

## the changing profession

Says Who? Teaching  
and Questioning the  
Rules of Grammar

ANNE CURZAN

ONE WINTER MORNING, THE STUDENT SCANNING CARDS AT THE FRONT DESK OF THE UNIVERSITY GYM NOTICED THE “FACULTY” LABEL on mine and asked which department I was in. I replied that I teach in English. A middle-aged man who checked in behind me chased me down the hall. When he caught me, he exclaimed with frustration, “English, eh? Well, could you *please* get students to stop using plural pronouns when they need singular ones? *Everyone—they, someone—they*. It’s just terrible English.”

A few weeks after the gym incident, an esteemed senior colleague stopped me in the hallway. She said, “One of my students had this footnote in her paper about using ‘they’ as a singular generic pronoun, and it said that *you* said that students could do this and reference you.” She then said with a look that combined disbelief and something close to horror, “You don’t really say that, do you?”

In fact, I do. I tell students they may choose not to follow the prescriptive usage rule that forbids treating *they* as singular as long as they demonstrate audience awareness in explicitly recognizing their choice if need be (hence the footnote). I tell students a lot of other “heretical” things about grammar too. I do so because I believe that students, like all speakers of English, have the right to know where the prescriptive rules of written Standard English come from. I also believe that all speakers have the right to make informed decisions about when those rules are appropriate for their writing.

Both the man at the gym and my colleague probably think that I am abandoning my job as an English teacher. English departments are, after all, one of the centers of “language authority,” where the prescriptions in usage books and style guides are enforced, if not written. As an English teacher, I am, at least in name, one of the “language mavens” that the linguist Steven Pinker writes about—that loose network of language authorities who, in theory, steer this ship we call the English language. What kind of English teacher am I to contradict the prescriptions of language authorities like William Safire and encourage the inclusion of impertinent grammar footnotes?

ANNE CURZAN is associate professor of English at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where she also holds an appointment in the School of Education. Her primary research areas include history of the English language, language and gender, lexicography, and pedagogy.

I will argue that we abandon our job as English teachers if we do *not* ask students to question how they are expected to write in school and other institutions. We must simultaneously teach the prescriptive grammatical rules and empower students to think critically about them. It is intellectually dishonest and pedagogically irresponsible to pretend that written Standard English is above question—to put it on a pedestal and leave it there unchallenged and largely unexamined. We say to our students, “Question everything. Except Standard English.” That is not fair or in keeping with the kind of critical pedagogy that most of us espouse.

An important caveat: In making this argument, I am not arguing that we should not teach students Standard English and the prescriptive usage rules of formal, edited academic prose. Students are often judged by their control of Standard English and of specific usage conventions, particularly in their writing, and we have a responsibility to give them access to these grammatical and stylistic rules. I *am* saying that it is unfair to encourage our students to critically question everything except the very conventions in which they are asked to write.

This piece considers what happens when we apply to usage rules and stylistic conventions the same kinds of critical questioning that we encourage with other topics. For example, who first said that two negatives make a positive (in language) or that *he* can function as a generic? And why have people believed such claims? What happens if we open this door and let students question the status of Standard English and logic of prescriptive rules?

In making this argument, I am battling popular usage books such as Lynne Truss’s runaway best-seller *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, which confidently assert that some kinds of English are better and some constructions we might naturally say or write are wrong. Why do readers, including those in English departments,

tend to believe Truss, a self-proclaimed non-specialist, over someone like me, a linguist who specializes in English grammar? I fear that linguists have not effectively made the case to English teachers. To paraphrase John McWhorter, if I weren’t a linguist, I might not believe me either (7). But we must fundamentally rethink how we teach grammar in the writing classroom. We and our students should not accept “Because” as an appropriate answer if a student asks, “Why do I have to write this way?” We must have a better explanation for them.

### Defining Grammar

Native speakers of any language “know grammar” in the sense that linguists use the term. *Descriptive grammar* describes what speakers actually do—the rules we follow to create coherent, well-formed utterances. As English speakers, we know to put articles before nouns, and we know that some singular nouns can be modified by an indefinite article (*a book*) while others cannot (*\*a stuff*). In English we can grammatically say *none of them is* or *none of them are*, even if some usage guides object to the subject-verb agreement in the latter; but we would not say *\*none of them am* in any variety of American English. These are all descriptive rules of English grammar, rarely captured in usage guides because this knowledge is considered too basic and rarely trips up speakers or writers. In sum, descriptive grammatical rules capture the grammatical knowledge that allows speakers to communicate systematically and meaningfully.

