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Analyzing Grammar Rants: An Alternative to Traditional Grammar Instruction

Kenneth Lindblom and Patricia A. Dunn teach language awareness and use through published complaints about the teaching of grammar. Students are able to recognize issues of race and class that determine acceptable usage and learn the importance of audience in their own language use.

There are excellent reasons for teachers to avoid traditional grammar instruction, the kind of grammar instruction in which students are exposed to lists of "the rules" of "proper" or "good" grammar and are expected to produce writing that fits within those constraints. Traditional grammar instruction can encourage distorted views of how language works, ignoring some of the most interesting aspects of language shift and change. Traditional grammar instruction can help to perpetuate cultural prejudices regarding class and race that are mirrored in what is often referred to as the difference between "correct" and "incorrect" or between "proper" and "improper" language use. Perhaps most important, a series of respected studies conducted since the 1960s has consistently shown that traditional grammar instruction does *not* help students write better. In fact, some studies suggest traditional grammar instruction causes students to make *more* errors in their writing.

In this article we do not survey the research and revisit the arguments against traditional grammar instruction as we have elsewhere (Dunn and Lindblom, "Developing," "Why"), but rather we focus on more effective instruction in grammar and usage. We seek ways of helping students to understand the subtleties of language, to know how a particular turn of phrase can connote to audiences a host of unstated points, and to be aware that their writing is going to be judged as a reflection of their intelligence and ability in and out of school. We seek methods to help students develop rhetorical knowledge of audience and context, to become what we call "savvy writers."

What Are Grammar Rants?

Journalists, cultural critics, politicians, and others frequently publish their complaints about the teaching of grammar, spelling, writing, and speaking. Because these laments are often heated, we call these writings "grammar rants." They go back as far as ancient Greece and appear frequently today in newspapers.

Consider, for example, a Dear Abby column, which begins: "A while back, I wrote a column on the misuse of words and other irritants and named a few" (Phillips and Phillips D2). From there Abby describes and defends her list of "irritants" (including use of double negatives, regional "mispronunciations," and using words that are not "proper," such as *irregardless*). We find Abby's column a superbly useful grammar rant. As we explain later in this essay, most of Abby's complaints are based not on "good grammar," as her title suggests ("Good Grammar Magic to Her Ears"), but on assumptions about power, class, and race—issues of language that all students should learn. Also important is that the specific points Abby makes about English usage in the piece relate to some of the very rules of Standard English that many student writers have trouble employing in their school writing.

We have found such grammar rants to be especially productive (and even fun) ways of helping students to learn about sociopolitical assumptions underpinning language prescriptions and the rules of Standard English students must learn to employ effectively.

Why Begin with Grammar Rants?

Traditional grammar instruction often begins with study of a list of prescriptions for language use. In contrast, we suggest beginning with grammar rants for three important reasons. First, grammar rants are more interesting and more fun for adolescents to explore than are stale lists of rules. Often expressed through venomous, heated prose, grammar rants bring a drama to what can otherwise be a dry subject for students; that is, students are more likely to understand and remember rules of Standard English if they are exposed to them though engaging rants than through a generic list. Some teachers believe that students can only appreciate grammar rants once they know the rules. We believe precisely the opposite: we find the students who are most inspired by grammar rant analysis are those who have resisted traditional grammar instruction.

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Even more important, however, is our second reason. A grammar rant from a prominent cultural figure highlights the central point of our analysis: Whether we like it or not, powerful people make value judgments about other people's intelligence based on language use. Young writers and speakers must learn that the forms of language they choose will be judged, sometimes harshly, by their audiences, and their ability to appear intelligent will be affected by their audiences' opinions of their language choices. Cultural figures who write grammar rants speak for powerful segments of society—people who have the power to hire and fire, admit to colleges and professional organizations, and arbitrate financial or legal negotiations. To be successful in their lives, young writers and speakers must

understand what powerful people believe about language use. These beliefs can be usefully teased out from the grammar rants that regularly appear in print all around us.

Grammar rants are also useful because they tend to focus on the least obviously complicated, least specialized, and arguably most important aspects of language use: the direct impact of language use on communication of meaning and the social connotations that are embedded in language choices.

Topics of Study for Grammar Rants

We begin analysis of a grammar rant by asking simple, but generative (in fact, some might even say, *loaded*), questions:

1. What does the author of the grammar rant think is important about language and communication?

2. What does the author say about errors or mistakes in people's writing or speaking? What are examples of what this author would consider "errors" or "mistakes"? What do our grammar handbooks say about these uses of language?

3. Do the author's claims about what is right or wrong in language always hold true in any communication situation, or can you think of exceptions? Does the author acknowledge exceptions? What does the presence of exceptions do to the validity of the author's claim?

