

Making Peace in the Language Wars

Bryan A. Garner

“This battle between linguistic radicals and linguistic conservatives continues unabated.”

– Robert W. Burchfield

SHORTLY AFTER the first edition of my *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* appeared in 1998, a British reviewer – the noted linguist Tom McArthur – remarked about it: “Henry Watson Fowler, it would appear, is alive and well and living in Texas.”¹ This might have seemed like the highest praise possible. After all, in the American press in the 1980s and 1990s, Fowler had been hailed as “immortal” (*Fortune*), even “saintly” (*L.A. Times*). Meanwhile, his 1926 *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* had been called “classic” (*New York Times*) and “indispensable” (*Christian Science Monitor*).

But McArthur didn’t intend any praise in his comment. Fowler, you see, was a prescriptivist: he issued judgments about linguistic choices.² McArthur, like almost every other linguist, is a descriptivist: he mostly disclaims making judgments about linguistic choices.³ And the describers and the prescribers (if I may call them that) haven’t been on speaking terms for a very long time.

THE WARS

Prescribers seek to guide users of a language – including native speakers – on how to handle

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¹ “... That Is Forever Fowler,” 15 *English Today* 59 (1999).

² See H.W. Fowler & F.G. Fowler, *The King’s English* (1906); H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926). For a solid biography of H.W. Fowler, see Jenny McMorris, *The Warden of English* (2001).

³ See “Descriptive & Prescriptive Grammar,” in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* 286 (Tom McArthur ed., 1992) (“A *descriptive grammar* is an account of a language that seeks to describe how it is used objectively, accurately, systematically, and comprehensively.”).

words as effectively as possible. Describers seek to discover how native speakers actually use their language. An outsider might think that these are complementary goals. In fact, though, insiders typically view them as incompatible. And the battles have been unpleasant, despite being mostly invisible (or irrelevant) outside academic linguistic circles. Hence David Foster Wallace's apt query: "Did you know that probing the seamy underbelly of U.S. lexicography reveals ideological strife and controversy and intrigue and nastiness and fervor on a nearly hanging-chad scale?"⁴

Prescribers like to lambaste their adversaries for their amoral permissiveness:

* 1952: "Some of the vigilantes who used to waylay your themes to flog each dangling participle and lynch every run-on sentence now seem to be looking for a chance to lay the language on your doorstep like a foundling and run like hell before you can catch them and ask them how to rear the brat. They're convinced that it's healthy, that it will grow up very well-adjusted provided it's never spanked or threatened or fussed over. They're perfectly willing to furnish you with its past history, and even help you keep records on its day-to-day development, but they'll only tell you what it has done, not what it should or should not do. The English grammar textbook of the future may approach its subject in the same spirit in which the Kinsey report tackled sex."⁵

* 2000: "Modern-day linguists who insist on a 'nonjudgmental' approach to language like to belittle Fowler. They are fools."⁶

Describers, meanwhile, like to denounce

prescribers as priggish, often ignorant, authoritarians prepared to fight to the death over nonissues:

* 1970: "Those who fancy themselves preservers of standards in language, most of whom would hotly deny the appellation 'purist,' believe quite sincerely that their stand is highly traditional and regard as dangerous subversives those scholars who devote themselves to the objective description of their first-hand observations. Many who righteously maintain that split infinitives and terminal prepositions are cardinal sins regard themselves as forward-looking men of liberal temperament ..."⁷

* 1999: "There is hardly any other area in life in which people so badly informed can actually be proud of their ignorance while still proclaiming themselves to be guardians of truth and saviors of others from error."⁸

At least one describer, Edward Finegan, has conceded that "linguists have not afforded the guardians [i.e., prescribers] a fair hearing," adding that "this imbalance is exacerbated by the bad press the guardians have in turn inflicted on linguists, a bad press that has bruised the credibility of the linguistics profession."⁹ Indeed, the Linguistic Society of America long ago conceded what remains true today: "a fair portion of highly educated laymen see in linguistics the great enemy of all they hold dear."¹⁰

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES?

In short, there's long been bad blood between the two camps. It continues to this day. Even

4 David Foster Wallace, "Tense Present: Democracy, English, & the Wars over Usage," *Harper's Magazine*, Apr. 2001, at 39, 40.

5 Louis B. Salomon, "Whose Good English?," 38 *Am. Ass'n Univ. Profs. Bull.* 441, 442 (Fall 1952) (as quoted in *The Ordeal of American English* 160, 161 (C. Merton Babcock ed., 1961)).

