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Bad Language

Are Some Words Better than Others?
I don’t want to talk no grammar. I want to talk like a lady.
—Eliza Doolittle

Like many linguists, I have wrestled for years with the issue of Standard English. How do I reconcile the fact that language change is natural and inevitable with the more visceral feeling that some usage bothers me personally? Certain changes I resist. Others I embrace. As an occasional teacher of writing, I have a more difficult problem. I recognize that many traditional rules of grammar and exposition are essentially arbitrary. Yet I often continue to teach them because they are expected. This is perhaps socially justified, but the contradiction undermines the teaching enterprise.

For those who reflect on language, other troubling contradictions arise as well. Offensive or vulgar speech is one such language problem. Supporters of the abstraction of free expression may still be troubled by language that is derogatory, uncivil, or crude. Should we regulate the civility of speech or trust that the free exchange of ideas will separate the good from the bad?

Language diversity is another issue that provides apparent contradictions. Those who embrace diversity and multiculturalism in society may still feel that a common public language is necessary for efficiency, national unity, and economic success. What sort of encouragement, support, coercion, or policy should be aimed at language standardization, if any?

When it comes to language, our opinions and reactions about what is good may sometimes be at odds with our other beliefs.

This work arises from the tensions that such language issues as grammatical change, stylistic variety, incivility, and diversity create. Language problems like these seem to have some things in common. This book is thus motivated by another question as well: to what extent is bad language a created and evolving concept as opposed to a natural, fixed one? If it is the former, we should explore how the various characterizations of bad language (and, by contrast, of good language) serve parallel functions, how they employ similar arguments, and how they evolve.

Examining various kinds of bad language together can also illuminate and situate language among some broader cultural issues and it can engage us in a more meaningful discussion of grammar, coarse speech, and variation. That is what this work is about.
One  Bad Language: Realism versus Relativism

What does the phrase “bad language” mean to you? Perhaps you think of swearing or slang. Is it bad language to curse if you hit your thumb with a hammer? Is it bad language for a novelist to use the f-word in dialogue? What about the speech of a sitcom character, newscaster, or presidential candidate? Is it bad for young people to use slang like *dude*, *chill*, *my bad*, *hook up*, or *bling-bling*?

Some people think of regional or ethnic dialects as bad English. Texas writer Molly Ivins, for example, once suggested that to Northerners “a Southern accent is both ignorant and racist.” She cited the World War II genre of movies, whose stock characters included “a Midwestern hero, a wise-cracking New Yorker, and a dumb Southerner” as one source of dialect stereotypes.¹ Is it really bad English to pronounce *ten* and *pen* as “tin” and “pin” or to use the pronoun *y’all*? Another stigmatized dialect form is the New York City dialect. Are pronunciations like “chawklit” bad English? And what about Ebonics? Are pronunciations like “aks” or grammatical usages like “He been married” bad?

People also identify bad English with a foreign accent or with English mixed with another language. In a 1952 episode of the program *I Love Lucy*, Lucy Ricardo hires an English tutor to polish her speech so her son won’t learn her bad habits. Commenting on her husband Ricky’s Cuban accent, she says “Please, promise me you won’t speak to our child until he’s nineteen or twenty.”² Is it bad English to speak with a Cuban accent and mix Spanish with English, as in “Okay, gracias” (or “Yo quiero Taco Bell”)? More than fifty years after “Lucy Hires an English Tutor,” accent modification is big business in the United States and internationally.

Even if you don’t have a definite opinion on swearing, slang, and accents, it is likely that you equate bad English with certain forms of grammar or word use. I once heard someone talk about his office being the *escape goat* for problems. Even though the phrase was a natural re-interpretation of the word *scapegoat*, it suggested to me that the speaker hadn’t read much. When I teach writing, I try to model standard usage and I correct nonstandard forms such as “I seen the Cascade Mountains,” “We should of found another route,” and “There had to be a way in which to do that.” But there are many so-called errors that I do not correct. Consider, for example, these items, from practice tests in an early twentieth-century grammar correspondence course:³

What do you think of (me—my) going to town?
I was frightened at (that examination’s length—the length of that examination).
You must act (quicker—more quickly).
The order was (only intended—intended only) for the major.
You must report to me (more often—oftener).

