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ABSTRACT

This paper, a small part of a larger project which explores the effects of linguistic insecurity on language production, discusses the negative attitudes toward language of some of the present-day "language elite"--those who take pleasure in or earn their livelihood by "Correcting every body else." Linguistic insecurity is, then, the feeling that many Americans have that their use of language is full of errors, unskillful, or gauche. Edwin Newman's attitudes toward contemporary language (basically, that America will be the death of the English language) are summarized. In addition, the results of a study documented in the "Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage" are described. In this study, 136 distinguished consultants on language usage (Isaac Asimov, Charles Kurait, Peter Prescott, and others) took a yes/no stand on questions of usage and commented on their responses. (KS)

LINGUISTIC INSECURITY: THE EFFECT OF ATTITUDES TOWARD LANGUAGE ON LANGUAGE PRODUCTION
FLOWERS OF EVIL

Dennis E. Baron

This paper is a small part of a larger project exploring the effects of linguistic insecurity on language production. This section of the study, called "Flowers of Evil," discusses the negative language attitudes of some of the present-day language elite -- those who take their pleasure in or earn their livelihood by correcting everybody else. The few generalizations that emerge are still quite tentative, and will be until work on the next section dealing with the effects of these and other language attitudes, and optimistically titled "Strange Fruit," is completed.

Linguistic insecurity is the feeling that many if not all Americans have that their language is somehow not quite up to snuff, that it is out of control -- riddled with errors -- or simply unskillful and gauche: the commas, spoken and written, come in all the wrong places. It is a feeling of guilt that is sometimes conscious, often not, and its effects are sometimes trivial, occasionally distressing. It drives ordinary folk being introduced to English teachers to exclaim, "Oh, you're an English teacher? I guess I better watch my grammar." And it drives students in Descriptive Grammar courses to demand that we tell them where to put their commas. It fuels the fire of the University's back-to-basics-in-composition movement and it inflames the defenders of our language against barbarities like chairperson which seem always at the gates. At one extreme it produces hypercorrections that may alter the course of the language; at the other it produces a devastating, though usually temporary, state of silence that inhibits communication between individuals and groups.

Two major forces in our culture operate together to produce linguistic insecurity: the stereotyping of social and geographic dialects, and an educational system based on a doctrine of correctness and purity in language that invariably conflicts with the facts of English usage. Linguistic insecurity may very well be a sociolinguistic universal. Formal language study -- the ascertaining of standards, the writing of grammars, instruction in English for speakers of English -- is often considered a response to the fear of language corruption and decay and the concomitant rise of the middle class. A self-appointed language elite emerges to establish or defend standards and to regulate the language behavior of others. These are the gatekeepers, and their attitudes are sometimes liberal, sometimes conservative, often contradictory, invariably prescriptive. Some have sought to improve the language with borrowed words, others to reform it from them.[1] Addison, arguing against the loss of the unstressed vowel in drown'd, walk'd, and arriv'd, "which has very much disfigured the Tongue, and turn'd [sic] a tenth part of our smoothest Words into so many Clusters of Consonants,"[2] himself "disfigures" turn'd. These experts variously appeal to and reject reason, custom, authority, taste, morality, and their own personal vision. They defend the language by mounting attacks on its speakers. And they do not concern themselves so much with keeping the enemy out -- particularly at the present time -- for they are firmly convinced the barbarians are those already inside. So we find them, sitting at their gates, watching our grammar.

The opinions of the English language elite in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries have been explored in detail by Leonard and others. The situation in the twentieth century offers a new twist, as

the gap widens between the language experts -- the linguists -- and the language elite, who either have no formal linguistic training or reject such training out of hand. Mencken was to some extent an exception, an all-inclusive, nationalistic popularizer attempting for the American language what Whitman thought to do for American poetry. Edwin Newman, who seems to regard himself as being in the Mencken data-collecting tradition, is more representative of contemporary language attitudes. In Strictly Speaking he asks the question, "Will America be the death of English?" and not surprisingly his answer turns out to be yes. Newman clearly believes that our language has become as decayed and impoverished as our natural resources and social institutions. He traces this imagined decay, in part, to the cult of youth, the cult of change, and the war in Vietnam which "conferred a kind of blessing on youth and inexperience and not being in the establishment." He feels this led to "a wholesale breakdown in the enforcement of rules, and in the rules of language more than most.... Correct and relatively conventional language was widely abandoned by those in revolt."[3] In fact, Newman does not cite examples of the language of revolutionaries or the young, but liberally recounts the howlers of conservatives, aristocrats, and the middle aged and middle classed. But the implication is that corruption has come from below, that the linguistic and non-linguistic Watergates were caused by inside agitators.