4. How do the author's claims about language relate to the socioeconomic class in which speakers and writers have been raised? Does the author acknowledge these connections? What do these connections between the author's claims and socioeconomics do to the validity of the author's claims?

5. How does the author's claim about language relate to the race of readers and writers? Does the author acknowledge these connections? What do these connections between the author's claims and race do to the validity of the author's claims?

6. How does the author's claim about language relate to the cultural or geographical region in which a speaker or writer is raised? Does the author acknowledge these connections? What do these connections between the

author's claims and cultural or geographic region do to the validity of the author's claims?

7. What can you tell about the author's connection of language use to the intelligence of speakers or writers? Does the author acknowledge these connections? What do these connections between the author's claims and intelligence do to the validity of the author's claims?

8. What can you tell about the author's connection of language use to the ethical or moral character of speakers or writers? Does the author acknowledge these connections? What do these connections between the author's claims and ethical or moral character do to the validity of the author's claims?

Questions such as these raise important, critical, and sophisticated aspects of language analysis. Because the questions do not require a specialized knowledge of linguistics, students across ability levels can join the discussion. The questions can spark engaged and emphatic debate among students. They can inspire individual research. And, do not be surprised if grammar rant analysis spills over into dinnertime discussions in the students' homes.

Using such questions, an English language arts teacher can guide discussion of grammar rants in ways that encourage students to become more aware of the language beliefs of powerful people and to become more aware of what such people are likely to consider "right" and "wrong." Students are also far more likely to examine and understand what are the more standard conventions for written English and what are the more controversial aspects of usage.

Examples of Grammar Rant Analysis: Bill O'Reilly and Dear Abby

Analyzing grammar rants can take many forms and, with creative teaching, can go in many directions. We present two examples here to give a sense of the instructional range possible. The first begins more philosophically and moves to close language analysis. The second takes the converse route. Both have the potential to generate the kind of useful language analysis likely to develop language savvy in students.

The O'Reilly Rant

Syndicated columnist Bill O'Reilly, in a rant against rap artist Eminem, argues against what he thinks "demeans our basic values." In the context of his larger rant, O'Reilly issues a short grammar rant that is worth examining further: "If a working-class or poor child rejects education, does not learn to speak properly, does not respect just authority and does not understand that having babies at age 14 is a ticket to ruin, then that child's life will likely be tragic" (C4). On the surface, O'Reilly makes what is a fairly simple and common point. A closer analysis, of course, reveals cultural prejudices and rashly constructed connections among morality, education, socioeconomic class, intelligence, and language use. Applying questions such as those listed in the previous section, we ask students: What are the assumptions behind O'Reilly's statement? What, specifically, does he mean by "to speak properly"? How could failing to "speak properly" contribute to a "ticket to ruin" and a "tragic" life? How does language (i.e., speaking "properly") fit in the context of rejecting education, respecting authority, and having babies at a young age? From O'Reilly's perspective, who speaks "properly" and who does not? Who gets to define what is deemed "proper"?

> We also direct students to find examples of phrases "in the field" by having them eavesdrop on conversations in the school cafeteria, list phrases used by friends and relatives, and note their own language use.

To ensure that students' analysis of this grammar rant focuses on language use, we ask them to create lists of language uses (phrases and words) that O'Reilly would be likely to consider "proper" and "improper." Since he identifies rap music as a source, we ask students to scour rap lyrics for examples of "proper" and "improper" language. We also direct students to find examples of phrases "in the field" by having them eavesdrop on conversations in the school cafeteria, list phrases used by friends and relatives, and note their own language use. Students' lists frequently include a variety of ways in which people denote subject-verb agreement, plurality, and possession. Having made lists of O'Reilly-inspired "proper" and "improper" language usages, students examine what several grammar and usage handbooks have to say about the

"errors" they collected. They find the language issues involved in each case are far more complex than O'Reilly's rant acknowledges.

O'Reilly's rant is explicitly sociopolitical, and we do not avoid that aspect of the rant. But by focusing students' examinations specifically on language use (even sending them out to collect empirical language data from the field), we also use the grammar rant as a springboard for in-depth exploration of specific language use. In the context of this sociopolitical discussion, the students seriously study language and handbooks, seem to understand better the ramifications for their use of language and, we hope, will be more attuned to the choices they make in future contexts.

> **The truth is, Standard English does not really make any more sense than nonstandardized dialects of English—in some cases, Standard English is simply a set of sanctioned language idiosyncrasies.**

Dear Abby's "Pet Peeves"

The Dear Abby column we mentioned earlier has generated many useful close examinations of language use in our English classes. "Good Grammar Magic to Her Ears" lists what Abby calls "rules of basic grammar" but these rules are actually "pet peeves" of usage she collected from readers. A descriptive list of almost two dozen language "irritants," this column is perfect for critical discussion of what counts as correct and incorrect among ordinary English speakers and writers.