When most teachers of English refer to grammar, however, they mean prescriptive grammar or usage rules—often including punctuation. *Prescriptive grammar* refers to the rules in most grammar or usage books that tell writers (and speakers) what they should and should not do. It is about language etiquette (“table manners,” as some linguists put it), and more often than not it’s what we shouldn’t do: don’t split infinitives, don’t end

sentences in prepositions, don't use double negation, don't use *between you and I*. As this brief list makes clear, prescriptive rules cover both Standard English grammatical structures (e.g., how to express negation) and style issues or how to write "good, effective English" rather than simply Standard English (e.g., where to put a preposition).<sup>1</sup> For this reason, we could use the cover term *points of usage* to talk about the prescriptive rules of written English typically enforced in writing classrooms, because some of these points are not really about grammar at all.

Prescriptive rule making tends to focus on points of variation in the language, whether they arise from differences in dialect or expressive style or from language change. There is little variation in how American dialects use articles, and so articles are not central in English usage guides. However, some nonstandard dialects of American English use "me and \_\_\_" constructions as subjects, and in the face of this variation, usage guides prescribe the "\_\_\_ and I" subject construction found in Standard English. Prescriptive rules about the "correct" use of the auxiliary verb *do* have not been canonized because this construction is currently stable in English; usage guides do, however, focus on the "correct" use of *can* and *may* because *can* is expanding its territory in present-day English, well into the realm of permission.

The contested use of singular *they*, highlighted in the opening anecdotes, provides a useful example of both kinds of grammatical rules. Current usage manuals typically tell writers that with a singular generic antecedent such as *anyone* or *a student*, they should use *he* or *she*, avoid any pronoun, or recast the statement in the plural. Until the 1980s, usage guides generally prescribed *he*, but there is now consensus that generic *he* is sexist. That is the prescriptive perspective. Despite it, most speakers of American English use singular *they* (see Newman), including many speakers who preach against the construction. In con-

versation, most speakers of American English would not notice, let alone object to, singular *they* in the utterance "If a student fails the final exam, they must retake the course." That is the descriptive perspective.

This contrast between written usage rules and spoken usage should lead all speakers, including students, to the question, Who said we can't write *they*? In this case, there is a concrete answer: Lindley Murray. At the end of the eighteenth century, Murray, in his best-selling *English Grammar*, took a sentence with a singular generic *they*, labeled it an error, and replaced *they* with *he*. Subsequent prescriptive grammarians accepted this judgment as a rule for correct or good English for almost two centuries. For several centuries before Murray's grammar, speakers and writers had been using singular generic *they*, and they have continued to do so ever since, despite the usage guides.<sup>2</sup>

Why do we as speakers let people like Murray tell us our use of language is wrong, in writing if not sometimes also in speech? Pinker writes that saying language users' spoken grammar is wrong is like telling a whale that it has the whale song wrong (370). And "wrong" has come to encompass everything from typos to nonstandard grammatical forms to ineffective style.

Usage rules for formal written English often presuppose the concept of Standard English. *Standard English* is a slippery term, and much ink has been spilled trying to pin down a definition. One common fallback answer is something like "Walter Cronkite's English" or "BBC English." Or not the English spoken in the South or in New York City.

Standard English, despite the pedestal on which we put it (to create an awkwardly formal but prescriptively correct construction), is one dialect among many—not the source of all the others. It is a dialect that has been elevated to the standard for social and political reasons, not because it is grammatically more logical or better.

Written Standard English can be easier to identify than spoken Standard English, which allows more variation, from accent to syntax to lexicon. Written Standard English is the variety generally used in education, bureaucratic publications, reference works, newspapers (except perhaps sports sections), and other formal documents. The written standard is the focus of most educational efforts and high-stakes testing, and it does change, but more slowly than the spoken language. Usage rules often function as a gatekeeper, slowing the entry of new forms into written Standard English. Some usage rules preserve older forms of spoken English in writing. But some usage rules have never corresponded particularly well to the spoken language. We should discuss these facts with students as we teach usage rules.