Newman attacks language he doesn't like by ridiculing it, and some of his examples are amusing: his cake du jour and potatoes o'grattan, remind me of the increasingly common Midwest menu item, roast beef with au jus. But some of his ridicule is poorly directed. A five page list of college presidents whose first, last, and middle names are inter-

changeable, eg, Lloyd Drexell Vincent, makes at best a weak point, since they, like most of us, do not usually choose their own names. Newman also attacks language for being improper, eg, "You may convince that. You may convince of. You may not convince to."[4] (despite a 16th century cite in OED, sense 5a) He also objects to different than, a great infuriator of purists. Interestingly, the cite in Webster's Third for different than is from Nathan Pusey who, among other things, was a college president whose first and last names could not be interchanged. Newman's new book, A Civil Tongue, is not tinged with the bitterness of his earlier work: the general comments on the nature of language are toned down, but still revealing. He reiterates his notion that language is an aspect of human behavior subject to enforcement: "the alternative to a code of conduct is, if not chaos, certainly confusion and embarrassment, and language is conduct."[5] He has retreated from a severe purist stance to one that is enlightened but still despotic. He defines a civil tongue as one "not bogged down in jargon, not puffed up with false dignity." And he personifies its self-correction mechanism as benevolent but firm: "it treats errors in spelling and usage with a decent tolerance but does not take them lightly."[6] In a sweeping gesture, Newman declares himself unopposed to language change, but only because the language is in such bad shape today.[7]

A more representative survey of current attitudes is found in the Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage, edited by William and Mary Morris, with the help of "a panel of 136 distinguished consultants on usage."[8] This panel, similar in idea and composition to the one used for the American Heritage Dictionary, edited by William Morris, votes on such ticklish cases as the acceptability of dangling hopefully, as in "Hopefully the Dodgers will win the doubleheader." The panelists take a yes/no stand on each question, and comment as well. 58% of the panelists disapprove of this

use of hopefully in speech, 76% in writing. (Hopefully is a hot issue in usage, cf. the animated exchange of letters in TLS last summer and the treatment by Newman as well.) Most usage questions are decided in a similarly negative manner, although not surprisingly the panel accepts variation in speech more readily than writing.

It is not this pseudo-democratic arbitration that is most significant about the work. What is more important, at least for this study, is the set of extreme and varied attitudes toward disfavored styles of discourse shown by the editors and panelists, attitudes which contribute to and reinforce the linguistic insecurity of the students in our schools, and of the general public; attitudes which at the same time reveal an incredibly high level of insecurity on the part of the experts themselves.

Positive responses by the panel to questioned forms are usually neutral in tone. Acceptance of hectic in the sense 'characterized by excitement' rather than the original 'flushed, feverish' is accompanied by such straightforward comments as "Yes [I use it this way], and so does everybody else," and "Yes. It really has become generally used in this new sense." Sometimes positive responses are enthusiastic, eg Isaac Asimov's "Sure!" or Robert Sherrill's outburst in reference to defenestrate, "God, yes! We really need that!" And occasionally they reflect some linguistic sophistication: Charles Kuralt says of hectic, "I wasn't even aware of the medical connotations. Words do change in meaning...."

Many of the panelists are confident they live in a perfectible world, one which can have both good grammar and good taste, and they indicate their willingness to work unselfishly toward that goal. Isaac Asimov says, "I'm very proud of knowing the distinction and insist on correcting others freely," and panelist Edwin Newman (unique) says, "I deliver unwelcome lectures

on the subject to colleagues." A very few despair of having the cake or eating it: "Who really tries to correct other people's speech? All we can do is close our eyes and nod" (Peter Prescott, decimate), while those who hold the middle ground temper their zeal by carefully, though somewhat ironically, distinguishing their role from the negative stereotype of the language pedant: "I lack the grammarian's frenzy" (Wouk, dilemma), "I don't think you have to be a purist here; superlatives as comparatives denote illiteracy." (P.S. Prescott, foremost) They affirm the need for vigilance, yet they recognize their power is limited: "this one grew up on me (and the language) while I wasn't watching." (E. Stahr, boast)

