

## Handout 2: Some Background on “Right” and “Wrong” in Language

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### 1. Introduction

- ◆ Discussions of non-standard varieties must often deal with **stigmatised** variables (syntactic, morphological, phonological features regarded as somehow “bad” (“lazy”, “ugly”, “illogical”, “stupid”, “barbarous”...) by many non-linguists. English examples:
  - (1) Singular *they*: *If a student fails, they can repeat the test.*
  - (2) Preposition stranding: *Who did Cuthbert talk to?*
  - (3) Non-Latin-style accusative: *It is me.*
  - (4) Spilt infinitives: *The best thing would be to quickly leave.*
  - (5) Affix reduplication: *fixer-up-er*
  - (6) Denominal verbs (some): *We contacted/accessed/trialed them.*
  - (7) wanna-contraction: *Do you wanna go?*
  - (8) Negative concord: *They don't give you nothing nowhere.*
  - (9) Non-standard inflection: *I never done it.*
  - (10) Plural marking on you: *Youse aren't real Australians.*
- ◆ German examples (some region-specific):
  - (11) „Rheinische Verlaufsform“: *Bärbel war am arbeiten.*
  - (12) German *do*-support: *Horst tut arbeiten.*
  - (13) Use of *brauchen* without *zu*: *Du brauchst nicht hingehen.*
  - (14) Ellipsis of *gegangen*: *Wir sind einkaufen/essen.*
  - (15) *weil* with verb-second order: *...weil der Laden war zu.*
  - (16) *Wie* in comparatives: *Beethoven ist besser wie Mozart.*
  - (17) Non-standard possessives: *Hast du dem Fritz seine Nummer?*
- ◆ We show that criticisms of stigmatised features are mostly based on flawed reasoning. They are not intrinsically bad (though their being stigmatised means that it would be a mistake to use them in certain social settings).
- ◆ Some linguists (implicitly) deny that value judgments about language are legitimate, claiming that only **descriptive** statements are appropriate, and that **prescriptive** (**normativist**, **purist**) approaches to language are in error. Unless stated carefully, this position harms the reputation of linguistics, e.g. for the following reasons:
  - ◆ Sometimes prescriptive approaches clearly are appropriate (see section 2).
  - ◆ Dogmatic assertions that “the native speaker is always right” are unhelpful. Linguists must demonstrate specific problems with arguments against stigmatised features.

### 2. Cases where prescriptive statements are warranted

- ◆ Correction of non-native English:
  - (18) *There exist two possibilities, to spread these informations.*
  - (19) *A child don't learn language on this way.*
- ◆ Criticism of offensive language use:
  - (20) *Since the dawn of time, men have wondered what life means.*
- ◆ Advice on averting miscommunication:
  - (21) a. PROSECUTOR: *Did you manage to put poison in Mr Smith's drink?*  
b. DEFENDENT: *No.* [presupposes attempted poisoning]
  - (22) *lightglobe* ['lightbulb'; often not known outside Australia]
  - (23) *inflammable liquids* [dangerous ambiguity]
  - (24) *Our employees should only wear black shoes.* [fairly cold in winter...]
  - (25) Cockpit communication (Krifka et al 2003):
    - a. *Not very much more fuel.* [pre-engine-failure euphemism]
    - b. *Climb [tu] five zero* [two or to?]

- ◆ Training in prestige (standard) variety: warnings that use of some non-standard features in particular settings might result in their users being unfairly disadvantaged.
- ◆ **Conclusion:** Linguists who deny any need for prescriptive approaches to language are making their profession a sitting duck for criticism.

