

“Whatever.”: A New Language Model?

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I. PAMPERING YOUR INTELLECT: SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Since 1857, *The Atlantic Monthly* has brought the fruits of highbrow fact and fiction to a select audience of literate Americans. Almost three hundred years earlier, an even older publishing institution, Cambridge University Press, issued its first book.¹ In the December 2002 issue of *The Atlantic*, Cambridge University Press ran a full-page advertisement, inviting readers to “PAMPER YOUR INTELLECT”, recommending titles that might serve as mental spas (p. 97). But instead of a pampering, the discerning reader was dealt an unkind blow. The ad contained no fewer than six proofreading errors: proper names were misspelled (e.g., Immanuel Kant became “Immanuel Kent”), common nouns were treated no less kindly (e.g., “Environment” degenerated into “Enviornment”), and subtitles on book jackets didn’t always match up with those listed in the text (e.g., “My Father’s Life with Bipolar Disorder” morphed into “My Father’s Life with Bipolar Disease”).

Did Cambridge simply have a bad day or is editorial sloppiness becoming ubiquitous? Casual observation suggests the latter. Look no further than official signage for the Washington, DC metro system. The name of my university’s subway stop appears

¹ Cambridge University received a charter from Henry VIII in 1534 to publish books. However, the first book actually printed appeared in 1584 (Black 2000).

two different ways: sometimes correctly as “Tenleytown” (i.e., as one word), yet other times with an incorrect two-word version, i.e., “Tenley Town”. Examples of this sort have proliferated to such a degree that a disgruntled reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* declared that a decade ago, all competent proofreaders must have been taken out and shot.

The issue, I suggest, is not so much a devolution of proofreading skills as a quiet revolution in social attitudes towards linguistic consistency. This paper explores the forces driving this revolution and considers the sorts of effects changing notions of consistency in spoken and written language could have upon the English language in coming decades.

II. LANGUAGE AS RULE-GOVERNED BEHAVIOR

For over a century, practically all linguistic theorists have shared the assumption that human languages (including changes in languages over time) are amenable to being described by laws, consistent patterns, or rules. The Neogrammarians, European Structuralists, and American Structuralists all spoke of linguistic regularity, but the best known contemporary model is Chomsky’s, which characterizes language (at all levels: phonological, morphological, etc.) as rule-governed. Those rules constitute the bedrock upon which the linguistic competence of individual language users is based.

Of course, it doesn’t take a professional linguist to recognize that languages provide avenues for shared human communication precisely because they can be described by a set of principles that members of a speech community share. That is, shared interpretations of words or word collocations make it possible for people to use

language (rather than, say, charades or brute force) to get their meanings across to one another. If I say “chocolate mousse” when I mean “strawberry shortcake”, it’s no surprise when I fail to get the dessert of my choice. And if I declare “Suzette should cut Manfred’s hair” when I mean for Manfred to shear Suzette’s locks, the duo can hardly be expected to comply with my intent. Linguistic communication is generally successful because we understand one another’s pronunciation or handwriting, agree what words are referring to, and comprehend syntactic relationships in the sentences we speak and write.

In talking about “rules” shaping linguistic usage, linguists sharply distinguish between descriptive rules (what a member of a speech community “knows” about his or her language by virtue of growing up among other members of that community) and prescriptive rules (how self-appointed language arbiters tell us we are – or are not – supposed to use language, e.g., no sentence-final prepositions or double negatives; distinguish between the modals *can* and *may*).² The realm of written language is overwhelmingly the domain of prescriptivism, which dictates how words are spelled, how punctuation is distributed, and what special formalities are needed when committing words to paper that may function differently from speech (e.g., proper salutations in letters, making transitions between written paragraphs).

As a profession, linguists concern themselves with descriptive rules, dismissing prescriptivism as an artificial phenomenon having more to do with social class (or social climbing) than with speakers’ “natural” linguistic competence. Since the majority of

² In actual fact, the line between descriptive and prescriptive grammar is not always easily drawn. For example, when language change is in progress (as is still the case with *can* and *may*), there is a tendency to dismiss as “prescriptivist” any call to distinguish between two words that historically had different meanings which, presumably, were part of speakers’ lexical competence.

linguists concern themselves with spoken, not written language, the state of prescriptive judgments in writing simply isn't on most linguists' radar screens.

