

Todd Hull, 2023

Volume 7 Issue 2, pp. 125-146

Received: 18th July 2023

Revised: 02nd August 2023, 12th September 2023

Accepted: 14th September 2023

Date of Publication: 15th September 2023

DOI- <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijtel.2023.72.125146>

This paper can be cited as: Hull, T. (2023). Correcting Students Correctly: Avoiding Grammar Misconceptions in the Foreign Language Classroom. *PUPIL: International Journal of Teaching, Education and Learning*, 7(2), 125-146.

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CORRECTING STUDENTS CORRECTLY: AVOIDING GRAMMAR MISCONCEPTIONS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Grammatical accuracy is a justifiable goal in language teaching classrooms. But misconceptions about grammar can hinder this goal. The main misconception is that native speakers make grammar errors when using their own native language. They do not. The idea that native speakers can make grammar mistakes in their own languages is detrimental to foreign language classrooms because when language teachers attempt to find answers to grammar questions, they encounter conflicting information and are sometimes not able to give their students useful answers. The main cause of the misconception that native speakers can make grammar errors in their own language is the conflation of formal and informal style, a conflation of grammar and style, which leads to informal usage being incorrectly stigmatized as incorrect grammar. This paper will outline three major misconceptions arising from this fundamental confusion of style and grammar: 1) the idea that native speakers use words incorrectly; 2) native speakers using words that are said not to be real words; and 3) conflation of emphasis and redundancy. This issue will be addressed in the context of the English language.

But the principles apply across languages. Knowledge of these misconceptions will allow language teachers to answer and advise students.

Keywords

Grammar, Formal Communication, Informal Communication, Grammar Misconceptions

Figure 1: *10 Bad Grammar Examples to Avoid*



(Source: <https://ritamaloney.com/article/10-bad-grammar-examples-to-avoid>)

1. Introduction

“One of the most frustrating things for any linguist is a virtually universal misimpression that the world is full of people [making grammar errors in their native languages, one of the] myths about language dismissed by all linguists, but [believed by] almost everyone else.” (McWhorter, 1998). In other words, native speakers (cognitively normal, adult native speakers) do not make grammar errors in their own native language. Yet when one searches for information about correct grammar, one frequently finds statements like, “Sometimes, though, an error ... sounds more natural than the grammatically correct version.” Or “Common usage is all too frequently incorrect usage.” (Fogarty, 2008) Or “Of course hearing something doesn’t make it right.” (Fogarty, 2009) Or “Sometimes, though, an error of this kind sounds more natural than the traditionally grammatically correct version...sometimes the ungrammatical way sounds best. And see, I just caught myself...using *best* instead of *better* in that sentence. I compared two items the grammatical way and the ungrammatical way...I guess *best* is sometimes the best option, even if it’s not technically correct.” (Fogarty, 2023) Or Russell Baker (1988) claiming about Shakespeare’s “between you and I” in *Merchant of Venice* that “grammatically, of course, Shakespeare was wrong. He should have written 'between you and me.’”

But when scholars of language (as opposed to lay people) describe how native speakers use languages that they were born into, an uncontroversial statement is: *Native speakers do not make grammar errors in their own language* (with native speaker being defined as a cognitively normal, adult native speaker)...Native speakers make slips of the tongue, but not grammar errors. So what is correct grammar? Simply, correct grammar is what comes naturally [from] cognitively normal, adult native speakers of a language. Who makes grammar errors? Native speaker children under the age of about six, non-native speakers of a language, and those with abnormal cognitive function. (Hull, 2019)

The misimpression that cognitively normal, adult native speakers can make grammar errors in their own languages leads to conflicting information about what is “correct.” This detracts from the ability of foreign language teachers to get information about language use and usage for their students. This paper will address three common misconceptions about grammar: 1) the idea that native speakers are using some words incorrectly; 2) native speakers using words that are purported not to be real words; and 3) the conflation of emphasis and redundancy. I will not just abstractly define and discuss these misconceptions, but will give concrete examples so that educators can refer to them directly. Finally, given the ubiquity of these misperceptions, I will give usage suggestions for what learners should do when using language in the real world.

