Prescriptive versus Descriptive Grammars

By Jack Lynch

The grammar books you're used to are what linguists call prescriptive: that is, they prescribe rules for proper usage. For several hundred years, "grammar" was synonymous with "prescriptive grammar." You went to a book to get the official word: thou shalt not split infinitives; thou shalt not end sentences with prepositions. (This is presumably why you're reading this guide now: to find out what's "right" and what's "wrong.")

Linguists today are justly dubious about such things, and most spend their time on descriptive grammars: descriptions of how people really speak and write, instead of rules on how they should. They're doing important work, not least by arguing that no language or dialect is inherently better than any other. They've done a signal service in reminding us that Black English is as "legitimate" a dialect as the Queen's English, and that speaking the way Jane Austen writes doesn't make you more righteous than someone who uses y'all. They've also demonstrated that many self-styled "grammar" experts know next to nothing about grammar as it's studied by professionals, and many aren't much better informed about the history of the language. Many prescriptive guides are grievously ill informed.

Fair enough. Sometimes, though, I enjoy picking fights with those linguists, usually amateur, who try to crowd prescription out of the market altogether. The dumber ones make a leap from "No language is inherently better than another" (with which I agree) to "Everything's up for grabs" (with which I don't). The worst are hypocrites who, after attacking the very idea of rules, go on to prescribe their own, usually the opposite of whatever the traditionalists say. These folks have allowed statistics to take the place of judgment, relying on the principle, "Whatever most people say is the best."

These dullards forget that words are used in social situations, and that even if something isn't inherently good or evil, it might still have a good or bad effect on your audience. I happen to know for a fact that God doesn't care whether you split infinitives. But some people do, and that's a simple fact that no statistical table will change. A good descriptivist should tell you that. In fact, my beef with many descriptivists is that they don't describe enough. A really thorough description of a word or usage would take into account not only how many people use it, but in what circumstances and to what effect.
Much can be said against old-fashioned bugbears like end-of-sentence prepositions and singular they. They're not particularly logical, they don't have much historical justification, and they're difficult even for native speakers to learn. But you don't always get to choose your audience, and some of your readers or hearers will think less of you if you break the "rules." Chalk it up to snobbishness if you like, but it's a fact. To pick an even more politically charged example, Black English is a rich and fascinating dialect with its own sophisticated lexicon and syntax. But using it in certain social situations just hurts the speaker's chances of getting what he or she wants. That's another brute fact — one with the worst of historical reasons, but a fact still, and wishing it away won't change it.

That doesn't mean the old-fashioned prescriptivists should always be followed slavishly: it means you have to exercise judgment in deciding which rules to apply when. Here's the principle that guides what I write and say whenever traditional ("correct") usage differs from colloquial ("incorrect") usage.

- Does the traditional usage, hallowed by prescriptive grammars and style guides, improve the clarity or precision of the sentence? If so, use the traditional usage.
- Does the colloquial usage add clarity or precision to the more traditional version? — if so, use the colloquial one, rules be damned.
- Sometimes the traditional usage, the one you've been taught is "right," is downright clumsy or unidiomatic. The classic example is "It's I," which, though "right" — traditionalists will tell you it is in the nominative case, and that a copulative verb requires the same case in the subject and the predicate — is too stilted for all but the most formal situations. "It's me" sounds a thousand times more natural. If you like being the sort of person who says "It's I," that's fine, but know that most of your audience, including most of the educated part of your audience, will find it out of place.
- If neither one is inherently better, for reasons of logic, clarity, or whatever, is the traditional form intrusive? If it's not going to draw attention to itself, I prefer to stick with the "correct" usage, even if the reasons for its being "correct" are dubious. For instance, the word only can go many places in a sentence. Putting it in a position the traditionalists call "wrong" will probably distract a few readers; putting it in a position the traditionalists call "right" won't bother anyone, even those who are less hung up about word placement. In this case, unlike the "It's I" case, following the "rule" will keep the traditionalists happy without irritating the rest of the world.
- For me it's a simple calculation: which usage, the traditional or the colloquial, is going to be more effective? Since most traditional usages work in most colloquial settings, and since many colloquial usages don't work in formal settings, I usually opt for the traditional usage.

Some determined iconoclasts consider it pandering to follow any traditional rule they don't like, and do everything they can to flout the old grammar books. I suppose some think wanton infinitive-splitting shows the world what free spirits they are, and some think giving in to "White
English” is unmitigated Uncle-Tomism.

Maybe. If rebellion makes you happy, go nuts; I won't stop you. But as I make clear throughout this guide, writing is for me a matter of having an impact on an audience, and my experience, if it's worth anything, is that some usages help you and some hurt you. Think about each one, not in terms of what you're "allowed" to say, but in terms of what your words can do for you. A dogmatic prejudice against the rules is no better than a dogmatic prejudice in their favor.

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