III. NOT PLAYING BY THE RULES: LEAKY GRAMMAR, PERFORMANCE ERROR, VARIATION, VACILLATION, NON-ENGAGEMENT

We all know that language rules are sometimes violated. Edward Sapir reminded us back in 1921 that however useful the notion of a grammar, “all grammars leak” – that is, there are always exceptions to the regularities we write rules to characterize.³ Even if speakers “know” both the rules and the exceptions, they can make mistakes – what the Chomskyan model characterizes as performance errors. A third sort of “rule violation” appears when language is in the process of changing. For example, many older, educated speakers of American English still find jarring the number agreements in sentences such as “Volvo continues their commitment to safety” (heard last year on NPR radio) or “None [of the former prisoners] were in court yesterday” (from a news story in the *New York Times*⁴). However, given the growing tendency for speakers to view many singular subjects as if they were plural, we can reasonably predict that sometime in the not-too-distant future, English will “regularly” treat names of companies (such as Volvo) and quantifiers such as *none* or *no one* as plural, in part to avoid such political indelicacies as having to specify gender in some antecedents, as in “No one raised his? her? hand”.

Exceptions to language “rules” have a fourth possible source: language-users simply not knowing which spoken (or written) pattern conforms to the rules. In speech, we often dismiss some of these confusions as fall-out from prescriptivism or incomplete language change (e.g., use of *who* versus *whom* when a direct or indirect object is called for has been vacillating for centuries). In writing, even Bill Gates (or his co-authors) couldn’t keep straight when to use *affect* and when *effect*.⁵ But I would like to argue that

³ Sapir 1921:39.

⁴ Saulny 2002:A1

⁵ Gates *et al.* 1995.

the problem is more pervasive than indecision on a couple of word choices. Rather, I suggest a fifth possibility: that we are raising a generation of language users (who, in turn, impact the usage patterns of their elders) who genuinely don't care about a whole range of "language rules". Whether the issue is spelling or punctuation, verb agreement or objective case, there seems to be a growing sense of laissez-faire when it comes to linguistic consistency. It used to be that when I walked into a room and mentioned I was a linguist, people nervously declared, "I'd better watch my grammar." These days, my students increasingly look askance when I labor over correcting their linguistic faux pas. They ask, "What's the big deal?"

What's going on?

IV. THE DEVOLUTION OF CONSISTENCY: THE "WHATEVER" GENERATION

The problem, I suggest, is the convergence of a constellation of forces that together are shaping a new attitude towards spoken and written discourse. We might dub this attitude "linguistic whatever-ism". The primary manifestation of this attitude is a marked indifference to the need for consistency in linguistic usages. At issue is not whether to say *who* or *whom* or whether *none* as the subject of a sentence takes a singular or plural verb, but whether it really matters which form you use. This challenge to the fundamental principle of language as rule-governed behavior is less a display of linguistic defiance than a natural reflection of changing educational policies, shifts in social agendas, a move in academia towards philosophical relativism, the magnifying effects of technologies that support computer mediated communication, and a commitment to life on the clock.

Let's look, in turn, at each of these factors.

Educational Policies

As children, we naturally absorb the spoken language of our environs. Children born in Mississippi generally sound like Mississippians, Bostonians like Bostonians. School systems then further shape the way we speak – and write. Normative instruction has traditionally instilled an awareness that rules exist in many linguistic domains.

Not surprisingly, a laissez-faire approach to language instruction begets a more casual attitude towards linguistic consistency. Since World War II, education in America has become increasingly informal, student-centered, and non-normative.⁶ As faculty, we have emphasized hearing what our students have to say and encouraged them to express themselves – literally in their own words. Is it therefore surprising that students take us at our word when we de-emphasize fine points of linguistic consistency?

The Social Agenda of Multiculturalism

The United States has long represented itself as welcoming a diverse stream of immigrants and tolerating divergent languages and customs. Whatever the historical accuracy of this avowal, recent decades have witnessed a concerted move towards “multiculturalism”, with the result that national rhetoric (and curricular design) reflect a legally and pedagogically structured celebration of individual and group differences. My point here is not to devalue teaching diversity but rather to suggest that diversity, by its very nature, is at odds with a normative social model.

⁶ Baron 2000, Chapter 5.

The social agenda of multiculturalism also has its linguistic face. We teach our children not to pass judgment on regional dialects or non-native speakers. In the process, we loosen our grip on a notion of linguistic correctness and consistency.

The Social Agenda of Class Status

America has historically been a haven for those seeking upward mobility. As in England,⁷ mobility has generally been facilitated by education, including mastery of such niceties as a genteel dialect, graceful handwriting, and knowledge of writing conventions. However, as American social lines have recently been redrawn to include a poor underclass, a small upper class, and a bulging middle class, the majority of the US population has declared itself socially arrived. Moreover, as money rather than education has emerged as the prime American status marker, how you speak or write has become less significant to many people than the dollar amount on a center forward's basketball contract or where you spend your vacations. That is, attention to language skills (and linguistic consistency) has become decreasingly relevant to social standing.⁸

Philosophical Relativism

A fourth factor in the recent decline in linguistic consistency has its roots in academic discourse. It has been suggested⁹ that the present generation of university students is more reticent to engage in debate or to criticize the words or actions of others than their predecessors. When challenged to make judgments or take sides, a common refrain is

⁷ See Baron 2000, pp. 123-142.