In each case, the test maker intended the first choice to be marked out as incorrect. But none of these seem to me to be errors worth correcting, and the last example actually seems smoother with more often rather than oftener.
Bad English is hard to define. One way is simply to say that it is English that doesn’t follow the rules. That of course raises a new question. What do we mean by the rules of a language? Broadly speaking there are two ways of thinking about rules. One view is that rules describe the regularities that speakers follow in using their language. For example, consider how English speakers form simple questions. We invert the helping verb (also known as the auxiliary verb) and the subject. In order to make a question from the simple statement Mary has left, we shift the auxiliary verb has to the front yielding Has Mary left? Similarly, the sentence Is John busy? is the question form of John is busy; Will you close the door? is the question form of You will close the door; and so forth.

What if there is no auxiliary verb in the statement form? In that case we add the special auxiliary verb do and put that in front of the subject. So Do you see that? is the question form of You see that. A rule of English is that questions are formed from statements by moving the auxiliary to the left of the subject or by adding a form of do when no other auxiliary is present. Such rules document how the English language works. They also provide building blocks for deeper investigation into the patterns of language. From very simple questions such as these, we could go on to investigate questions with interrogative pronouns, such as What are you reading? or we could study the use of do in negative sentences, as in I didn’t see that movie.

The study of language that focuses on patterns of use and rules like this is known as descriptive grammar. Descriptive grammar is the basis for dictionaries, which record changes in vocabulary and usage, and for the field of linguistics, which aims at describing languages and investigating the nature of language. Taking the description of language seriously means paying attention to such details as how questions are formed and similar patterns of language. It also means recognizing that these patterns are subject to variation and change. Dictionaries provide the most obvious illustration of the way that language changes. As new editions of dictionaries are published, they document new words that arise like Botox, identity theft, phat, and bioterrorism. They document new meanings of existing words such as the use of the word nuke as a verb meaning to heat by microwaving, or the change in the meaning of the verb print from mechanical to electronic reproduction of text and images.

Rules of grammar change as well. A moment ago I discussed the pattern of question formation in present-day English. But Shakespeare’s characters ask questions that reflect a different pattern of question formation. They ask such questions as What said he? and Came he not home to night? These questions are formed by inverting the main verb rather than by adding do, which was the common pattern in earlier English. In Shakespeare’s time, questions could be formed by inversion of the main verb or by adding do, as in And did you not leave him in this contemplation? The different options were used in different styles and situations, but eventually the forms with do became the only pattern for questions not having an auxiliary. In other words, the rules for forming questions have changed over the centuries.

The idea of following a rule is so deeply associated with correct behavior that it is tempting to think of rules as applying only to formal language and to view informal language as being without rules or being lax about them. But informal speech obeys rules as well. Take contraction, for example, a process that occurs in much informal language. Contraction of the verb is takes place in sentences such as Where’s my pen? Who do you think’s going to be there? and What’s going on? But contraction does not typically occur at the end of a sentence. We can say I wonder who that is but not I wonder who that’s. Other informal language is systematic as well. Even apparent conversational filler words have a system and meaning to them. Like, for example, is used to indicate approximation or exaggeration, as in He has, like, six sisters and He’s, like, 150 years old. It may also serve as an informal synonym for says, as in the sentence, I tried to play some music and he was all like “Quit making so much noise.”