To facilitate discussion of the issues, we have devised a chart (see fig. 1) that asks students to list the following information about each pet peeve: the pet peeve itself; the reason given for why the pet peeve is perceived as an error; the type of "error"—one that interferes with meaning, marks the speaker/writer's race or social class, and/or represents hypercorrectness[1]; and we leave space in the chart for the analyst's comments. Depending on the level of the students, we provide more or less information in the chart for them, and we ask them to work—generally in groups—to fill in the rest. (Here, we have completed the chart.) The chart is intended to help students focus on particular issues of language use they find worth discussing further. The completed chart is a means to generate valuable discussion, not the goal.

The pet peeves included in Figure 1 have proven especially interesting, and the comments we included are our own. For example, the word *irregardless* does grind on some people's nerves, and Abby even points out that "it has nosed its way into the dictionary." But why should *irregardless* irritate people so, if flammable and inflammable are perfectly acceptable as synonyms in Standard English? The truth is, Standard English does not really make any more sense than nonstandardized dialects of English—in some cases, Standard English is simply a set of sanctioned language idiosyncrasies. But if one is speaking to an audience that subscribes to Standard English conventions and that audience is more powerful than the speaker, that speaker should avoid using the word *irregardless.*

Far more interesting are some of the pet peeves that reveal (or appear to reveal) that the speaker is from a lower socioeconomic class or is not Caucasian: double negatives, "youse" for *you,* and "nuke-you-ler" for *nuclear.*

We have all learned that, logically, double negatives mean a positive, but no one in real-world communication ever actually misunderstands them[2]; the real problem of double negatives results from the hearer's perception of the speaker's race or social class and the hearer's assumptions about the abilities and intelligence of members of that race or class.

How about *youse* (or *y'all,* for that matter) for *you?* Sometimes it is useful to have a word that means "you bunch of people" and that cannot be interpreted as just "you" alone. Still, *youse* or *y'all* will certainly be read as wrong by some people, and if students encounter these people—on standardized tests or on job interviews—they should be prepared to avoid regional terms that will be used against them.

Pronunciation of the word *nuclear* has been a hot topic since George W. Bush, an infamous "nuke-you-ler" user, was elected president. We believe his pronunciation is deliberate and that it is intended to give President Bush the character of an ordinary Texan, when he is actually a Harvard- and Yale-educated, old-money millionaire from Maine whose family enjoys extraordinarily powerful political connections going back at least three generations. We have used President Bush's use of "nuke-you-ler" to discuss with students how

FIGURE 1. Analysis of Dear Abby's Grammar Rant

The Pet Peeve	Abby's Reasoning	"Error" Interferes with Meaning	"Error" Marks Social Class or Race	"Error" of Hypercorrectness	Additional Comments
irregardless	"Just plain 'regardless' will do"				How about flammable/inflammable?
double negatives	"'I don't know nothing' and 'We don't go nowhere' are the worst offenders."		X		Discuss Abby's use of the phrase "worst offenders" in the context of a language pattern used most often in AAVE and working-class dialects.
youse for plural *you*	"'You' is both singular and plural."		X		The plural *you* is sometimes confusing. ("Do you mean just me or all of us?")
"nuke-you-ler" for "nuke-lee-er"			X		Two words: President Bush! This kind of pronunciation helps his populist image and makes him seem folksy, even though he is from old oil money and a well-established political family.
myself for *me*	"'See Bobby or me' is correct."			X	*Myself* has a more formal sound, which is why people use it in more formal circumstances.
"for-tay" for "fort" when pronouncing the word *forte*	"'forte' . . . is pronounced 'fort'—not for-tay."			X	If you say "fort," you may be corrected. If you explain, you'll come off as a snob or know-it-all. If you say "for-tay," you may be corrected by someone who read this Dear Abby column. It's a no-win situation. Our advice: When in Rome . . .
snuck for *sneaked*	"it's not used by people who use proper English."			X	*Sneaked* sounds wrong. Abby's reason is a great example of tautology or what Aristotle calls "begging the question," both of which are logically invalid.
"all are not" for "not all are"	"Saying, 'All women are not beautiful,' when one means, 'Not all women are beautiful.'"	X			Abby's example sets up a useful discussion of gender study.
Students' Pet Peeves could be added					

regionalisms can be rhetorically effective in speech and in writing. Savvy writers tailor their writing for their audiences—and not all audiences warm up to Standard English.

Also fascinating are the "errors" that may be examples of hypercorrectness, errors that result from a speaker's or writer's overcompensation for other errors. We have listed two in our chart. A clear case of hypercorrectness is *myself* for *me* in an instance such as "If you have any questions, see the administrator or myself." The use of *myself* in such cases seems more formal, and speakers who use this diction are usually trying to bring a more formal tone to the conversation. Sometimes it works; sometimes it does not—depending on the audience involved and whether that audience has the background and power to raise a concern. A favorite example of this "error" comes from the Mike Myers character, Austin Powers, who announces to a stranger, "Allow myself to introduce . . . myself." The look on Powers's face is precious as he springs the linguistic trap he has inadvertently set for himself.

