal stuff, though. FYI.)

⁵⁷There is a respectable body of English-Ed research to back up this claim, the best known being the Harris, Bateman-Zidonis, and Mellon studies of the 1960s.

⁵⁸There are still some of them around, at least here in the Midwest. You know the type: lipless, tweedy, cancrine—old maids of both genders. If you ever had one (as I did, 1976-77), you surely remember him.

assumption that SWE is the sole appropriate English dialect and that the only reasons anyone could fail to see this are ignorance or amentia or grave deficiencies in character. As rhetoric, this sort of attitude works only in sermons to the choir, and as pedagogy it's disastrous, and in terms of teaching writing it's especially bad because it commits precisely the error that most Freshman Composition classes spend all semester trying to keep kids from making—the error of presuming the very audience-agreement that it is really their rhetorical job to earn.⁵⁹ The reality is that an average US student is going to take the trouble to master the difficult conventions of SWE only if he sees SWE's relevant Group or Discourse Community as one he'd like to be part of. And in the absence of any sort of argument for why the correct-SWE Group is a good or desirable one (an argument that, recall, the traditional teacher hasn't given, because he's such a dogmatic SNOOT he sees no need to), the student is going to be reduced to evaluating the desirability of the SWE Group based on the one obvious member of that Group he's encountered, namely the SNOOTy teacher himself. And what right-thinking average kid would want to be part of a Group represented by so smug, narrow, self-righteous, condescending, utterly uncool a personage as the traditional Prescriptivist teacher?

I'm not trying to suggest here that an effective SWE pedagogy would require teachers to wear sunglasses and call students Dude. What I am suggesting is that the rhetorical situation of a US English class—a class composed wholly of young people whose Group identity is rooted in defiance of Adult Establishment values, plus also composed partly of minorities whose primary dialects are different from SWE—requires the teacher to come up with overt, honest, and compelling arguments for why SWE is a dialect worth learning.

These arguments are hard to make. Hard not intellectually but emotionally, politically. Because they are baldly elitist.⁶⁰ The real truth, of course, is that SWE is the dialect of the American elite. That it was invented, codified, and promulgated by Privileged WASP Males and is perpetuated as “Standard” by same. That it is the shibboleth of the Establishment, and that it is an instrument of political power and class division and racial discrimination and all manner of social inequity. These are shall we say rather *delicate* subjects to bring up in an English class, especially in the service of a pro-SWE argument, and extra-especially if you yourself are both a Privileged WASP Male and the teacher and thus pretty much a walking symbol of the Adult Establishment. This reviewer's opinion, though, is that both students and SWE are way better served if the teacher makes his premises explicit and his argument overt—plus it obviously helps his rhetorical credibility if the teacher presents himself as an advocate of SWE's utility rather than as some sort of prophet of its innate superiority.

Because the argument for SWE is both most delicate and (I believe) most important with respect to students of color, here is a condensed version of the spiel I've given in private conferences⁶¹ with certain black students who were (a) bright and inquisitive as hell and (b) deficient in what US higher education considers written English facility:

⁵⁹INTERPOLATIVE BUT RELEVANT, IF ONLY BECAUSE THE ERROR HERE IS ONE THAT GARNER'S ADMAU MANAGES NEVER ONCE TO MAKE

This kind of mistake results more from a habit of mind than from any particular false premise—it is a function not of fallacy or ignorance but of self-absorption. It also happens to be the most persistent and damaging error that most college writers make, and one so deeply rooted that it often takes several essays and conferences and revisions to get them to even see what the problem is. Helping them eliminate the error involves drumming into student writers two big injunctions: (1) Do not presume that the reader can read your mind—anything that you want the reader to visualize or consider or conclude, you must provide; (2) Do not presume that the reader feels the same way that you do about a given experience or issue—your argument cannot just assume as true the very things you're trying to argue for.

Because (1) and (2) seem so simple and obvious, it may surprise you to know that they are actually *incredibly hard* to get students to understand in such a way that the principles inform their writing. The reason for the difficulty is that, in the abstract, (1) and (2) are intellectual, whereas in practice they are more things of the spirit. The injunctions require of the student both the imagination to conceive of the reader as a separate human being and the empathy to realize that this separate person has preferences and confusions and beliefs of her own, p/c/b's that are just as deserving of respectful consideration as the writer's. More, (1) and (2) require of students the humility to distinguish between a universal truth (“This is the way things are, and only an idiot would disagree”) and something that the writer merely opines (“My reasons for recommending this are as follows:”). These sorts of requirements are, of course, also the elements of a Democratic Spirit. I therefore submit that the hoary cliché “Teaching the student to write is teaching the student to think” sells the enterprise way short. Thinking isn't even half of it.