It is also tempting to think of regional dialects as breaking the rules of good English. The grammar of regional speech varies from that of
Standard English, but the variation is systematic and patterned. It is more accurate, then, to view dialects as having different rules from the standard. In Appalachian English, for example, speakers sometimes put an a-sound before words that end in -ing. This results in familiar expressions like a-hunting we will go. But speakers who use this dialect feature do not simply put the a- before any word that ends in -ing. Appalachian speakers who use the a- prefix might say Everyone went a-hunting but not Everyone likes a-hunting or I bought a new a-hunting dog. The a- is possible when the -ing word is a verb, but not when the -ing word is a noun or adjective. So the grammar of Appalachian English has a fairly sophisticated rule of a-prefixing that is missing in Standard English.

Dialect variation also occurs in the usage of individual words as well. An example involves the use of the adverb anymore. In Standard English, its primary use is in negative sentences (such as Yogi Berra’s famous statement that “Nobody goes there anymore. It’s too crowded”) and in questions (such as Do you go there anymore?). In some parts of the county, however, speakers also use anymore in sentences such as Everyone is cool anymore or Anymore you’re working too much. The extension of anymore to positive statements does not mean breaking a rule. Rather, different speakers have different rules for using this adverb, and dictionaries recognize such variation in usage notes. The eleventh edition of Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, for example, notes that positive anymore “is now reported to be widespread in all speech areas of the U.S. except New England.”

The idea that dialect and informal speech are organized systems with rules is an important one. Suppose you try to write a novel with an Appalachian or Midwestern character. It is possible to use the rules of the dialect to draw a convincing portrait of that character’s speech or to bungle the rules of the dialect to create an ineffective portrayal. Or suppose you are an advertiser or politician wishing to appeal to an audience of young people, blue- and pink-collar workers, or senior citizens. You are likely to want to tailor the level and formality of your speech to them, and to follow the rules for the speech variety you believe is most effective for your audience.

The variability of language is significant in another way. It means that good and bad language cannot be defined in absolute terms. The standard language of one era, generation, medium, or region might well differ from the standard of another. The editorials of the New York Times or Wall Street Journal differ from the arts and culture reporting in Time magazine. Educated speech in Atlanta or Austin differs from educated speech in Seattle or Boston. Speakers shift their styles depending on their audience, using vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar that fit well. And vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation norms all change. If they did not change, we might still be using dictionaries from one hundred years ago and Chaucer and Beowulf would be much more popular with students.

Language change does not mean that any novelty automatically becomes the norm and achieves widespread educated usage. Some innovations become widely used while others fail. Television is an excellent source of newly coined vocabulary but some new vocabulary takes hold and some does not. A coinage like regift, from the series Seinfeld, seems to me to be a likely candidate to become standardized. Other novelties, such as low-talker, hand-sandwich, and shushee (also from Seinfeld) or kitten, frowny, girl-powery, knifey, and huntery (from Buffy the Vampire Slayer) are unlikely to become widely used.

Innovation and variation in pronunciation and grammar evokes similar strong feelings. Some variation is unremarkable while other variation is contentious and stigmatized. Consider the pronunciation of the words economic, Uranus, Oregon, and nuclear, for example. The variable pronunciation of the first two words is typically treated as a matter of alternate standard pronunciations: EEKonomic versus ECKonomic or YOURunus versus youRAYnus. The pronunciation of Oregon as or-uh-GUN or or-uh-GAWN varies according to whether one is native or an outsider. The pronunciation of nuclear is different. For many it is a marker of education and refinement whether one says NU-clee-ur or NU-cu-lar.
For an example from the realm of grammar, consider the choice between relative pronouns in the following pair of sentences:

You will work in an office (that—which) you will see later.
You will work with a colleague (who—whom) you will meet later.

In each example, the two choices represent usage variation. In the first example, the choice between *that* and *which* is stylistic. Writers, speakers, and editors may have preferences but either choice is good usage. In the second example, however, some speakers, writers, and editors see the choice between *who* and *whom* as one of correctness. For them, the use of *who* in this example is bad grammar because the pronoun is the logical object of the verb *meet*. We will return to this particular example in more detail in chapter 3.