Some of the panelists indicate a willingness to have their own language reformed, although none goes as far as Lord Chesterfield did in offering to recognize Samuel Johnson as Dictator of the English language: "I will not only obey him, like an old Roman, as my dictator, but like a modern Roman, I will implicitly believe in him as my pope, and hold him to be infallible while in the chair; but no longer. More than this he cannot well require; for I presume that obedience can never be expected when there is neither terror to enforce, nor interest to invite it."[8]

While the panel regards the misuse of language by others in the traditional manner as general evidence of cultural decay -- "the use of 'gifted,' etc. is one of the reasons America is in such terrible shape today!" "[The use of finalize is] another reason the country is going to hell." -- it sees its own failings quite democratically as evidence of personal, moral decay, and the panelists' comments can acquire a confessional if not always convincing tone: "I fear it is rather sloppy of me;" "Yes, [I use it], slob that I am;" "I'm a hypocrite! I probably use either;" "I count myself a traditionalist -- and am amazed at my in-

consistency;" "I'm afraid my standards are impure and utterly subjective."

The panelists recognize, even celebrate their own fallibility. They often admit to using a form and apologize for that use at the same time. The panel favors by three to one observation of a distinction between _less_, for non-count nouns, and _fewer_ for count nouns. Thomas Fleming says, "It makes me feel guilty to admit [not observing the distinction]," but there is no indication on his part that he cannot live with this guilt. Isaac Asimov indicates he will make an effort to reform: "I do not observe the distinction but I should, now that it has been explained to me." And Francis Robinson even takes the pledge: "[I do not observe the distinction] but I will from now on." Shana Alexander sums up the panel's feeling of personal fallibility explicitly: "one function of these ballots is to spruce up the language habits of your panelists." Perhaps the extreme case is found in John Brooks' comment on dangling _hopefully_, couched in terms of confession and contrition: "to my shame I once wrote it before I learned to hate it." But he tempers the gloom, adding hopefully, "and there may be a lesson in that."

While many of the panelists are happy to put their language under the correction of their colleagues, they are clearly more comfortable when they themselves are the dictators. Their comments on disfavored language may be neutrally phrased: "I would not use it but it does not offend me" (David Schoenbrunn, _thank you much_), but generally they are not as restrained or as analytical as their positive ones. Language offenders are traditionally seen as non-human, or at least physiologically or morally incapable of using language, but ironically the panel's own comments on stigmatized forms may also be nonverbal: "!!" -- or the more emphatic "!!!" -- or they may be vocalized as primitive animalistic or

humanoid responses: "UGH!" "Yeech!" or "PFUI", indicating a reaction that is organic, even genetic, rather than intellectual.

It is traditional to regard disfavored language as ugly. The editors, explaining nonce words, illustrate with glottochronology and lexicostatistics, offering the gratuitous comment, "At least we hope they are nonce words. They are much too ugly to survive." Erich Segal is one of the few panelists who rejects the role of linguaesthetician. In his comment on thank you much, he says, "Are we discussing what is 'beautiful' or what we consider to be 'correct'? I don't think we should adjudicate the beauty or ugliness of a phrase. Our task is tough enough." Segal is no wild-eyed descriptivist, however. Like the other panelists, he clearly feels that truth and beauty are linguistic universals, only beauty is too hard to legislate.

Less traditional are the caustic, mocking, or trivializing responses to certain usage items, particularly those concerning sex reference (a distinct contrast, by the way, to the affirmative editorial stance on sex-neutral language). Many of the panelists simply cannot resist making bad jokes. A question on maintaining distinctions between groom and bridegroom brings the following: "Do anywhere near as many men handle horses as handle brides?" "What is the difference between handling women and horses?" and "Horses, wife, why quibble?" In discussing the term Ms., several panelists say it is useful when marital status is unknown, thereby substituting a pragmatic function for the original, political one, that of removing attention from marital status altogether. Others consider it a sop, unfortunately the fate of much sex-neutralizing language, using it only for those who expect it. It is one thing to bend a word to your own purpose, quite another to trivialize it by ignoring it, as in Rex Stout's

"Certainly (I use it). It means 'manuscript,'" or by punning, as in Pickney Keel's "I find that most ladies prefer Miss or Mrs., not a neat Ms."