### 3. Case studies of bad language criticism

#### 3.1. Use of accusative (objective) pronouns

- (26) a. *It was me.*  
b. *Who did it? - Me.*  
c. *What? Him working? You can't be serious.*
- ◆ Such uses of objective pronouns have often been dismissed as wrong or illogical, even though *I* and *he* in the above examples sound unnatural to native speakers.
  - ◆ Justifications given (e.g. by some schoolteachers) for this criticism are as follows.
    - ◆ Latin uses nominative in such cases (e.g. *ego* “I” and not *me* “me”).
      - ◆ **Reply:** We are speaking English, not Latin.
    - ◆ There is nothing to assign accusative case to the pronoun in (26).
      - ◆ **Reply:** Even without explicit appeal to Latin, this argument still shows a confusion of English grammar with the grammar of other languages like Latin, German. In (natural) English, the forms of pronouns are determined by a simple rule: The subjective forms (*I, he* etc.) are used in subject position. ‘Objective’ forms (*me, him* etc.) are default forms, used in all other positions.
      - ◆ Thus, (26) does not display a lack of logic or of knowledge of grammar rules. They simply display a different logic/grammar from that of Latin, German.
  - ◆ Language critics make the mistake of imposing rules of other languages on English in criticising various other linguistic phenomena. Examples of such criticisms:
    - ◆ Preposition stranding (*who did you talk to?*) is bad because Latin disallows it.
    - ◆ Pronouncing *economics* with [e] and not [i:] is bad since it had a long vowel in Greek.

#### 3.2. Negative concord (‘double negation’)

- ◆ Double negation (more accurately: *negative concord*): use of two elements which are inherently associated with negation in a negative sentence:
  - (27) *I didn't buy nothing.* [negative concord: non-standard]
  - (28) a. *I didn't buy anything.* [equivalents in Standard English]  
b. *I bought nothing.*
- ◆ Negative concord is often dismissed as ‘illogical’ on the grounds that the negative elements cancel each other out: “two negatives make a positive”.
  - ◆ **Reply:** Yes, (27) is not good Standard English, and in Standard English it indeed has the interpretation ‘I bought nothing’.
  - ◆ But in non-standard English, negative concord is not illogical. In dialects with negative concord, *no* in *nothing* agrees with the negative element *n't*, just like *any* in *anything* does. In negative concord dialects, *no* works differently from Standard English *no*. Calling negative concord illogical is thus another example of ignorantly imposing rules from one variety on another.
  - ◆ *nothing* has two functions in negative concord dialects, matching Standard English *anything* and *nothing*. This is no worse than Standard English, where *anything* has two functions: that in *I didn't buy anything* and that in *you can do anything*.
  - ◆ To say negative concord is intrinsically illogical is to arrogantly accuse speakers of French, Italian, Hungarian, Japanese, Russian of being incapable of logical thought.

- ◆ In French the situation is almost the reverse of English: not using negative concord is informal and sometimes described as ‘bad French’:

- (29) Je n’ai rien acheté. [negative concord: neutral style]  
 I not.have nothing bought
- (30) J’ai rien acheté. [no negative concord: informal]  
 I.have nothing bought

- ◆ Linguists do not deny that the two types of negation are subject to social, stylistic, text-type conditions in each language (e.g. in formal writing it is appropriate to use negative concord in French but not in English). But it is important to recognise that these are *arbitrary* conventions (like shaking hands).

### 3.3. Criticisms of *hopefully*

- (31) *I entered the room hopefully.* [*hopefully*<sup>1</sup> ‘full of hope’]
- (32) *Hopefully the programme won’t crash.* [*hopefully*<sup>2</sup> ‘I hope that’]
- ◆ Examples of savage criticisms of *hopefully*<sup>2</sup>:
- (33) “This once-useful adverb meaning “with hope” has been distorted and is now widely used to mean “I hope” or “it is to be hoped.” Such use is not merely wrong, it is silly. To say, “Hopefully I’ll leave on the noon plane” is to talk nonsense. Do you mean you’ll leave on the noon plane in a hopeful frame of mind? Or do you mean you hope you’ll leave on the noon plane? Whichever you mean, you haven’t said it clearly. Although the word in its new, free-floating capacity may be pleasurable and even useful to many, it offends the ear of many others, who do not like to see words dulled, or eroded, particularly when the erosion leads to ambiguity, softness, or nonsense.” [Strunk & White 2000:48; my emphasis]
- (34) Opinions of usage panellists (journalists etc.) in Morris & Morris (1985:289ff):
- “‘Hopefully’ so used is an abomination and its adherents should be lynched.”
  - “Slack-jawed, common, sleazy.”
  - “...barbaric, illiterate, offensive, damnable, and inexcusable.”
  - “...to my shame I once wrote it before I learned to hate it.”
  - “I can see myself writing it-but it’s wrong.”
- ◆ Why all this hate-filled language?
    - ◆ A 20<sup>th</sup> century innovation, *hopefully*<sup>2</sup> was not learned by all speakers in childhood and thus disagreed with their *Sprachgefühl*. They ‘reasoned’ that it must be ‘wrong’.
    - ◆ Sociological reasons (Whitley 1983): *Hopefully* became a popular shibboleth distinguishing the educated from the illiterate.

