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the word on the street

fact and fable about american english

John McWhorter

When we talk to each other, what do we really say? What makes speech correct? What is language anyway, and how does it define us?

In *The Word on the Street*, John McWhorter reveals our American English in all its variety, beauty, and expressiveness. Debunking the myth of a "pure" standard English, he considers the speech patterns and accents of many regions and ethnic groups in the U.S. and demonstrates how language evolves. He takes up the tricky question of gender-neutral pronouns. He dares to ask, "Should we translate Shakespeare?" Focusing on whether how our children speak determines how they learn, he presents the controversial Ebonics debate in light of his research on dialects and creoles.

The Word on the Street frees us to truly speak our minds. It is John McWhorter's answer to William Safire, transformed here into everybody's Aunt Lucy, who insists on correcting our grammar and making us feel slightly embarrassed about our everyday use of the language. ("To *whom*," she will insist, and "don't split your infinitives!") He reminds us that we'd better accept the fact that *language is always changing*—not only slang, but sound, syntax, and words' meanings—and get on with the business of communicating effectively with one another.

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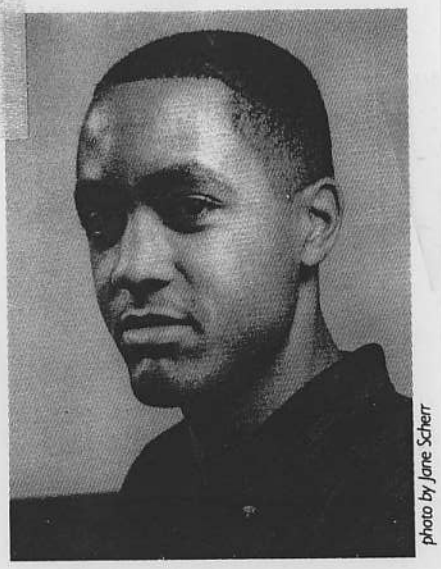

photo by Jane Scherr

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The Word on the Street

Fact and Fable about American English

John McWhorter

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CHAPTER THREE

Leave Your Language Alone

The "Speech Error" Hoax

Over the years, a linguist learns to accept that even the jolliest of conversations will be occasionally stopped dead by a certain kind of sad little thud—a person sheepishly asking whether what they just gracefully expressed was "said right," according to the glum "rules of grammar" supposedly vital to intelligent expression.

Here, I do not mean people speaking nonstandard dialects like Black English, Brooklyn English, or rural Southern English, although users of these dialects certainly often have linguistic insecurities that I hope to have helped dispel in this book so far. In this case, I am referring to speakers of even relatively standard English dialects from places like San Francisco, Connecticut, and Madison, Wisconsin—what we would perceive as "ordinary," *Thirtysomething*, Hugh Downs, Demi Moore American English.

Indeed, it is safe to say that most Americans, educated or not, have a sense that much of the time, they abuse the English language in the same way as they might abuse their bodies by holiday bingeing, slacking off on exercise, or staying out too long in the sun. It is obvious that all of us abide by at least some "rules" without fail—people do not say, "Girl this too many toys have." However, the common feeling is that in everyday speech, we tend to stumble on other rules. These rules are seen as having the same authority as the ones that forbid things like *girl*

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this, but are, for some reason, much harder to actually observe without careful self-monitoring.

This sense of casual speech as Saturday night sin is a minor tragedy, for the simple reason that these "rules" are actually a collection of hoaxes, having nothing whatsoever to do with the logic and clarity they ostensibly maintain. So strikingly influential today, these rules mostly can be traced back to the arbitrary fiats of a couple of long-forgotten eighteenth-century pundits. The rules these obscure martinets came up with were not based on any unified, authoritative conception of how language works on the order of Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* for physics, since nothing of the sort even existed at the time. Instead, these ideas were the product of kitchen-sink, seat-of-the-pants notions that only looked plausible within the era's still-embryonic perception of how languages work. To a modern linguist, seeing people forced into linguistic genuflections like *Whom did you see?* and *Between you and I* by these long dead emperors with no clothes is like watching people hang garlic in their doorways to ward off evil spirits.

Just as the person asking whether they said it "right" supposes, linguists do study grammar. However, the popular conception of "grammar" is to what linguists do as alchemy is to chemistry. The grammar that linguists study focuses on getting at the rules underneath what people say, period. This is a rich and tricky business that has generated thousands of books, dissertations, and articles, figuring out such rules as those that explain why we say that a person withstood pressure, but that they later grandstanded about it, not grandstood. This is called *descriptive* grammar, and has nothing to do with the rather surreal notion of telling people what they *should* say. The other grammar, which is about counterintuitive, party-pooping bizarrerie, such as "Don't end sentences with prepositions" and "The *shall* of the future is only used with *I*" is called *prescriptive* grammar, and is neither taught to nor discussed by linguists, except as the persistent little scourge that seems to have gotten hold of the Anglophone world.

Prescriptive grammar has spread linguistic insecurity like a plague among English speakers for centuries, numbs us to the aesthetic richness of nonstandard speech, and distracts us from attending to genuine issues of linguistic style in writing. We can see through all of this with a closer look at the idea that even casual standard dialect speech is somehow full of errors.