⁶⁰(Or rather the arguments require us openly to acknowledge and talk about elitism, whereas a traditional dogmatic SNOOT's pedagogy is merely elitism in action.)

⁶¹(I'm not a total idiot.)

I don't know whether anybody's told you this or not, but when you're in a college English class you're basically studying a foreign dialect. This dialect is called Standard Written English. [Brief overview of major US dialects a la page 98.] From talking with you and reading your first couple essays, I've concluded that your own primary dialect is [one of three variants of SBE common to our region]. Now, let me spell something out in my official teacher-voice: the SBE you're fluent in is different from SWE in all kinds of important ways. Some of these differences are grammatical— for example, double negatives are OK in Standard Black English but not in SWE, and SBE and SWE conjugate certain verbs in totally different ways. Other differences have more to do with style—for instance, Standard Written English tends to use a lot more subordinate clauses in the early parts of sentences, and it sets off most of these early subordinates with commas, and under SWE rules, writing that doesn't do this tends to look “choppy.” There are tons of differences like that. How much of this stuff do you already know? [STANDARD RESPONSE = some variation on “I know from the grades and comments on my papers that the English profs here don't think I'm a good writer.”] Well, I've got good news and bad news. There are some otherwise smart English profs who aren't very aware that there are real dialects of English other than SWE, so when they're marking up your papers they'll put, like, “Incorrect conjugation” or “Comma needed” instead of “SWE conjugates this verb differently” or “SWE calls for a comma here.” That's the good news—it's not that you're a bad writer, it's that you haven't learned the special rules of the dialect they want you to write in. Maybe that's not such good news, that they've been grading you down for mistakes in a foreign language you didn't even know was a foreign language. That they won't let you write in SBE. Maybe it seems unfair. If it does, you're probably not going to like this other news: I'm not going to let you write in SBE either. In my class, you have to learn and write in SWE. If you want to study your own primary dialect and its rules and history and how it's different from SWE, fine—there are some great books by scholars of Black English, and I'll help you find some and talk about them with you if you want. But that will be outside class. In class—in my English class—you will have to master and write in Standard Written English, which we might just as well call “Standard White English” because it was developed by white people and is used by white people, especially educated, powerful white people. [RESPONSES at this point vary too widely to standardize.] I'm respecting you enough here to give you what I believe is the straight truth. In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is just How It Is. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can believe it's racist and unfair and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something—if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our nation uses to talk to itself. African-Americans who've become successful and important in US culture know this; that's why King's and X's and Jackson's speeches are in SWE, and why Morrison's and Angelou's and Baldwin's and Wideman's and Gates's and West's books are full of totally ass-kicking SWE, and why black judges and politicians and journalists and doctors and teachers communicate professionally in SWE. Some of these people grew up in homes and communities where SWE was the native dialect, and these black people had it much easier in school, but the ones who didn't grow up with SWE realized at some point that they had to learn it and become able to write fluently in it, and so they did. And [STUDENT'S NAME], you're going to learn to use it, too, because I am going to make you.

I should note here that a couple of the students I've said this stuff to were offended—one lodged an Official Complaint—and that I have had more than one colleague profess to find my spiel “racially insensitive.” Perhaps you do, too. This reviewer's own humble opinion is that some of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair, and that pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever really changing them.

ANOTHER KIND OF USAGE WARS-RELATED EXAMPLE, THIS ONE WITH A PARTICULAR EMPHASIS ON DIALECT AS A VECTOR OF SELF-PRESENTATION VIA POLITENESS⁶²

Traditionally, Prescriptivists tend to be political conservatives and Descriptivists tend to be liberals. But today's most powerful influence on the norms of public English is actually a stern and exacting form of liberal Prescriptivism. I refer here to Politically Correct English (PCE), under whose conventions failing students become "high-potential" students and poor people "economically disadvantaged" and people in wheelchairs "differently abled" and a sentence like "White English and Black English are different, and you better learn White English or you're not going to get good grades" is not blunt but "insensitive." Although it's common to make jokes about PCE (referring to ugly people as "aesthetically challenged" and so on), be advised that Politically Correct English's various pre- and proscriptions are taken very seriously indeed by colleges and corporations and government agencies, whose institutional dialects now evolve under the beady scrutiny of a whole new kind of Language Police.

From one perspective, the rise of PCE evinces a kind of Lenin-to-Stalinesque irony. That is, the same ideological principles that informed the original Descriptivist revolution—namely, the rejections of traditional authority (born of Vietnam) and of traditional inequality (born of the civil rights movement)—have now actually produced a far more inflexible Prescriptivism, one largely unencumbered by tradition or complexity and backed by the threat of real-world sanctions (termination, litigation) for those who fail to conform. This is funny in a dark way, maybe, and it's true that most criticisms of PCE seem to consist in making fun of its trendiness or vapidness. This reviewer's own opinion is that prescriptive PCE is not just silly but ideologically confused and harmful to its own cause.