6 Erich Eichman, *Wall Street Journal*, 7 Jan. 2000, at W11.

7 Thomas Pyles & John Algeo, *English: An Introduction to Language* 29 (1970).

8 Ronald Wardhaugh, *Proper English: Myths & Misunderstandings About Language* 172 (1999).

9 Edward Finegan, "On the Linguistic Forms of Prestige," in *The Legacy of Language: A Tribute to Charlton Laird* 146, 148 (Phillip C. Boardman ed., 1987).

10 Linguistic Society of America, *Report of the Commission on the Humanities* 156 (1964).

when contemporary describers propose a rapprochement, it typically consists simply in having prescribers concede the error of their ways. For example, in their new *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002), Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum airily note that “although descriptive grammars and prescriptive usage manuals differ in the range of topics they treat, there is no reason in principle why they should not agree on what they say about the topics they both treat.”¹¹ That might seem like a promising statement, but in fact it’s disingenuous – rather like a warring spouse who quarrelsomely proposes a “reconciliation” by insisting that all the fault lies with the other side. For in the very next sentence, we find our two conciliators claiming that prescribers (1) overrely on personal taste; (2) confuse informality with ungrammaticality; and (3) appeal to “certain invalid arguments”¹² (unspecified). That’s it. In their view, it’s all the fault of prescribers.

But the fault lies at least equally at the feet of the describers, many of whom (1) insist that their methods are the only valid ones; (2) disclaim any interest in promoting the careful use of language, often denouncing anyone who seeks to do so; and (3) believe that native speakers of English can’t make a mistake and that usage guides are therefore superfluous.

You may think that’s just hyperbole. Sadly, it isn’t. True enough, there may not be such a thing as a “pure describer,” since every commentator has at least some predilections about usage, however covert. But many describers also dogmatically oppose value judgments about language. That in itself is a value judgment – and a very odd one, in the eyes of ordinary people. Here’s a sampling of

what “pure describers” have said in the literature:

Lakoff: “For change that comes spontaneously from below, or within, our policy should be, Let your language alone, and leave its speakers alone!”¹³

McWhorter: “Descriptive grammar ... has nothing to do with the rather surreal notion of telling people what they *should* say. The other grammar, which is about counterintuitive, party-pooing bizarrerie, ... is called *prescriptive* grammar and is neither taught to nor discussed by linguists, except as the persistent little scourge that seems to have gotten hold of the Anglophone world.”¹⁴

These writers see language as if it were merely a series of events to be duly recorded. They don’t see it – or don’t want to see it – as the product of human conduct and human decision, nor its use as a skill that can either be left rudimentary or be honed.

Meanwhile, describers themselves write exclusively in standard English. If it’s really a matter of complete indifference to them, why don’t they occasionally *flout* (or should that be *flaunt*?) the rules of grammar and usage? Their writing could *militate* (or is it *mitigate*?) in favor of linguistic mutations if they would allow themselves to be as *unconscious* (*unconscionable*?) in their *use* (*usage*?) of words as they seem to want everyone else to be. But they don’t. They write by all the rules that they tell everyone else not to worry about. Despite their protestations, their own words show that correctness is valued in the real world.

Why should linguists believe – as many certainly do – that language, of all human tools, is uniquely incapable of being misused or abused? Why should language alone be immune to ignorant or careless handling? It’s

11 *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* 6 (2002).

12 *Id.* at 6–7.

13 Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *Talking Power: The Politics of Language* 298 (1990).

14 John McWhorter, *The Word on the Street: Fact @ Fable About American English* 62 (1998).

hard to imagine professionals in any other field of human endeavor making an analogous argument.

One surprising aspect of descriptivist doctrine is that it's essentially anti-education: teaching people about good usage, the argument goes, interferes with the natural, unconscious forces of language, so leave speakers alone. This doctrine relieves English teachers of the responsibility to teach standard English. And it dooms us all to the dialect of the households in which we've grown up. One result is rigidified social strata. After all, you're unlikely to gain any responsible position – such as that of a linguistics professor – if you can't speak and write standard English. So much for egalitarianism.