GRAMMATICAE LINGUAE ANGLICANAE: SHOEHORNING ENGLISH INTO LATIN

The naked emperor most of this traces back to was a certain English bishop by the name of Robert Lowth, who doubled as a scholar of Hebrew poetry. His legacy would be confined to an obscure corner of scholarship today had he not taken the time to pen a brief sketch of his conception of "proper" English grammar in 1762. A few decades later, the American Lindley Murray produced an even more influential knock-off of Lowth's book, which has us continuing, two centuries later and counting, to judge clear and elegant standard English constructions wrong. This little book, *English Grammar*, published in 1794, was a big hit here and in England (where Murray had written it after relocating), was endlessly reissued into the twentieth century, and was one of the main direct sources of schoolroom teachings about "correct" English. As a result, Anglophones today have a deep-seated ambivalence about ordinary speech that would perplex speakers of many other languages.

Yet the fact is that neither of these men were exactly experts on language. To be sure, this was because at the time nobody was. Linguistic science as we know it did not exist in the 1700s. Only near the end of that century did it even become widely known that the Romance languages, the Germanic languages, and the Slavic languages had a common ancestor; esteemed German philosophers had soberly asserted that German had been spoken in the Garden of Eden; dialects were discussed mostly off the record like gossip; and creole languages were largely unknown except to the missionaries who were learning them in a few colonies.

It is not surprising, then, that Lowth and Murray labored under the common illusions that a language ought be a static, unchanging system; that language change can only be decay; and that as a result, it is possible for people's speech to be "illogical" and "incorrect." Indeed, these assumptions underlay almost every point these men made in their little books.

In view of what we now know about linguistics, however, *English Grammar* is valuable only as a historical curio, rather like an ancient map with blobby, approximate renderings of the continents and sea serpents bobbing in the oceans. You access it on microfilm at university libraries and chuckle. Yet this little antique still has happy kids being told today

that *Billy and me went to the store*, which falls out of all of our mouths as easily as *Good morning*, is wrong.

One thing that made these traps especially enticing for scholars of Lowth and Murray's day was that the Renaissance had drawn reverent attention to Classical Latin and Ancient Greek. As languages of towering civilizations, and vehicles of endless works of profound intellect and creative inspiration, Latin and Ancient Greek naturally came to seem inherently "noble" languages themselves. Reinforcing this was that we largely encounter these languages in their "Polaroid" forms—written, and in their standard varieties. Thus the way was open to the pleasant but treacherous notion that this was what Latin and Greek had really been like on the ground—word meanings, endings, and sentence structures solid as a rock despite centuries of vigorous usage by human beings.

Thus Lowth and Murray's books were founded on the idea that Latin and Ancient Greek had been inherently ideal languages, that the "best" English should follow their grammar, and that to the extent that English did not, it was "straying" from a somehow divinely anointed template. In other words, they not only made the mistake of treating fluent, nuanced, and systematic speech as degraded, but went even further in considering the abused source to be not a hypothetical "original English," but a Latin pattern. Lowth's book even had a long quote from Cicero in Latin on its cover.

The problem here is that English is not Latin and did not even develop from Latin; as a Germanic language, its ancestor was a now-lost language similar to Gothic. As we have seen, it doesn't even make sense to criticize Latin's actual descendants, the Romance languages, as straying from Latin rather than just changing as all speech does—Dante did not write in "crummy" Latin. Certainly, then, it does not follow to criticize English as flouting the rules of a language it developed wholly separately from.

Yet this is exactly what Lowth and Murray did. They are the source of two of the most famous grammar "rules." The first is that we should not end sentences with a preposition, i.e., that *I don't know what to do it with* is linguistic slumming, and that the "real," "best" way of putting it would be *I don't know with what to do it*. The very awkwardness of this "proper" version is our first clue that something is up here. How often have you reworded something you were writing to avoid "dangling" a

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preposition? And yet, brushing away the eraser dust or backtracking on the word processor, did you ever wonder just why this is supposedly such a peccadillo? We are sometimes told that it is because *preposition* inherently means pre-position, and that thus prepositions should be placed pre- something. Yet why is it that we can only apply this rule under the pain of sounding like Martians?

This notion is due to nothing more or less than the fact that the naked emperors observed that Latin did not place prepositions at the end of its sentences and decided that therefore English shouldn't either, despite the fact that every English speaker did and does this about once in every minute of speech. In a supreme irony, Lowth himself breaks the rule in explaining it, complaining, "This is an idiom, which our language is strongly inclined to"!

The fact that English speakers are so "inclined to" putting prepositions at the end of a sentence is because, quite simply, it is an English rule, just as we are so inclined to put *the* before *girl* and not after. There is no celestial approbation for keeping prepositions before anything—indeed, the very naming of little words of position and relationship *prepositions* is based on Latin structure. In a great many of the world's languages, the same types of words always come after the noun (remember Ewe: *xo-me* "house-inside" "in the house").

It is not hard to empathize with how Lowth and Murray must have seen this. They were living at a time when English was still new at the business of being an international language, when only a few centuries before it had been only the fitfully written tongue of the just-folks stratum of an island society where French was king. A century before, for example, a John Wallis had written a grammar of English in Latin—*Grammaticae Linguae Anglicanae*—this still being the norm for serious publications. In other words, men like Lowth and Murray labored under the echoes of a linguistic inferiority complex, within which an appeal to the structure of Latin had a certain authoritative ring—rather like the classic relationship between new and old money. But we are long beyond this today—in writing a business report, are we really supposed to craft our sentences according to the syntax of—Cicero?

