

Strength or Weakness: When to Break the (Grammatical) Rules

Mohala Kaliebe

Professor Erin Diaz

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When it comes to the evaluation of the grammatical and syntactical aspects of written language, two perspectives stand apparently opposed. The prescriptivist perspective promotes strict rule-following; the descriptivist, an acceptance of rule breaking as natural language usage and evolution. Yet the diverse nature of written language – in terms of purpose, audience, style, etc. – demands the application of both, with emphasis on one or the other depending upon such distinctions. Although certain situations demand prescriptive grammatical adherence, the effectiveness of technically erroneous communication in colloquial contexts suggests that the successful transfer of meaning outweighs the importance of standard, conventional language usage.

The context in which prescriptivists complain about grammar misuse suggests that the key element of propriety in language usage is not the presence or absence of errors, but the audience and perception of those errors. iFixit CEO Kyle Wiens argues that “grammar is relevant for all companies,” in which words “are a projection of you in your physical absence. And...people judge you” if those words contain grammatical mistakes (Wiens, 2014, p. 103). While Wiens’s metaphor of words as a “projection” of their writer equates writing with identity and underscores the significance of its correctness, the critical words in his argument are in fact “companies” and “judge”. Grammar is not “relevant” to just anyone, but specifically to business organizations – and even then, merely due to the “judge[ment]” of others within that same realm. Admittedly, such judgement greatly impacts perception of a company’s overall skills. Wiens finds that workers of his who “pay attention” to their grammar also pay attention to their jobs,

menial or complex, and argues therefore that “job performance” specifically can be judged through one’s use of standard English (Wiens, 2014, p. 103). Yet Wiens still limits this judgement to the world of “job[s]”. This limitation suggests that the need for good grammar is not universal; rather, only formal, professional communication necessitates such rigidity. Prescriptivist journalist Sue Shellenbarger also argues within professional bounds, quoting a human-resources executive “aghast” at professional letters that “included grammar and style mistakes and were written ‘as if they were speaking to a friend’” (Shellenbarger, 2014, p.106). The balanced conjunction of the letters’ faults establishes “gramm[atical]... mistakes” and a “friend[ly]” tone as equally “[ghastly]”, equating error with informality and suggesting the equivalency of their opposites – formality and perfection. Descriptivist Linton Weeks, as well, associates prescriptivist grammar with formality; “formal, edited prose using the grammatical and orthographic conventions of standard English” exists primarily in the realm of professionally “published works” (Weeks, 2014, p. 117). The repeated association of standard English conventions with formal and professional contexts among both prescriptivist and descriptivist grammarians suggests that informality allows for a degree of language laxness that formality does not.

Within the context of informal communication – conversation, instant messaging, writing on social media platforms – what matters most is not *how* something is said in terms of standard language correctness, but the recipient’s understanding of *what* is being said. Weeks and English professor Connie C. Eble argue that “If clarity of communication is the aim, most prescriptive rules of usage do not really cause misunderstanding... ‘Between you and I’ gets the point across as well as ‘between you and me’” (Weeks, 2014, p. 116). The pronouns “I” and “me”, though intended for different situations, are nevertheless both stand-ins for the same subject: the first

person. As such, the use of either accomplishes the “aim” of referring with “clarity” to the correct subject; the meaning transfers regardless of the “prescriptive rules of usage”. So too can words such as “nauseous” and “nauseated” be feasibly interchanged; despite their prescriptivist differences (making one feel sick versus the feeling of being sick), the fact that both allude to a feeling of illness allows for the reasonable understanding of intended meaning despite technical misuse (Dailey, 2014, p. 114). Copyeditor Colleen Barry claims that “Dictionaries are about words as they’re used, not as they think they should be used” (Dailey, 2014, p. 114). If words can be and are “used” to communicate meaning effectively in informal speech and writing, then a contradiction with how “they should be used” is irrelevant; communication depends on comprehension, not correctness.

Despite the flexibility granted by informality with its focus on understanding rather than precision, certain prescriptive English conventions cannot reasonably be broken. Weeks refers to a “different kind” of writing existing online, distinguished by “the use of ‘U’ to represent ‘you,’ confused homophones such as ‘you’re’ and ‘your’ or ‘it’s’ and ‘its,’ and the use of newish terms like ‘LOL’ for ‘laughing out loud’” (Weeks, 2014, p. 117). Weeks’ list equates the creation of acronyms and abbreviations with grammatical errors of homophone misuse; however, such an equivalence is misleading. While abbreviations and acronyms involve the substitution of a word for a derivation of said word with the *same* meaning – “U” for “you” – an error such as homophone misuse involves the substitution of a word for one of a *different* meaning. Unlike the aforementioned erroneous but ultimately harmless swap of “I” and “me”, homophones such as “it’s” and “its” simply do not have the same meaning; “it is” will never be the same as “that which belongs to it”. As such, errors such as homophone exchange remain incorrect even by descriptivist standards. The practical social communication of myself and my peers – arguably

the most rampant users of the online writing style Weeks refers to – reinforces this stance; though we deliberately use abbreviations, acronyms, and slang, any use of “your” for “you’re” is unintentional and viewed as such. Furthermore, such a mistake sent via text is often rectified with an additional message containing an asterisk attached to the correct word (i.e. a message reading “your beautiful” immediately followed by a message reading “*you’re”). This consistent perception of error and subsequent correction even in the most informal communication underscores the necessity of this prescriptive rule to fulfill the descriptive goal of comprehension. Irrelevant audial similarity aside, the exchange of words with disparate meanings undermines the clarity of communication.

Nevertheless, colloquial communication differs from business communication with the absence of one key factor: impactful judgement. While a grammatical error in a professional setting prompts suspicion of a lack of competence – an inability to pay attention, for example (Wiens, 2014, p. 103) – the same error in a friendly exchange does not. In my social communication experience, even an ever-unacceptable error such as homophone exchange remains conventionally considered a harmless mistake and forgiven. The asterisk correction method must be used only by the perpetrator of the error; for a message’s recipient to correct it would be considered presumptuous. A stark contrast to professional writing, in which written work would conventionally be “edited” by one’s professional peers (Weeks, 2014, p. 117). The presence or absence of judgement, therefore, divides the business and the casual, the prescriptive and the descriptive. Within the casual and descriptive realm, then, the continual substitution of words with others that fulfill the same need underscores the flexibility inherent in language and reminds us of its purpose: communication. That written language can fulfill this purpose despite the violation of grammatical conventions underscores not its weakness, but its strength.

Works Cited

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