Figure 2: 30 Common Grammar Mistakes



(Source: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fbecomeawritertoday.com%2Fcommon-grammar-mistakes%2F&psig=AOvVawI-5irn2MJXfHoiWhrqmllo&ust=1694097050988000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=2ahUKEwjOmuS4mZaBAxW-pVYBHUylCvoQr4kDegUIARCmAQ>)

2. Conflating Grammar and Style: Mistaking Informal Usage and Language Evolution for “Wrong Grammar”

Cognitively normal, adult native speakers do not make grammar errors when using their own language. But of course their utterances are not always grammatical. Native speakers make slips of the tongue, for example when speaking quickly, being distracted, or uttering long stretches of speech. These do result in ungrammatical speech. But they do not constitute “grammar errors” in the colloquial sense that the non-scholarly community means when they speak of “wrong grammar.” Slips of the tongue happen to speakers who would otherwise speak grammatically. But actual grammar errors result from a speaker not having knowledge or mastery of the language. Scholars of language are descriptivists. They describe how language is actually used by language users. Lay people are often prescriptivists. They would like to dictate how they think language should be used.

For scholars of language, true grammar errors are found in non-native speakers, young native speaker children, and those with cognitive impairments. For lay people grammar errors pepper the everyday speech of native speakers, though those making this claim have a hard time saying exactly what constitutes an error. The best definition of an error that one proponent of this prescriptivism can propose is that an error is “any serious departure from Standard English.” (Garner, 2012). A major source of language misperception is the conflation of linguistic innovation—natural language change and evolution—with ungrammatical speech. Emblematic of this is the opinion that yes, “language will change. But that’s not the same as saying we must welcome all changes, many of which begin as errors.” (Garner, 2012) Scholars of language point out that language change is natural and that to resist it is to put language in chains. Prescriptivists of old may have railed against *has* supplanting *hath*. But those prescriptivists are universally ridiculed today. David Crystal (2004) comments on the irony of each new generation of prescriptivists castigating the prescriptions of their predecessors. “What puzzles me is why people fail to make the appropriate deduction from this behaviour, and see the pointlessness and counter-productiveness of being prescriptive about language.” Prescriptivists attempt to justify their mandates through the “relative immediacy of linguistic perspective. The prescriber cares about how language is used here and now. The describer views language more distantly, observing that linguistic change is inevitable.” The focus is on how language is used in the present day and “has more to do with what works for today’s readership, distracting as few readers as possible...Good usage reflects how a careful writer of today approaches linguistic questions.” (Garner, 2016) One of the main thrusts of this paper is that

people with knowledge of language do not get distracted by claimed grammar errors and that knowledge of language obviates prescriptivist theorizations. Garner approvingly quotes Peter Farb: “One justification sometimes heard for freedom in breaking the rules of the language game is that languages change with time anyway. But that argument is beside the point. Even though the rules may change tomorrow, they are still binding while they are in force today.”

That argument is fallacious because prescriptivists fight against tomorrow ever coming. They want to live in an eternal today where *hath* never becomes *has*. Garner does concede that “no one seriously wants to halt all change in a living language” and that “prescribers need to be realistic. They can’t expect perfection or permanence, and they must bow to universal usage.” However, he still states that “when an expression is in transition—when only part of the population has adopted a new usage that seems genuinely undesirable—prescribers should be allowed, within reason, to stigmatize it.”

But that circle can never be squared. Either one accepts change or one does not. Enforcing “rules” that are “binding while they are in force today” is outlawing all change forever and endeavoring to make it impossible for today’s rules to change tomorrow. It is attempting to prevent change from *ever* happening. There can be no case for stigmatizing. Rather, stylistic *preferences* should be stated in style manuals. And they should be stated as preferences—not stigmatizations.

Another unjustified fear that prescriptivists have is that allowing language change will result in what D.J. Enright describes as the “spread of chaos.” (as cited in Garner, 2016). F.L. Lucas says that “it is not a question of banning all linguistic changes...Since language cannot stand still, the main thing for the public interest is that alterations in vocabulary and idiom should not become too rapid, reckless, and wanton” This fear is unfounded because chaos has never ensued as a result of natural language change. This fear of chaos is “false. Discourse communities are systems in which an equilibrium naturally, and always, prevails. Language never changes fast enough for communication to disintegrate and make living native speakers unintelligible to one another.” (Hull, 2019) Prescriptivism is superfluous. It is not needed to keep language in check. Language does that naturally, organically, and automatically. Style manuals are useful in advising those who communicate in *formal* speech or writing. Pullum (2010) states that while “riddled with inaccuracies, uninformed by evidence, and marred by bungled analysis” that he does not always object to prescriptivist “style advice.” (Pullum, 2009) Prescriptivists may sometimes be consulted for *style*. But their claims of native speaker *ungrammaticality* are false. These misperceptions have their roots in various places such as

pseudo-grammatical or pseudo-logical reasoning, pseudo-historical folk etymology, and claiming personal stylistic preferences as grammar “rules”.