The same goes for the odd little idea that we are not supposed to place words between *to* and a verb, the famous "split infinitive." This renders sentences like *I wanted to carefully explain to her why the decision was made* "less desirable" than *I wanted to explain to her carefully why the*

decision was made. In fact, a case can be made for the second sentence not getting the thought across as well as the first, which in placing *carefully* next to *explain*, communicates the intended care in explanation cleanly and immediately. In fact, the notion of split infinitive is also based on an attempt to make English structure conform to that of Latin. In Latin, infinitives were never split for the simple reason that they were one word, as in most languages—thus "to speak" was simply *loquere*, "to love" was *amare*. You could no more split an infinitive in Latin than you can split an adjective in English. However, to impose this rule on English makes about as much sense as issuing an edict that pianos will only be played with one finger at a time in order to conform more closely to the lovely sound of the flute.

A simple comparison makes this clear: *A boy* in Latin was *puer*, since Latin had no indefinite articles. Does this mean that *a good boy* is a split nominative? Where is this in Murray's book? Obviously, because no degree of Latin worship could make people even begin to say "good a boy," Lowth and Murray could only get away with imposing rules that created at least superficially plausible English. Yet much of this English is, if not utterly beyond conception like *good a boy*, then just awkward—*I don't know with what to do it, I wanted to explain to her carefully why the decision was made*. Obviously, *good a boy* is just an extreme at the end of a continuum of varying degrees of nonsense.

When it comes to these two "rules," people of letters and the general public alike have always maintained a certain quiet resistance, though at least paying them lip service on occasion. Even among works agreed to represent the "best" English written, it would be difficult to find one without a number of dangling prepositions and split infinitives. Meanwhile, it is safe to say that these things play only a small role in most English speakers' linguistic insecurities, even though many look to the application of these rules as a sort of ideal always out of reach. Many of us are familiar with the anecdote that has Winston Churchill responding to an assistant's correction of a dangling preposition in one of his manuscripts by huffing that "this is the sort of English up with which I shall not put," which forces even someone insisting on the rule to concede its hopeless inapplicability in many instances. Similarly, a great many writers and learned people have summarily dismissed the split infinitive rule over the years.

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This kind of resistance has led some prescriptivists to charge that their linguist critics are beating a dead horse, and that the prescriptive rules that people pay most attention to today are concerned with issues of genuine logic and clarity. It is true that some of these rules have more sway today than others. (I, for example, do not recall ever being taught about split infinitives.) For one thing, however, even to the extent that modern style manuals urge us to *avoid* dangling prepositions or split infinitives "when possible," they are cluttering our lives needlessly, because these rules have no justification whatsoever, and their application may even tarnish aesthetics and obscure logic. Imagine a doctor telling us to inhale twice and exhale twice "whenever possible"—this would serve the exact same purpose as avoiding preposition dangling and split infinitives.

More importantly, however, some of these rules have a much more dominant influence. The worst of them are the ones attempting to shoehorn English pronouns into Latin behavior.

One of these pronoun rules is the one stipulating that it is wrong to say, "It's me," and that actually we should say "It is I," the justification being that "the verb 'to be' takes a nominative pronoun." Blissfully, this rule is an example of the fact that some of the prescriptivist fiats have more pull than others: Observing this rule makes one a cartoon character—to even the starchiest, most heavily perfumed individual, standing at a door and piping "It is I!" would be almost as inconceivable as saying to one's dog, "That's good a boy!" (Actually, one can imagine Hyacinth in the British sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances* pulling "It is I!," but this only supports the point!)

The reason both utterances are comedy is because neither are rules of English: "The verb 'to be' takes a nominative pronoun" sounds so out-of-the-blue to us because it is a rule not of English but of Latin, where one would indeed say *sum ego* "it is I," with the nominative pronoun *ego*. In Ancient Rome, it would have been *sum me* "it is me," with the accusative pronoun, which would have elicited the whoops. Yet because *It is I* could get one locked up, few people have ever bothered to apply this rule—although many have labored under the idea that they are therefore eternally flouting a rule off somewhere, when in fact they were doing nothing but speaking their own complex and sensitive language.

This misconception of how English pronouns work is also behind what is seen as one of today's most widespread "mistakes," the sentence type *Billy and me went to the store*. From an early age, we are told by relatives and teachers that this is "wrong" because the pronoun should be a subject pronoun, being, after all, part of the subject of the sentence. "Who went to the store? Billy went, and, well, you don't say 'Me went,' do you? Well, then, it should be 'Billy and I went to the store,' shouldn't it?"

The question that arises here is why, if this makes so much sense, does *Billy and me went to the store* feel so natural to us? To be sure, many of us have probably internalized the correction *Billy and I went to the store* so thoroughly that we don't have to think much about it anymore. However, we learned this secondarily, as we learn new languages. No child starts out by saying *Billy and I went to the store*, which is why we all had to be corrected into it, and very few of us could claim to never say *Billy and me went to the store*, especially at off-guard times among family and friends, after a drink, early in the morning, late at night. One might object that no matter how prevalent it is, *Billy and me went to the store* is still a mistake of "logic," and that we cannot always excuse something based on its prevalence (adultery and tax fraud coming to mind).

In this case, however, we are once again dealing with an attempt to apply Latin grammatical rules to a different language.