Language variation presents us with choices, and as a result we may often be unsure what is best in any particular situation. There is a natural tendency for speakers and especially writers to look for a fixed standard of language, and this desire for fixed standards leads to a second notion of rule. This second kind of rule is one that judges usage as correct or incorrect, and that prescribes the use of one form over another. In fact, we call such an approach prescriptive grammar. In the case of medicine, prescriptions have a clear function—to cure a condition or alleviate a symptom. The medical metaphor is revealing in that some people see the standard language as representing linguistic health and see variation as a metaphorical infection. The prescriptive approach sees certain fixed rules as defining the standards of clarity, logic, precision, and discipline, and as respecting authority and tradition. For prescriptivists, disobeying the rules or changing them indicates a disregard for these qualities.

The descriptive and prescriptive viewpoints come into particular opposition around the question of standard language. Prescriptivists tend to view standards as following from rules largely independent of usage, rules that reflect the tastes of the most refined and most discriminating among us. Prescriptivists believe that usage ought to conform to this authority, and nonstandard language is a source of inaccuracy and anarchy—it is a language problem. Because prescriptivism aims at conserving traditional distinctions, usages, and forms, changes to the standard are generally resisted rather than embraced, even when the changes are widespread among the educated. Descriptivists, on the other hand, tend to see standards as following from the norms of widespread mainstream usage. These norms are subject to change and may be influenced by such things as fashion, the media, casual speech, and nonstandard usage. Descriptivists also emphasize that nonstandard usage is regular, even though it may be ineffective for many purposes. They thus tend to be relativists who see norms as following the usage of the educated mainstream, while prescriptivists tend to view norms less flexibly and to see them as informing, correcting, and judging the tastes of the people. For prescriptivists, good language is central to character and should be widely evident in all one’s language. For descriptivists, language is made up of alternative forms of order that might be adopted by speakers depending on their purpose.

The contest between descriptivism and prescriptivism has been at the center of discussions of grammar and good English through much of the last century. Concerns about the moral consequences of relativism in language were a topic of considerable attention in the middle of the twentieth century, for example. In a 1961 review of *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, newspaper columnist Sydney J. Harris complained about its descriptivist approach:

Relativism is the reigning philosophy of our day, in all fields. Not merely in language, but in ethics, in politics, in every field of human behavior. There is no right and wrong—it is all merely custom and superstition to believe so.\(^\text{11}\)

Harris’s worry was that failure to uphold standards of language—grammatical right and wrong—would lead us down the slippery slope to nihilism and anarchy. We can contrast Harris’s view with the positive view of relativism presented just a decade earlier by the National Council of Teachers of English in its 1952 report *The English Language Arts*:
All usage is relative. The contemporary linguist does not employ the terms “good English” and “bad English” except in a purely relative sense. He recognizes the fact that language is governed by the situation in which it occurs.  

The two quotes reflect the opposite views of good English held by prescriptivists and descriptivists. The first quote implies an approach in which there is an abiding right and wrong to usage and the second an approach in which standards are determined by situation and context. Since language is a product of culture, these views reflect opposite pictures of cultural standards as well. As a consequence, questions of good and bad language are part of a much broader debate between those who advocate recognizing and promoting just a single cultural tradition (traditionalists) and those who advocate the value of competing traditions in language, the arts, history, and literature (relativists).

This book examines how language is characterized as “good” and “bad,” focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and accent. For the mainstream of speakers, good language is seen as grammatically correct, rhetorically simple, free of regionalisms and foreign influences, and neither too coarse nor too avant-garde. The picture that emerges is one in which the notion of “good language” often reflects social desires for uniformity, conformity, and perceived tradition. The concepts of good and bad language also reflect relationships among different groups, especially between a perceived mainstream and various others. Examining the social interpretation of language yields such distinctions as polite versus coarse, correct versus incorrect, native versus foreign, pedantic versus colloquial.