#### 3.3.1. Attempts at rational arguments against *hopefully*<sup>2</sup>

See Whitley (1983:130f) on sources and other arguments.

- A. Argument: *Hopefully* means ‘full of hope’, so it needs a subject capable of hoping.  
Reply: The premise confuses the etymology of the affix *-ful* with its current use.  
 Consistent application of the premise would force us to ditch the adverbs below (and others can be found by typing “\*fully” into www.onelook.com):
- (35) *The pianist played the sonata dreadfully.* [full of dread?]
- (36) *fruitfully, watchfully, fitfully, plentifully, lawfully, usefully, gainfully, wastefully, dutifully, gratefully, manfully, pitifully, playfully, wistfully, woefully, wonderfully*
- ◆ Such confused arguments from etymology would also mean that most French adverbs should not be used (*clairement* “clearly” < vulgar Latin *clara mente* ‘with clear mind’):
- (37) a. *La porte se ferme lentement.* “The door closes slowly.” [with a slow mind?]  
 b. *Il va évidement pleuvoir.* “It will evidently rain.” [with an evident mind?]

- B. Argument: Adverbs should modify verbs.

Reply: a) Why is the *etymology* of grammatical terms a criterion? (Cf. *noun, verb*)  
 b) Adverbs can modify adjectives, adverbs: *completely clear(ly)*  
 c) Adverbs describing speaker’s attitude, rather than the manner of the verb, are numerous. Should we ditch all of the following?

- (38) a. *Unfortunately, the swindler escaped conviction.*  
 b. *Mercifully, the offenders were punished with the utmost severity.*  
 c. *Thankfully, that ungrateful creep was not given any more money.*
- (39) obviously, definitely, luckily, interestingly, happily, surely, surprisingly, regrettably, disappointingly, curiously, oddly, admittedly, alarmingly, predictably, honestly, ideally, incidentally, strikingly, intriguingly, supposedly, confidentially, understandably, sadly

#### 3.3.2. Summary of the faults in the arguments against *hopefully*<sup>2</sup>:

- ◆ Irrational, abusive discourse.
- ◆ Issuing fiats about what a word ‘means’ based on confusion of etymology with meaning.
- ◆ Lack of empirical research (even on language accepted by all purists).
- ◆ Deficient knowledge of language (witness e.g.: fixation on *hopefully*<sup>2</sup> while ignoring other adverbs committing the same ‘misdemeanours’).
- ◆ Automatic dismissal of language change.

#### 3.4. The progressive passive

- (40) PROGRESSIVE PASSIVE: The house is being built (by Mr. Smith and Sons).  
 (41) PASSIVAL: †The house is building (by Mr. Smith and Sons).  
 (42) a. Our garden is putting in order... [Austen; after Denison 1998:148]  
 b. The street lamps were lighting... [Dickens; after Denison 1998:149]

- ◆ Reactions to the progressive passive (all from Visser 1973:2014; my underlining):
- (43) “a corruption of language” ... “clumsy and unidiomatic” ... “an awkward neologism, which neither convenience, intelligibility, nor syntactical congruity demands...” [1858; G. P. Marsh, *Lectures on the English Language*]
- (44) the “fatal absurdity” [of the progressive passive consists] “in the combination of is with being; in the making of the verb to be a supplement, or, in grammarians’ phrase, an auxiliary to itself, an absurdity so palpable, so monstrous, so ridiculous, that it should need only to be pointed out to be scouted”... “a monstrosity the illogical, confusing, inaccurate, unidiomatic character of which I have, at some length, imperfectly set forth” ... “It means nothing...” [1871 R. Grant White, *Words and their Uses*]
- (45) “...rationally or irrationally, I have an undying, never-dying hatred to is being, whatever arguments are brought in its favour. At the same time I fully grant that it is so convenient in the present state of the language, that I will not pledge myself I have never been guilty of using it.” [before 1890; John Henry Newman]

- ◆ It is hard to see a *rational* argument against the progressive passive, and it is unsurprising that language critics no longer attack the progressive passive.
- ◆ What is the guarantee that more modern diatribes against innovations in a language won’t look similarly ridiculous in subsequent centuries?