Latin had various forms of a pronoun according to its case. Thus *I* was *ego*: *ego amo* "I love." The object form, however, was *me*, as in *Petrus amat me* "Peter loves me"; the dative form was *mihi*, as in *Petrus dat librum mihi* "Peter gives the book to me"; the ablative form (comprising a grab bag of assorted prepositional concepts) was *meo*, as in *factus meo* "done by me." English, however, arranges things differently. English has only two forms of most pronouns, a subject form and what is called an oblique form. For example, the first person singular subject pronoun is *I*. Now, one can pretend that English is Latin and say that it has a "dative form" *to me*, an object form *me*, and an "ablative form" *by me*, etc. However, as we can see, when all is said and done, English has only one other first person singular pronoun besides *I*, and that is *me*—*to me* is not a pronoun, it's a preposition *plus* a pronoun. Thus we can combine *me* with various prepositions in order to express "dativeness" (*to me*) or "ablativeness" (*by me*), but there is only one pronoun form per

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se in all such constructions, *me*. In a language like English, this other form is called the *oblique*—oblique pronouns occur everywhere the subject pronoun does not. Thus where Latin, like many languages, juggled subject, object, dative, and ablative pronouns, English, like many languages, juggles just two, the subject and the oblique. These are different but equally systematic divisions of labor, just as baboon packs have a pyramidal social hierarchy while lovebirds travel in pairs.

What is important is that in many subject/oblique languages, the subject form *I* gets an even smaller slice of the pie than we would already expect because the oblique form is even used in many places where the subject pronoun would be in Latin. The subject form is used in ordinary sentences like *I have a cat in my lap* or *I am hungry*. However, in other subject positions, English lets the oblique form do the job, and *Billy and me went to the store* is a prime example.

Now, some might quite reasonably suspect me of constructing an after-the-fact apology for laziness here, couching frayed logic in cute terminology. However, we will see that this isn't true by looking at what would happen if we really did try to make English obey the Latin rules.

For example, we are told that if *I* is the subject, then we must use the subject form. If so, then, let's try this: someone asks who built a massive card house, and it was you who built it. They ask "Who made this?" Your answer? Well, since you are the subject—i.e., you made it—shouldn't your answer be "I"? Obviously, you would say "Me." This is because in English, when the pronoun occurs alone, the oblique form must be used, even if it is a subject. This is a systematic operation in English, not just a random "exception." Notice that if the guy across the street made the card house, then you would answer not "He!" but "Him"; if it was his sister, "Her!", not "She!"; if you and your friend, "Us!", not "We!"; if it was some other people, "Them!", not "They!".

The *Billy and me* case is also based on a systematic rule of this kind, specifically that the oblique is also used to express a subject not just after *and*, but after all members of the particular group of words *and* belongs to, conjunctions, such as *and*, *or*, and *but*. For example, which one is better, *Everybody but I went to the store* or *Everybody but me went to the store*? The first sentence is a little off—you are tempted to set off the *I went to the store* from the *Everybody but*, only to have to go back and put it all back together, and it also sounds remote and stiff. More to the point, chances are your Aunt Lucy has never even corrected you for this one,

which is evidence of the fundamental arbitrariness of the obsessive concern with the *and* version. Note also how awful this can be with *or*: *Who should do it? Billy or we?* Finally, there are ways in which observing the Latin rule backs us into a corner even with *and* itself. Many of us "get around" the *Billy and I* issue by saying "Me and Billy went to the store." Yet note that this is considered getting around despite the fact that it, too, breaks our supposed rule—shouldn't it be *I and Billy*? Yet no one says this, nor does anyone seem to have any problem with *Me and Billy went to the store*. As we see, the focus on the one sentence type *Billy and me went to the store* is vastly arbitrary, forcing us to pay attention to a mythical rule that even the most prescriptive speakers break hundreds of times a day in other constructions.

The tragedy of this hopeless little nonrule is that it is so counterintuitive that most of us misapply it (to the extent that one can misapply a rule based on nothing), thereby producing sentences that are neither good English nor good prescriptive grammar. We are told that *Billy and I went to the store* is proper because *I* is a subject. However, this goes against our internal sense of when to use a subject pronoun in English, which we have learned based on everyday patterns like *Who did it? Me!* and *Everybody but me tried it*. Thus what usually sticks in our minds is a vague sense that "*I* should be used after *and*," and this leads to the common phrase *between you and I*, as in *Between you and I, we really ought to check in on her*. The problem here is that *I* is not a subject in this case, and thus this is wrong according to the prescriptive rule—and yet as we have seen, neither is it real English. The same goes for equivalent usages like *more fun than with just you and I* and *just like you and I*.

English simply operates according to a different rule than Latin when it comes to pronouns. No matter how much we might like English to use its subject pronoun form in every subject position, it just doesn't, and to make it do so creates sentences that basically aren't any language we recognize. Of course, Latin isn't the only language that is tidy about matching subject forms to subject position. When I was a teenager learning Spanish, for instance, I remember noticing on *Sesame Street* that when they presented a Spanish version of a song that had been called "Me" in English, it was called "Yo," the subject form, rather than the object form "Me."

