

In what sense is “bad grammar” bad?

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Varieties of language

Consider the following sentences, which say the same thing in different ways:

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|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) | Why aren't you singing? | (Standard English) |
| (2) | Pourquoi ne chantez-vous pas? | (French) |
| (3) | ¿Por qué no cantan ustedes? | (Spanish) |
| (4) | Why ain't y'all singin'? | (a variety of English) |

The last of these, (4), is the kind of English you might hear in rural Georgia. Many people do not consider it a language at all. It is not the standard national language of any country, and some people react to this kind of speech as if it were proof of ignorance or even bad character.

In fact, however, it is the native language of many people, and they are no less intelligent because their native language is not something else. Every normal human being speaks a language, which matches the language of a substantial number of people around him but may or may not match the standard language of a nation.

Expressiveness

A common misconception is that nonstandard varieties of language, such as (4), are less expressive or less logical than standard languages.

It is true that the people who establish standard languages – basically, communities of educators – strive for clarity and expressiveness, but they do not always maximize it.

In the examples above, (3) and (4) make it clear that more than one person is being addressed. Examples (1) and (2) do not; they use “you” ambiguously to mean one person or more than one. On this particular point rural Georgia English is clearer than Standard English.

Double negatives

Now consider these three examples:

- (a) I don't see anything.
- (b) I don't see nothing.
- (c) Je ne vois rien.

These are Standard English, another variety of English, and French. They illustrate two different ways of making a negative sentence. In (a) the negative is expressed only once; in (b) and (c) it is expressed on every word that can be made negative. (The French example says, word for word, "I not see nothing.")

English teachers often say that *I don't see nothing* is illogical because two negatives make a positive. A native speaker of Latin would agree with this; in Latin, two negatives *do* make a positive. But try telling this to the French. The simple fact is that at some point during its development from Latin, French switched over to the other method of forming negatives. German sticks with the single-negative system; Spanish uses multiple negatives; and English is vacillating, so that on this point, standard written English is different from many people's actual speech.

In all of these languages, you *can* still use a double negative to express a positive by saying something like, *It is not true that I don't see anything*. Put the two negatives in separate clauses, and they operate separately.

Where do standard languages come from?

"Correct English" is not governed by a standards committee. It is the rough consensus of a huge number of writers, editors, and educators, and there is no reason to expect them all to agree perfectly about everything.

In the United States, three rival dictionary publishers – or maybe more – use the name of Noah Webster, who died in 1843 and is no longer around to answer questions. Dictionaries and grammar handbooks often differ on uncertain matters. In general, the Merriam-Webster Company embraces new usages enthusiastically, while the *American Heritage Dictionary* is more conservative and more candid about reporting when something is controversial.

Some countries, such as Spain and France, do have "language academies" which attempt to define an official standard language. This does not work particularly well; notoriously, people talk the way they want to, rather than the way the academy says they should.

Nonstandard and foreign languages in the classroom

How should American schools handle students whose native language is not Standard English? Particularly if the native language is Spanish or a nonstandard variety of English (e.g., "Ebonics"), this has been a matter of hot controversy, particularly since some people enter the debate without knowing what the educators are really proposing.

I take it for granted that every student must master Standard English. Otherwise the students are not prepared for the national job market, and the educational system has failed them. Thus, I am against using anything else as an *alternative* to Standard English in the schools.

On the other hand, I see nothing wrong with acknowledging students' native language and using it in a limited way to facilitate education. In particular, it is important for members of ethnic minorities *not* to believe that their language is "bad" or something to be ashamed of.

Unfortunately, many people view AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) as simply a product of ignorance, a failed attempt to speak Standard English. That would be as silly as viewing Czech as a failed attempt to speak Russian. It is simply a different, closely related language, with somewhat different origins.

AAVE is not the national standard language, which blacks, along with everyone else, need to master (which was the point of Bill Cosby's famous speech). But it is certainly a genuine language, and in some ways it is more expressive than Standard English. For instance, in AAVE you can distinguish *Don't sing* from *Don't be singin'* – the latter means "Don't make a habit of singing" or "Don't sing constantly." AAVE speakers are a bit puzzled why this distinction is often left unexpressed in Standard English.

Language change

Look back at examples (1)-(4) at the beginning of this essay. Compare them to this:

(5) Wherefore sing ye not?

Just 400 years ago, this was Standard English. Clearly, the language has changed.

In order to get the full benefit of a widespread standard language, we generally resist change. The reason is that change causes fragmentation; changes do not catch on everywhere at the same time. That is why "slang" is in disfavor. People in different parts of the world do not understand each other's slang; when you use slang, you give up communication.

Sometimes, giving up communication is exactly what people want. Teenagers and members of in-groups often *want* to distinguish themselves from the rest of the community. Also, among people who are bright but not fully educated, it is often easier to make up new words than to learn the existing ones.

Sometimes, also, slang is useful. Many of us are annoyed at how younger people say *was like* to mean *said*. (“She was like, ‘Oh, no!’ and I was like, ‘But yes!’”) Personally, I rather hope this usage will go out of fashion soon.