2.1. Pseudo-Grammatical Claims of Grammar Errors

Russell Baker’s insistence that Shakespeare had been wrong in writing *between you and I* is an example of fallacious pseudo-grammatical reasoning. Shakespeare writes: “All debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death.” (Jowett et al., 1986) Baker’s argument rests on the fallacy that since *between you and I* could be substituted with the accusative case pronoun *us*, every word in a phrase must be in the accusative case. “But that is just false,” says Steven Pinker (1994) who correctly points out that a conjunction is an example of a “headless” construction which does not require agreement within the conjunction between the grammatical number of the pronouns and the grammatical gender of pronouns inside it. *Between you and I* is not a grammar error.

Similar is a claim about *us*. *She invited we associates to the party for (correct) She invited us associates to the party.* (Garner, 2012) If *associates* is taken out, *us* is required. Users of formal language would more often use *us associates* and view *we associates* as a hypercorrection. But scholars of language know that *we associates* is not an error but instead a stylistically unpopular choice in formal, published, edited prose.

It has also been said that “it would be incorrect to say *it was the tallest of the two buildings*. You’re comparing two buildings. So you should use a comparative, *taller*—not a superlative, *tallest*.” (Fogarty 2023) But *tallest* is not incorrect here. Using *tallest* in this context fulfills the prime mandate of language: instant and successful communication. It does not cause any confusion amongst native speaker interlocutors. In formal usage, one may choose to use *taller*. But it is a *style* choice, not a *grammatical* one.

One of the most common mistakenly flagged usages conflates nouns modified by adjectives with compound words. It is said that *attorney generals* is a grammar error. The correct form is claimed to be *attorneys general* (though allowances are sometimes made for the hyphenated British English *attorney-generals*). The cause of this mistaken stigmatization is a misunderstanding of a class of compounds called open nouns. (Chicago Manual of Style, 2023) Open nouns act as single-lexical-unit functional compound nouns written with two non-hyphenated words (in this example, *attorney general*). The stigmatization of *attorney generals* stems from a conflation of this open noun with a noun (*attorney*) modified by an adjective (*general*). Since adjectives do not take plural markers in English, *attorney generals* is said to be erroneous. However, *attorney general* is a multi-word morpheme open noun, which places it in the same functional category as examples given on the Chicago Manual: *face mask*, *cell phone*,

and sea level. Insisting on *attorneys general* is the same as insisting on *faces mask, *cells phone, or *seas level. More examples of correct but mistakenly flagged utterances are:

- “Code of honors.” (Itzkoff & Westgard, 2019)
- Political commentator, James Schneider explained that “the British Monarch is formally the head of state of countries in the commonwealth like Canada and Jamaica and that those countries have *governor generals* that govern on behalf of the king or queen.” (Schneider, 2022)
- Paul Graham (2022), co-host of the Energy Insiders podcast said that “we’ve had a pretty long dialog with the nuclear proponents. It’s been a case of slowly coming to terms with the *point of views* we are coming from.” His co-host, David Leitch mentioned “...electricity *statement of opportunities*.”
- Dr. John Osterholm (2022) stated that “over the course of this pandemic there have been lifelines. There have been roadblocks. There have been in some cases of *edge of cliffs*.”
- Anand Giridharada (2022) described some figures in a book he was being interviewed about as being “pretty clear *stick in the muds* for a set of ideals—not compromisers.”
- And journalist, Ross Cullen (2023) reported that “We have seen *difference of opinions* among unions.”

None of these utterances is ungrammatical. They are all open nouns functioning as multi-morpheme lexical items. The plural marker placed at the end of all of the utterances is grammatically correct.

Similar is stigmatizing the grammatical *open fired*, mistakenly claiming that it should be *opened fire*. Some of these items may be revised in published, edited text according to house style guides or editor prerogative. But these are *stylistic* choices. None of them is *ungrammatical*.