More to the point, however, plenty of languages restrict their subject pronouns the way English does, another being none other than

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French, whose speakers are certainly under no illusion that their language is in any way wrong even in its little wrinkles. English speakers could learn a lot from the French on this score. For example, just as we have *Who did it? Me!*, the French would be *Qui l'a fait? Moi!* Miss Piggy certainly doesn't sashay around proclaiming *Je!*, which sounds awful even to someone with just a few months of French. Just as English has *Billy and me went to the store*, French has *Guillaume et* ***moi*** *sommes allés au magasin*, not *Guillaume et* ***je*** *sommes allés*, up with which being told was "correct" no French person would put!

LANGUAGE CHANGE: NOT IN MY BACKYARD

In presuming that language patterns used by millions of people for centuries could somehow be glitches in need of repair, men like Lowth and Murray had the same misimpression of English as compared with Latin that we often have of nonstandard dialects compared with standard ones. However, the comparison with classical languages was only one source of their misconceptions. In other cases, what created the impression of "incorrectness" was not a failure to be Latin but simply change over time, which we generally don't mind as long as we don't experience it directly.

The prime example of this is the preservation of *whom* as the object form of *who*, as in *Whom did you see?* Prescriptivists depict *whom* as a part of English that its speakers are somehow too lazy to use. Indeed, *whom* is so foreign to how the rest of English works that it is not learned spontaneously as most of the language is, but must be carefully, consciously mastered. As we have seen, the reason for this is not that certain features of a language somehow bring out the inner slob in all of us, but that *whom* is a lone relic of an earlier stage of English within which *whom* was but one part of a whole pattern that any child had mastered by the age of five. In Old English, as in Latin, all nouns and pronouns, including nitty-gritty words like *who*, *what*, and *whom*, occurred in different forms according to how they were used in the sentence—object, dative, etc. If English were still this kind of language, then children would pick up *whom* along with the object-marked forms of all the other pronouns like *which* and *who*, just as a Russian child does today. However, in English we only retain such distinctions in our

pronouns, and even then not in all of them (*you* has only one form). The lingering object form of this one word *who* simply does not "compute" as we learn to speak English because it does not fit into our modern system. It's as if we had been told to keep the Old English first person singular ending *-o* on just the verb *see*, with *I see* being seen as the lazy form and *I seeo* as the proper one. Since this ending would have long been dropped from every other verb in the language that once took it, anyone learning English would assume that there was no ending on first-person singular verb forms. We can be sure everyone would be walking around saying *I see*—and yet feeling that this somehow marked them as a bit of a philistine.

Indeed, the very randomness of *whom* gives one pause. It is completely a matter of chance that it was the *object* form—as opposed to some other form—of *who*—rather than any number of other words—which happened to be hanging around when a few self-appointed grammarians caught English on a slide and artificially froze it in time. If we could roll the tape again, it could have been the *dative*-marked form of *who*, *hwam*, or the genitive-marked form of *that*, *tham*, that happened to hang on a little longer than everything else and got put on life support instead. Ultimately, then, *whom* is as anomalous in today's language as we immediately intuit *hwam* and *tham* to be. Preserving *whom* is rather like a whale insisting on spending an agonizing five minutes on shore once a day simply because its ancestors were terrestrial.

Once we realize that language is a lava lamp, many of the things we consider wrong in casual speech become just a language going about its usual business. For example, we are often told that *Everyone told their mother* is "wrong," because *everyone* means "each one," and therefore is singular, such that the sentence "should" be *Everyone told his mother*. Indeed, as we can see from the make-up of *everyone*, it did originally mean "each one." However, over time it has come to have a plural meaning in the minds of speakers of English. It is tempting to see this kind of change as lazy, drifting as it does with no particular goal. However, it would seem much less objectionable to us if we could see how just about every feature of the language has this kind of change in its history. *Everyone* just happens to wear its history on its sleeve, its original parts *every* and *one* having happened to escape the gradual sound changes that hide most of this kind of thing in a language. If

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everyone really should still be treated as if it meant "each one," then why shouldn't we use *would* as the past tense of *want*, since this is exactly what it once was? Today, *would* is only used to form the conditional (*He would sleep if he could*), but it began in the meaning of *wanted* (*He would sleep yesterday but the lightning kept him awake*).

Changes like this are always taking place right under our noses. For example, what would you say the past tense of *sneak* is? Most people today would say *snuck* and giggle a bit or pull a face—we all have a sense that *snuck* is somehow a tad creative, and indeed it only appeared in the 1800s, before which the form was *sneaked*. In speech, *snuck* is nevertheless more popular every decade and has long overtaken *sneaked*, which is now used more in writing than speech. This is a classic example of a change in progress: we feel a little funny about the new form being prevalent in speech, while we revert to the less spontaneous form, which we nevertheless sense as "correct," in writing and formal speech. Yet *snuck* is even creeping into formal writing, and *sneaked* will almost definitely be history within another hundred years or so. There are experts in English usage who consider *snuck* "wrong," but if snuck is wrong because it did not used to exist, then giraffes are wrong because they once didn't exist. The so-called panel experts who put themselves on record in dictionaries and style manuals as "not liking" things like *snuck* simply lack historical perspective, and are setting themselves up as the snicker-evoking object lessons of tomorrow. For example, who would argue with *dug* today? Surely this is the Queen's English, and yet as late as the 1600s, *digged* was the more common form and *dug* was the upstart (Shakespeare himself wrote *digg'd*, although he delighted in casual speech enough to have it pronounced as we do rather than what was regarded as the proper pronunciation at the time, "dig-id").