### The Stakes

When it comes to language, the stakes are high. Language, as J. L. Austin reminds us, is how we do things. Language creates and maintains our communities. Through language, we assert our identities. And we judge others on language.

*Aks* for *ask*? “Ignorant” (people say). *Ain’t*? “Lazy.” Double negatives? “Sloppy.” I, along with all my linguist colleagues, will assert with full confidence that there is nothing grammatically wrong, in the descriptive sense, with these constructions. But people who make these responses are not judging the constructions—they are judging the speakers who use them.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, *aks* predates *ask* in the history of English and used to be a literary form. *Shouldn’t* used to be as condemned as *ain’t*. Chaucer used double negatives (as well as *axe* for *ask*). How does it happen that we condemn speakers who use these forms now as ignorant, while holding the same forms up as literary in earlier periods?

Some will argue that language is more of a choice than other aspects of identity. Yes and

no. We can choose to acquire new languages or language varieties, which we can master with differing levels of competence, often depending at least in part on how old we are. But our home language will always be part of our cognition and, arguably, part of who we are. We grow up speaking the way those in our home community speak. For some English speakers, that language is close to Standard English. For others, it is not. For all speakers, the home language carries meaning and power in that community. The linguist Geneva Smitherman reminds us, “See, when you lambast the home language that kids bring to school, you ain just dissin dem, you talking about they mommas!” (99). For all speakers, the written English they are expected to produce at school is stylistically, if not grammatically, different from what they speak. No one should feel they have to give up what they bring to school in order to acquire a new set of grammatical rules.<sup>4</sup> The teaching of grammar and usage conventions should follow an additive model—an expansion of students’ repertoires—rather than a replacement model.

### Says Who?

Whether they feel they know grammar or not, English teachers are supposed to uphold prescriptive rules of English usage. Most English teachers rely on the “they” who write usage guides and dictionaries to tell them what these rules are. Teachers may not know exactly who “they” are, but they tend to believe them anyway. After all, we have a long tradition of prescriptive grammarians telling us that our habits in the spoken language are wrong and should not be written down, so why stop believing them now?

Most English teachers also know only some of the many prescriptive usage rules out there. The enforcement of prescriptive grammar is a haphazard enterprise. Everyone has pet peeves (I certainly do) and catches the violations of the prescriptive rules they know.

Few if any know all the constructions that “they” have said are wrong or unacceptable.

For example, a good number of English teachers might circle *hopefully* as unacceptable in the following sentence in a formal paper: “Hopefully, the peace talks will lead to a resolution of the year-long conflict.” Some English teachers would undoubtedly catch the split infinitive in this sentence: “The diacritics used to formally capture pronunciation in dictionaries are different than those used in the International Phonetic Alphabet.” Probably fewer English teachers would identify a problem with *grow* in this sentence: “Hyundai must grow its business in the United States to survive.” And how many of you caught *different than*, used instead of *different from*, in the second sentence? Some teachers feel strongly about the prescriptive rule that dictates *different from*. So how many of these constructions are really errors and by whose definition?

To begin with *hopefully*, prescriptive grammarians assert that it is wrong to use *hopefully* as a sentence adverb—to use it to mean “it is hoped” or “I/we hope.” Of course, speakers of American English use *hopefully* this way all the time. And other sentence adverbs, such as *mercifully* or *frankly*, are acceptable. In the middle of the twentieth century, however, grammarians latched on to this relatively new use of *hopefully* as wrong, because of its ambiguity; and they have had striking success with English teachers, although not with English as it is spoken.

The usage note in *The American Heritage College Dictionary* on *hopefully* is illuminating about the who and how behind usage rules:

**hope·ful·ly** (hōp'fəl-lē) *adv.* 1. In a hopeful manner. 2. *Usage Problem* It is to be hoped.

USAGE NOTE Writers who use *hopefully* as a sentence adverb, as in *Hopefully, the measures will be adopted*, should be aware that the usage is unacceptable to many critics, including a large majority of the Usage Panel. But it is not easy to explain why critics dislike this use

of *hopefully*. It is justified by analogy to the unexceptionable uses of many other adverbs, as in *Mercifully, the play was brief*. The wide acceptance of the usage reflects popular recognition of its usefulness; there is no precise substitute. Someone who says *Hopefully, the treaty will be ratified* makes a hopeful prediction about the fate of the treaty, whereas someone who says *I hope* (or *We hope* or *It is hoped*) *the treaty will be ratified* expresses a bald statement about what is desired. Only the latter could be continued with a clause such as *but it isn't likely*. • Even though the usage is well established, critics appear to have become more adamant in their opposition. Only 34 percent of the Panel accepted the usage of *hopefully* in our 1999 survey, down from 44 percent in 1969. By contrast, 82 percent in the 1999 survey accepted the comparable use of *mercifully* as a sentence adverb. Thus it is not the use of sentence adverbs per se that bothers the Panel; rather, the specific use of *hopefully* in this way has become a shibboleth.

In other words, prescriptivists are clamping down on *hopefully*, making it a shibboleth between the highly and less educated. If this censure seems based largely on personal preferences, that's because it is.

Who is this Usage Panel? It is part of the “they” that writers and English teachers rely on to tell us what we should and should not do. The panel consists of more than two hundred well-known writers, critics, and scholars. The front pages of *The American Heritage College Dictionary* provide a list of their names. It includes writers such as Sherman Alexie, Maxine Hong Kingston, Annie Dillard, Calvin Trillin, and Pat Conroy; Harold Bloom and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., are on the list; David Sedaris and Garrison Keillor have a say on usage, as do Nina Totenberg, Robert Reich, and Antonin Scalia. And as of fall 2006, so do I.<sup>5</sup>

Eighty percent of the panel, reject *grow* as a transitive verb, as in “grow its business.” I myself have fully accepted *grow* as a transitive verb; it would never occur to me to call attention to it in a paper. I would, however, circle

*hopefully*. The critical point is that not only are prescriptions sometimes about personal preferences but our awareness of—and opinions about—the prescriptions can be highly individual as well.

Do speakers of English or English teachers have to believe or follow the Usage Panel? The front matter of *The American Heritage College Dictionary* provides this important reminder:

The Usage Panel should not be thought of as an academy empowered to rule on all questions of disputed usage. That is an expedient that the English-speaking world has rejected since the 18th century, and in a world where English is established as the language of a heterogeneous international community, the idea that any group or individual might arrogate the authority to fix standards seems not only illiberal but absurd. . . . Ultimately, readers will want to make up their own minds about each of such usage issues, but the opinions of the Panel may provide a useful point of reference. (xii)

But does anyone read the front matter of dictionaries? Do people really believe that giving a group the authority to create language standards is not only illiberal but also absurd? A close look at the usage note for *hopefully* reveals a fairly descriptive approach to the question. But many if not most users of this reference book probably do not distinguish between “is unacceptable to many critics” and “is unacceptable.”

None of this critical questioning of the “they” behind usage rules of written Standard English is meant to imply that Standard English is not valuable and should not be taught. A standard variety of a language facilitates communication across dialects and provides a useful written medium for publications. Like standard weights or measurements, it provides a shared form. However, Standard English has been elevated to the status of being more correct than anything else rather than simply being a shared standard. As a result, nonstandard English becomes substandard, illogical,

sloppy, wrong. But it ain’t so. I will make that case by debunking three myths about Standard English and prescriptive grammar.

First myth: language change involves the corruption of the language, and prescriptive rules will stop that corruption. All living languages change, and change is not decay—although older speakers often like to blame younger speakers for it. Prescriptive rules sometimes condemn a new construction: *hopefully* as a sentence adverb, *impact* as a verb, or *anxious* to mean “eager.” Over time, some of these prescriptions will be abandoned and forgotten, much like Jonathan Swift’s eighteenth-century concerns about the vulgarity of the relatively new words *mob* and *bubble*. Standard English, like all living languages, is changing. This fact, combined with our own often arbitrary knowledge of usage rules, should make all English teachers wary of “zero-tolerance” policies about grammatical “errors.”<sup>6</sup> Not that I do not (generally) follow prescriptive rules when I write academic articles or make notes on my students’ papers. But I don’t have a zero-tolerance policy. I circle questionable constructions, adding a clarifying note or question, rather than cross them out—which sends a very different message: it is not about the absolute replacement of one construction with another but about making grammatical and stylistic choices. I also acknowledge for students my own “hypocritical” position, as someone who is fundamentally interested in language change but whose job it is to ensure that they control the written conventions of Standard English and prescriptive usage rules in their writing if they choose to do so. In my experience, this position makes complete sense to students. So I note where they are breaking prescriptive rules, but I am careful about the words *right* and *wrong*.