Here is my argument for that opinion. Usage is always political, but it's complexly political. With respect, for instance, to political change, usage conventions can function in two ways: on the one hand they can be a *reflection* of political change, and on the other they can be an *instrument* of political change. What's important is that these two functions are different and have to be kept straight. Confusing them—in particular, mistaking for political efficacy what is really just a language's political symbolism—enables the bizarre conviction that America ceases to be elitist or unfair simply because Americans stop using certain vocabulary that is historically associated with elitism and unfairness. This is PCE's core fallacy—that a society's mode of expression is productive of its attitudes rather than a product of those attitudes⁶³—and of course it's nothing but the obverse of the politically conservative SNOOT's delusion that social change can be retarded by restricting change in standard usage.⁶⁴

Forget Stalinization or Logic 101-level equivocations, though. There's a grosser irony about Politically Correct English. This is that PCE purports to be the dialect of progressive reform but is in fact—in its Orwellian substitution of the euphemisms of social equality for social equality itself—of vastly more help to conservatives and the US status quo than traditional SNOOT prescriptions ever were. Were I, for instance, a political conservative who opposed using taxation as a means of redistributing national wealth, I would be delighted to watch PC progressives spend their time and energy arguing over whether a poor person should be described as "low-income" or "economically disadvantaged" or "pre-prosperous" rather than constructing effective public arguments for redistributive legislation or higher marginal tax rates. (Not to mention that strict codes of egalitarian euphemism serve to burke the sorts of painful, unpretty, and sometimes offensive discourse that in a pluralistic democracy lead to actual political change rather than symbolic political change. In other words, PCE acts as a form of censorship, and censorship always serves the status quo.)

As a practical matter, I strongly doubt whether a guy who has four small kids and makes \$12,000 a year feels more empowered or less ill-used by a society that carefully refers to him as "economically disadvantaged" rather than

⁶²ESPECIALLY GOOD EPIGRAPHS FOR THIS SECTION:

"Passive voice verbs, in particular, may deny female agency."—DR. MARILYN SCHWARTZ AND THE TASK FORCE ON BIAS-FREE LANGUAGE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN UNIVERSITY PRESSES.

"He raised his voice suddenly, and shouted for dinner. Servants shouted back that it was ready. They meant that they wished it was ready, and were so understood, for nobody moved."—E. M. FORSTER

⁶³(A pithier way to put this is that *politeness* is not the same as *fairness*.)

⁶⁴E.g., this is the reasoning behind Pop Prescriptivists' complaint that shoddy usage signifies the Decline of Western Civilization.

“poor.” Were I he, in fact, I’d probably find the PCE term insulting—not just because it’s patronizing (which it is) but because it’s hypocritical and self-serving in a way that oft-patronized people tend to have really good subliminal antennae for. The basic hypocrisy about usages like “economically disadvantaged” and “differently abled” is that PCE advocates believe the beneficiaries of these terms’ compassion and generosity to be poor people and people in wheelchairs, which again omits something that everyone knows but nobody except the scary vocabulary tape ads’ announcer ever mentions—that part of any speaker’s motive for using a certain vocabulary is always the desire to communicate stuff about himself. Like many forms of Vogue Usage,⁶⁵ PCE functions primarily to signal and congratulate certain virtues in the speaker—scrupulous egalitarianism, concern for the dignity of all people, sophistication about the political implications of language—and so serves the self-regarding interests of the PC far more than it serves any of the persons or groups renamed.†*

** INTERPOLATION

The unpleasant truth is that the same self-serving hypocrisy that informs PCE tends to infect and undermine the US Left’s rhetoric in almost every debate over social policy. Take the ideological battle over wealth redistribution via taxes, quotas, Welfare, enterprise zones, AFDC/TANF, you name it. As long as redistribution is conceived as a form of charity or compassion (and the Bleeding Left appears to buy this conception every bit as much as the Heartless Right), then the whole debate centers on utility—“Does Welfare help poor people get on their feet or does it foster passive dependence?” “Is government’s bloated social-services bureaucracy an effective way to dispense charity?” and so on—and both camps have their arguments and preferred statistics, and the whole thing goes around and around...