I'm mostly in the prescriptive camp (although, as I'll explain in a moment, I'm a kind of descriptive prescriber). The prescriptive camp explicitly values linguistic decisions and informed standards of correctness. It's a Fowlerian sensibility that Sir Ernest Gowers summed up as having five bases: "first the careful choice of precise words, second the avoidance of all affectations, third the orderly and coherent arrangement of words, fourth the strict observance of what is for the time being established idiom, and fifth the systematization of spelling and pronunciation."¹⁵ Gowers and I are hardly alone among Fowler's successors:

Pei: "Don't be afraid to exercise your power of choice. If you prefer 'telephone' to 'phone,' or 'greatly' to 'very much,' don't be afraid to use them. It's your language as much as anyone else's. At the same time, try to have a good reason for your choice, because language is one of the finest products of man's intelligence, and should be intelligently employed and intelligently changed."¹⁶

Safire: "Some of the interest in the world of words comes from people who like to put less-educated people down – Language Snobs, who give good usage a bad name. Others enjoy letting off steam in a form of mock-anger, treating their peeves as pets. But most of the interest, I think, comes from a search for standards and values. We resent fogginess; we resist manipulation by spokesmen who use loaded words and catch phrases; we wonder if, in language, we can find a few of the old moorings. We are not groping for the bygone, we are reaching for a firm foothold in fundamentals."¹⁷

Prescribers want to evaluate linguistic change as it occurs. They endorse the changes they consider fortunate and resist the ones they consider unfortunate – often with little success in the long run.

TWO VIEWS OF CHANGE

The opposing views aren't easily reconciled. Prescribers like established forms in grammar and word choice. They encourage precision and discourage letting one word usurp another's meaning (*infer–imply*, *lay–lie*, *like–as*). They dislike the indiscriminate use of two forms, especially opposed forms, for one meaning (*categorically–uncategorically*, *couldn't care less–could care less*, *regardless–irregardless*). They value consistency and historical continuity (preferring *home in* over *hone in*, *just deserts* over *just desserts*, and *slough off* over *sluff off*).

Describers, meanwhile, remind us that linguistic change is a fact of life – and conclude that it's therefore not worth opposing. As one has asked: "If language is going to keep changing anyway – and it is – what is the use of posting the little rules and making people uncomfortable only to see them eventually

¹⁵ Sir Ernest Gowers, "H.W. Fowler: The Man & His Teaching," Presidential Address to the English Association, July 1957, at 14.

¹⁶ Mario Pei, *All About Language* 9 (1954).

¹⁷ William Safire, *On Language* xv (1980).

blown away by the wind?"¹⁸ Another prominent describer has even seemed to tout mass heedlessness: "The inert ignorance of the uneducated about their language ... indeed has had a profound and on the whole a progressive effect on language, manifesting itself in an almost miraculously intricate and regular operation of known laws of linguistic behavior."¹⁹ Perhaps because that view involves a value judgment (ignorance is progressive), some describers disclaim it in favor of a value-neutral and all but valueless position, such as this: "The most sensible view about any language is that it changes. It neither regresses nor progresses."²⁰

Yet not all describers endorse fatalistic or optimistic views of change. Dwight L. Bolinger, a describer with impeccable credentials, has staked a position that most prescribers would find satisfactory: "If rules are to be broken, it is better done from knowledge than from ignorance, even when ignorance ultimately decides the issue."²¹ Another, the Oxford professor Jean Aitchison, concedes that "language change ... may, in certain circumstances, be socially undesirable."²²

One major difference between the prescriber and the describer, and their views toward change, has to do with the relative immediacy of linguistic perspective. The prescriber cares about how language is used here and now. The describer views language

more distantly, observing that linguistic change is inevitable. After all, Latin evolved into French, Italian, and other Romance languages – and the French, Italians, and others haven't been adversely affected by linguistic evolution. This is like a geographer arguing that seismic disruptions along the San Andreas Fault hardly matter in the larger scheme of things, since continents and seas will come and go: in the history of the earth, an earthquake in Los Angeles doesn't amount geographically to a blip on the big screen. But of course earthquakes do matter to the people who experience them.

And how language is used today – here and now – does matter to people who speak it, hear it, write it, and read it. Invoking the inevitability of linguistic drift doesn't help someone who is unsure about how to say *irrevocable*, what preposition to use after *oblivious*, or whether the verb after *a number of people* should be singular or plural. The linguistic choice that a speaker or writer makes will affect how others react. Linguists may take the long view, but good usage depends on the here and now.

Because usage constantly evolves, so must judgments about usage. Much of what Theodore Bernstein, an eminent *New York Times* editor, said in 1965 about the careful writer²³ endures to this day; some of it doesn't. That's the way usage is. The test of good usage has little to do with what endures, although

18 John McWhorter, *The Word on the Street* 85 (1998). But see Peter Farb, *Word Play* 84 (1974) ("One justification sometimes heard for freedom in breaking the rules of the language game is that languages change with time anyway. But that argument is beside the point. Even though the rules may change tomorrow, they are still binding while they are in force today.")

