

Bad Grammar

What Happens Next - 04.06.2024

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, politics, and medicine.

Today's topic is Bad Grammar.

Our speaker today is Anne Curzan who is the Dean of Literature, Science and Arts at the University of Michigan and the author of, *Says Who? A Kinder, Funner Usage Guide for Everyone Who Cares About Words*.

We will discuss the ongoing changes in proper usage of words, the growing importance of Microsoft Word Grammar Checker, how to effectively use dictionaries, and the role of non-native speakers in the evolution of the English language.

Buckle up!

Anne Curzan:

The English language is always on the move, and this is a source of delight to me. Younger speakers are saying “on accident,” “must” is on the decline and “have to” is on the ascent. I love it. And I have to say language change also keeps me in business as a historian of the English language. But I recognize that language can be a source of anxiety whether that is because you worry that all this change is ruining the language or perhaps because you worry that there are all these rules out there that you never learned and might trip you up. And this is exactly why I wrote the book, *Says Who? A Kinder, Funner Usage Guide for Everyone Who Cares About Words*.

I wear multiple hats. I'm a linguist who studies how language varies across communities and changes over time. I'm also an English professor who wants to make sure students can make fully informed choices as writers and speakers as they navigate all the ideas about correctness and rules about quote unquote good usage that are out there. I'm also a copy editor who notices every comma and I'm a former member of the American Heritage Dictionary Usage Panel. One of the key messages of the book is that we can care deeply about language and still embrace change and variation. We can be effective and careful writers and be kinder to each other about usage.

Diversity in language is part of the diversity of speakers and the English language is always changing, which can seem much cooler in retrospect than it does in the moment. It seems fun to

us now, that “nice” used to mean “silly,” and that the pronoun “you” used to be only plural and then became both singular and plural but kept the plural verb “are.” But it can seem worrisome that the verb “peruse” can now mean skim or that “whom” is falling out of usage.

In writing the book about how to talk about this sense of worry is that we each have an inner grammando in our head including people like me. The word grammando was introduced by Lizzie Skurnick in the column, *That Should Be a Word*, in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* in 2012. She defines it as someone who constantly corrects other people's grammar. I have adopted the term to talk about this voice in our head that may hear new or unfamiliar usage that surprises us. I'm honest that I don't like the word “impactful.” I do not have any good reason for this, but I find it aesthetically displeasing. And I recently had a strong reaction to the business jargon double -click.

I also have a very well-informed and loud inner wordy. And wordy is a relatively new word that refers to a lover of words. I would guess many of you play wordle or spelling bee, or you like to pun. We enjoy language. And this book aims to get more information to your inner grammando, and your inner wordy so that they can have more informed debates before you decide what you want to do as a speaker or writer, or whether you want to judge or comment on someone else's language. And a key part of that information is that notions of correctness and standardization are not stable over time or even across educated speakers.

As a historian of the language, I collect information not only about how the language changes over time but about attitudes about language and how they change over time. I have complaints from centuries ago about how terrible the word “colonize” is or the word “donate.” And that seems very quaint now. Many of our concerns today are going to seem quaint 50 or 100 years from now. And one of the many things I learned on the *American Heritage Dictionary Usage Panel* is that educated folks do not all agree about what is acceptable in more formal settings.

As opposed to finding it a problem or a source of worry that ideas about correctness are not absolute or not stable, we should see it as permission to ask, “Says Who?” when we're told that something isn't acceptable. We should try to get more information. Is this a useful rule or not? And then we can make informed decisions that are focused on clarity and rhetorical effectiveness about prevalence, about our own personal preferences. And with that information, we can be more generous listeners and readers when we encounter language that might surprise us or jar us. People can be very judgy about language. And one of my goals is to inject more kindness and more fun, along with better information into our conversations about usage.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's start with the *American Heritage Usage Panel*. What is it? How did you get chosen to be included in the panel? And why should we care about it?

Anne Curzan:

Those are all great questions and I wish more people asked those questions. If you look in the American Heritage Dictionary, including the online version, you will find usage notes. For example, if you look up something like the word *finalize*, you will find a usage note. And in the usage note, you will see the results of a poll of the usage panel. The usage panel was about 200 people. How they were selected is an excellent question. About 12 of those people are linguists. It is also famous novelists. Antonin Scalia was on there. Will Schwartz was on there. Historically, it was quite conservative. It was often critiqued as being very male and very white. They tried to diversify the panel over time.