There is one modern expression that impishly forces us to accept change whether we like it or not, *whole nother*, as in *That's a whole nother issue*. That little turn of phrase looks odd in print, doesn't it? And yet almost all of us say it all the time. (I certainly use it, and have had one person who denied using it come back and tell me that they caught themselves saying it.) The reason we all say it is because there is really, if you think about it, no correct form that this comes from—in other words, what is *whole nother* a sloppy version of? How would you "fix" it? *That's a whole another issue* is impossible, and *That's a whole other issue* sounds like something is missing—namely, the *n*! Basically, in this case,

whole and *another* have fallen into each other's arms in a mad little mess and have given us a useful expression. Of course, one could get around this by saying "That's a different issue entirely," but imagine saying this on your sofa over a beer talking about boxing, the neighbor who has eyes for you, or fried chicken. It's sterile and stuffy, the sort of thing that people in language arts textbook sentences seem to walk around saying.

"But *whole nother* can't be right because there's no such thing as *nother*," one might object. To which the answer is, there is now! After all, for a long time, there was no such thing as an apron—light work garments were called naprons. Saying *a napron* often, people gradually took the initial *n* of the word as part of the preceding indefinite article, and thus a new word was born. Similarly, nicknames used to be ekenames. *Nother* joins elite company. Language is a lava lamp. There is no frozen system next to which new things are wrong—new things are as inherent to language as flow is to a stream. If we plug in the lava lamp, and the clump doesn't move, then it's broken—in the same way, the only languages linguists have found that aren't changing are the ones which have been nosed out by another language (often English), are no longer spoken by people fluently, and will be extinct in a few decades. Along these lines, it is no surprise that an example of *whole nother* in writing was recently brought to my attention (*The Hollywood Reporter*, August 5, 1997, p. 16), in a report that was fairly breezy in tone, but was by no means self-consciously imitating casual speech.

One thing that makes language change difficult for many people to accept in their own lifetimes is a sense that a given change gums up the works, creating constructions that are somehow unclear or illogical. However, usually, the supposed problem would never have occurred to us independently and can only be made clear through decidedly athletic readings of the offending sentence. At close hand, the claims about lack of clarity and logic almost always turn out to be based on blinkered ideas about how language works.

A good example of this is the claim that the use of adverbs such as *hopefully* in sentences like *Hopefully she will arrive before sundown* are incorrect. It may be hard for many readers to believe, but as natural as it sounds to us, this usage has only been common for the past few decades. It has attracted a great deal of criticism on the grounds that *hopefully*, as an adverb, modifies the verb *arrive*, and that therefore the sentence above actually means that she will arrive with hope in her

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heart. We are advised to say *It is to be hoped that she will arrive* to convey what we thought we meant with *Hopefully, she will arrive.*

This idea takes as a given that adverbs will only serve in their canonical, grade-school function of modifying verbs and adjectives, as in *She did it quickly* and *The play was fabulously entertaining*. This conception of the adverb, straight from the "Lolly-Lolly-Lolly" installment of the *Schoolhouse Rock* television shorts, is a nice start, but only that when it comes to how adverbs are really used in English (and other languages). In fact, there is a whole class of adverbs that convey an attitude about a proposition rather than modifying a single verb. The problem with the complaints about *hopefully* is that no one has ever had any problem with these other adverbs, of which *hopefully* is simply a new example.

Certainly she will arrive before sundown. According to the supposed problem with *hopefully*, what this sentence "means" is that she will come through the doors with a firm expression of conviction on her face as the sun sets behind her—but surely in this case, no one would ever mean something this odd by the sentence. The "incorrect" meaning is in fact the only one any sane person could intend. *Admittedly* is similar. If we say "Admittedly she missed the train more than once," do we really mean that she missed the train in an "admitted" manner? What precisely would that even mean? It gets worse. Suppose we say, "Admittedly, the meeting could have been shorter." In what universe can anyone or anything be in an "admitted" state? Does this sentence mean that the meeting's period of existing in an "admitted" fashion, whatever this would mean, could have been briefer?

Thus if adverbs can only modify verbs and adjectives, then exactly what have words like *certainly* and *admittedly* been doing in English all these centuries, and why can't *hopefully* join them? In this context, we can dismiss the idea that *hopefully* is illogical or unclear. Like the idea that double negatives equal a positive, the supposedly dire confusion that the new use of *hopefully* creates is something that has to be carefully explained to us. *Hopefully, he will do it soon* is crystal clear in its meaning—none of us get a picture of a man doing something with an expression of blissful hope on his face.

The simple fact is that languages do not allow genuine unclear usages to become prevalent. Linguists have discovered that languages, like certain ovens, are self-cleaning, and tend to nicely fix up any true

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impediments to comprehension that language change occasionally accidentally creates. For example, those of you who are fond of old novels are probably familiar with the queer old word *wont*, used as in *She was wont to do such things*, meaning she had a tendency to do such things. This word is no longer a vital part of the spoken language, and the reason for this is that it is virtually impossible to utter it without creating a confusion with *want*, especially because its meaning even encroaches a bit on *want*. *She was wont to do such things* sounds rather like an odd misuse of *want*—"She was wanting to do such things."