What other ideas underlie notions of good and bad language? One is social mobility. The United States has a strong egalitarian tradition, and the doctrine of mobility through education links mainstream language with success. Grammar and language are part of the cultural capital that individuals pursue in order to improve their social and economic situation. Whether economic status can be changed through language betterment remains to be demonstrated of course, but the idea that speaking and writing a certain way is a ticket to a better life seems to be ingrained in the public consciousness. The wide number of newspaper and magazine features dealing with language suggests that consumers of the print media have a great interest in language as cultural capital. The many courses on English as a second language and programs on accent reduction also suggest that nonnative and dialect speakers worry about language as well. This interest is not at all new. At the beginning of the twentieth century, writer Sherwin Cody began advertising a series of books on The Art of Writing and Speaking the English Language. The books offered a guide to self-correction of grammar and pronunciation. Early versions of Cody’s advertisements headlined the claim that “Good English and Good Fortune Go Hand in Hand.” Later versions led even more directly with the simple question “Do you make these mistakes in English?” In various forms the ad ran continuously in magazines for forty years.

A second set of ingrained ideas connects language with intelligence and character. Some believe that nonstandard language reflects unclear and incorrect thinking or that it arises from a lack of initiative. For example, members of the usage panel of the 1975 Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage describe usage they disapprove of as “ Slack-jaw, common, [and] sleazy,” “sloppy,” “an abomination,” and a “barbarism.” Of course, all norms are moralized to some extent. From yard care to table manners, communities judge their members in part based on conformity to certain behaviors. Norms of language in particular emerge from a tradition that has often linked grammar with intellectual discipline and social graces and that has viewed nonstandard language as potentially debasing polite society.

We also find much politicization of language norms. Attention to the ideological and political consequences of language is part of a long tradition made popular by writer George Orwell. However, the focus on “political correctness” in the last decade of the twentieth century has placed word choice squarely in the public consciousness. Today, for example, the choice among the words queer, gay, and homosexual, between the expressions Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays, or between Founding
Fathers and Founders is as much a sign to others as one’s grammar and pronunciation. While grammar and pronunciation are viewed as signals of education, word choice is often seen as a signal of political beliefs. Some speakers see traditional usages as reinforcing existing privilege and view new inclusive usage as necessary language change. Others see the older norms as perfectly serviceable and new usages as radical attempts to enforce sensitivity or to impose political agendas.

Politicization of languages issues is also very evident in broader beliefs about the civic value of English. Many of us agree that fluency with the standard language aids civic participation—that knowing a certain type of English helps in having one’s voice heard. And people of diverse backgrounds also believe that it is useful for immigrants to adopt English. Many in fact believe that language assimilation is crucial because it creates shared national values. By contrast, supporting and maintaining languages other than English is seen by some as dividing society and encouraging separatism. These attitudes are especially evident in controversies over English-only laws and bilingual education, but we will also find similar attitudes focused on the nonstandard speech of some African-Americans.

The treatment of language norms as cultural commodity, as intellectual ability, as moral virtue, and as political ideology provides a strong motivation for speakers to conform to a standard that is associated with perceived refinement, intelligence, education, character, and commitment to national unity or mainstream political values. Of course, if none of these qualities is inherently connected to language, such judgments of people’s language are really characterizations of their willingness, their need, or their ability to adjust to the language practices of others. This will be part of the explorations that follow.

Anything Goes

The field of linguistics is concerned with the serious study of language. It asks questions aimed at discovering how languages work, how particular languages developed historically, how language functions socially and psychologically, and even how language is organized in the brain. Many linguists see themselves as scientists as well as humanists, and as a profession linguistics takes a descriptive approach to issues of usage. Because of this, the terms “descriptive grammar” and “descriptive linguistics” are often used interchangeably. What connects linguistics to broader debates over cultural values is the idea of relativism. Descriptive linguistics acknowledges the possibility of multiple and shifting standards and emphasizes that good usage is relative to the audience and purpose of communication. This aspect of linguistics is often mischaracterized by prescriptive traditionalists as the automatic denial of standards. The argument seems to be that recognizing multiple standards entails that there is no standard, and some traditionalists remain convinced that relativism in language is a moral, social, and intellectual danger and a model of permissiveness.