Opinion: The mistake here lies in both sides’ assumption that the real motives for redistributing wealth are charitable or unselfish. The conservatives’ mistake (if it is a mistake) is wholly conceptual, but for the Left the assumption is also a serious tactical error. Progressive liberals seem incapable of stating the obvious truth: that we who are well off should be willing to share more of what we have with poor people not for the poor people’s sake but for our own; i.e., we should share what we have in order to become less narrow and frightened and lonely and self-centered people. No one ever seems willing to acknowledge aloud the thoroughgoing self-interest that underlies all impulses toward economic equality—especially not US progressives, who seem so invested in an image of themselves as Uniquely Generous and Compassionate and Not Like Those Selfish Conservatives Over There that they allow the conservatives to frame the debate in terms of charity and utility, terms under which redistribution seems far less obviously a good thing.

I’m talking about this example in such a general, simplistic way because it helps show why the type of leftist vanity that informs PCE is actually inimical to the Left’s own causes. For in refusing to abandon the idea of themselves as Uniquely Generous and Compassionate (i.e., as morally superior), progressives lose the chance to frame their redistributive arguments in terms that are both realistic and realpolitikal. One such argument would involve a complex, sophisticated analysis of what we really mean by self-interest, particularly the distinctions between short-term financial self-interest and longer term moral or social self-interest. As it is, though, liberals’ vanity tends to grant conservatives a monopoly on appeals to self-interest, enabling the conservatives to depict progressives as pie-in-the-sky idealists and themselves as real-world back-pocket pragmatists. In short, leftists’ big mistake here is not conceptual or ideological but spiritual and rhetorical— their narcissistic attachment to assumptions that maximize their own appearance of virtue tends to cost them both the theater and the war.

⁶⁵ *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* includes a miniessay on VOGUE WORDS, but it’s a disappointing one in which Garner does little more than list VWs that bug him and say that “vogue words have such a grip on the popular mind that they come to be used in contexts in which they serve little purpose.” This is one of the rare places in ADMAU where Garner is simply wrong. The real problem is that every sentence blends and balances at least two different communicative functions—one the transmission of raw info, the other the transmission of certain stuff about the speaker—and Vogue Usage throws this balance off. Garner’s “serve little purpose” is exactly incorrect: vogue words serve *too much* the purpose of presenting the speaker in a certain light (even if this is merely as with-it or hip), and people’s odd little subliminal BS-antennae pick this imbalance up, and that’s why even nonSNOOTs often find Vogue Usages irritating and creepy. It’s the same phenomenon as when somebody goes out of her way to be incredibly solicitous and complimentary and nice to you and after a while you begin to find her solicitude creepy: you are sensing that a disproportionately large part of this person’s agenda consists in trying to present herself as Nice.

***†INTERPOLATION: EXAMPLE OF A SNOOT-RELATED ISSUE IN THE FACE OF WHOSE
MALIGNANCY THIS REVIEWER'S DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT GIVES OUT ALTOGETHER, AD-
MITTEDLY

This issue is Academic English, a verbal cancer that has metastasized now to afflict both scholarly writing—

*If such a sublime cyborg would insinuate the future as post-Fordist subject, his palpably masochistic locations as ecstatic agent of the sublime superstate need to be decoded as the “now all-but-unreadable DNA” of the fast industrializing Detroit, just as his Robocop-like strategy of carceral negotiation and street control remains the tirelessly American one of inflicting regeneration through violence upon the racially heteroglossic “Wilds” and others of the inner city.*⁶⁶

and prose as mainstream as the Village Voice's—

At first encounter, the poems' distanced cerebral surfaces can be daunting, evading physical location or straightforward emotional arc. But this seeming remoteness quickly reveals a very real passion, centered in the speaker's struggle to define his evolving self-construction.

Maybe it's a combination of my SNOOTitude and the fact that I end up having to read a lot of it for my job, but I'm afraid I regard Academic English not as a dialectal variation but as a grotesque debasement of SWE, and loathe it even more than the stilted incoherences of Presidential English (“This is the best and only way to uncover, destroy, and prevent Iraq from reengineering weapons of mass destruction”) or the mangled pieties of Business Speak (“Our Mission: to proactively search and provide the optimum networking skills and resources to service the needs of your growing business”); and in support of this total contempt and intolerance I cite no less an authority than Mr. G. Orwell, who 50 years ago had AE pegged as a “mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence” in which “it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning”⁶⁷ n It probably isn't the whole explanation, but as with the voguish hypocrisy of PCE, the obscurity and pretension of Academic English can be attributed in part to a disruption in the delicate rhetorical balance between language as a vector of meaning and language as a vector of the writer's own resume. In other words, it is when a scholar's vanity/insecurity leads him to write primarily to communicate and reinforce his own status as an Intellectual that his English is deformed by pleonasm and pretentious diction (whose function is to signal the writer's erudition) and by opaque abstraction (whose function is to keep anybody from pinning the writer down to a definite assertion that can maybe be refuted or shown to be silly). The latter characteristic, a level of obscurity that often makes it just about impossible to figure out what an AE sentence is really saying,⁶⁸ so closely resembles political and corporate doublespeak (“revenue

⁶⁶FYI, this snippet, which appears in ADMAU's miniesay on OBSCURITY, is quoted from a 1997 Sacramento Bee article entitled “No Contest: English Professors Are Worst Writers on Campus.”