2.2. Pseudo-Logical Claims of Grammar Errors

Some speech is said to be erroneous because it is not logical, prompting accusations of incorrect speech on pseudo-logical claims about grammar. The classic example of this type of claim is the proscription of the double negative in English. Here it is said that as in mathematics a double negative equals a positive. So if someone says *Sam doesn’t have no evidence*, they are actually stating that Sam has evidence. This is a fallacy because success in language use is achieved with instantaneous and successful transmission of meaning rather than accordance with mathematical logic. *Sam doesn’t have no evidence* instantly and without confusion, transmits to native speakers of English that Sam does not have any evidence. There

is no confusion in the mind of the interlocutor. Myriad mathematically “illogical” language constructions result in successful linguistic communication all the time. And since successful communication is the criterion, mathematical logic is irrelevant and is thus not a valid criterion for whether or not a construction is grammatical (not to mention the fact that double negatives were a part of the standard grammar of Old English).

Similarly, no one is confused when someone says they *could care less* about something rather than saying they *couldn't care less*. But that phraseology is said to be illogical because it technically means that someone actually could be less concerned about something when what they mean is that their level of concern could not be any lower. Saying that one *could care less* instantly and successfully conveys the meaning that one couldn't care less. There is no grammar error there. But as a stylistic choice, *couldn't care less* would generally be preferred.

There is also no confusion when someone expresses the sentiment that something is very special by saying that it is *very unique*. This is incorrectly seen as an error since *unique* is said to mean “one of a kind” and nothing can logically be more one of a kind than anything else. Users of language in formal settings will usually avoid *very unique*. But again, it is a stylistic choice, not a use of more proper grammar.

Style manuals are justified in suggesting Sam *doesn't have any evidence*, *couldn't care less*, and *unique*, but only as *style choices*—not as grammatical mandates.

3. Perceptions of Incorrect Word Usage by Native Speakers

Some native speakers use *literally* to mean *figuratively*. “I was literally starving to death waiting for you at the restaurant.” This is stigmatized by prescriptivists. Also rejected is using *myriad* as a noun instead of an adjective. Prescriptivists say that *plethora* must be used in cases where a noun is called for. They reject sentences like, “There were a *myriad* of causes for the collapse,” saying that *plethora* must be used in place of *myriad*. Or the sentence must be restated: “There were *myriad* causes for the collapse.” Some native speakers use *enormity* to mean large in size. Prescriptivists reserve *enormity* to mean something that is outrageous and despicable, like a massacre of civilians. (Fiske, 2011) But words changing meaning over time is a natural part of language change. (McWhorter, 2017) In formal contexts such as published, edited prose, using *literally* to mean *figuratively*, *myriad* as a noun, and *enormity* to mean *enormousness* would not normally be used. These are *stylistic* choices. But these stylistically unpopular usages are all *grammatically* unimpeachable.

4. Words Said Not To Be Words

Some words used by native speakers are said not to be “real words.” One of the most high-profile examples is *irregardless*. Saying that *irregardless* is “not a word” is an invalid claim belying a lack of linguistic knowledge. As soon as a native speaker utters a lexical item, it automatically and immediately becomes a word. Is that a problem? No, because “rules of proper usage are tacit conventions. Conventions are unstated agreements within a community to abide by a single way of doing things—not because there is any inherent advantage to the choice, but because there is an advantage to everyone making the same choice” just as countries driving on either the right or left side of the road. (Pinker, 2012) (Again, *irregardless* would not be used in formal, published, edited prose—not because it is “wrong” or “not a word,” but because it’s informal style is not in keeping with formal conventions.)

Steven Pinker was referring here to formal written prose. But the idea applies to all language use. A person may create a word out of the blue, in which case it immediately becomes a real word. But words like that almost never catch on. They almost never become long-term members of the lexicon of a language. At best they become trends that last for months or years and then fade into history. More often they are used by a small segment of native speakers and never make it into the larger lexicon at all. So language will never become “flooded” with a chaotic plethora of words that nobody understands. Tacit conventions keep the lexicon at a level that maintains seamless communication amongst the vast majority of users of a language for the vast majority of the time. Older speakers, for example, who claim not to be able to understand half of what younger speakers are saying actually understand nearly 100% of what younger speakers are saying, with a few exceptions. These exceptions almost never impede fluid communication and become part of the lexicon of older speakers upon very short explanation of their meanings and usages. Nevertheless, their potential to impede communication is almost always overestimated.

5. Misunderstanding Redundancy

Prescriptivists also stigmatize redundancy. Careful users of formal language avoid redundancy. But prescriptivists misunderstand redundancy and falsely flag some utterances as redundant when in fact what is proscribed as redundant actually often serves subtle linguistic purposes that would not be achieved were the “redundancies” to be excised. There are at least three categories of prescriptivist misperception of redundancy: 1) Wrongly advocating the

excising of words they consider redundant, 2) confusing redundancy with emphasis, and 3) pseudo-grammatical or historical claims of redundancy.