### 3.5. Singular *they*

- ◆ Singular *they* (*they*<sup>sing</sup>) = *they/them/their/themself/themselves* with singular antecedent:

- (46) *If somebody rings, and they don't say their name, ask them to identify themselves.*  
 (47) *In a classroom, the teacher has to know more than they explicitly teach.*  
 (48) *Whoever said that forgot to take their medication.*  
 (49) *If a student disputes the mark, send them to me.*  
 (50) *No decent person treats their friends like that.*

- ◆ Uses by famous authors throughout history:

#### Chaucer

- (51) And **whoso** fyndeth hym out of swich blame, / They wol come up... [ca. 1395, The Pardoner's Prologue]

#### Caxton

- (52) **Eche of them** sholde ... make theymselve redy. [1489 *Sonnes of Aymon* i. 39]

#### Sidney

- (53) Now this king did keepe a great house, that **euerie body** might come and take their meat freely. [1580, *Arcadia* II. (1613) 156]

#### Shakespeare

- (54) Arise; **one** knocks. / ... / Hark, how **they** knock! [1599; *Romeo and Juliet*, III:3]  
 (55) God send **every one** their heart's desire! [*Much Ado About Nothing*, Act III Scene 4]

#### King James Bible (1611)

- (56) According to the number that yee shall prepare, so shall yee doe to **euery one**, according to their number. [Numbers 15:12]  
 (57) Then shalt thou bring forth **that man, or that woman** (which haue committed that wicked thing) vnto thy gates, **euē that man, or that woman**, and shalt stone them with stones till they die. [Deuteronomy 17:5]  
 (58) ...in lowliness of minde let **each** esteeme other better then themselues. [Phl. 2:3]

#### Jane Austen

- (59) I would have **everybody** marry if they can do it properly. [1814; *Mansfield Park*]

#### Thackeray

- (60) **A person** can't help their birth. [1848 *Vanity Fair*, xli; cited Jespersen 1894:30]

- ◆ *They*<sup>sing</sup> is natural to many (most?) native speakers around the modern English-speaking world, even if they avoid it in formal speech/writing.
- ◆ Alternatives are unsatisfactory: *he* excludes females, *he or she* is awkward. (*They*<sup>sing</sup> can only be satisfactorily avoided by rewording, e.g. using plural antecedents.)

- (61) a. If a caller fails to say their name, ask them to identify themselves.  
 b. If a caller fails to say his name, ask him to identify himself.  
 c. If a caller fails to say his or her name, ask him or her to identify himself or herself.

### 3.5.1. They say *nay* to *they*: criticisms of singular *they*

- ◆ Fowler (1926) calls *they*<sup>sing</sup> an “error”, “old-fashioned”(!) and advocates *he*.
- ◆ Strunk & White (2000:60): replace *they*<sup>sing</sup> with *he*, or else rephrase the sentence.
- ◆ Simon (1980), after Webster (1989:902):  
 ‘... I bristle at [defenses of *they*<sup>sing</sup> appealing to the fact that] “reputable writers and speakers” have used them...But the lapses of the great ones do not make a wrong right...’
- ◆ Times Online Style Guide (2003) (see if you can spot the obvious mistake here):  
 ‘*They* should always agree with the subject. Avoid sentences such as “If someone loves animals, they should protect them”. Say instead “If people love animals, they should protect them”.’

### 3.5.2. The *they*-sayer’s reply to the naysayers

- ◆ The objection from naysayers is that *they* is plural, so it can’t have singular antecedents. Naysayers apparently think that *they*-sayers cannot count.
  - ◆ The objection misses the point that *they* has two functions: (i) plural, (ii) singular common gender. There are other pronouns with two functions that nobody criticises:
- (62) I bought her books.  
 (63) Ich mag sie. [her? them?]  
 (64) No one should forsake his friends. [this is recommended by some naysayers, but it is ambiguous between a male interpretation and a generic male/female interpretation]
- ◆ If naysayers argue that singular *they* is bad because the plural function is historically older, then they should also stop using *you*, German *Sie*, French *vous* to refer to single people.
  - ◆ Naysayers might object that *they*<sup>sing</sup> is illogical because it is grammatically plural:
- (65) If someone said that, they were mad. [\*was]
- ◆ However, purely grammatical, non-semantic features are nothing unusual:
    - ◆ German *Mädchen* (grammatically, not semantically neuter)
    - ◆ *trousers* (grammatically plural) vs. *Hose* (grammatically singular)
    - ◆ English interrogative *who* is grammatically singular, even if semantically plural:
- (66) I heard a lot of people were present. Who {was/\*were} in the room?