The word *forte* raises additional problems. One must choose between sounding either snobbish or stupid (if one says "fort") or run the risk of being corrected (if one says "for-tay"; see fig. 1).

Another reason that Abby's column is especially useful is that the reasons for each pet peeve's being an error are made refreshingly explicit—a rarity in grammar rants, in which implicit logic usually reigns supreme and must be unpacked or hypothesized by grammar rant analysts. In some cases, grammar ranters use quite faulty logic, but because it is so implicit, it can be difficult to detect. In one case identified in our chart (*snucked* for *sneaked*), Abby uses tautological logic: an invalid form of logic described by Aristotle as "begging the question." These logical ploys reveal misassumptions common among grammar ranters that Standard English is a more logical, sensible, and intelligent form of English than nonstandardized dialects of English. This close analysis of language and the arguments surrounding language are crucial for savvy writers to understand.

One of Abby's pet peeves is an error that does significantly interfere with meaning. Substituting the phrase "all are not" for "not all are" makes an important difference in meaning and is thus a serious error, not a debatable point about language use.

There are clear cases of right and wrong in language; they are just rarer than most grammar ranters seem to realize. (We should point out that Abby's example to demonstrate the problem in this case frequently prompts strong reactions from students with coursework in women's studies.)

There is no need to depend solely on published grammar rants to find examples worth discussing in English class. We leave blank spaces in our chart where students may add their own pet peeves or the pet peeves of others they have encountered. Students' lives are filled with infinite varieties of communication. We encourage students to be language anthropologists and to bring examples of real-world language use into the classroom to analyze and discuss. We also advocate using students' writing in class as data archives, rich for analysis of interesting language usage—both successful uses and misfires. It is important that students understand both.

The Results: Students Who Are Savvy Language Users

We have found that grammar rant analysis is a powerful tool for generating engaged and quite sophisticated discussion of language in English classes. Beginning with grammar rants piques students' interest, and careful guidance from teachers can help students develop insightful understandings of language use. Once students see for themselves how important careful and deliberate choice of language is for their success, they may be more judicious in their language use. In the best instances, students will continue to study, learn, and remain open-minded and even fascinated with issues of language, developing as what we have called "savvy writers."

We hope colleagues will find our suggestions to be a productive alternative to the traditional grammar instruction that has preoccupied the profession for years without providing any positive results for student writing.

Notes

1. Hypercorrectness occurs when a speaker makes what is perceived as an error as a result of trying too hard to be seen as correct. For example, the first author of this essay grew up in the Bronx, where it is common to hear *r*s added to words that end in a vowel (e.g., *soder* for *soda; umbrellar*

for *umbrella; idear* for *idea*); it turns out there is ample evidence to indicate this pronunciation is most common among upwardly mobile communities and may be a result of these speakers' attempts to rid themselves of another regional linguistic habit. Often, words ending in *r* are pronounced without the *r* in the Bronx (e.g., "moth-ah" for *mother;* "may-ah" for *mayor*). People trying to rid their speech of this habit may begin inadvertently adding *r*s to words that end in vowels. The new so-called error (placing an *r* at the end of a word that ends in a vowel) may be the result of overcompensation, or "hypercorrectness." There is significant and troubling irony here. The linguistic structure that causes some to view its users as lazy or unmotivated (adding an *r* where it does not belong) actually results directly from the speaker's *concerted efforts* to correct another perceived deficiency.

2. Edgar H. Schuster performs an interesting experiment with his students in which he has them perform a double negative. One student pretends she does not have change for a soda machine and asks another student if he has change. The second student, reading from a script says, "I don't have no change." The first student is instructed to do what she would do naturally. In every case, Schuster says,

the student at the soda machine has immediately gone on to ask another student for change, indicating that she understood the double negative to be a negative. There is never a confusion of meaning (Schuster 53).

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EJ **20** Years Ago

Learning Grammar through Teaching

I learned a little grammar in the ninth grade from Miss Roberts, a scowly, dark little woman who paced across the front of the room, one hand holding her Warriner's, the other raised with pointed finger floating over the bent heads of the class, seeking her next victim. I learned grammar then the way I "learned" geometry, as a set of rules to be applied to given situations as assigned. In neither grammar nor geometry did I have the foggiest notion where the rules came from or how they worked. I learned a little more English grammar when I studied Latin for two years. But I did not really learn grammar until I first taught it.

Jean Sanborn. "Grammar: Good Wine before Its Time." *EJ* 75.3 (1986): 72–80.