5.1. Advocating Excising “Unnecessary” Words

Those who endeavor to root out redundancy often advocate excising words they see as unnecessarily repetitive. Sometimes utterances like *the reason is because* or *the reason is why* are stigmatized. The rationale is that when one uses *reason* in this phrase one is already stating the *because* and the *why*. So *because* and *why* are said to be redundant, unnecessary, and they should be replaced with *that*: the reason is *that*. This is a conflation of redundancy and emphasis. Saying something like, “Democracies provide more prosperity than autocracies. *The reason is because* democracies foster a diversity of ideas, which leads to innovation and prosperity” emphasizes a stronger causal effect of the benefits of democracy than leaving out the *because*. It emphasizes the strength of the cause that leads to prosperity—democracy. Replacing *because* with *that* in this context loses this subtle linguistic distinction. Editors of formal prose may still revise the phrase. But that is a *stylistic* choice that is made only upon careful consideration that linguistic subtleties are retained in a rephrasing. There is no justification for stigmatizing the use of *because* in that context as redundant. And there is especially no cause for labeling it “wrong grammar.”

5.2. Conflating Redundancy with Emphasis

Sometimes *at* and *to* are flagged as redundancies in utterances like *where we are at* and *where we are going to*. In the former, *at* is said to be redundant because saying where we are already states our position. In the latter, *to* is said to be superfluous because going already states our directional movement. This is the error of conflation of emphasis with redundancy. The *at* and *to* in utterances like, “this is where we are *at* in this process” and “that is where we are going *to* as we move towards modernizing our infrastructure” emphasize certain and subtle linguistic aspects of the utterance. One thing the *at* and *to* do in these utterances is emphasize that we are only temporarily at a certain point but will progress to another level in the future. Another is that they mark a starker contrast between where we are coming from (the origin) and where we are headed (the destination) than leaving out the *to* or *at*. An example is former professional cyclist, Inga Thompson pointing out some reasons to watch kids’ sports even though children are not performing at a level as impressive as their professional, adult counterparts: “When you watch some of these...kids leagues...you can sit there and go wow, that was impressive for that kid for that age for where they’re *at* [emphasis added].” (Thompson, 2023) To end that sentence with “where they are” loses the emphasis on how impressed Thompson is with how far the children have come and how impressive that feat is. Excising

words in these cases as “superfluous” or redundant omits subtle emphases, and prescriptivist lack of linguistic knowledge leads to their mistakenly being flagged.

5.3. Pseudo-Grammatical or Pseudo-Historical Claims of Redundancy

Some word combinations are purported to be redundant because an affix of one word meant the same thing as the word it is paired with at some point in the word’s history, or in the language the word was derived or borrowed from. One example is *inherent in* because the prefix *in* in *inherent* means *in*. So the independent word *in* in the phrase *inherent in* is said to be redundant. *Comport with* is sometimes stigmatized since the *com* in *comport* means *with* in Latin. Flagging these is mistaken because the *in* and *com* are not cognitively processed with those meanings by native speakers of English. And if they are not processed with those meanings, they cannot be redundant. *Please RSVP* is seen by some as redundant because the *SVP* stands for the French *please, s’il vous plaît*. So to say *please RSVP* is claimed to be unnecessarily repeating the word *please*. This is erroneous since most native English speakers do not cognitively process the *s’il vous plaît* in *RSVP*. Stigmatizing all of these examples stems from a prescriptivist lack of linguistic knowledge.

6. Errors, Genuine and Claimed

A side-by-side list of utterances that are actually ungrammatical along with a list of utterances claimed by prescriptivists to be erroneous makes clear the contrast between real and false grammar errors. Seeing examples of real errors side by side with false errors makes clearer the nature of real errors versus utterances that are claimed to be erroneous based on a confusion of formal and informal style. The key point is that cognitively normal, adult native speakers would never make any of the real errors. The true errors are real-life examples that I have encountered and are all examples of utterances that are actually grammatically incorrect. No native speaker who might use utterances mistakenly flagged by prescriptivists as grammatically incorrect and discussed in the previous sections of this paper would ever utter any of the true grammar errors. The examples of utterances that are claimed to be erroneous are instead either completely grammatical but informal speech, or not errors at all. They are *grammatically* correct but not always *stylistically* preferred in formal expression, where many would follow the alternatives suggested.