19 John S. Kenyon, "Ignorance Builds Language" (1938), in *A Language Reader for Writers* 175, 176 (James R. Gaskin & Jack Suberman eds., 1966).

20 Ronald Wardhaugh, *Proper English: Myths and Misunderstandings About Language* 42 (1999).

21 Dwight L. Bolinger, *Language: The Loaded Weapon* 55 (1980). Cf. Louis Foley, *Beneath the Crust of Words* 83 (1928) ("Ignorance has had considerable effect in the development of language. Many changes which have been made in the forms, uses, and meanings of words would certainly not have occurred if the language had been used only by those who knew it thoroughly.")

22 Jean Aitchison, *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* 260 (3d ed. 2001).

23 See Theodore M. Bernstein, *The Careful Writer* (1965).

good usage is fairly stable and tends to endure. It has more to do with what works for today's readership, distracting as few readers as possible. It's a test of credibility among contemporaries. Good usage reflects how a careful writer of today approaches linguistic questions.

THE CAREFUL WRITER

One common tack of describers is to question all the assumptions about what is meant by "careful writers,"²⁴ "the best writers,"²⁵ or "respected people"²⁶ – the abstractions that prescribers postulate for establishing a standard of good usage. When it's impossible to identify exactly who these people are, describers claim victory by concluding that no such standard exists.²⁷

But this idea that "careful writers" (etc.) are unidentifiable is a fallacious position for two reasons.

First, we say that usage is judged good not because the *best writers* employ it, but because

it helps writers use words successfully.²⁸ Likewise, we say that apples are healthful not because wise people eat them, but because of their observable effects on the human body. The fact that we eat apples doesn't make them "good food."

Second, the *careful writer* may exist for the language in the same sense as the *reasonable person* exists in law, the *average voter* in politics, or the *typical consumer* in marketing. It's a pragmatic construct that allows us to assess and predict behavior. The careful writer is good usage anthropomorphized. You can't point to a particular person as a "careful writer," or a "reasonable person" either. But that's irrelevant. It doesn't mean that a real standard doesn't exist. Even Richard W. Bailey of Michigan, a thoroughgoing describer, acknowledges that the linguistic standard exists: "Linguists who pretend that there is no consensus about the elite forms of English confuse their egalitarian ideals with the social reality that surrounds them."²⁹

Still another difference between the camps

24 William Strunk Jr. @ E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* 59 (3d ed. 1979) ("The careful writer, watchful for small conveniences, goes *which*-hunting, removes the defining *whiches*, and by so doing improves his work."); Maxine Hairston, *Successful Writing* 118 (2d ed. 1986) ("Although the verb *to be* in all its forms (*is, am, was, were, will be, have been*, and so on) remains the central verb in our language, careful writers use it sparingly.>").

25 William Strunk Jr. @ E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* 72 (3d ed. 1979) ("It is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript ends up in need of major surgery. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers."); Thomas R. Lounsbury, *The Standard of Usage in English* vi (1908) ("The best, and indeed the only proper, usage is the usage of the best."); John F. Genung, *Outlines of Rhetoric* 9 (1893) ("A most valuable habit to cultivate ... is the habit of observing words, especially as seen in the pages of the best writers; of tracing fine shades of meaning, and noting how suggestive, or felicitous, or accurately chosen they are. It is by keeping their sense for words alert and refined that good writers constantly enlarge and enrich their vocabulary."); Brainerd Kellogg, *A Text-Book on Rhetoric* 17 (1881) ("Rhetoric ... has only *usage* as authority for what it teaches – the usage of the best writers and speakers. And this is variable, changing from generation to generation.").

26 Bergen Evans @ Cornelia Evans, *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* v (1957) ("Respectable English ... means the kind of English that is used by the most respected people, the sort of English that will make readers or listeners regard you as an educated person.").

27 For a splendid example of this specious approach, see John Algeo, "What Makes Good English Good?" in *The Legacy of Language: A Tribute to Charlton Laird* 122–23 (Phillip C. Boardman ed., 1987).