Spelling gives us a clue as to why this ambiguity ever arose in the first place. The reason English spelling is such a nightmare is because it is based on a language that no longer exists, specifically Middle English of the mid-1400s. At that time, as the spelling tips us off to, *wont* was pronounced like today's *won't*, while *want* sounded similar to its modern version. In fact, *wont* came from a different root than *want*; namely an old verb *wonen*, meaning "to be accustomed to." However, in the 1400s English vowels underwent a profound transition, and the same current that transformed the pronunciation of *pot* from the original "pote" to today's "paht" made *wont* sound like *want*. Since the language can't have both of these words when their meanings are so closely related, and *want* is obviously the more indispensable of the two, *wont* has been put in the attic.

Along these lines, English would not allow adverbs like *hopefully* to apply to whole propositions if doing this really left us momentarily adrift imagining the subject of the sentence bursting with joyous expectation. The quibbles about *hopefully* are quite simply a false issue, proceeding upon a *Schoolhouse Rock*-level conception of how language works. As delightful as those little TV segments were (how come nobody ever seems to remember the adjective one, my favorite?), they were not the whole story. All warnings about *hopefully* should be stricken from style manuals—like ending sentences with prepositions, splitting infinitives, and *whom*, this one is not even worth avoiding "when possible."

A final "rule of grammar" we all supposedly run around breaking is the constraints on the use of *shall*. Here is what the latest edition of the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (p. 1657) tells us:

> In the first person, *shall* is used to indicate simple futurity: *I shall not have to buy another ticket*. In the second and third persons, it is expressed by *will*: *The comet will* (not *shall*) *return in 87 years. You will* (not *shall*) *probably encounter some heavy seas when you round the point*. The use of *will* in the first person and of *shall* in the second and third may express determination, promise, obligation, or permission, depending on the context. Thus *I will leave tomorrow* indicates that the speaker is determined to leave; *You and she shall leave tomorrow* is likely to be interpreted as a command. The sentence *You shall have your money* expresses a promise ("I will see that you get your money"), whereas *You will have your money* makes a simple prediction.

As Warner Brothers cartoon characters often used to say, "Uh—yeah."

What kind of rules are these? Are we really expected to believe that an arbitrary splotch of persnickety specifications like these arose naturally among people busily chopping potatoes, getting married, burping babies, training animals, catching colds, and dropping dead? Don't all these little directives sound more like something somebody came up with while sitting in their study late at night without much else to do? In fact, that is just where they came from: A certain John Wallis cooked this one up in 1653 in one of the earliest outlines of English "grammar," the *Grammaticae Linguae Anglicanae* mentioned earlier. Simple as that.

In other words, any insecurities we have about *shall* are based on our being accused not just of daring to allow our language to change, but in this case, of allowing a change from an original state that never existed! In other words, the reason we have to be carefully taught these "rules" for *shall* is not because English speakers have strayed from them over time. On the contrary, there has never been a time when English speakers *ever* observed these rules. Unlike "Don't dangle prepositions" and "Don't split infinitives," these rules about *shall* are not even based on Latin or Greek, just the prim, autocratic little caprice of a guy wearing stockings 350 years ago. Lowth picked this *shall* nonsense up, and the rest is history. In real life, *will* has long been preferred to *shall* in the English-speaking world outside of England, except for set, rather stiff expressions such as *Shall we go?* But even the British never used *shall* according to these baroque rules, and today even England is slowly giving it up altogether. As with all of these rules, the *shall* rule is indefensible on grounds of clarity—we are perfectly capable of convey-

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ing a note of obligation or permission with intonation and context, something most writing-based accounts tend to ignore. If we mean *You and she will leave tomorrow* to convey an implicit command, melody gets this across beautifully by putting some emphasis on *will*. In fact, the actual difference between the simple future meaning of this sentence and one conveying an air of "you'd better or else" is accomplished in real life with contraction—to say "You'll leave tomorrow" means that tomorrow you will be on your way; to say "You will leave tomorrow" with no contraction immediately pricks up the addressee's ears to the fact that not just the future, but a certain desire as to what will occur in the future, is intended.

KNOCKS AND DINGS: LANGUAGE'S MARKS OF CHARACTER

However, things do arise in languages that can be seen as illogical in the strict sense. For example, I often hear people saying something like "You have to work up to it gradually—you just can't walk in and ask her!" I openly admit that to me, this sounds like "a mistake." What a person means by this sentence is that you can't simply walk in, not that you simply can't, and my sense of how it "should" be is that *just*, since it means "simply," should come before *walk*, not *can't*.

However, I have not submitted this as a complaint to some column, nor would I ever mention this to students as "bad language." In the strict sense, unlike *hopefully* and the disappearance of *whom*, it isn't logical. Crucially, however, it creates no barrier to understanding. In the context in which it pops up, the chance of a person meaning "you simply *can't*" would be too slight to consider. In general, in all languages all the time, little things pop up that flout the rules of the internal system. This is not a sign that the waters are slowly eating through the dam. Because hundreds of other constructions in the language continue to follow the system, the system remains intact, just as the Internal Revenue System functions despite the eternal existence of tax evasion. In the meantime, the expectations created by the system, plus simple context, ensure that even the little rule-breaking expression is easily understood.

Thus railing against things like my *just can't* would be like waxing indignant over a dog with one brown eye and one blue—external things that clearly are not perfect but are irrelevant to the quality of the soul. Just as we learn to revel in nature's imperfections, we should revel in language's—not because there is something cute about "dings," but because these things do no harm, and, in any case, we are powerless to stop them.