Table 1: Claimed Grammar Errors: True and Claimed (Utterances in Tables 1 And 2 Have No Relation except That Some Are True Errors While Others Are Claimed)

Claimed errors
<i>I couldn't hardly</i> for (correct) <i>I could hardly</i> . (Garner 2016)
<i>Where are you at?</i> for (correct) <i>Where are you?</i> (Garner, 2012)
<i>Not that big of a deal</i> for (correct) <i>Not that big a deal</i> . (Garner, 2012)
"Anyone can do as they please." The correct form is, of course, "anyone may do as he pleases" (Simon, n.d.)
"I realize it is not grammatically correct, but in the interest of gender-neutral language, I support saying that every student should receive the aid <i>they need</i> instead of the grammatically correct <i>receives</i> the aid <i>he or she needs</i> ." (Sanabria & Sanabria, 2013)
The best borrowers are grabbed by the banks and financial institutions <i>who</i> [read <i>that</i>] are in a position now to offer finer rates. (Garner, 2016)
The Rhode Island Wind Ensemble <i>is comprised of</i> [read <i>comprises</i> or <i>has</i>] 50 professional and amateur musicians, ranging in age from 15 to 82. (Garner, 2016)
<i>I'm going to lay down for a nap</i> for (correct) <i>I'm going to lie down for a nap</i> .
<i>It's about 10 miles further down the road</i> for (correct) <i>It's about 10 miles farther down the road</i> .

(Source: Authors' Own Illustration)

Table 2: True Grammar Errors

True errors
I will go to the Los Angeles to watch baseball game of Dodger.
I very like smoke the cigarette.
He have ten peach.
Please submit the two document until Friday.
I am very exciting our vacation on this summer.
I will play bowling this weekend.
Most people is kind. But some is not.
You don't have to smoke here. It is prohibit.
Doctor is good person because he cure patient.

(Source: Authors' Own Illustration)

No native speaker of English who might say, “It’s not that big *of* a deal” would ever say something like, “I am very exciting our vacation on this summer.” Native speakers do not make grammar errors when using their own language.

7. Should There Be Standards?

Considering that all of the above are misapprehensions by prescriptivists and the fact that native speakers do not make grammar errors, should standards be abolished? No. One might wear jeans and a T-shirt to watch a softball game on Saturday morning and a tuxedo to a black-tie event on Saturday night. Both are exactly appropriate for the contexts in which they are worn. There are no “errors” in the attire worn at the softball game. Using informal language in informal contexts and formal language in formal contexts is what scholars of language both promote and do. Prescriptivists sometimes claim hypocrisy in descriptivists’ nominally praising colloquial usage but then conforming to formal standards in their own writings. Here prescriptivists fail to understand that one can (and should) wear jeans and a T-shirt to the softball game and formal attire to the black-tie event. There is no contradiction in being formal in formal contexts and informal in informal ones. In fact, switching between formal and informal language depending on context is one of the hallmarks of a sophisticated user of language.

Further, towards the end of the evening at a black-tie event, people may loosen their ties for the sake of comfort. In *popular* scholarly works addressed to a *lay audience*, scholars sometimes insert more informal language for various purposes (more effectively engaging audiences, for example). But prescriptivists sometimes view this loosening of the black tie for a small part of the event as unacceptable shoddiness for an affair of such formality. For one to make the personal choice of loosening formal conventions in a scholarly work directed at the general public is a subjective choice (one that many scholars make for the *popular* works they write—and importantly, not in submissions to academic journals). Occasional loosening the black tie in popular scholarly works is not unscholarly. To state that infusing these works with occasional informal language constitutes “wretched...misusage” unbecoming of “a book representing itself as a work of scholarship” (Garner 2016) is one of the reasons prescriptivists comprise the laity and are generally not members of the scholarly community.

We should differentiate between formal and informal language usage in standards for formal communication such as journal articles, academic presentations, news articles, resumes, and job applications—so long as these standards are seen as *stylistic* choices and not perceived as being more *grammatically* correct than less formal communication. So there should be

standards and conventions for formal discourse. But cognitively normal, adult language users in informal (or formal) discourse do not make grammar errors.