Since a broader debate about relativism plays such a key role in language controversies, we should consider in more detail the nature of some objections to it.\(^\text{15}\) One version of antirelativist sentiment appears in critic William A. Henry III’s book *In Defense of Elitism.*\(^\text{16}\) Henry focuses on the contrast between elitism and egalitarianism, seeing the latter as committed to the idea (paraphrasing humorist Roger Price) that everyone not only begins the race equal but finishes equal. Elitism, conversely, maintains the possibility of some culture being superior for certain purposes. For Henry, superior cultures are ones that preserve liberty, provide a comfortable life, promote science, medicine, and hygiene, and produce permanent art of some complexity.\(^\text{17}\) In his view, relativist egalitarianism results in anti-intellectualist populism that scorns intellectual distinction-making . . . respect and deference toward leadership and position, esteem for accomplishment, especially when achieved through long labor and rigorous education; reverence for heritage, particularly in history, philosophy and culture; commitment to rationalism and
scientific investigation; upholding of objective standards; most important, the willingness to assert unyieldingly that one idea, contribution or attainment is *better than* another.\(^{18}\)

There are several problems with such attacks on relativism. First, the equation of relativism with anti-intellectualism is faulty. The conclusion that tradition is constructed and arbitrary does not imply that it is impossible to make distinctions and evaluate alternatives. Nor does the fact that a cultural form is popular make value judgments impossible. Those versed in contemporary music, folk art, and animation can often make fine distinctions and critical assessments about works in those domains. The elite may be unfamiliar with these subjects, but the same intellectual distinction-making and appreciation is possible in popular culture as in high culture.

Equating relativism with nihilism is also faulty. The flawed reasoning goes something like this: since different cultures treat ethical, social, linguistic, and cultural issues in different ways, it must be impossible to find absolute values or standards or even to evaluate competing ideas. If everything is relative, there is no canon, no standard, no right. However, an understanding of the constructed nature of traditions ought to encourage the evaluation of competing ideas by opening both tradition and innovation to rigorous study. Relativism can thus best be understood as the view that received wisdom is not beyond challenge.

The romanticized view of culture set forth by William Henry parallels the romanticized view of prescriptive grammar. The reasonable idea that there ought to be a common standard is transformed into the belief that such a standard reflects an inherent good. When tradition is romanticized in this way, departures from it, whether grammatical or cultural, are apt to be represented as corruption and decay rather than innovation or progress. But romanticism of tradition is not merely a characteristic of criticism by nostalgic grammatical and cultural conservatives. The political center and left also sometimes see nonstandard language and mass culture as a danger to civic norms and shared democratic values. Progressivist romanticism manifests itself in the idea of self-improvement and public cooperation through common language and, more generally, through a common culture. The progressive case for standard language as an aspect of modern education is notably summarized by E. D. Hirsch in his book *Cultural Literacy*. Hirsch writes that after the industrial revolution:

> The worker had constantly to adapt to new, more efficient, methods. Because of the continually changing occupations that were increasingly demanded by large industrial societies, people had to communicate with a wider economic and social community. Achieving wider communication required literacy and a common language. At the same time, the political system had to become correspondingly bigger, requiring wider circles of communication to carry out laws and provide centralized authority.\(^{19}\)

Hirsch cites Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism*, which stresses that members of an industrial society “must be able to communicate by means of impersonal, written, context-free, to-whom-it-may-concern type messages.”\(^{20}\) The implication is that such communications must be in a shared, common language. For such writers as Hirsch and Gellner, standardization is not so much a moral issue as a functional one—an issue of an individual’s practical economic needs and of a society’s administrative and political ones. Hirsch holds a similar position with respect to the content of cultural literacy, seeing cultural literacy as “the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world.”\(^{21}\)

There are, then, different sources for romanticization of grammar and culture. On the one hand, there is nostalgic traditionalism, which is partly grounded in the belief in the superiority of elite forms, the corruption of mass culture, and the nihilism of relativism. On the other hand, there is progressivism, which sees access to standards of language and culture as a prerequisite for meaningful social participation and
which sees the influence of nonstandard language and mass culture as potential impediments to participation.