And what we received every year was a ballot with a set of usage questions where we were asked whether we thought something was acceptable usage. So, for example, you might get *finalized* as one of the usage questions and you get a sentence with the verb *finalize* and you had four choices, completely unacceptable, somewhat unacceptable, somewhat acceptable, completely acceptable.

And you had to pick one; you were not allowed to just punt. When you look in the dictionary and you see something like 70% of the panel rejects this sentence of 200 people. There weren't particularly good specifications about what we should think about as acceptable or unacceptable except in more formal context. And from what I know from the American Heritage Dictionary editors, their sense was that some people filled it out over a cup of coffee based on their personal preferences about what is acceptable or unacceptable. Some of us like me, because I am trained as a linguist, went to look at actual usage to see, is this used in edited writing? And if so, I am going to mark it as acceptable. But that is what that panel was. It was disbanded in 2018. You will still find the usage notes, but it is no longer updated.

Why should we care? It is a really important question. We should care for two reasons. One is people should understand what that usage panel is so that when they read the note, they do not think that this is some absolute authority about language. It's the opinion of 200 people asked on a survey. The second reason it's helpful is that it allows us to get a sense of whether a subset of educated people might be cranky about something. It does not mean that that construction is not acceptable or wrong, but it does mean that in some contexts you may encounter crankiness in readers or listeners. And to be a rhetorically effective writer or speaker, it is helpful to know what you might encounter.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book, you often say that this use has changed over time and the crankiness level varies over time. And the American Heritage Dictionary Survey panel's views change over time and

they are getting more or they're getting less cranky. And that is important to you. How should we think about crankiness over time?

Anne Curzan:

Finalize is a great example of this, that when they started doing surveys on finalize in the late 1960s, the panel was very cranky about this verb. It was seen as bureaucratic jargon, unnecessary. For many listeners now, finalize feels neutral, not particularly jargony.

In the book I say it is the sound of a peeve dying. It goes back to a comment I made in those first six minutes about accepting that notions of correctness or standard change over time because they do. Sometimes people are cranky because something is new. Sometimes they are cranky because they have just noticed it.

A good example in the book of that is “hopefully” as a sentence adverb used to mean it is hoped. We will say, hopefully it will stop snowing here in the Midwest. That means there's a general hope. I am probably part of that hope, but it's not just me. That usage started in the early 20th century, and it was bubbling along. Nobody had noticed that it had happened. And then in the 1960s, it came onto the radar of grammarians.

And some of them said, this is terrible usage. You should not use hopefully as a sentence adverb. You all should stop that. Now, of course, we did not stop that as speakers. We continue to use, “hopefully,” to mean it is hoped. But if you look at edited writing, you see a dramatic drop in edited writing because editors were told you need to edit that out. And so, they do. It did not change how we speak, but for a while, it changed how we wrote.

But in the 21st century, many usage guides have given up the fight and said, fine, fine, you can use hopefully as a sentence adverb, because it works the same way as a sentence adverb, like “mercifully,” and nobody has their hackles up about that.

Larry Bernstein

I sense your sense of frustration and anger that the American Heritage Dictionary has decided to abandon this usage survey. And I wonder why you think it's important that that institution continue within that organization.

Why doesn't Ann Curzan start a usage survey? Why don't you start something else and follow up where they have given up?

Anne Curzan:

Larry, that is so interesting to me that you sense that I'm frustrated that the panel was ended because I don't think that is my reaction. The panel its history is a response to the controversy

over Webster's Third New International Dictionary, which came out in the early 1960s. It was a very descriptive dictionary. They took out a lot of usage labels and it was very controversial. And a lot of people thought that the editors of Webster's Third had abandoned the prescriptive role of a dictionary. They thought that the dictionary should be providing more judgment. It shouldn't just be recording, but it should also be judging.