Many commentators miss this distinction between standards for formal usage such as published, edited prose and informal usage like everyday speech. This leads to claims like, “usage dictionaries got hijacked by the descriptive linguists, 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 okay.” (Garner, 2016) This is false, a misunderstanding of the practice of scholars of language to note that in *informal* usage as long as a native speaker says it, it’s okay. But in published, edited text, a set of formal conventions is followed in which descriptivists state that *not* everything a native speaker says is okay. Descriptivists advocate for standards in *formal* usage. Those with opinions on the most effective and eloquent usage can make their cases either to advise makers of style guides or to write style guides of their own—but, importantly, never to denigrate usage that does not conform to those subjective standards, especially in informal communication.

Something like the American Heritage Dictionary’s usage panel is a good idea to guide standards of *formal* usage. This can deal with the incremental changes over time that prescriptivists are concerned with and is the closest thing to squaring the circle of maintaining present standards while accepting language change. A majority of a usage panel might not accept a certain usage in formal contexts when it first arises amongst a community of native speakers of a language. But if the usage becomes more ingrained in native speaker usage over time—especially in published, edited prose—the percentage of the panel that rejects the usage will decrease accordingly and the usage may be accepted by a majority over time.

A prime example of this is the singular *they*. In 1996, 80% of the American Heritage Dictionary Usage panel rejected the sentence, *A person at that level should not have to keep track of the hours they put in.* But in 2008, 52% accepted it. In 2015, that figure was up to 58%. (American Heritage Dictionary, n.d.) And many style manuals such as Chicago and AP now fully accept its use (though sometimes with reservations and advice to reword when possible to avoid it). This example of thoughtful scholars following usage trends amongst published, edited text had the majority of them coming to accept it over time as it gained wider acceptance amongst careful editors of formal prose. Contrast this with prescriptivists’ nearly 0% acceptance rate and their concomitant commentary on the singular *they*: “Disturbing though these developments may be to purists, they’re irreversible. And nothing that a grammarian says will change them.” (Garner, 2003)

In addition to the thoughtful, scholarly approach of the usage panel, a key is that a usage panel advises mostly on *formal* usage—not informal usage. And while the panel may not accept some usages in formal contexts, a panel that views language correctly never stigmatizes or derogates usages that they reject. They may simply advise against them in formal discourse. A scholarly usage panel also avoids kneejerk, emotional rejection of language innovation that is common amongst prescriptivist lay users of language and is a productive forum for addressing language evolution on the boundaries.

7.1. Language Evolution at the Boundaries

The prescriptivist stigmatizations of informal style conflated with improper grammar based on invalid criteria like pseudo-grammatical and pseudo-historical principles or charges of redundancy are easily rebutted. But in other cases, language change does run up against the boundaries of contemporary grammaticality. Unlike a large portion of usage flagged by prescriptivists, some language usage by native speakers is not simply a matter of style. This is exactly the type of language that a panel like American Heritage is best for.

A prominent example of usage on the boundary is using past tense forms where past participles are traditionally called for. Here are some examples from native English speakers, both relatively formal (interviews in the news media) and informal (regular people asked to comment).

- A radio show host mentioned that “something you have recently *wrote*...is that...the Obama administration has approved more arms sales than any administration since World War II.” (Jeserich, 2015)
- Asked about the capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, US Capitol Police Inspector General, Michael Bolton (2021) testified that “it certainly would have provided the department a better posture to repel these attackers. It would put them in a better position. It would be very difficult to say it would have absolutely turned the tide, but it certainly would have *gave* them a better chance at doing what they needed to do.”
- Amesh Adalja (2022) of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security asked, “Why wasn't there a better nursing home policy? That would have made a bigger dent that would have actually *gave* nursing homes the resources to be able to take care of these patients.”

Past tense forms that are quite frequently used in place of a participle are *broke* for *broken* and *shook* for *shaken*.

- Rob Keller, spokesperson for the Morton County Sheriff's Department in North Dakota stated about pepper spraying protesters at a Dakota Access pipeline site that, "We are law-abiding in this country and anytime a law is *broke*, there are consequences *of* it." (He also used *of* in a nonstandard—but grammatical—manner.)
- A law professor said that "unfortunately, having the journalism and the law schools together had *broke* the seals of confidentiality." (Beety, 2022)
- Activist Linda Janet Holmes, commenting on the April 2015 shooting death of Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina said, "I was deeply *shook* and saddened by what I saw." (Holmes, 2015)
- Journalist Ernesto Arsay (2015) reported that "San Bernardino residents and workers were *shook* up by a mass shooting at a social services building."
- Interviewing campaign manager Symone Sanders for the 2016 candidacy for president of the United States of Senator Bernie Sanders, news program host, Amy Goodman (2015) commented to Ms. Sanders, "Your campaign has been *shook* up."