But teenagers say *was like* because it serves a useful purpose. It does not mean exactly the same thing as *said*. Rather, it means, “said, but I’m not quoting the exact words.” It’s useful to be able to say this in two syllables.

The stories behind some widespread “grammar errors”

Split infinitives

About 100 years ago, everyone had to learn Latin, and many educated English speakers had been taught Latin more thoroughly than English. They tended to impose rules of Latin grammar upon their native tongue.

In Latin, an infinitive is a verb form like *to go* or *to eat*, but it is a single word (without *to* as a separate element). Thus it cannot be split.

Accordingly, phrases like *Star Trek’s* “to boldly go” are impossible in Latin – there’s no way to put *boldly* in the middle of the infinitive – and some grammarians feel they should be forbidden in English.

Prepositions at the end

“Never use a preposition to end a sentence with,” says the old joke. Again, this is a case of a Latin rule being applied to English. In Latin, prepositions always precede nouns. English just doesn’t work that way. In English, the noun can be moved away from the preposition without any loss of clarity. *Which student did you send this to?* is perfectly good English.

The confusion about “and I”

As six-year-olds, most of us naturally said things like

Him and me went to the store.

Our teachers taught us to say:

He and I went to the store.

which is indeed Standard English. But why did we start out saying it the other way? After all, by age 6 we already were using *he*, *him*, *I*, and *me* correctly in isolation.

The answer has to do with phrase structure. In *He went to the store*, *he* is “governed by” (connected directly to) the verb *went* as subject. That’s why it is *he* and not *him*, and also why, in the same position, you would use *I* and not *me*.

In *Him and me went to the store*, *him* and *me* are governed by *and*, not by *went*. Thus – until you learn another rule of grammar – they don’t look like subjects of a verb, and you’ll probably use the unmarked forms *him* and *me* rather than the subject forms *he* and *I*.

Unfortunately, a good many people mis-learn the rule. They simply change “and me” to “and I” everywhere it occurs. That’s a mistake too. Consider this sentence:

They saw him and me. (correct)

This is perfectly correct; compare *They saw him* and *They saw me*. But some people say

They saw he and I. (ungrammatical)

This is a “hypercorrection” (the result of overgeneralizing a rule taught in school).

Dropping the g in –ing

Notoriously, many speakers of English leave off the final *g* on verb forms that end in *–ing*. They say *comin’* and *singin’* rather than *coming* and *singing*.

Teachers call this “laziness” but it’s actually something much more respectable. The English suffix *–ing* combines the functions of two earlier suffixes, one of which had the *g* while the other didn’t. The old suffixes were *–ing* and *–en*. Some people pronounce one and some pronounce the other.

English, you will recall, is a Germanic language; although much of its vocabulary comes from Latin, the grammar is closely related to German. In fact, the two versions of *–ing* survive separately in German; they are *–ung* and *–end(er)*, for forming nouns and adjectives respectively.

<i>eine Singung</i>	<i>a singing (performance)</i>
<i>ein singender Cowboy</i>	<i>a singing cowboy</i>

Even among the English nobility as recently as WWII, many people chose to pronounce *–ing* without the *g*.

Who and whom

The difference between *who* and *whom* is exactly the same as between *they* and *them* or *he* and *him*.

<i>Whom do you see?</i>	<i>You see <u>them</u>.</i>	<i>You see <u>him</u>.</i>
<i>For <u>whom</u> does the bell toll?</i>	<i>For <u>them</u>.</i>	<i>For <u>him</u>.</i>
<i><u>Who</u> rings the bell?</i>	<i><u>They</u> ring the bell.</i>	<i><u>He</u> rings the bell.</i>

For unclear reasons, many varieties of English have lost the word *whom*, so that nowadays it has to be taught in school. Some confusion arises. Consider the sentence structures:

The man whom the police accused...
(They accused him.)

The man who the police say is the prime suspect...
(They say he is the prime suspect.)
Understand “the police say” as if it were in parentheses.

Many newscasters use *whom* in the second of these, incorrectly.

Why bother to use correct English, then?

The point of this essay is that nonstandard language is not the same thing as stupidity or inarticulateness. Everyone speaks a language, but not every language is the literary standard language of a nation. Further, not everyone is a clear thinker and a clear communicator – but that’s a separate issue. Plenty of unclear communicators speak perfectly grammatical English; plenty of people are logical, eloquent, and even entertaining in nonstandard dialects.

I do not consider it a fault of character if a person’s language happens to be Spanish or AAVE or rural Georgia English instead of Standard English. It is not even a reflection on the person’s intelligence or articulateness.

My students, however, know that I am a real stickler for correct (Standard) English in their papers and oral presentations. Why? Because I want them to be understood and respected.

This works two ways. First, mastery of Standard English is evidence of education. Most people learn to communicate effectively at the same time they learn to conform to the standard language. These are two separate skills, but they are normally taught together, and even teachers do not distinguish them.

Second, and more importantly, standard language is a matter of consideration for the audience. I’m going to speak your language – the standard language – rather than asking you to learn mine, or even put up with my quirks. By using Standard English and using it carefully, I show that I care whether you understand me.