In addition to sex, violence plays an important part in the panel's negative responses. Couched in metaphors of evil, there is strong temptation to read their comments literally. Some expressions are seen as acts of violence, eg, "really, raping the language," but more often they stir the panelists to violence of their own: "No! No! Kill! Kill!" At other times, the comments employ metaphors of disease, criminality, and social decay. Bad language has the power of a virus: "it's faintly nauseating," "this is one that makes me physically ill." It draws insult, either direct -- "If someone says 'I feel nauseous' I'll reply, 'You sound it'" -- or indirect -- "I don't know people stupid enough to say this." It is also seen as crime crying out for punishment. Panelists yearn to shift from figurative to real life roles as legislators: "I propose that it be made a federal offense to use fun as an adjective. Twenty years for the first offense, life sentence for second offenders," or judges: "The writer who dreamed up the Winston commercial should be jailed," and "I'd hand out a twenty-year sentence to anyone saying 'emote,'" -- notice we are dealing with felonies, not misdemeanors -- and never mind due process when it comes to capital crimes, as Thomas Fleming says of dangling hopefully, "its adherents should be lynched."

In dealing with language literally too horrible for words, the panelists and editors, with incredible acts of will, exhibit hardcore, oxymoronic knownothingism: "The words grevious and greviously simply do not exist, although they turn up all too often in popular speech," and

"irregardless is not only a non-word...it is wasteful of breath." Anthony Burgess says of alibi, "it can't mean one thing in Latin and law and another in nonlegal English," a sharp contrast to William O. Douglas' approval of the extended use of the term as any 'excuse'. The panelists are simply unaware of the contradictions inherent in statements combining a vague feeling for language theory and its rejection in favor of moral judgment: "Acceptance as standard usage is, I judge, a matter of time. To use words like 'finalize' is merely to be inelegant and to uglify the language," and they do not hesitate to reject the historical record of the language when it goes against their own sense of what is right, e.g. Herman Wouk's "[gift as a verb] disgusts me, and I'm sorry there's an accidental justification for it in OED." This view of ego triumphant over language is at once the essence and the antithesis of traditional purism.

Despite their often adamant stances, the panelists are aware of the social function of language, and many realize the limits within which their manipulation of other people's language can be effective. In a blatant concession to sociolinguistic reality, the panelists recognize, no doubt unwittingly, a force more powerful than prescriptivism. Many of them read the apparently coordinate "Would you correct a friend or pupil who used [dilemma] in this more generalized application?" as a request to choose A or B and respond by making the distinction: "Pupil yes, friend, no, for I would lose too many of them!" They are sure of their opinions, but only sure enough to flaunt them where they hold the cards.

The gatekeepers of contemporary American usage reveal a curious mixture of hate and fear toward our language and its users (though they are democratic enough to include themselves), a mixture that should prove disconcerting to readers of the Harper Dictionary. Except for a few

cases where absolutes are legislated, the reader is kept off balance by the division of panel opinion. If a majority of the panel is to rule, those desiring to imitate the literate (not the 'lettered' but the 'chosen') must reject not only the stigmatized form but those a priori distinguished literates on the usage panel who backed a loser. If only landslides are decisive, as in the almost universal disapproval of critique as a verb, we are asked to embrace linguistic norms having about as much permanence as their political analogues. While two panelists note that critique f_lls the gap being created as criticize comes more and more to mean 'find fault with,' eleven others openly or implicitly pretend such a shift is not taking place. This state of confusion masquerading as authority can only increase the level of insecurity of many of those consulting the Dictionary, and that can result in an increased rate of hypercorrection which can, in turn, alter the shape of the language, and keep the gatekeepers in business.

It is the ultimate irony of this purported reference work that the editors are sufficiently unaware of the referential quality of language as to be unable to generalize the significance of their own comment on British and French attempts to deal with the problem of Franglais (q.v.): "Nothing, of course, was accomplished by either faction, for the processes of linguistic change are not often much affected by the actions of committees, no matter how earnest they are or how pure their motives."

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Notes

[1]Esther K. Stafford, [illegible]lish Pronunciation According to the Grammarians [illegible]ists of the Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," Unpublished dissertation, University of Wisconsin (1938), p. 5.

[2]Spectator 135, in W.F. Bolton, ed., The English Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 103.

[3]Edwin Newman, Strictly Speaking (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), p. 11.

[4]Newman, p. 32.

[5]Edwin Newman, A Civil Tongue (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), p. 4.

[6]Ibid., p. 6.

[7]Ibid., p. 4.

[8]Morris, William, and Morris, Mary, eds. The Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.