28 I owe this argument to I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 52 (1936).

29 Richard W. Bailey, "Whose Usage? Fred Newton Scott @ the Standard of Speech," in *Centennial Usage Studies* 1 (Greta D. Little @ Michael Montgomery eds., 1994).

is that describers want comprehensive descriptions of languages, while prescribers unapologetically treat only a selective set of linguistic problems. Describers have criticized prescribers for this selectivity: “The normative tradition focuses on just a few dots in the vast and complex universe of the English language.”³⁰ Because describers are “scientists” who seek to record and catalogue all the observable linguistic phenomena they can, they will go into great detail about matters that have minimal interest to nonlinguists – why we don’t say *House brick built is*, for example. Prescribers, by contrast, write for a wide audience and deal mostly with issues that can taunt even seasoned writers – the difference between *hearty* and *hardy*, for example, or whether the correct form is *hare-brained* or *hairbrained*. So prescribers tend to assume that their readers already have some competence with the language.

Yet another major difference deals with the use of evidence. Describers amass linguistic evidence – the more the better. Prescribers often issue their opinions *ex cathedra*. In fact, inadequate consideration of linguistic evidence has traditionally been the prescribers’ greatest vulnerability. But the better prescribers, such as H.W. Fowler and Eric Partridge, have closely considered the facts underpinning their judgments. In my work, I take the descriptivist tack of citing voluminous evidence. I believe it is useful to see the contextual use of words, not in made-up examples but in published passages.³¹

INSTINCT VS. SKILL

While prescribers view language as involving a multitude of decisions, describers often discuss language as if its use were all a matter of instinct. “To a linguist or psycholinguist,” writes Steven Pinker of MIT, “language is like the song of the humpback whale.”³² He tenaciously pursues this odd comparison, ridiculing prescribers as if they were essentially the same as naturalists claiming that “chickadees’ nests are incorrectly constructed, pandas hold bamboo in the wrong paw, the song of the humpback whale contains several well-known errors, and monkeys’ cries have been in a state of chaos and degeneration for hundreds of years.”³³ He caps it off with this: “Isn’t the song of the humpback whale whatever the humpback whale decides to sing?”³⁴

The analogy is deeply fallacious in all sorts of ways. First, although the capacity for language may indeed be instinctive – and Pinker makes a good case for this in his book – the specifics of any given language (for example, why we call one object a *hat* and another a *table*) aren’t instinctive at all. Words are arbitrary symbols that are learned, and there are lots of nuances. Second, human beings must make myriad decisions when forming sentences and paragraphs, whereas other animals aren’t known to make the same kinds of decisions in following their instincts. Third, Pinker’s line of reasoning would eliminate any means for judging the effectiveness of human expression. Yet we all know – and Pinker knows very well –

30 Sidney Greenbaum, “Current Usage and the Experimenter,” 51 *Am. Speech* 163, 163 (1976).

31 Cf. Samuel Johnson, Preface, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) (“Authorities will sometimes seem to have been accumulated without necessity or use, and perhaps some will be found, which might, without loss, have been omitted. But a work of this kind is not hastily to be charged with superfluities: those quotations, which to careless or unskilful perusers appear only to repeat the same sense, will often exhibit, to a more accurate examiner, diversities of signification, or, at least, afford different shades of the same meaning.”).

32 Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* 370 (1994).

33 *Id.*

34 *Id.*

that some human beings communicate more effectively than others.

So much for the describers' misplaced scientism: it can lead to astounding instances of muddled thought.

Despite the describers' decades-old campaign to convince us that no uses of language are inherently better than others, literate people continue to yearn for guidance on linguistic questions. Yet consider what one well-known linguist, Robert A. Hall Jr., famously said: "There is no such thing as good and bad (or correct and incorrect, grammatical and ungrammatical, right and wrong) in language. ... A dictionary or grammar is not as good an authority for your speech as the way you yourself speak."³⁵ Some of the better theorists in the mid-20th century rejected this nihilism. Here, for example, is how Max Black responded:

This extreme position ... involves a confusion between investigating rules (or standards, norms) and prescribing or laying down such rules. Let us grant that a linguist, qua theoretical and dispassionate scientist, is not in the business of telling people how to talk; it by no means follows that the speakers he is studying are free from rules which ought to be recorded in any faithful and accurate report of their practices. A student of law is not a legislator; but it would be a gross fallacy to argue that therefore there can be no right or wrong in legal matters.³⁶

One might have thought that this no-right-and-no-wrong fallacy had long since been laid to rest. But it's very much with us, at least in academia. Through the latter half of the 20th century and still today, there has been an academic assault on linguistic standards. Today the remark "That's not good English" would likely be met with the rejoinder, "Says who?"

This is because people are increasingly hearing the dogma that no use of language is better than any other.