⁸ Baron 2003a.

⁹ See, e.g., Kakutani 2002.

“Whatever.” Anything’s OK. Let’s not fight over it. Whatever you do or say – including however you say or write it – is fine.

CMC Technology

Given this pedagogical, social, and intellectual culture of acceptance, it’s hardly surprising to find educated speakers and writers being non-judgmental of the kind of language showing up in contemporary technology-driven communication such as email, instant messaging, or short text messaging. The literature is already rife with descriptions of how chaotic computer mediated communication (CMC) can be – multivocal emoticons instead of precisely-chosen adjectives or adverbs, devil-may-care spelling and punctuation, logical incoherence.¹⁰ What’s more, there are signs that the laid-back approach to writing online is beginning to infiltrate off-line writing as well.¹¹ While not being the direct cause of change in language attitudes, computer technology is reinforcing the devolution of linguistic consistency that was earlier set in motion.

Life on the Clock / Text in the Fast Lane

Finally, current writing patterns reflect the haste with which “finished” writing is now often produced. As modern Western society increasingly began living “on the clock”, we sped up many aspects of daily activity, including the way we wrote.¹² Mechanical devices (first the typewriter, then the stand-alone word processor, now the networked computer) have made it increasingly easy for us to prepare and dispatch documents without pausing to reflect upon whether we have actually written (and sent) the text we

¹⁰See, e.g., Hale and Scanlon 1999, Crystal 2001, Baron 2003b.

¹¹ See, e.g., Lee 2002.

¹² See Baron 2002.

intended. But the modern tyranny of the clock exists apart from the machinery we use to respond to that temporal taskmaster.¹³

V. LANGUAGE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

No one (including me) is suggesting that the English language is about to disintegrate into a babel of unstable idiolects. The changing attitudes towards linguistic consistency that we've been describing are still largely at the edges of linguistic regularity, particularly involving writing mechanics and the well-known "uncertainty zone" containing the likes of *who* vs. *whom*, *affect* vs. *effect*, *it's* vs. *its*, with which native speakers have been wrestling for some time. What is new – and significant – is the emerging attitude of the "whatever" generation that sustained concern about linguistic consistency may be foolish (and perhaps even the hobgoblin of little minds).¹⁴ It therefore seems prudent to consider some potential ramifications of this attitude for the shape of English usage in the coming decades. Among the plausible scenarios are these:

- Writing will increasingly become an instrument for recording informal speech rather than the distinct form of linguistic representation that emerged by the end of the seventeenth century in England.¹⁵
- As a literate society, we will continue to write, but will revert to an attitude towards spelling and punctuation conventions redolent of medieval and renaissance England – i.e., often idiosyncratic anarchy.

¹³ See Eriksen 2001.

¹⁴ "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do." (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, "Self-Reliance")

¹⁵ See Baron 2000 for discussion of the evolving historical relationship between spoken and written English over the past 1200 years.

- Language (both spoken and written) will play a reduced role as a social status marker.
- We will see a diminution in the role of writing as a venue for clarifying thought.¹⁶

Modern linguist theory eschews passing judgment on any linguistic variant, and I am not about to do so now. Rather, I am suggesting that should linguistic entropy snowball, we may find ourselves in the dubious position of defending the inherent regularity of linguistic systems while finding that culturally-accommodating, techno-savvy, and clock-driven language users are increasingly unable to understand one another.

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¹⁶ See Baron 2002 for a summary of the argument that writing has historically served to clarify thought.

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NOT PLAYING BY THE RULES

- **Leaky Grammar**
- **Performance Error**
- **Variation and Diachronic Change**
- **Vacillation**
- **Non-Engagement**

THE DEVOLUTION OF CONSISTENCY:

The “Whatever” Generation

- **Educational Policies**
- **The Social Agenda of Multiculturalism**
- **The Social Agenda of Class Status**
- **Philosophical Relativism**
- **CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) Technology**
- **Life on the Clock / Text in the Fast Lane**

THE SHAPE OF ENGLISH USAGE TO COME: Possible Directions for the “Whatever” Generation

- **Writing as record of informal speech rather than a distinct form of linguistic representation**
- **Growing irrelevance of writing “mechanics” (spelling, punctuation)**
- **Reduced role of language as marker of social status**
- **Diminished role of writing in clarifying thought**