CORRECT ENGLISH

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I came to *Correct English: Reality or Myth?* thinking of myself as a modest prescriptivist. Thanks to Geoffrey Marnell I have come to understand that I need to distinguish my concern over the mechanics of the language as a tool for communication from the idea of grammatical rules per se, many of the traditional ones of which I myself have regarded as ill-informed and ill-advised. Marnell rightly regards the important issues as being not whether traditional rules are complied with, but whether language is used in accordance with principles of clarity and economy; and the common usage of our

intended audience should be a guide as to what works in respect of achieving that goal.

Marnell recapitulates many of the familiar examples of traditional rules based on prejudice and unfounded opinion and it is hard to disagree. Of course it is not wrong to split infinitives and often that is even the better option, inasmuch as it may contribute to clarity. But at the same time, it is also hard to see how a shift from rules to principles is not still a species of prescriptivism, differing only in what is being prescribed. Clarity and economy rather than traditional rules have become the main virtues to be pursued.

"We do not need the putative varieties of prescriptivism to write *well* (my italics)," he claims, "and *good* (my italics) writing *can* be taught" (p. 12). Yet it seems an odd notion of descriptivism that subsumes such notions as goodness, which is a prescriptive notion. Marnell is focused on the terms "correct" and "incorrect", although he does allow "wrong" as a virtual equivalent of the latter (pp. 51-52), and ignores the status of the other terms that he employs and that would ordinarily also be regarded as terms for prescribing: "well", "good", "should", "ought", "better", etc. It is one thing to say that good principles of writing or principles of good writing (or good practices) *should* be informed by descriptions of common usage; it is quite another to deny that this is just a new and better nuanced prescriptivism. When I attribute goodness I do not merely describe.

What is unusual about Marnell's explanation and defence of descriptivism is that it is basically a piece of applied philosophy, employing vocabulary, drawing distinctions, and referencing authors that would be familiar to many who have had a few introductory

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courses in philosophy: a priori vs. a posteriori, deductive vs. inductive reasoning, "justified true belief", categorical imperative, category mistake; Ryle, Wittgenstein, Hare, Beardsley, Ayer, Rawls, Hume. Moreover, he lays out arguments explicitly with numbered premises. As an academic philosopher, I love this. But one might wonder, will the wider audience for whom the book is intended be equally loving or become impatient with the fine dialectical manoeuvres? Let's hope it will educate and win some converts to the philosophical cause.

Through a series of tortuous arguments involving dictionary definitions, Marnell hopes to convince us that the use of "correct" and "incorrect" to describe language is a category mistake; he quotes Gilbert Ryle: "[A category mistake represents facts] as if they belonged to one logical type or category (or range of types or categories), when they actually belong to another" (Marnell, p. 88).

Marnell believes that correctness belongs to the category of things we can know, and he claims grammar cannot be placed in that category. It turns out that his underlying reason for this is that sentences that purport to express grammatical knowledge, viz. grammatical prescriptions, cannot be true or correct because they are categorical imperatives (unconditional commands) and commands cannot be true or false. Well, I agree he is correct (!) that commands cannot be true or false. However, they can still be appropriate or inappropriate: For two-way roads, "Drive on the right" is an appropriate command in Canada, but inappropriate in Australia. "Pass the salt" is infelicitous if there is no salt. However, the problem for Marnell is that rules or prescriptions don't have to be expressed as commands: "You ought not to do X", "You should not do X", "It is wrong to do X"

are all declarative (or indicative) sentences. Moreover, the reductive thesis that value-judgements are disguised commands is controversial and not widely accepted. Many people believe there is such a thing as moral truth, after all.

Indeed, it is odd to see a descriptivist arguing that it is a mistake (as in "incorrect"?) to call a rule in the declarative form "correct" (or even that it is a mistake to regard *any* particular piece of language as correct or incorrect) given that it is such a common and well established usage.