Today the teaching of standard English is even being labeled discriminatory. An essay published in 1998 by a University of Michigan linguist, James Milroy, says this: "In an age when discrimination in terms of race, color, religion, or gender is not publicly acceptable, the last bastion of overt social discrimination will continue to be a person's use of language."³⁷

In other words, the spirit of the day demands that you not think critically – or at least not think ill – of anyone else's use of language. If you believe in good grammar and linguistic sensitivity, *you're* the problem. And there is a large, powerful contingent in higher education today – larger and more powerful than ever before – trying to eradicate any thoughts about good and bad grammar, correct and incorrect word choices, effective and ineffective style.

THE TERMS OF A TRUCE

Prescribers should be free to advocate a realistic level of linguistic tidiness – without being molested for it – even as the describers are free to describe the mess all around them. If the prescribers have moderate success, then the describers should simply describe those successes. Education entailing normative values has always been a part of literate society. Why should it suddenly stop merely because describers see this kind of education as meddling with natural forces?

Meanwhile, prescribers need to be realistic. They can't expect perfection or permanence, and they must bow to universal usage. But

35 Robert A. Hall Jr., *Leave Your Language Alone!* 6 (1950).

36 Max Black, *The Labyrinth of Language* 70 (1968).

37 James Milroy, "Children Can't Speak or Write Properly Any More," in *Language Myths* 64–65 (Laurie Bauer & Peter Trudgill eds., 1998).

when an expression is in transition – when only part of the population has adopted a new usage that seems genuinely undesirable – prescribers should be allowed, within reason, to stigmatize it. There’s no reason to tolerate *wreckless driving* in place of *reckless driving*. Or *wasteband* in place of *waistband*. Or *corollary* when misused for *correlation*. Multiply these things by 10,000, and you have an idea of what we’re dealing with. There are legitimate objections to the slippage based not just on widespread confusion but also on imprecision of thought, on the spread of linguistic uncertainty, on the etymological disembodiment of words, and on decaying standards generally.


As Roy Harris has remarked: “There is no reason why prescriptive linguistics should not be ‘scientific,’ just as there is no reason why prescriptive medicine should not be.”³⁸ Harris went even further, denouncing the antiprescriptive doctrine as resulting from naiveté:

Twentieth-century linguists, anxious to claim “scientific” status for their new synchronic discipline, were glad enough to retain the old nineteenth-century whipping-boy of prescriptivism, in order thereby to distinguish their own concerns as “descriptive,” not “prescriptive.” When the history of twentieth-century linguistics comes to be written, a naive, unquestioning faith in the validity of this distinction will doubtless be seen as one of the main factors in the academic sociology of the subject.³⁹

Elsewhere Harris has referred to “the anti-prescriptivist witch-hunt in modern linguistics.”⁴⁰

Other linguists have explained the blind spot that misleads so many of their colleagues. In 1959, C.A. Ferguson suggested that linguists too often take a blinkered look at the language, ignoring its social import: “[Describers] in their understandable zeal to describe the internal structure of the language they are studying often fail to provide even the most elementary data about the socio-cultural setting in which the language functions.”⁴¹

Maybe this, in turn, is because linguistic investigations tend to be highly theoretical – and divorced from most people’s immediate interests in language. Barbara Wallraff, an *Atlantic* editor who is a prescriber with acute judgment, puts it in a self-deprecating⁴² way: “I am not an academic linguist or an etymologist. Linguistics and what I do stand in something like the relation between anthropology and cooking ethnic food, or between the history of art and art restoration.”⁴³ Other analogies might be equally apt, such as musicologists vis-à-vis musicians, or sociologists vis-à-vis ethicists.

To my knowledge, anthropologists don’t denounce ethnic food, and art historians don’t denounce art restorers – especially not when the cooks and the artisans know a thing or two about the material they’re dealing with. Musicologists don’t censure musicians who teach others how to produce a vibrato. Sociologists don’t look askance at ethicists who aim to guide human behavior. Those who study language could learn something from these other fields – something about balance, civility, and peaceful coexistence. 

38 Roy Harris, *The Language Makers* 151 (1980).

39 *Id.* at 151–52.

40 Roy Harris, *The Language Machine* 128 (1987).

41 C.A. Ferguson, “Principles of Teaching Languages with Diglossia,” in *Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics* 437 (1959).

42 I use this phrase advisedly. See pp. 198–99 of my *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (1998).

43 Barbara Wallraff, *Word Court* 2 (2000).