⁶⁷This was in his 1946 “Politics and the English Language,” an essay that despite its date (and the basic redundancy of its title) remains the definitive SNOOT statement on Academese. Orwell's famous AE translation of the gorgeous “I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift” part of Ecclesiastes as “Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account” should be tattooed on the left wrist of every grad student in the anglophone world.

⁶⁸If you still think assertions like that are just SNOOT hyperbole, see also e.g. Dr. Fredric Jameson, author of *The Geopolitical Aesthetic and The Prison-House of Language*, whom *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* calls “one of the foremost contemporary Marxist literary critics writing in English.” Specifically, have a look at the first sentence of Dr. Jameson's 1992 *Signatures of the Visible*—

The visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object; while the most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess (rather than from the thankless effort to discipline the viewer).

—in which not only is each of its three main independent clauses totally obscure and full of predicates without evident subjects and pronouns without clear antecedents, but whatever connection between those clauses justifies stringing them together into one long semicolon sentence is anyone's guess at all.

Please be advised (a) that the above sentence won 1997's First Prize in the World's Worst Writing Contest held annually at Canterbury University in New Zealand, a competition in which American academics regularly sweep the field, and (b) that F. Jameson was and is an extremely powerful and influential and oft-cited figure in US literary scholarship, which means (c) that if you have kids in college, there's a good chance that they are being taught how to write by high-paid adults for whom the above sentence is a model of erudite

enhancement,” “downsizing,” “proactive resource-allocation restructuring”) that it’s tempting to think AE’s real purpose is concealment and its real motivation fear.⁶⁹

The insecurities that drive PCE, AE, and vocab-tape ads are far from groundless, though. These are tense linguistic times. Blame it on Heisenbergian uncertainty or postmodern relativism or Image Over Substance or the ubiquity of advertising and PR or the rise of Identity Politics or whatever you will—we live in an era of terrible preoccupation with presentation and interpretation, one in which the relations between who someone is and what he believes and how he “expresses himself”⁷⁰ have been thrown into big-time flux. In rhetorical terms, certain long-held distinctions between the Ethical Appeal, Logical Appeal (=an argument’s plausibility or soundness, from *logos*), and Pathetic Appeal (=an argument’s emotional impact, from *pathos*) have now pretty much collapsed—or rather the different sorts of Appeals now affect and are affected by one another in ways that make it nearly impossible to advance an argument on “reason” alone.

A vividly concrete illustration here concerns the Official Complaint that a certain black undergraduate filed against me after one of my little *in camera* spiels described on pages 108-109. The complainant was (I opine) wrong, but she was not crazy or stupid; and I was able later to see that I did bear some responsibility for the whole nasty administrative swivet. My culpability lay in gross rhetorical naïveté. I’d seen my speech’s primary Appeal as Logical: the aim was to make a conspicuously blunt, honest argument for SWE’s utility. It wasn’t pretty, maybe, but it was true, plus so manifestly bullshit-free that I think I expected not just acquiescence but gratitude for my candor.⁷¹ The problem I failed to see, of course, lay not with the argument *per se* but with the person making it—namely me, a Privileged WASP Male in a position of power, thus someone whose statements about the primacy and utility of the Privileged WASP Male dialect appeared not candid/hortatory/authoritative/ true but elitist/high-handed/authoritarian/racist. Rhetoric-wise, what happened was that I allowed the substance and style of my Logical Appeal to completely torpedo my Ethical Appeal: what the student heard was just another PWM rationalizing why his Group and his English were top dog and ought “logically” to stay that way (plus, worse, trying to use his academic power over her to coerce her assent⁷²).

If for any reason you happen to find yourself sharing this particular student’s perceptions and reaction⁷³ I would ask that you bracket your feelings just long enough to recognize that the PWM instructor’s very modern rhetorical dilemma in that office was not much different from the dilemma faced by any male who makes a Pro-life argument, or any atheist who argues against creation science, or any caucasian who opposes Affirmative Action, or any African-American who decries racial profiling, or anyone over eighteen who tries to make a case for raising the legal driving age to eighteen, etc. The dilemma has nothing to do with whether the arguments themselves are plausible or right or even sane, because the debate rarely gets that far—any opponent with sufficiently strong feelings or a dogmatic bent can discredit the argument and pretty much foreclose all further discussion with a rejoinder we Americans have come to know well: “Of course *you’d* say that”; “Easy for *you* to say”; “What right do *you* have to...?”