Most dictionary editors will tell you that they see their job as describing the language. They are just trying to keep up with all of us. We are changing the language. We're introducing new words. We're changing the meaning of words. It's part of a living language. And they are tracking us. And once they think something is going to stick, they'll get it into a dictionary.

But we as users tend to go to dictionaries to find the right answer. What does that word mean? And the dictionary editors would say, "we're just recording the way you all are using the language and we might not have caught up to you yet." The usage panel that American Heritage created was a direct response to the controversy over Webster's Third that it opened the market where people said, Merriam-Webster is not doing its job. American Heritage jumped in and said, "you want more guidance? We'll create this usage panel that will give you guidance." So, it was designed in a more prescriptive way to give people guidance. I do think that there is a useful aspect to that of getting a sense of the crankiness temperature of a set of educated people. But I also think that fundamentally the role of a dictionary is to record language as it is used.

Larry Bernstein:

I took several courses on the Great Courses on language. Two with you for How a Conversation Works and English Grammar Bootcamp. But I also one Kevin Flanagan called Building a Better Vocabulary.

Kevin Flanagan suggested that we need to be more active users of dictionaries. There is this site called One Look. You type in the word and underneath are 20 different dictionaries use of a word. And they are different. The Collier Dictionary spends time going over how often it is used over time, and then which definition of the word is used more frequently. Other dictionaries use the word in text, articles, or books.

How do you use dictionaries? How should our listeners use dictionaries? And what should be our objectives of using these dictionaries?

Anne Curzan:

There are so many things I love about this question because I spend so much time thinking about dictionaries. I love dictionaries. I collect dictionaries. Dictionaries are fascinating. They are a remarkable resource. And they are so much more interesting than people give them credit for.

A resource like One Look is especially important in that it highlights that you're going to find different definitions in different dictionaries and different editors are going to have different approaches and philosophies about what a dictionary should do. We should be curious about that. We can think more carefully about how words work, what they mean, which dictionaries we find especially helpful.

The world of dictionaries has also changed in the online world. Dictionaries used to be very constrained by pages and they were trying to keep dictionaries at a reasonable price, which meant that if you were going to put some new words in, you had to take words out. It also meant that you had to keep definitions concise. So maybe you could not include too many examples of it used in a text because they needed to save space.

Now that many dictionaries are online, you can provide lots of textual examples. You can provide more commentary. That information is helpful for us figuring out how does a word work? Because a definition will get you only so far. It can only be so nuanced in terms of not only what does that word mean denotationally, but how does it function in a sentence? What are some of the connotations that come with it?

I am a huge fan of more information and definitions sitting alongside each other to become a more informed user of words. What it comes down to for me is that we become more effective writers and speakers when we have more information, and our curiosity is stoked.

Larry Bernstein:

I am in the trading business, and I use a Bloomberg terminal. And the Bloomberg terminal, if you typed in W-O-R-D and hit return, it was a dictionary, and you could type in the word you wanted, and it would give you a definition. And for the longest time, the dictionary was the Oxford English Dictionary.

And then one day it changed to the American Heritage Dictionary. I ran to the head of global arbitrage trading at Salmon Brothers. And I said, what are we going to do? And he said, Larry, I think for your purposes, the American Heritage Dictionary will be sufficient.

Anne Curzan:

You were probably the only person who noticed.

Larry Bernstein:

And there is a huge difference between the Oxford English Dictionary and the American Heritage Dictionary. Maybe you could articulate the differences and why you decide which one to use.

Anne Curzan:

I am someone who typically is going to look at several dictionaries because I have learned that they function so differently and the more information I can get the better informed I feel. The Oxford English Dictionary is a historical dictionary. The goal of that dictionary when it was first proposed in the 19th century was to record the history of every word in the language, which is an incredibly ambitious goal for a dictionary. It is an enormous dictionary, and it records the changes in word meaning over time. It is the resource you can go in and look up, for example, lollygag and discover that when that word first came into English, it meant, among other things, to fool around in the kissing sense of fool around.

There are other Oxford dictionaries that are designed to capture contemporary usage and not as much the history of every word. American Heritage has the usage panel, so they are trying to provide some guidance when they think there is a usage issue. But fundamentally this whole discussion captures the problem with the phrase look it up in the dictionary. And I want to ask, which dictionary? What year was it published? Who was the editor? Because it matters.