#### 4. General remarks on bad language criticism

##### 4.1. Summary of common faults in bad language criticism

- ◆ Sometimes a lack of objectivity, including insulting language in extreme cases.
- ◆ Deficient knowledge of language (neglect of the last century of research in language).
- ◆ Unmotivated disdain for language change, despite the fact that all languages are always changing and that today’s good language is the bad language of yesterday and tomorrow.
- ◆ Unmotivated assumption that there is only one good form of language. Specifically:
  - ◆ This feature must be wrong because it is absent in my variety (i.e. it sounds bad to me, disagrees with my *Sprachgefühl*).
  - ◆ Non-standard features are seen as inherently bad, although standard languages are just dialects which happened to gain wider respect due to historical accidents (e.g. association with important political/cultural centres like London, Paris).

##### 4.2. Some reasons for (the acceptance of) bad language criticism

- A. The fact that all natural languages have different varieties. Some consequences:
- ◆ A person may feel that features from other dialects “sound bad” because they do not conform to his/her grammar (“Sprachgefühl”). Untrained observers confuse this with objective right/wrong.
  - ◆ More scope for arbitrary aesthetic judgments (“that dialect is ugly”).
  - ◆ People may dislike a feature/variety because they (un)consciously associate it with a (geographically / racially / politically / socially defined) group they disapprove of. E.g.
    - ◆ American racists are likely to dislike African American Vernacular English.
    - ◆ Dislike of Cockney glottal stops due to dislike of punk subculture.
    - ◆ Dislike of a feature because it is “not used in good families.”
  - ◆ A sincere desire to help speakers of non-prestige varieties, coupled with the belief that non-standard language is inherently deficient / illogical / grammarless etc.
- B. Social causes: 1) Language use as a *shibboleth* (signal) of intelligence, education.  
2) Language as an arena for fighting liberalism/egalitarianism. (See Cameron 1995:ch.3, Nunberg 2003, Pullum 2004 on the anti-liberal nature of some language criticism). One example:  
“...these permissivists [=critics of language purism] usually come from socially underprivileged backgrounds, and are sentimental populists and kneejerk liberals ... They are motivated by wanting to prove their less literate kinfolk right.” [Simon 1994]
- C. Reification: Languages construed metaphorically as ‘things’ separate from their users, which should be protected. Witness the following metaphors:
- (67) *They murder the language.*  
Similarly: *massacre, torture, butcher, slaughter, crucify*, Ger. *radebrechen*
- (68) “The English language is being treated nowadays exactly as slave traders once handled their merchandise, or as the inmates of concentration camps were dealt with by their Nazi jailers.” (Simon 1980)
- D. The nature of language processing and linguistic knowledge:
- ◆ Language processing is extremely rapid and operates like a reflex.
  - ◆ Linguistic knowledge is inherently *unconscious* because processing involves multitasking (simultaneous phonological processing, lexical access, syntactic parsing, semantic interpretation and pragmatic reasoning).

- ◆ The fact that our knowledge of language is subconscious and works with extreme ease and rapidity makes language look much simpler than it is.
- ◆ This illusion of simplicity tempts people to apply low standards when it comes to deciding who should be trusted as an expert on language. Knowledge of the last hundred years of *scientific* (empirically motivated and properly reasoned) arguments about language is not considered necessary because most people don’t know that such science exists. (“Why would it? Language is so simple.”)

##### 4.3. How should linguists respond?

- ◆ Merely stating that all native speakers’ varieties are equally good will not convince people influenced by the phenomena just seen.
- ◆ Suggestions for linguists trying to improve the situation:
  - ◆ Being aware of the causes of bad prescriptivism.
  - ◆ Being prepared to address criticisms of ‘wrong’ language in an informed and fair way.
  - ◆ Not implying that linguists are against all prescription. They could stress the need for:
    - ◆ advice on how to communicate clearly
    - ◆ teaching prestige varieties (e.g. Standard English) in schools, without treating non-standard varieties as *inherently* deficient

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