Now (still bracketing) consider the situation of any reasonably intelligent and well-meaning SNOOT who sits down to prepare a prescriptive usage guide. It’s the millennium, post-everything: whence the authority to make any sort of credible Appeal for SWE at all?

English prose.

⁶⁹Even in Freshman Comp, bad student essays are far, far more often the products of fear than of laziness or incompetence. In fact, it often takes so long to identify and help with students’ fear that the Freshman Comp teacher never gets to find out whether they might have other problems, too.

⁷⁰(Notice the idiom’s syntax—it’s never “expresses his beliefs” or “expresses his ideas.”)

⁷¹(Please just don’t even say it.)

⁷²(The student professed to have been especially traumatized by the climactic “I am going to make you,” which was indeed a rhetorical boner.)

⁷³FYI, the dept. chair and dean did not, at the Complaint hearing, share her reaction...though it would be disingenuous not to tell you that they happened also to be PWMs which fact was also remarked on by the complainant, such that the whole proceeding got pretty darn tense indeed, before it was over.

ARTICLE'S CRUX: WHY BRYAN A. GARNER IS A GENIUS (I)

It isn't that *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is perfect. It doesn't seem to cover *conversant in* vs. *conversant with*, for example, or *abstruse* vs. *obtuse*, or to have anything on *hereby* and *herewith* (which I tend to use interchangeably but always have the uneasy feeling I'm screwing up). Garner's got a good discussion of *used to* but nothing on *supposed to*. Nor does he give any examples to help explain irregular participles and transitivity ("The light shone" vs. "I shined the light," etc.), and these would seem to be more important than, say, the correct spelling of *huzzah* or the plural of *animalculium*, both of which get discussed. In other words, a rock-ribbed SNOOT is going to be able to find stuff to kvetch about in any usage dictionary, and ADMAU is no exception.

But it's still really, really good. Except for the VOGUE WORDS snafu and the absence of a pronunciation entry on *trough*,⁷⁴ the above were pretty much the only quibbles this reviewer could find. ADMAU is thorough and timely and solid, as good as Follett's and Gilman's and the handful of other great American usage guides of the century. Their format—which was Fowler's—is ADMAU's, too: concise entries on individual words and phrases and expository cap-titled MINIESSAYS on any issue broad enough to warrant more general discussion. Because of both his Fowler Society and the advent of online databases, though, Garner has access to many more examples of actual published SWE than did Gilman nine years ago, and he uses them to great, if lengthy, effect. But none of this is why Bryan Garner is a genius.

ADMAU is a collection of judgments and so is in no way Descriptivist, but Garner structures his judgments very carefully to avoid the elitism and anality of traditional SNOOTitude. He does not deploy irony or scorn or caustic wit, nor tropes or colloquialisms or contractions...or really any sort of verbal style at all. In fact, even though Garner talks openly about himself and uses the 1-S pronoun throughout the whole dictionary, his personality is oddly effaced, neutralized. It's like he's so bland he's barely there. For instance, as this reviewer was finishing the book's final entry,⁷⁵ it struck me that I had no idea whether Bryan A. Garner was black or white, gay or straight, Democrat or Dittohead. What was even more striking was that I hadn't once wondered about any of this up to now; something about Garner's lexical persona kept me from ever asking where the guy was coming from or what particular agendas or ideologies were informing what he had admitted right up front were "value judgments." This seemed very odd indeed. Bland people can have axes to grind, too, so I decided that bland probably wasn't the right word to describe Garner's ADMAU persona. The right word was probably more like objective, but with a little o, as in "disinterested," "reasonable." Then something kind of obvious occurred to me, but in an unobvious way—this small-o kind of objectivity was very different from the metaphysical, capital a-type Objectivity whose postmodern loss had destroyed (I'd pretty much concluded) any possibility of genuine Authority in issues of usage.

Then it occurred to me that if *Objectivity* still had a lowercase sense unaffected by modern relativism, maybe *Authority* did as well. So, just as I'd done w/r/t Garner's use of *judgment*, I went to my trusty conservative *American Heritage Dictionary* and looked up *authority*.

Does any of this make sense? Because this was how I discovered that Bryan Garner is a genius.