Second myth: prescriptive grammar always makes sense. Some prescriptive conventions can usefully clarify ambiguity, but some are relics. For example, English speakers had been splitting infinitives for hundreds of

years before nineteenth-century grammarians latched onto this feature as an imperfection in English. Why? The origins of this rule are not completely known. It may be linked to the historical privileging of Latin grammar. While English is clearly not Latin, parts of English prescriptive grammar are still based on Latin. In Latin, infinitives are one word and therefore cannot be split. But full infinitives in English are two words, and users of English continue to happily split them (as I did right there). The rule may also reflect the canonization of an idiosyncratic preference by some grammarians. In 1998, in a progressive linguistic move, the *Oxford American Desk Dictionary* rescinded its prohibition against split infinitives. Eleven years later, those who don't notice split infinitives probably still don't notice them, and those who dislike split infinitives probably continue to circle them no matter what Oxford says.

Third myth: Standard English is better than other varieties of English. Standard English certainly has higher social status. Written Standard English has a more extensive formal vocabulary and set of stylistic conventions, given its use in formal writing, including academic writing. But Standard English is not structurally better than other varieties of English. Nonstandard varieties are not illogical or any less rule-governed, in the descriptive sense, than Standard English. Three examples usefully demonstrate this point: *ain't*, multiple negatives, and *hissself*.

The use of *ain't* is condemned as ignorant, uneducated, and worse. Why is *ain't* considered so much worse than, say, *don't* or *can't*? The word first appeared at the end of the seventeenth century as *an't*, a contracted form of *am not* and *are not*. In 1781 John Witherspoon condemned a list of "vulgar abbreviations," including "an't, can't, han't, don't, should'nt, would'nt, could'nt, &c." (qtd. in "Ain't"). Over time, most of these contractions have redeemed themselves, but not *ain't*. *Ain't* may have been so criticized because its

form does not clearly correspond to the forms that, with *not*, make up the contraction (*am*, *is*, *are*, *has*, *have*, and in some dialects *does*, *do*, and *did*). However, one could make a similar point about *won't*. *Ain't* also fills a gap in Standard English. In Standard English, speakers accept *aren't I?* as grammatical. How in the world is *aren't I?* more grammatical—or logical, for that matter—than *ain't I?*<sup>7</sup>

Multiple negatives used to be standard in most varieties of English—as they are in many other languages, such as Spanish and French. Multiple negatives appear in *Beowulf* and the works of Chaucer. In the early modern period, some varieties of English, including the variety that became Standard English, came to favor constructions with single negation, but many varieties continued to employ multiple negation. The grammarian Robert Lowth, in his *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1763), insisted that double negatives cancel each other, as they do in some mathematical operations (139). Of course, this is absurd: no one would interpret "I can't give you no money" as a speaker's willingness to fork over cash. But the notion that double negatives are illogical and therefore wrong slowly took hold. There is nothing grammatically wrong with double negatives. In fact, some language commentators even lamented their loss. Fitzedward Hall includes the following quotation in *Modern English* (1873): "[I]f we examine the history of the language, we perceive, that, since the date of the authorized translation of the Bible,—the finest example of English,—the alterations that have taken place have been, generally, for the worse. The double negative has been abandoned, to the great injury of strength of expression" (qtd. in Bailey 241). Most English teachers, not to mention most speakers of English I know, are surprised to hear the loss of this condemned form lamented.

The reflexive pronoun *hissself* usefully illustrates how nonstandard varieties are as rule-governed in the descriptive sense as Standard English. In Standard English, most

reflexive pronouns are formed by the combination of a possessive personal pronoun and *self* (*myself, yourself, ourselves*). However, Standard English is inconsistent in the application of this rule: *himself* and *themselves* are irregular. In some nonstandard varieties, including African American English, the same rule (possessive pronoun + *self*) is followed throughout the paradigm: *myself, yourself, hisself/herself, ourselves, yourselves, theirselves*. The internal logic of the nonstandard system surpasses that of the standard system.