A Culture of Engagement

In this book, I ask how language attitudes are represented and constructed. How do certain language varieties come to be characterized as uneducated, vulgar, immoral, foreign, ethnic, provincial, ephemeral, convoluted, or politicized? How is other language, by contrast, characterized as respectful, accessible, clear, direct, authoritative, and democratic? In exploring language attitudes, I hope not just to show that simple notions of good and bad language fail but also to suggest how we might think more productively about language.

It is possible, I think, to be discriminating about language in the middle space between moralism and nihilism. The correct approach to questions of language involves something like the model of law or philosophical ethics. Judges recognize that there are a variety of ways that the meaning of a statute can be interpreted. In fact the so-called canons of legal interpretation in some ways parallel traditional grammar. These canons are rules available to judges for interpreting the meaning of laws. But as legal theorist Karl Llewellyn demonstrated more than half a century ago, it is possible to find competing and contradictory rules for interpreting laws. As a result, judges have considerable latitude in interpretation—a judge can, for example, follow the original intent of a law or its plain language. Any judge will develop a judicial practice that guides his or her interpretation of laws. No grammatical rulebook can automatically determine the meaning of a law. If it could, Supreme Court decisions on matters of statutory interpretation would always be unanimous and immediate. Reasoning in philosophical ethics is similar. Philosophers recognize that one cannot always follow principles like the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative (treat humanity as an end rather than a means), or Utility (maximize the greatest good for the greatest number) to determine ethical behavior. Sometimes these principles conflict, and sometimes the application and consequences of a principle are not obvious. Getting ethics or law right requires analysis that dissects and balances the different ways in which a decision might be valid.

Language use (and ultimately language policy) is likewise a matter of asking questions and solving problems. Just as judges must balance different interpretive rules and ethicists must balance different concepts of right, so speakers and writers must balance language conventions. Speakers must do this balancing pragmatically, continually reassessing usage. The reason for this continual reassessment is that language questions are really questions about appropriateness, and what is appropriate for the classroom versus the living room, or for diplomacy versus politics, will vary. The art of using language, like that of any other complex decision making, lies in deciding which of various principles applies and why. And authority, whether in law, ethics, or language, comes from the method in which decisions are made, not from mere adherence to tradition or popular opinion.

The same need for engagement and continual reassessment exists in other fields as well. Consider literature, art, and music, fields in which there have long been tensions between mass culture and elite culture and between the contemporary and the classical. Education has as one of its goals to encourage people to think about literature, art, and music, not just to become familiar with a set of great authors, artists, and composers. We expect students to develop the ability to explain aesthetic choices and we want them to demonstrate habits of mind that will allow them to make informed cultural choices as citizens.

Some commentators link the development of these abilities and habits with a canon of traditional works determined by objective standards of aesthetic superiority. William Henry, for example, suggests that Americans have always felt more comfortable with contemporary and folk culture than with classical, but he views folk art forms such as weaving, the blues, and square dancing as “lesser forms of art than oil
painting, ballet, and opera because the techniques are less arduous and less demanding of long learning, the underlying symbolic language is less complicated, the range of expression is less profound, and the worship of beauty is muddled by the lower aims of community fellowship.”23 Henry suggests that more highly valued forms of art can be identified by arduousness of technique, length of learning, the complexity of symbolic language, and the profundity of range of expression. Suppose this is true. It is still an open question whether such rigor, complexity, and profundity can be found in popular works, in contemporary works, or only in works passing a test of time. And in fact, many scholars and teachers of literature, art, and music recognize that the canon changes. We teach Saul Bellow, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Plath, and Ralph Ellison in literature classes along with Chaucer, Milton, and Dickens. We teach Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Richard Serra along with da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Titian. And we teach Thelonious Monk, Aaron Copland, and the Beatles along with Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven.

