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What are the Popular Grammarians Really Saying About Language and Usage? (What Do They Have to Offer Teachers of English?)

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The argument that has existed for as long as written language has existed is: what determines "correctness" in a language? The Greeks argued it; great British authors and lexicographers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries argued it; early American lexicographers argued it; and today, the argument continues, as it will in the future. Only the names change from century to century, while the debate itself remains relatively unchanged. Today literary types are involved again, of course; but accompanied by journalists, editors and educators.

As a teacher of English and one who cares about language, it was for me to analyze what the popular grammarians were really saying about language and usage. I'd been taught plenty about language from the linguists' point of view (descriptivists), and had only heard from the opposition (prescriptivists) in passing, as in "that's what the linguists disagree with." But I'd never really heard the prescribers' position explained by a prescriber: one of those "purists" as they were usually described; the ones who were supposed to equate change in language with deterioration. The Language Snobs. The Elitists.

So I sought them out: Edwin Newman's **Strictly Speaking;** Richard Mitchell's (alias The Underground Grammarian) **Less than Words Can Say;** John Simon's **Paradigms Lost;** and William Safire's **On Language.**

I approached the prescriptivist camp with several questions in mind: What are these people *really* saying about language, linguists, literacy, and teachers of English? Are *all* of them as conservative and prescriptive as I have been led to believe? And, what do they have to offer me as a teacher and writer of English?

The Legacy of Error Hunting

The practice of error hunting, borrowed from the methods of instruction in Latin, found strong support by some early American textbook authors and continues to flourish today, pointing out the incorrect is more instructive than examining the correct (Lindley Murray, Robert Lowth and Goold Brown). Yet some teachers believe that this method may have introduced more obscure error in the process than would ever have been generated by regular use. Today, however, Edwin Newman, former NBC reporter and announcer, maintains the error hunting tradition in his **Strictly Speaking** and **A Civil Tongue.**

In his texts, Edwin Newman spends a great deal of time "error hunting," with very little reference to the historical nature of the English language. Although he knows very little about the history or characteristics of language, Newman honestly believes that he can and should save English by telling the rest of us how we abuse it. The subtitle of **Strictly Speaking** is **Will America Be the Death of English?** and his "well-thought-out mature judgement is that it will" (p. 1).

"Language is in decline," he writes and the cause is, of course, primarily the decade of the 1960's: rapid changes during that decade; the rise and increased involvement of minority groups; a generation gap aggravated by the Vietnam War; and, a culprit I assume is not charateristic only of the 1960's, television which "exalted the picture and depreciated the word" (p. 11). His reaction to come-and-go popularisms such as "out-of-sight" are overblown, for Newman sees such usage as a clear indication that the language is "declining." Compared to the other writers discussed in this text, only Newman seems to completely deny the influence popular use can have on a questionable usage; he sincerely does not understand why a National Society for the Suppression of "Y'Know" in England failed to make any substantial dent in a usage Newman describes as "one of the most far-reaching and depressing developments of our time" (p. 14).

Finally, my suspicions concerning Mr. Newman's naivte about language and usage were confirmed when he answered the question: "What makes the incorrect more attractive than

the correct?" with: "The desire to be up with the latest in thing" (p. 33). Earlier, Newman had explained that President Nixon can be heard on the infamous Watergate tapes to drop the "g" on "ing" words apparently to ensure that his down-to-earthiness would be recognized" (p. 16).

Yet, in spite of such ignorance about language and its use, Mr. Newman has achieved a reputation as a knowledgeable and important protector of our "declining" language, as he describes it; and unfortunately, he has many believing that he does, in fact, deserve such stature. But although the position was self-appointed and lately seems confirmed by his popularity, he has just not done his homework in language history and usage.

The Attack of the Underground Grammarian

Unlike Mr. Newman, Richard Mitchell in **Less Than Words Can Say** believes that it is not language that is declining but the minds of some who use it. His metaphor for this event is "the worm in the brain": a bug that enters the skull and by eating portions of the brain, takes away the ability to use language effectively. Passive verbs, jargon, education-ese and the incorrect are all signs of this little bug at work on one's head. "There is nothing wrong with English," he writes. "We do not live in the twilight of a dying language....What is thought to be a decay of English in our time, is, in fact, a decay in the brains of those who have not learned to manipulate English" (pp. 189-90).