WHY BRYAN A. GARNER IS A GENIUS (II)

Bryan Garner is a genius because *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* just about completely resolves the Usage Wars' problem of Authority. The book's solution is both semantic and rhetorical. Garner manages to collapse the definitions of certain key terms and to control the compresence of rhetorical Appeals so cleverly that he is able to transcend both Usage Wars camps and simply tell the truth, and to tell the truth in a way that does

⁷⁴To be honest, I noticed this omission only because midway through working on this article I happened to use the word *trough* in front of the same SNOOT friend who compares public English to violin-hammering, and he fell sideways out of his chair, and it emerged that I have somehow all my life misheard *trough* as ending with a *th* instead of an *f* and thus have publicly mispronounced it. God only knows how many scores of times, and I all but burned rubber getting home to see whether perhaps the error was so common and human and understandable that ADMAU had a good-natured entry on it—but no such luck. Which in fairness I don't suppose I can really blame Garner for.

⁷⁵(on *zwieback* vs. *zweiback*)

not torpedo his own credibility but actually enhances it. His argumentative strategy is totally brilliant and totally sneaky, and part of both qualities is that it usually doesn't seem like there's even an argument going on at all.

WHY BRYAN A. GARNER IS A GENIUS (III)

Rhetorically, traditional Prescriptivists depend almost entirely on the Logical Appeal. One reason they are such inviting targets for liberal scorn is their arrogance, and their arrogance is based on their utter disdain for considerations of persona or persuasion. This is not an exaggeration. Doctrinaire Prescriptivists conceive of themselves not as advocates of correct English but as avatars of it. The truth of what they prescribe is itself their "authority" for prescribing it; and because they hold the truth of these prescriptions to be self-evident, they regard those Americans who reject or ignore the prescriptions as "ignoramus" who are pretty much beneath notice except as evidence for the general deterioration of US culture.

Since the only true audience for it is the Prescriptivists themselves, it really doesn't matter that their argument is almost Euthyphrotically circular—"It's the truth because we say so, and we say so because it's the truth." This is dogmatism of a purity you don't often see in this country, and it's no accident that hard-core Prescriptivists are just a tiny fringe-type element of today's culture. The American Conversation is an argument, after all, and way worse than our fear of error or anarchy or Gomorrah decadence is our fear of theocracy or autocracy or any ideology whose project is not to argue or persuade but to adjourn the whole debate *sine die*.⁷⁶

The hard-line Descriptivists, for all their calm scientism and avowed preference for fact over value, rely mostly on rhetorical *pathos*, the visceral emotional Appeal. As mentioned, the relevant emotions here are Sixtiesish in origin and leftist in temperament—an antipathy for conventional Authority and elitist put-downs and uptight restrictions and casuistries and androcaucasian bias and snobbery and overt smugness of any sort...i.e., for the very attitudes embodied in the prim glare of the grammarian and the languid honk of Buckley-type elites, which happen to be the two most visible species of SNOOT still around. Whether Methodological or Philosophical or pseudo-progressive, Descriptivists are, all and essentially, demagogues; and dogmatic Prescriptivists are actually their most valuable asset, since Americans' visceral distaste for dogmatism and elitist fatuity gives Descriptivism a ready audience for its Pathetic Appeal.

What the Descriptivists haven't got is logic. The Dictionary can't sanction everything, and the very possibility of language depends on rules and conventions, and Descriptivism offers no *logos* for determining which rules and conventions are useful and which are pointless/oppressive, nor any arguments for how and by whom such determinations are to be made. In short, the Descriptivists don't have any kind of Appeal that's going to persuade anyone who doesn't already have an EAT THE RICH-type hatred of Authority *per se*. Homiletically speaking, the only difference between the Prescriptivists and the Descriptivists is that the latter's got a bigger choir.

Mr. Bryan A. Garner recognizes something that neither of these camps appears to get: given 40 years of the Usage Wars, "authority" is no longer something a lexicographer can just presume *ex officio*.

In fact, a large part of the project of any contemporary usage dictionary will consist in *establishing* this authority. If that seems rather obvious, be apprised that nobody before Garner seems to have figured it out—that the lexicographer's challenge now is to be not just accurate and comprehensive but *credible*. That in the absence of unquestioned, capital-A Authority in language, the reader must now be moved or persuaded to grant a dictionary its authority, freely and for what appear to be good reasons.

Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* is thus both a collection of information and a piece of Democratic⁷⁷ rhetoric. Its primary Appeal is Ethical, and its goal is to recast the Prescriptivists' persona: the author presents himself not as a cop or a judge but as more like a doctor or lawyer. This is an ingenious tactic. In the same sort of move we can see him make w/r/t *judgement* and *objective*, Garner here alters the relevant *AHD* definitions of *authority* from (1) "The right and power to command, enforce laws, exact obedience, determine,

⁷⁶It's this logic (and perhaps this alone) that keeps profascism or royalism or Maoism or any sort of really dire extremism from achieving mainstream legitimacy in the US—how does one vote for No More Voting?