Larry Bernstein:

Going back to another thing that Kevin Flanagan said in Building a Better Vocabulary is he wanted to list synonyms for a word and then try to decide which one of those words removed ambiguity and promoted clarity. You got to go reach for your thesaurus for that. How do you think about when to use the thesaurus, when to use the dictionary, and how they complement each other.

Anne Curzan:

I'll certainly turn to a thesaurus when I'm looking for synonyms. Online dictionaries there will be a link to a list of synonyms. Those lines between a thesaurus and a dictionary have gotten blurrier in this online world where we are not constrained by space.

The whole question of synonyms is interesting. There are linguists who will argue that there are no such thing as true synonyms. All words have slightly different connotations. They are going to mean slightly different things or be used in somewhat different ways. Where I want to double down or as my business girlfriends would say “double click” is your point about clarity and rhetorical effectiveness when we are choosing among synonyms. Because when people hear the arguments, I am making, they will say, anybody can use anything anytime. That is not what I'm saying. What I am saying is that caring about language can involve curiosity and an openness to change.

Larry Bernstein:

I worked with Salmon Brothers I had the opportunity to run an office in Tokyo. I worked in London, New York, and Chicago. The use of English language differed depending on which

office I was in. Sometimes words would have different meaning geographically speaking. For example, the use of the word brilliant if used in the New York office reflected some insightful idea where in England brilliant meant something above average and of no real importance. I was working in the emerging markets department, and in 1997 there was an Asian financial crisis. English was the language for business in Asia. But their use of the English language in a business setting was often for my grammatical ears, not right. They would use the expression so-called often more than once in a sentence.

They would say something like, in 1994, there was a so-called Tequila Crisis that resulted in the collapse of so-called emerging markets debt. Why are you doing that? Do you want to give yourself more time? But it was not just one guy. It was widely popular in its use.

Today, there are more Nigerians speaking English than there are Englishmen speaking English. There are multiples more people speaking English in India than there are Americans speaking English. English is the lingua franca for all business globally. And those speakers will adapt their local customs, their local languages, and apply it into English. And it is just a matter of time before we will engage with them in these business settings and say that's so-called good. I want to adopt those. How do you think about the use of language and its global nature and cross use?

Anne Curzan:

It is a fascinating time to be a historian of the English language. 500 years ago, if you had said English will be a global language, if there is a lingua franca, if there is a global language, it will be English. People would have thought that that was ludicrous. English was a language spoken on an island off the coast of France. And it was seen as unworthy compared with Latin and French.

During the Renaissance, there was a real effort to make English better. And that was part of why we borrowed thousands of words from Latin, Greek, Italian, and French. And because of imperialism and colonialism, English spread around the world. But for my perspective, life is long and who knows what's going to be true a few hundred years from now. It is true that right now English is spoken around the globe. And linguists will talk about world Englishes, that there are many varieties of English around the world. I will say Microsoft Spellchecker does not like Englishes as a plural, but as linguists, we use it anyway.

You also make an important point about speakers of English. There are many more speakers of English as a second language than there are speakers of English as a first language and many of the speakers of English, including speakers of English as a first language, speak other languages alongside English. So, the future of English likely belongs to all the speakers who speak English alongside other languages as opposed to monolingual English speakers. And when you speak English alongside other languages, those languages will influence the form of English that you

speak. South African English is different from Singaporean English, is different from Nigerian English, Indian English, American English, New Zealand English. They're all legitimate varieties. And then you have, as you're noting, varieties of English that are being used in business contexts as a lingua franca among speakers of many first languages. And there will be adaptations in those contexts.

What I love about your example is your suggestion that we will all learn to adopt the linguistic conventions within context where we want to succeed. So, if “so-called” is clearly a popular way of speaking in this context and we want to be accepted in this context, we will start to adopt the language in this context. And as power shifts over time, it will be interesting to watch what happens with world Englishes that what varieties of English people see as the most prestigious to control will correspond with social, political, and economic power.

Larry Bernstein:

With my podcast What Happens Next, I spend a substantial portion of my week editing the transcripts. I use the AI version, and Microsoft Word Grammar Checker doesn't like what my speakers are saying.