Mitchell sees writing as the means we use to pursue logical thought and blames public education for not teaching English the way *he* believes it shoud be: "We know how to teach reading and writing....It requires drill and recitation and memorization and practice" (p. 83). Mitchell faults education for becoming a subject in itself with teachers more concerned with offering experiences to students than knowledge. He also condemns teachers who refuse to admit, by what he describes as a twisted sense of democracy, the differences in people that make some more capable than others. Finally, "the land of public education provides a happy home only for those in whom the skills of language and thought are but poorly developed" (pp. 218-19).

But inbetween the continuing indictment of public education, Mitchell has some interesting thoughts on language and usage. He sees changes in language as necessary and inevitable as people continue to use it, but acceptable only if the change results in more precise, more effective language. An example he uses is the coining of "incentivize" to mean to provide with an incentive: "To our ears, incentivize may be ugly, but 'incentive' itself was once ugly to the English ear. If 'incentivize' names an action that cannot, in fact, be otherwise named, we'll learn to live with it" (p. 194). On the other hand, Mitchell's position on what he calls unnecessary changes, beginning as simple errors, also exhibits the sound of common sense:

> It is also true that, like any language in regular use, it's always changing, perhaps very slowly, but changing. Nevertheless, in some ways it is simple and permanent enough so that anyone who uses it can safely spend his whole life using...singular verbs to go with singular subjects (p. 68).

Mr. Mitchell's thoughts on usage are also historically sound: "Although there's no reason why this or that in a language should be 'right' and something else 'wrong,' it does not follow that you can do whatever you please in it" (p. 58). He supports this conclusion by linking the choice one must make in usage with the audience for which the message is intended.

Paradise Lost

John Simon's **Paradigms Lost** collects essays on language and usage originally written for **Esquire** magazine between 1976 and 1980. These essays seem an excellent representation of the prescriptivist point of view; teachers with any linguistic study at all will probably disagree with most of what Mr. Simon writes; but nevertheless, **Paradigms Lost** is essential reading for anyone interested in the debate between describers and prescribers. Besides, after having read these essays, I now know exactly what Simon has to say about language; some of his positions are not what I have been led to believe.

First, the essays are a lesson in writing well, for Simon is a good writer, regardless of whether or not I agree with what he says. He usually begins each piece by analyzing the precision and correctness of the writer or piece of writing in question. Although he does enjoy spliting hairs, his analysis is always initially and quickly performed so he can move on to more important, more interesting thinking.

Mr. Simon's position on some issues are not as unyielding as one might have been led to think from seeing him speak or having read his columns. His objection to descriptive linguists, for example, is not in the recording and reporting of the actual uses of language, but that they fail to supply people with the information needed to decide for *themselves* what usage to adopt. For this purpose, Simon proposes a new dictionary to not only record the uses of words but also who, or what groups, use the word, leaving readers to decide for themselves which words might be thought appropriate in different situations or for different audiences.

On changes in language, Simon's position, usually represented as unyielding, is of course conservative but not as immovable as reported. For example, in an essay titled "Should We Genderspeak?" Simon agrees that references to "man" as a generic term in such phrases as "the species Man" should be replaced by "human beings," or just "people." He also views "forewoman," "newspaperwoman," or "congresswoman" as accurate coinages to describe women who work at such positions, but balks at dropping "ess" endings on some nouns such as "actress" for what he calls semantic reasons and conciseness. Like Mr. Mitchell, Simon sees language change as inevitable and necessary, but condemns changes brought about through what he labels the ignorance of precise, established use. This seemed terribly prescriptive to me until I began to think about my own use of language. For example, the sloppy interchanging of "infer" with "imply" is exactly the kind of "unnecessary change" Simon writes about. In this respect I am not that far from Simon's position.

Mr. Simon's reputation as a conservative, even elitist thinker about language is, of course, well deserved; although this reputation is misleading. Even so, he handles the reputation with wit and unexpected verve, as in the concluding essay titled, "Why Good English Is Good For You." Here he goodheartedly admits his membership in "old fogeydom" and writes:

> Misinformed attacks on Old Fogeydom, I have noticed, invariably represent us as people who shudder at a split infinitive and would sooner kill or be killed than tolerate a sentence that ends with a preposition. Actually, despite all my travels through Old Fogeydom, I have yet to meet one inhabitant who would not stick a preposition onto the tail of a sentence; as for splitting infinitives, most of us O.F.'s are perfectly willing to do that, too, but tactfully and sparingly, where it feels right (p. 213).