Marnell approvingly quotes Hume's claim that an "ought"-statement cannot be derived from an "is"-statement. He calls Hume's "ought"-statements "imperative *statements*" but that is a bit of sleight of hand; imperatives don't make statements. Hume himself regarded "ought"-statements (his term is "propositions") as capable of expressing truths or falsehoods — he just didn't believe you could derive them without an "ought"-statement among the premises.

Marnell devotes a large chapter to what he calls "the myth of correctness". After reading Marnell, I want to add a myth of my own: the myth of prescriptivists vs. descriptivists. As far as I can tell, it's *all* prescriptivism, with the differences just being a matter of degree. Marnell divides prescriptivists into two camps, *strong* and *weak*. At the very far end of the spectrum you would have his strong prescriptivists, viz. those who believe in "inviolable laws of language use that should never be broken" (p. 56), and next door you would have his weak prescriptivists, viz. those who believe that language can at best be governed by rules (conventions), not laws, where the rules are regarded as a product of human

intervention, but still worth treating as inviolable. One might be suspicious of the strong/weak distinction, but perhaps a case can be made for laws of grammar being analogous to Aristotle's Laws of Thought, thereby rationalizing a belief that grammar is not governed by mere convention. (I have encountered grammar Nazis but never one who actually believed anything like that, and I suspect that upon closer examination an ostensible strong prescriptivist would turn out to be just a vehement weak prescriptivist, but at least the stronger position is conceivable if nothing else.)

Nevertheless, even by Marnell's own lights there are no descriptivists who do not offer prescriptions for language use; their prescriptions are just more modest and limited in scope. Marnell's descriptivists are not mere practitioners or aficionados of descriptive linguistics. They make recommendations based on common usage and the goal of communication, and what they recommend is deemed to be *better*. (What exactly is "common usage" anyway? The concept itself is vague and at best based on extrapolations from limited data subjected, for better or worse, to various selection criteria.)

Marnell, as a descriptivist, maintains that "communication is paramount and … in general the best way to achieve it is by adopting the conventions of one's audience (whoever they might be)" (p. 175). Many of us have had the experience of reading instructions for a product written by someone whose native language is obviously not English and whose prose is so incomprehensible that even educated guesswork is of no help. Is the error of the instructions' writer simply that he hasn't taken the common usage of his particular audience into account? That's unlikely. In such cases it's

virtually certain that an audience for which that would be common usage does not exist. The instructions' writer knows what he means to say (one hopes) but cannot say it in idiomatic English. Is it really plausible to regard his English as neither correct nor incorrect?

As a university professor I have had students, whose first and only language is English, write sentences that are gobbledygook; yet they cannot understand what is wrong with the sentences or coherently explain what they mean. Such students are the victims of a school system that replaced literature, grammar, and composition with so-called "language arts", which seems to have consisted mostly of rap sessions and movies. They were not taught grammar because it was contended that as native speakers they already knew how to properly speak the language. Not even having learned about parts of speech and the roles of those parts, they ended up producing sentences that couldn't be parsed (oh, for the days of sentence diagrams). The common usage of a group may not be adequate to the demands of communication in a technologically advanced society, and educators need to step in, prescriptions in hand, to educate the intended audience. The resources of pidgin aren't always up to the task.

I confess that part of my motivation for prescriptivism has always been the hope that it would slow down linguistic change. It saddens me that much of the English canon is becoming less and less accessible because of change (but not only because of change: many young people have not been taught how to understand sentences with embeddings and subordination). I don't deny that change is inevitable, but I don't want to embrace it as Marnell seems to and I wish he had more sympathy for such concerns.

Be that as it may, *Correct English: Reality or Myth?* is an important book. As far as I know, it is the first of its genre that can justifiably be regarded as being significantly a work in applied philosophy. The issues it addresses, as well as those it hints at in passing (e.g. national policies for language), deserve further study and should become part of a more broadly envisaged philosophy of language.

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