The question, then, should not be whether *himself* or *hissself* is right. Both are grammatical in different dialects of English. Both are meaningful, and both can be appropriate and effective in different contexts. *Himself* is the Standard English form, and as such it will be more effective in most formal written registers. Knowing this information allows students to use Standard English as an informed choice, with a particular audience and purpose in mind.

The fact that Standard English and prescriptive usage rules are not as easy as right and wrong is exactly what makes the teaching of grammar and usage interesting. Almost everyone is interested in how their language works, and English teachers do not exploit this fact enough. If we open up conversations about “who says,” students learn the usage conventions of written Standard English while being given the tools to challenge them appropriately. Standard English and prescriptive grammar are about who has the social power to prescribe and who is silenced in the process. If we want to talk about social justice and diversity in our classrooms, we need to talk about language. It is as pressing an issue as any other we could possibly address.

### A Modest Pedagogical Proposal

So now a proposal for moving forward from this argument to produce better learning in our classrooms. This proposal aims to ener-

gize the teaching of grammar (in the prescriptive and descriptive senses)—to transform it from behavior modification to engaged learning, not only about language but about everything else that gets wrapped up in attitudes toward language.

The proposal: *Teachers need to educate themselves about the fundamentals of language and open up genuine conversation in their classes about prescriptive usage rules and grammar more generally.*

It is not acceptable for English teachers to remain uninformed about the conventions of written Standard English that they are enforcing. Teachers should know about resources such as descriptive grammar books (e.g., Biber et al.) and dictionaries of usage (e.g., *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage*), which provide the kind of information described in the grammatical examples above. Teachers should also know about policies such as NCTE’s “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” and CCCC’s position paper “The National Language Policy.”

Grammar is not, and should not ever be framed as, a “Because I say so” subject. Teachers in composition and literature classrooms often state that they want to address issues of power and social justice as part of discussions of literature, writing, and culture. Language may work as well as or better than any other topic to put those issues on the table. Who says what is correct? Who gets discriminated against? Why do we all acquiesce in such decisions? These questions require teachers to acknowledge explicitly their own position in this hierarchy, and when they do, they open up a space for genuine conversation about language rules and choices.

This conversation could take many forms. A discussion of literature could explore how standard and nonstandard dialects (including eye-dialect spellings) are used to type characters. A discussion of usage in a composition class could become exploratory as students

weigh reasons for adhering to—or breaking—a given written convention, from the technicalities of punctuation to including *hopefully* as a sentence adverb to exploiting the expressive power of *ain't* in written prose. Students could be encouraged not simply to refer to a book like *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* as a guide but to examine critically the social and moral judgments that are attached to “incorrect” punctuation usage in it. Or an instructor could write on a student paper “Come talk to me about this construction” rather than crossing it out as an error.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of these conversations, students can be empowered to make grammatical as well as rhetorical choices. There is a fear that if we open up Standard English and usage rules to questioning, students will suddenly abandon the whole enterprise of learning them. This seems unlikely. First, students understand what is at stake in their mastering Standard English and written usage conventions; they understand the gate-keeping function of this knowledge. Second, students are willing to master arbitrary rules. Consider the games that they enjoy. In the end, students are more likely to resist when grammar or usage rules that contradict their everyday experience with language are presented as natural, logical, unquestionable, and inherently better than what they already know. Instructors who approach language questions descriptively and critically allow students to engage with language intellectually and personally—as they must for lasting learning. It is more intellectually honest and pedagogically effective to talk critically about what the grammatical cliché “sounds better” means in different contexts, from interactions with friends to job interviews, from informal e-mail to formal academic papers.

In asking students to question everything, teachers understand that students will not immediately overthrow power structures simply by becoming more aware of how they work. We hope that they will be more informed citi-

zens, striving for social justice. Language is no different. In public debates about language, we need more informed citizens, who do not condemn nonstandard American dialects as broken English, who understand that students do not need to erase their home languages to learn Standard English, spoken or written. We need citizens who understand that it is not fair to judge someone as inferior because they speak differently or break a prescriptive usage rule. To achieve this, we need teachers who are willing to think differently about what it means to teach English grammar.