The Joy of Fence Riding

William Safire's **On Language** is also a collection of articles, from his regular **New York Times** column on language. But of all the popular writers on language I've read recently, none appear to be having more fun than Mr. Safire as he plays with the language and how it is used. Part of this fun comes from the inclusion of his readers' responses to his columns and the interplay between Safire and his readers is often delightful. But he doesn't approve and delight in just any form of reader criticism. In "The Great Permitter," Safire distinguishes between his own healthy opinion of language and usage and the pedantry he sees in some of his readers and some other writers on language:

> To be conscious of language is to be proud of the maginificent and subtle instrument in your hands; to be self-conscious about the possibility of error, or fearful of the derision of your listener at your experiments with the instrument, is to be a nerd, a schnook, and a wimp (p. xii).

Occasionally, though, Safire plays the error hunters' game; once he even deliberately included an obscure error in an article, then later chastised his audience when none had caught the error. Although Safire's weekly insights on language and its use and users are as entertaining and interesting as any I've found, it is his

position on usage that I find unique and so helpful. In "The Great Permitter" Safire sets forth his stance as "libertarian language activist":

> The traditional language activist derides and often sensibly resists change in the language—why use 'rip-off' when 'theft' will do?....The libertarian language activist counters that 'rip-off' graphically describes an act of theft, and by virtue of its vividness as well as widespread acceptance deserves its place in the dictionary...(p. xiii).

Safire then continues to describe the libertarian language activist as not a "relax-and-enjoy-it purely descriptive type," but one who does want to "cheer on 'parameter'" as it battles its way into the realm of accepted meaning ("borrowed from mathematics and now used to mean scope, or limit").

Thus, Safire's label of libertarian activist is one he hopes will distinguish him from other protectors of lanaguage who, he says, give good usage a bad name. More specifically, though, I see two qualities of Safire's approach that distinguish him from all other writers on language. The first is his admission, often delight, in the influence popular use can have upon a questionable usage: "English is a stretch language," he writes. "One size fits all. That does not mean anything goes; in most instances, anything does not go. But the language, as it changes, conforms itself to special groups and occasions" (p. xiv).

Second, is his employment of an often brilliant sense about language. For example, Safire cheers on the use of the word "hopefully" at the beginning of a sentence, used to mean the writer or speaker hopes, because he says the word is filling a gap in meaning that exists in English. His analogy for this is the word "regret," which has both a "regretfully" and a "regretably" form; as modifiers placed at the beginning of a sentence, each form has a different meaning. But the word "hope" is short on forms and so Safire sees "hopefully" as a needed usage, since no "hopeably" exists.

Safire's insight and love for English makes him the most interesting and useful writer and thinker on language I've found here. His position, described here as "fence riding," now seems to me better described as fence floating: above both extreme positions and above the fence that divides these extremes, Safire's position is one of overview: historically informed and realistic about language, yet still ready to humorously fight the good usage fight and lose (he regularly admits the uselessness of his objections to some uses of language). Safire offers those who care about language a common sense philosophy of usage and correctness that is difficult to find fault with, which is often incisive and helpful.

Conclusion

The debate between describers and prescribers concerning usage and correctness will not end; history has proven that much. And if Edwin Newman continues to serve as the popular savior of our declining language, it will not prove to change much either. But our students should be informed enough to allow them to rise above the pedantry; some history and a little insight into the nature of our language should be a standard lesson in all classrooms of English. Students should be aware of the arbitrary history of usage and correctness, not to slight those qualities because they are important, but rather to put them in perspective both historically and personally within the students' own writing and speaking processes and styles.

For an overview of the history of correctness and usage beginning with the Greeks, through the British and American debates, to the recent past (the uproar over **Webster's Third** in 1961) teachers can read **Attitudes Toward English Usage: The History of a War of Words** by Edward Finnegan (Teachers College Press, 1980). For the popular writers' prescriptivist point of view, one must read John Simon; for to simply cite Simon as consumate purist, without reading what he actually has to say is simply not fair, even though it is characteristic of this debate. Read it; then condemn it. And of course, for some common sense thinking, the libertarian language activist stance is essential; Safire just might set you free of the pedantry.