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Arguing About Language

By GARY GUTTING

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Today I'm going to hopefully beg a question which will incentivize the reader to share their views. Yes, I'm writing about English grammar and usage.

Debates about linguistic norms typically set traditionalists against revisionists. The two sides are particularly entrenched because each is rooted in a fundamental truth: the traditionalists are right that the rules are the rules (for instance, pronouns do need to agree in number with their referents), and the revisionists are right that language does change over time (nouns can come to be used as verbs).

The two fundamental truths are reconcilable because language is both our creation and our master. We humans invented and continue to reinvent our language to meet various needs, but language can serve these needs only if, at any given time, we conform to most of what has been already devised. Therefore, although we as an evolving species make language, it is also imposed on each of us individually. There's a sense in which we speak language and a sense in which, in Mallarmé's famous phrase, "language itself speaks."

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As a result, there will always be a tension between sticking to and violating linguistic rules. We can, however, often fruitfully discuss emerging linguistic innovations if we keep in mind three main goals of language use: effective communication, pleasing expression and moral solidarity.

Leif Parsons

Language is, first of all, a tool for saying as well as possible what we intend to say. For this purpose, it makes sense to avail ourselves of all the resources offered by our language at a given time. Traditionalists are on their strongest ground when they are defending against changes that deprive us of useful linguistic tools. So, for example, the slippage that allows "infer" to mean "imply" weakens the valuable distinction between a person's drawing a conclusion and an

argument's requiring one. Similarly, allowing "refute" to mean "deny" obscures the distinction between proving and asserting that a claim is false. And making "beg the question" a mere variant of "raise the question" deprives us of a simple way of distinguishing between asking a question and assuming a particular answer to it.

Granted, even after linguistic evolution has assimilated opposing terms to one another, it is still possible to use our language to make the distinctions they formerly expressed. But resisting the assimilation allows us to learn important logical distinctions merely by learning our language.

Of course, language does eventually change in all sorts of ways, whether from reformist design (for instance, the 18th-century campaign for spelling uniformity), ignorance or sheer inattention. The point, however, is that at any given stage, proper language use promotes a clarity and subtlety of thought that will diminish if certain standards aren't upheld.

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Linguistic change is also often resisted on aesthetic grounds. Some people find split infinitives ("to plainly see"), "verbed" nouns ("let me caveat that") or misspelled words ("supercede") simply ugly. Similarly for verbal tics such as "like" and "uh," or "echoes" that repeat the same word or phrase in close proximity. Conversely, many enjoy the elegance, pithiness or clarity of certain modes of expressions. Aesthetic judgments are personal but not necessarily idiosyncratic, and we may well be able to sensitize others to what we find repellent or attractive. There is room for lively and enlightening discussion, even though the final conclusion may be "de gustibus."

Our attitudes toward language are also important expressions of cultural and ethical loyalties. Knowledge of and respect for established linguistic rules may, for example, express allegiance to our literary tradition. To be careless in how we speak and write can signal that we are ignorant or disdainful of the writers and speakers who helped craft our language. Even worse, we may lose access to parts of that tradition: I know from my own experience that even bright undergraduates often cannot really read the lucid prose of David Hume or John Stuart Mill.

We may also approve or disapprove of neologisms out of sympathy or animus toward groups from which they originate. Recent debates over "how young people talk" — their frequent use of "like," the interrogative "uplift" young women often add to declarative sentences and so forth — have become proxies for disagreements about our hopes and fears for our children. Here too disputes about language have strong moral resonance.

The pure traditionalist and pure revisionist positions are both oblivious to what is at stake in arguments over language. The traditionalists claim they are just asking us to play by the rules of the game; revisionists say they are just asking us to accept the fact

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that language is always changing. But both sides ignore the profound consequences of how we speak.

Language usage is and should be a battleground. Our task is to make the conflict fruitful. To do this, we need to understand what precisely is at issue in any particular dispute. Does a new locution advance or retard our power to express our ideas effectively? Is the issue primarily one of different aesthetic sensibilities? Or is our argument over language rooted in deeper disagreements over who we are and how we should live? Once we understand what is really at stake, we may be able to learn much through arguing about language.

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