⁷⁷(meaning *literally* Democratic—it Wants Your Vote)

or judge” / “A person or group invested with this power” to (2) “Power to influence or persuade resulting from knowledge or experience” / “An accepted source of expert information or advice.” *ADMAU*’s Garner, in other words, casts himself as an authority not in the *autocratic* sense but in a *technocratic* sense. And the technocrat is not only a thoroughly modern and palatable image of authority but also immune to the charges of elitism/classism that have hobbled traditional Prescriptivism. After all, do we call a doctor or lawyer “elitist” when he presumes to tell us what we should eat or how we should do our taxes?

Of course, Garner really *is* a technocrat. He’s an attorney, recall, and in *ADMAU* he cultivates just the sort of persona good jurists project: knowledgable, reasonable, dispassionate, fair. His judgements about usage tend to be rendered like legal opinions—exhaustive citation of precedent (other dictionaries’ judgements, published examples of actual usage) combined with clear, logical reasoning that’s always informed by the larger consensual purposes SWE is meant to serve.

Also technocratic is Garner’s approach to the whole issue of whether anybody’s even going to be interested in his 700 pages of fine-pointed counsel. Like any mature specialist, he simply assumes that there are good practical reasons why some people choose to concern themselves with his area of expertise; and his attitude about the fact that most Americans “could care less” about SWE usage isn’t scorn or disapproval but the phlegmatic resignation of a professional who realizes that he can give good advice but can’t make you take it:

The reality I care about most is that some people still want to use the language well.⁷⁸ They want to write effectively; they want to speak effectively. They want their language to be graceful at times and powerful at times. They want to understand how to use words well, how to manipulate sentences, and how to move about in the language without seeming to flail. They want good grammar, but they want more: they want rhetoric⁷⁹ in the traditional sense. That is, they want to use the language deftly so that it’s fit for their purposes.

It’s now possible to see that all the autobiographical stuff in *ADMAU*’s preface does more than just humanize Mr. Bryan A. Garner. It also serves to detail the early and enduring passion that helps make someone a credible technocrat—we tend to like and trust experts whose expertise is born of a real love for their specialty instead of just a desire to be expert at something. In fact, it turns out that *ADMAU*’s preface quietly and steadily invests Garner with every single qualification of modern technocratic authority: passionate devotion, reason and accountability (recall “in the interests of full disclosure, here are the ten critical points...”), experience (“...that, after years of working on usage problems, I’ve settled on”), exhaustive and tech-savvy research (“For contemporary usage, the files of our greatest dictionary makers pale in comparison with the full-text search capabilities now provided by NEXIS and WESTLAW⁸⁰), an even and judicious temperament (see e.g. this from his *HYPERCORRECTION*: “Sometimes people strive to abide by the strictest etiquette, but in the process behave inappropriately⁸¹), and the sort of humble integrity (for instance, including in one of the entries a past published usage-error of his own) that not only renders Garner likable but transmits the kind of reverence for English that good jurists have for the law, both of which are bigger and more important than anyone person.

Probably the most ingenious and attractive thing about his dictionary’s Ethical Appeal, though, is Garner’s scrupulousness about considering the reader’s own hopes and fears and reasons for caring enough about usage to bother with something like *ADMAU* at all. These reasons, as Garner makes clear, tend to derive from a reader’s concern about his/her own linguistic authority and rhetorical persona and ability to convince an audience that he/she cares. Again and again, Garner frames his prescriptions in rhetorical terms: “To the writer or speaker for whom credibility is important, it’s a good idea to avoid distracting any readers or listeners”; “Whatever you do, if

⁷⁸The last two words of this sentence, of course, are what the Usage Wars are all about—whose “language” and whose “well”? The most remarkable thing about the sentence is that coming from Garner it doesn’t sound naive or obnoxious but just...reasonable.

⁷⁹(Did you think I was kidding?)

⁸⁰Cunning—what is in effect Garner’s blowing his own archival horn is cast as humble gratitude for the resources made available by modern technology. Plus notice also Garner’s implication here that he’s once again absorbed the sane parts of Descriptivism’s cast-a-wide-net method: “Thus, the prescriptive approach here is leavened by a thorough canvassing of actual usage in modern edited prose.”

⁸¹Here, this reviewer’s indwelling and ever-vigilant SNOOT can’t help but question Garner’s deployment of a comma before the conjunction in this sentence, since what follows the conjunction is neither an independent clause nor any sort of plausible complement for “strive to.” But respectful disagreement between people of goodwill is of course Democratically natural and healthy and, when you come right down to it, kind of fun.)

you use data in a context in which its number becomes known, you'll bother some of your readers." *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage's* real thesis, in other words, is that the purposes of the expert authority and the purposes of the lay reader are identical, and identically rhetorical—which I submit is about as Democratic these days as you're going to get.