English teachers have a responsibility to foster systematic, informed, and reflective knowledge about the English language. One place to start is to encourage critical inquiry about the rules of language, descriptive and prescriptive, so that students understand what is at stake in the choices that they make. We should encourage our students and ourselves to ask at every language turn, Says who?

---

## NOTES

1. Sidney Greenbaum usefully differentiates “correct” English and prescriptive grammar from “good” English and effective style: “Correct English is conformity to the norms of the standard language. Good English is good use of the resources available in the language. In that sense we can use a non-standard dialect well and we can use the standard language badly. By good English we may mean language used effectively or aesthetically: language that conveys clearly and appropriately what is intended and language that is pleasing to the listener or reader. . . . By good English we may also mean language used ethically” (17–18).

2. Ann Bodine’s groundbreaking article is an excellent discussion of the early prescription on singular pronoun use. For more on the history of generic pronoun use, see Curzan, *Gender Shifts*, and Balhorn.

3. Rosina Lippi-Green argues that discrimination based on language is so common and so accepted that it should be seen as the “last back door to discrimination” (73). Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee similarly assert that “usage rules are the conventions of written English that allow Americans to discriminate against one another” (283). Arguing that language is the “last” back door to discrimination, as Lippi-Green does, may opti-

mistically overestimate the extent to which other doors to discrimination have been closed.

4. Throughout this article, I employ singular generic *they* for the reasons explained above.

5. There are several other linguists on the panel, and I hope that our perspective helpfully counterbalances some of the more prescriptive perspectives that may guide the voting of other members. That said, even as a descriptively minded linguist, I am put in a difficult position when I am asked to decide, yes or no, if a particular construction is acceptable. While I may deem a new construction acceptable, I sometimes know that the majority of my colleagues do not—and may deem it incorrect in student or professional writing. My tendency in such a case is still to choose acceptable, since the Usage Panel ruling may help my colleagues accept the change in the language.

6. Typos and other mistakes that result from the lack of proofreading can be relatively easily distinguished from grammatical and stylistic issues.

7. Students should ask why writers can insert *ain't* into otherwise standard prose for emphasis without being condemned. Many prescriptive rules are far from absolute, and stylistic choices can override grammatical proscriptions. These are exactly the conversations we should be having openly with our students in writing classrooms.

8. For more discussion about opening up questions of language authority in the classroom, see Curzan, “Lexicography” and “Teaching.”

## WORKS CITED

- “Ain’t.” *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage*. 1994 ed. Print.
- The American Heritage College Dictionary*. 4th ed. 2002. Print.
- Bailey, Richard W. *Images of English*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991. Print.
- Balhorn, Mark. “The Rise of Epicene *They*.” *Journal of English Linguistics* 32.4 (2004): 79–104. Print.
- Biber, Douglas, et al. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Pearson, 1999. Print.
- Bodine, Ann. “Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular *They*, Sex-Indefinite *He* and *He or She*.” *Language in Society* 4.2 (1975): 129–46. Print.
- Crowley, Sharon, and Debra Hawhee. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn, 1999. Print.
- Curzan, Anne. *Gender Shifts in the History of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.
- . “Lexicography and Questions of Authority in the College Classroom.” *Dictionaries* 21 (2000): 90–99. Print.
- . “Teaching the Politics of Standard English.” *Journal of English Linguistics* 30.4 (2002): 339–52. Print.
- Greenbaum, Sidney. *Oxford English Grammar*. London: Oxford UP, 1996. Print.
- Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Lowth, Robert. *A Short Introduction to English Grammar, with Critical Notes*. London: A. Millar, R. and J. Dodsley, 1763. Print.
- McWhorter, John. *Word on the Street: Debunking the Myth of a “Pure” Standard English*. Cambridge: Perseus, 1998. Print.
- Newman, Michael. *Epicene Pronouns: The Linguistics of a Prescriptive Problem*. New York: Garland, 1997. Print.
- Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct*. New York: Morrow, 1994. Print.
- Smitherman, Geneva. “Ebonics, King, and Oakland: Some Folk Don’t Believe Fat Meat Is Greasy.” *Journal of English Linguistics* 26.2 (1998): 97–107. Print.
- Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: A Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*. New York: Gotham, 2003. Print.