Some of us, compelled by idealism, might propose that we try to eradicate as much of this sort of thing as possible. If we were dealing with a mere handful of things, I might agree myself. However, it must be understood that such things are by no means a marginal phenomenon—all languages are just dripping with them. For every single construction that attracts someone's attention, there are three others that we never even notice unless they are pointed out.

For example, we say "I am not," but then we say "Aren't I?" in the next breath though we would never say "I are not." Obviously this makes no sense, but when is the last time Aunt Lucy beat you about the head about this one? What benighted soul runs around saying, "Amn't I?"

As Latin has noun endings for things like the accusative (*Petrus videt puer-**um*** "Peter sees the boy"), Russian has an instrumental ending meaning "with, by means of": *Ja pishu karandash-**om*** "I write with a pencil." Russian usually has no verb "to be" in the present; however, it does in other tenses. When a person comes after a verb "to be" in, for example, the past tense, they are given this instrumental ending. For example, *Sascha byl profesor-**om*** "Sascha was a professor." Clearly, this makes no blessed "sense"—the sentence does not mean "Sascha existed by means of a professor" or anything of the sort. However, this is the only way to say such things in Russian—to leave off the ending would be downright wrong and mark you a foreigner. It arose through a gradual series of changes and reinterpretations that transformed the notion of "by means of" into "in the capacity of," any number of which could have been considered wrong at the time. Even today, in a technical sense, it certainly is "wrong." But neither this nor the hundreds of other senseless little exceptions in Russian detract from its grandeur—think of it as a linguistic equivalent to the famous birthmark on Gorbachev's forehead. In any case, the notion of Chekhov being told that

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his language was wrong because the verb *to be* should take the nominative as it did in Latin is worth a one-act play at least.

In general, one of the greatest challenges to learning any foreign language is dealing with the irregularities. No spoken language lacks them except Esperanto, which was made up—and we can be sure that if Esperanto were spoken by a substantial community for centuries running, then it would quickly develop them. Yet we do not curse the languages we learn for being full of mistakes.

What it comes down to is that treating little wrinkles like *just can't* as problems is like popping bubbles in a pot of boiling water. For each bubble you pop, a dozen new ones appear right then, and nothing we did could stop the roiling process generating the bubbles in the first place—and in the long run, what's wrong with the bubbles? They harm no one and, actually, they're rather pretty.

It is also useful to realize that even a language's vocabulary is always full of innumerable little holes that we never notice because the original words are long gone or changed into something else. If someone can be *ruthless*, then wouldn't it be nice to have a word *ruth*? *Despite his pleas, she showed him no ruth.* Big dictionaries actually list this word, but it is obviously not an active part of anyone's spoken, or usually passive, vocabulary. *Ruth* is gone, replaced by the French import *mercy*. Yet the language is hardly crippled. And where is the opposite of *disheveled*? Where is *sheveled*? If we want to describe someone as "sheveled," we generally say something like "You know, 'put together'," which we sense doesn't hit the mark precisely, and thus accompany with a bit of pantomime involving smoothing out our clothes and adopting a ramrod posture, along with chirpy little grunts implying "nice and tidy." Yet the world turns. More to the point, there is no such thing as a language without little holes like this, called *lexical gaps*. They are not signs that English itself is for some reason being worn down to a nub. For French speakers, try saying, "The way I parked the car, it was sticking out into the road," directly expressing the specific concept of the sticking out rather than rephrasing it as "I parked wrong." It's just impossible—of course the concept can be expressed in French, but not in one concise sentence; generally, a French speaker would say simply that the car was parked badly and accompany it with gestures indicating the sticking out. *C'est la vie*—French remains a glorious tongue. If its

speakers are so sure of this despite its little factory defects, then what exactly is so wrong with English?

All languages are pockmarked with thousands of little flutters like this—lexical gaps, constructions like *aren't I?*, that do not follow from the rules of the language. It's the nature of the beast—there exist no languages without a great many such things. It must be remembered that anything that creates a *real* processing problem, like *wont*, gets flushed, but things that do not become bric-a-brac, and ought be loved as we love our *tchatchkes*. Despite centuries of indignant raving by prescriptivist pundits, these changes have marched happily along—with English at all times remaining the linguistic Stradivarius that it always has been. (Do a PET scan on a Strad and you find hairline cracks and evidence of long-forgotten repairs.)

In other words, this chapter's take-away nugget of linguistic truth is,

Gradual change leads to inconsistencies in all languages, but these do not impede communication.

LINGUISTS AT A CAT SHOW: SCIENCE VERSUS AESTHETICS

I am by no means the first linguist to have pointed out the fallacies in these supposed rules of grammar over the years. One of the first to do this for a popular audience was Robert Hall in a chapter in his fine little book from 1950, *Leave Your Language Alone!*, which furnished the title of this chapter. Some of my more recent favorites are Bill Bryson's observations in *The Mother Tongue*, and Steven Pinker's in *The Language Instinct*.

However, from responses in newspaper columns, magazines, and conversation, I sense that our arguments have often fallen on deaf ears. In particular, many people appear to believe that linguists, in claiming that there are no grounds for designating any common speech patterns wrong, are dismissing any concern for style or clarity in language.

In fact, linguists are by no means impervious to the practical and aesthetic benefits of language used with precision and grace. Our claim is simply that a great deal of what passes for concern about clarity and style actually addresses nonissues. When people ask me whether some