How do you feel about Microsoft Word's influence on the language? And should Microsoft use a usage panel to evaluate these decisions?

Anne Curzan:

You make the point that the way we speak is different from the way we write, and Microsoft Word is trying to adhere to particular rules about the way we write. I would guess that Microsoft wants to get rid of the adverb “very” because there's a sense that often you don't need intensifiers. If it's important, it's important. You do not need to say “very.”

I would say in writing, that's generally good advice just to go back and look at those intensifiers and see if you need them. But in speech, we often want to be emphatic. We want to make the point.

Microsoft Word Grammar Checker is a powerful force in the world. It is typically on by default, and it underlines things in our writing and suggests that there is a usage problem there. I did research on this about 15 years ago, and I could get information about what dictionaries Microsoft was using for the spell checker, but I could not get reliable information about what usage guides they were using for the grammar checker.

If I could get that grammar box to pop up with the kind of information that I include in Says Who? which is balanced information about where does this rule come from? Is this a useful rule?

That would be such a powerful way to help people make informed choices as writers. I would love to harness the power of that in a more descriptive way to help people make decisions.

Larry Bernstein:

I have read three of your books. Fixing English is an academic book that I found difficult to read because it uses a lot of linguist jargon. The second was How English Works that was a grammar textbook, and now your just released book entitled Says Who? Which is fun, not didactic, and written with humor for a broad audience. Why didn't you write your other books in a similar style as Says Who? Why can't academic books be beautifully written without jargon? Why did you write these books so differently?

Anne Curzan:

You ask such great questions. I love this one too. You are absolutely right. I use a different voice in all three of those books. My first two books, the first one is called Gender Shifts in the History of English and the second one is Fixing English are academic books. They are written for my fellow linguists, my fellow historians of the English language. They are published with academic presses. And I know that they are going to have a very small audience. I have written a good number of pieces and two books that are written to advance my own field. I tried to make them as good a read as I could within the genre of academic writing, which has conventions about how you cite other scholarship and how you advance the argument. I love writing for broader audiences, so when Michael Adams and I had the chance to write the textbook, we embraced the chance to write to students. You are trying to help students master a field. There is a different tone. You are outlining concepts and trying to explain them. But we certainly tried to make it more readable and more fun than most textbooks. One could argue about whether we succeeded, but we tried.

Says Who? is my first trade book. It's my first book to as broad an audience as I can reach. I loved writing it. I really appreciate you saying it lets us laugh along. It's what I want people to get to do. We can learn best when we're entertained.

It's intellectually interesting, but it also personally grabs us through stories, through humor, and that that's a great way to learn. Historically in universities that writing is not the writing that has been valued in the promotion system. And that is a reality of the academic world in which I work. I'm currently serving as the Dean of the College of Literature, Science and the Arts at the University of Michigan. And I have worked to convey the message that all the different genres that we're trying to advance as academics should count. So that's very formal academic work all the way through more public trade books. But historically, we have tended in the academy to value the former and not the latter.

Larry Bernstein:

What are you optimistic about as it relates to the future of the English language?

Anne Curzan:

I'm optimistic that the future of English will be fascinating and that it will reflect the contact of English with hundreds, if not thousands of other languages around the world. And I am excited to watch what that means for Englishes. And the future of English is Englishes.

Larry Bernstein:

This is part one of a two-part series with Anne Curzan. In the second part, Anne will discuss the benefits of jargon with insiders, teaching grammar to kids, the changing pronunciation of words and dialects, and the ongoing evolution of the English language.

If you missed our previous podcast the topic was Argentina Won't Pay!

Our speaker was Greg Makoff who has a new book entitled Default: The Landmark Court Battle over Argentina's \$100 Billion Debt Restructuring.

Emerging market countries issue billions of new bonds each year, and several of these countries will not pay their creditors back. We heard what happened in Argentina as a test case to ascertain what the appropriate public policy response should be for the IMF and the Federal courts to assist investors to restructure these debts.

I first met Greg when we worked together at Salomon Brothers 30 years ago, and Greg explained the implications for a lack of a bankruptcy solution for a sovereign, and that means that there will likely be a long-drawn-out fight.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.