

March 1997 Issue

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## A War That Never Ends

The laws of grammar may be arbitrary, as those who would simply dismiss them assert. But arbitrary laws are just the ones that need enforcement.

By Mark Halpern

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FOURTEEN years ago Geoffrey Nunberg, a professor of linguistics at Stanford, published in this magazine a piece called "[The Decline of Grammar](#)," which dealt with the conflict between the judgmental and nonjudgmental approaches to questions of correctness in language usage -- the war between the prescriptivists and the descriptivists. His article drew one of the greatest volumes of reader response that the editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* had seen in years. Most of the other burning public issues of fourteen years ago have receded: we are not now much concerned about the possibility of nuclear war, or a Russian attack on Western Europe, or the insidious effect of inflation in undermining the economy. But the fierce interest in language usage remains as strong as ever. The most



recent evidence of its perennial fascination for us is the range of reaction accorded last year's appearance of a of H. W. Fowler's lucid and elegant guidebook. But even more revealing of the eternal nature of the usage war is another book, published two years ago: Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*, which deserves to be looked at in some detail.

Pinker picks up where Nunberg left off -- indeed, he picks up well before Nunberg left off, duplicating many of the latter's arguments and analogies, and making the same errors in defending the descriptivist position. If I treat the two men here as interchangeable, almost as a two-headed monster, it's partly because they are indeed as one in their outlook on the relevant issues, and partly because my quarrel is really with neither man but rather with the philosophical position they share -- not only with each other but with virtually all academic students of linguistics.

Nunberg made the two classic objections to prescriptivism. The first is the scientific objection: laws of nature are involved here, and those trying to influence linguistic events without knowledge of linguistic laws are simply demonstrating their ignorance and making fools of themselves. Nunberg likened them to landscape gardeners trying to stop or modify the processes of plate tectonics. But if the "frantic efforts" of the gardeners "to keep Alaska from bumping into Asia" are ridiculous, is it not equally silly for geologists to tell landscape gardeners that they must not presume to pollard a lime tree, or put in a fishpond, without deferring to the experts on plate tectonics?

The second is the egalitarian objection: the prescriptivists are attempting to foist their own linguistic practices, which are usually the practices of the educated, affluent, fortunate members of society, on the less educated and affluent members.

One of the points that Nunberg, like all of his school, was most eager to make is that the "rules" of grammar, and of good usage generally, have no scientific basis; they are just someone's idea of what is proper, and that idea changes from generation to generation. The descriptivists are so eager, indeed, to make sure this point has registered that they seldom stop making it long enough to hear the reply: "Yes, we know this; we do not contend that the rules we propose for the sake of clarity and richness of communication were handed down from on high. They are ordinary man-

made rules, not divine commandments or scientific laws (although many have support from historical scholarship), and we agree that they, like all man-made things, will need continual review and revision. But these facts are no more arguments against laws governing language usage than they are against laws governing vehicular traffic. Arbitrary laws -- conventions -- are just the ones that need enforcement, not the natural laws. The law of gravity can take care of itself; the law that you go on green and stop on red needs all the help it can get."

If one had to select a single sentence of Nunberg's to serve as a précis of his article, it would be this: "But it is impossible to talk intelligently about the language nowadays without having an idea of what the program of modern linguistics is all about. . . ." This key statement is false. What linguistic scientists have been doing in this century, regardless of the value it may have for other purposes, has absolutely no relevance to the constellation of literary-philosophical-social-moral issues that we are talking about when we discuss usage. Nunberg himself confirms my point: he gives reasons throughout the article for his specific judgments in matters of usage, and nowhere are the findings of linguistic science among them.

### **Would language take some natural course, if only outsiders would cease to meddle with it?**

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Descriptive grammarians suppose that language is an entity with its own laws of development, or natural destiny, and that prescriptive grammarians are trying to interfere with the course of that natural destiny. Nunberg objects to the prescriptivist approach on two grounds: it is futile, since language will follow its natural destiny despite all the efforts of the prescriptivists; and it is somehow wrong -- immoral? unethical? -- to try to interfere, even though the attempt must be futile. But neither Nunberg nor any other linguist has offered any evidence for either of these points.

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LORI GOTTLIEB

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An acorn, left to itself, becomes an oak, and a geneticist altering its DNA to make it grow into an elm, or a fish, may justly be said to have interfered with its natural course. But what does language, undisturbed, become? What course do we know it would take if only outsiders would cease to meddle with it? No one has ever shown that language has such a natural course, let alone that there would be anything wrong, if such a course did exist, in altering it.

Of the many attempts that have been made to regulate language usage one way or another, some have succeeded and some have failed. Are we to take it on faith that the ones that succeeded were somehow in accordance with language's inherent nature, and the others were somehow not? Nunberg and his allies have no scientific standing in their quarrel with "pop grammarians" like John Simon and William Safire; if they disagree with such prescriptivists, they do so not as scientists observing from above the fray, distinguished by superior knowledge and disinterestedness, but simply as fellow gladiators down in the arena -- passionate and opinionated, like their adversaries.

