

Prescriptivism and Usage. Spring Quarter 2004. Handout 7.

1. Seventh assignment.

For SIS course, for 19 May, for CSP course, for 17 May: Draw up a manifesto for providing advice to those who seek, or just need, help with their writing. What features of English – be specific – should this advice focus on? Why? Pick some feature and explain how you would provide this advice.

Handout this week: Discussions from the newsgroup soc.motss, from 2/03 on deterioration/progress in language, from 3/04 on the pain of change, plus letters to the NYT in response to Rosenthal's piece on punctuation.

2. The perils of instruction.

2.1. Pronoun case: Nominative (*I, he, we,...*) vs. Accusative (*me, him, us,...*). Note that *Nominative* and *Accusative* are just names for sets of word forms, and could be replaced by *Case 1* and *Case 2* (plus *Case 3* (*my, his, our,...*) and *Case 4* (*mine, his, ours*)). The question is: how do (particular groups of) people use these forms?

Almost all English speakers share at least one principle that concerns the nominative case: (A) Complete subjects in finite clauses are nominative (and not accusative). *I did it. *Me did it. He is coming. *Him is coming.*

Most speakers and writers use the accusative for predicative pronouns (*It's me, honey! Is it him that you're worried about? The winner is her. I want the winner to be her*), and have for a very long time, and this is the system that virtually all children pick up, but there's a prescriptivist rule (based on the situation in Latin) that insists on the nominative here (and won't even tolerate the accusative in informal speech and writing); this rule is normally argued for in only two contexts, identificational sentences with subject *it* (*It's me/I*) and abbreviated answers to information questions (Q: *Who did it?* A: *Me/I.*), disregarding the many other contexts in which predicative pronouns can occur.

Two messy cases: modifier pronouns (*They've always treated us linguists badly*), modified pronouns (*They're always picking on poor/little me*). What happens when these things are subjects?

Other messy cases: *but/like/than* plus pronoun.

2.2. Accusative coordinate subjects: *Me and Kim did it. Sandy and him are coming*. Non-standard but very widespread (and of considerable vintage). Where does this come from?

Principle (B): All occurrences of nominative pronouns are predicted by principle (A). That is, use the nominative for complete subjects of finite clauses, and only there.

For formal standard English, the principle is (C) Pronouns in coordinate structures have the case they would have if standing alone.

2.3. Instruction by exemplar: Don't say *Sandy and him are coming*, say *Sandy and he are coming*. But how is your student supposed to extrapolate from the specific models you provide? What features need to be changed? In what way? On what occasions? (And why? If you don't see a reason for changing your behavior, you're probably not going to invest much interest in the process.) There's plenty of room for creative misunderstanding.

Instruction by rule: (C) as above. But does the rule you cite cover the cases you want it to, and not ones you don't want it to? And will your student be able to understand the rule, with its technical terms and unspoken assumptions about grammar?

2.4. Mischief: (D) No prepositions at the end of a sentence. What counts as a preposition? Particles routinely, but incorrectly, get dragged along with true prepositions. So, sometimes, does stranded infinitival *to*, even though, so far as I know, no prescriptivist warns against it. So people end up avoiding – well, trying to avoid – structures that no one proscribes. (Then there's "at the end of a sentence" ("preposition at end", as MWDEU has it), which leads people to treat stranded prepositions that happen not to be sentence-final as obeying (D), though the rule is intended to prohibit them too.)

More mischief: (E) Don't split infinitives. This proscription leads people to be suspicious of adverbs between *to* and a later main verb, even if another verb intervenes: "A morsel of genuine history is a thing so rare as to be always valuable" (Thomas Jefferson, 1817 letter to John Adams, objected to on soc.motss in 10/03 as an instance of a split infinitive). Or adverbs preceding an *-ing* verb of the sort that alternates with the marked infinitive: *It started gently raining* (suspicious by contamination from the split infinitive *It started to gently rain*). Or even the preposition *to* + adverb + *V-ing*: *I attributed it to really being interested in the subject matter*.

Still more mischief: Inveighing against accusative coordinate subjects leads people to be suspicious of accusative coordinate pronouns in general, and so to hypercorrect, by using nominative case for coordinate objects: *They saw Sandy and I*. (cf. *Oh, my Gard!* from some mostly-rless speakers, or *chicking* for *chicken* and *kitching* for *kitchen* from some people who've been told not to "drop their g's".)

2.5. Second-level mischief: Speakers with nominative coordinate objects serve as models for other speakers; what started as a hypercorrection, a kind of mistake, becomes just another variant in the pool. More startlingly, since the innovators here are people who are grammatically upward-mobile, actually TRYING to attain correctness, people who seem to care more than most folks about the way they speak and write, the variant they introduce has a fair chance of being understood by others as especially elegant or formal. The result is an actual reversal of the values associated with this variant; some people come to think of nominative coordinate objects as the good stuff and accusative coordinate objects as at best informal or colloquial, if not just wrong.

Another reversal: Using *lay* for positional *lie* eliminates an anomaly in the verb lexicon of English, and so is incredibly widespread. Usage advice not to do this produces a certain amount of hypercorrection (*lie it on the floor*, reported by Geoff Pullum from a webpage about indoor marijuana cultivation), but it also produces a reversal, in which speakers firmly believe that the scheme with intransitive *lay* is the correct one and that intransitive *lie* 'recline' is just wrong. The reversal is encouraged by the fact that these speakers recall being taught that there's an important rule having to do with positional *lie*, but they're so firm in their knowledge of the system they have that they conclude that positional *lie* should be avoided so as to avoid ambiguities with *lie* 'tell an untruth'!