In fact, it has been noted by scholars that a long-term trend throughout the history of English has been past participles specifically ending with the letter *n* disappearing and giving way to their past tense forms. (McWhorter 2023)

Sometimes nonstandard forms arise out of analogy with similar lexical items. McWhorter (2023) stated that a very common instance of this is the nonstandard *brang* for *brought*. This is likely from an analogy with verbs like *ring*, *sing*, and *spring* (Merriam-Webster n.d.) the past tense forms of which are *rang*, *sang*, and *sprang*. Prosecutor, Linda Dunikoski (2021) in the trial for murder victim, Ahmaud Arbery addressed one of the suspects, telling him that "you *brang* your 12-gauge pump shotgun with you ready to fire."

None of these past tense/past participle usages constitutes a grammar error. They are all cases of the garden-variety language change that is a part of the history and evolution of every human tongue. But they are close enough to the boundaries of contemporary grammaticality to be addressed by something like an American Heritage Usage Panel. Periodic reviews by a panel would take into account general trends in these instances and take panel members' input as to whether they are established enough to be recommended by style guides as appropriate in formal contexts. This is a scholarly, measured process that avoids emotional rejection based on intuition and tradition.

8. What Should Language Teachers And Learners Do?

With knowledge of these fallacies and misapprehensions, what should language teachers and learners do? Should educators advise a free-for-all where students speak and write any way they want? The answer is no—especially in formal contexts such as resumes or applications for admission to institutions of higher education. Students must be informed that it is necessary to follow common conventions in these circumstances since those making decisions about granting job offers or admission to college are more often than not linguistically unversed.

If scholarly panels predominated instead of subjective style manuals, foreign language teachers could obtain more consistent and reliable information for their students. Absent this, teachers can look for signs of a lack of knowledge of grammar. Sources which claim “grammar errors” amongst native speakers can be deemed unversed in grammar. However, a lack of grammatical knowledge does not mean teachers can learn nothing from those sources. They are often good resources for style. What those sources term “correct grammar” can often be a good stylistic choice, even if the source is not grammatically versed. For example, a prescriptivist is wrong to claim that *further* is “wrong” for physical distance and *farther* is “correct.” But in formal writing, as a stylistic choice, teachers can advise students to use *farther*. A useful approach to prescriptivist guides can be to translate what they stigmatize as “wrong” as possibly not the best stylistic choice in formal discourse. And what they incorrectly term “correct grammar” can often be the best stylistic choice in formal contexts.

Correct information is critical in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs as “EAP units choose the most appropriate model for their students.” (Flowerdew, 2016). And as English Medium Instruction (EMI) increases around the world and EMI instructors “find themselves having to rethink their teaching approaches in order to teach their courses in English,” access to reliable information about English usage is important. (Richards & Pun, 2022) Getting jobs or positions at schools should not be jeopardized under any circumstances. Using formal conventions in formal contexts can “help you avoid low grades, lost employment opportunities, lost business, and titters of amusement at the way you write or speak.” (Brians, n.d.) But the more people who become aware of what grammatical correctness actually is—utterances from cognitively normal, adult native speakers—the better the chances that people in the future will accept utterances mistakenly deemed by prescriptivists to erroneous now.

9. Conclusion

Cognitively normal, adult native speakers do not make grammar errors in their own native languages. Stylistically unpopular usage is not wrong. Language that does not conform to pseudo-grammatical prescriptions or that does not follow mathematical logic is not erroneous. Native speakers do not use words incorrectly. There is no such thing as words that are not words. Many instances of purported redundancy are examples of emphasis. In a perfect world, all language users would understand these principles and make a division only between the formal and informal usage of cognitively normal, adult native speakers and leave behind the notion that native speakers can make grammar errors. Formal language would be used in formal discourse, but only as a *style* choice, not as something viewed as more *grammatically* correct. Standards for formal expression would be advocated for. But under no circumstances would native speakers ever be stigmatized, belittled, chided, criticized, castigated, condemned, canceled—or even gently “corrected”—based on their use of language in informal contexts. The more people that are in possession of this knowledge the more enlightened will be the understanding of language use and usage. But until this knowledge becomes universal, it will still be necessary to follow the existing conventions in arenas that affect people’s lives, such as work environments in which people could be passed over for promotions for perceived grammar errors.

An area of future consideration could focus on the acceptable level and amount of informal language in scholarly books written for lay audiences.

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