How the battle will turn out, how it *should* turn out, no one can say with any authority; and since there is no natural course with which to interfere, "interferences" are simply what linguistic scientists call those events of linguistic history that they cannot accept.

**A desire to construct standards is an essential element of human nature -- not an aberration.**

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Nunberg and his allies have not absorbed Edmund Burke's dictum: Art is Man's Nature. The nature under investigation by linguistic science is man's nature, of which a desire to construct standards, and use them to correct practice, is an essential element, not an aberration.

AS noted earlier, a more recent salvo in the bombardment of the amateurs by the professionals came from Steven Pinker, who is a professor of psychology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the director of its Center for Cognitive Neuroscience. The novelty and main value of his book lie in his weaving together the recent findings of brain researchers, geneticists, and developmental psychologists to formulate an admittedly primitive but suggestive picture of how human beings learn to speak. It includes a presentation of the work of Noam Chomsky that is the clearest I have yet seen; a balanced and sober analysis of the efforts over the past decade or two to get chimpanzees and gorillas to use language as human beings do; and an interesting attempt to show that the development of language can be accounted for by standard Darwinian natural selection, despite Chomsky's doubts.

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But in the twelfth of his thirteen chapters, "The Language Mavens," Pinker takes a little holiday from science and attempts to show how ridiculous the majority of nonlinguist writers on language are. Most of the chapter is devoted to analyses by Pinker of specific usage arguments offered by the "mavens." These are sometimes attributed to a specific maven (usually Safire), sometimes to unnamed "defenders of the standard" (unlike Nunberg, Pinker nowhere mentions Fowler). In most of these encounters Pinker comes out ahead. He wins partly because he has carefully chosen the battles he fights, having had little trouble finding cases in which various mavens have taken indefensible positions, and partly because he has chosen antique battles -- is anyone still worrying about "ain't," or the splitting of infinitives? But the chief reason for his triumphs is that many of the mavens make the fatal mistake of trying to justify their literary-philosophical-social-moral views with historical facts, or supposed facts, about the development of the language -- in short, with citations and arguments about which the professional linguist will usually be better informed, or at least able to sound more authoritative. (To see what really expert mavens can do in applying their rule-based expertise to clearing up bad prose, get hold of a copy of *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge -- not the modern paperback reprint, with its ruinous cuts, but the original 1943 edition, published by Macmillan. It is one of the three or four books on usage that deserve a place on the same shelf with Fowler.)

The difference between the linguists and the mavens is captured neatly in the dual meaning that "grammar" bears in Pinker's book. To the descriptivist, "grammar" is usually short for "generative grammar": the hypothetical mechanism, embodied in the brain, that produces sentences. To call any recorded utterance ungrammatical, given this sense of the term, is to make a strange, almost meaningless statement; it is like criticizing the way the stomach produces digestive juices. To the prescriptivist -- and

the majority of the educated public -- "grammar" means the mechanism, embodied in books and teachers, that decides whether what you've said was correctly said, and in this sense the charge of being ungrammatical is one that we often find justified.

Now, Pinker is well aware of the dual meaning of "grammar" and its derivative forms -- he spends the first pages of chapter twelve making the distinction I have just summarized. He draws a correct conclusion.

[The descriptive and prescriptive meanings of rules, grammar, and so forth] are completely different things. . . . One can choose to obsess over prescriptive rules, but they have no more to do with human language than the criteria for judging cats at a cat show have to do with mammalian biology.

Pinker provides in his cat-fancier-versus-biologist analogy another argument that, like Nunberg's geologists-versus-landscape-gardeners analogy, deserves to be pushed a step beyond where its author leaves it. Cat fanciers clearly have no grounds for telling mammalian biologists how to go about their business. Have the biologists any more grounds for telling the fanciers that this shorthair is too cobby, that Siamese's points are too dark, and the whole show should be canceled anyway?

Pinker's phrase "obsess over" does not sound like the language of a scientist, and his statement that rules have nothing to do with language needs qualification (he means that they have nothing to do with those aspects of language he is professionally interested in). Apart from these characteristic stigmata, his statement is unexceptionable. One wonders, though, why Pinker is unable to proceed to the next step in the argument: if the two viewpoints are so radically different, on what grounds does the descriptivist criticize the prescriptivist?

Pinker concludes his campaign against the prescriptivists by quoting a lengthy passage from the preface to Johnson's, which he misunderstands as championing the descriptivist position.

Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design, require that it should fix our language, and put a stop to those alterations which time and chance have hither to been suffered to make in it without opposition. With this consequence I will confess that I have flattered myself for a while; but now begin to fear that I have indulged expectations which neither reason nor experience can justify. . . . Sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength.

Even if Johnson sadly gave up the hope of fixing the language -- faced with what in the same passage he called the world's "folly, vanity, and affectation" -- he did not give up believing in the nobility of the cause. Had Pinker read only a little farther in that preface, he would have found words that no one could misunderstand.

Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language.

Illustration by Jeffrey Fisher

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