The point of studying cultural change is to engage the canons of the past with the culture of the present, not to subordinate one to the other. This is a point that such critics as Henry seem to resist. The goal ought to be intellectual engagement, and that means viewing canons, rules, and conventions as objects of inquiry, not mere cultural currency. It does not mean denying the usefulness of canons, rules, and conventions. Richard Keller Simon provides some examples of the engagement of tradition and popular culture in his book Trash Culture. In his teaching, Simon analyzes canonical literature—The Faerie Queene, Much Ado About Nothing, and The Iliad, among others—and demonstrates how its structure and themes are paralleled in popular culture. Simon typically begins by having his students study the complexity of canonical texts and moves on to show how such texts interweave with popular narratives and how contemporary popular culture often recycles themes of canonical works. So for example, he discusses how the early episodes of the television comedy Friends parallel the play Much Ado About Nothing, how Star Wars mines The Faerie Queene, and how Rambo draws on The Iliad. Simon’s approach does not mean that he is teaching courses about Stars Wars, Friends, and Rambo (though one could certainly imagine commentators making that assertion). Rather, what Simon is doing is using the canon to help students understand and analyze the cultural discourses that they most frequently encounter, while at the same time fostering appreciation for the canon. Such an approach does not entail claiming that Rambo is as good as The Iliad or that there are no distinctions of quality. It instead attempts a constructive engagement between the traditional canon and contemporary works.

At a different level, there can also be a constructive engagement between tradition and theory in literature. Traditional approaches focus on the character of the literature—it’s literariness, influences, or universal value. Theoretical approaches, including the postmodern, ask how reading, interpreting, and canon formation reflect competing and contested discourses and how the process of reading affects interpretation. Often, however, the tension between the traditional and the theoretical is exaggerated as a contrast between defenders and destroyers of culture or between theoretical sophistication and cultural fundamentalism. What is needed instead is some constructive engagement of traditionalist and theorist. In his book Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., suggests one approach. Gates suggests that a canon is important not because it represents the reading material of the power elite but because it is “the commonplace book of our shared culture, in which we have written down the texts and the titles that we want to remember.”24 In attempting to articulate a canon of African-American literature, Gates finds himself searching for a position between those “who claim that black people can have no canon, no masterpieces,” and those “who wonder why we want to establish the existence of a canon, any canon, in the first place.”25 This position between is the space that I think it is productive to occupy in language as well: a space that engages tradition and innovation by accepting that canons, standards, and hierarchies are socially constructed objects but that still maintains the possibility of making distinctions and choices. We seek a space that recognizes that outsider
languag, mass culture, and nonstandard language have a structure and a context that can be productively studied. In many cases such study illuminates the traditional forms of literature, culture, and language as well.

Linguists are sometimes pessimistic about public understanding of their field. But I think they have less cause for pessimism than many other fields. The general public is not always interested in art, poetry, or classical music. The public is interested in language, so a sustained and coherent articulation of a realistic message has a wide potential audience. And while descriptive linguistics has detractors, it faces nothing like the organized opposition that biology has or the academic marginalization of education or critical theory. Linguistics is well positioned to establish a culture of engagement between the canonization of Standard English and the denial of the possibility of a common language. The engagement of these two perspectives means understanding that canons and traditions are constructed but also inevitable. And it means understanding that the real object of study ought to be how standards emerge and change, not merely what they consist of.

My goal in what follows is to focus on “bad language” as a cultural construct and to show how badness is a much more complex phenomenon than it first appears to be. In developing this position, it is necessary to consider (and reject) alternatives. The chief alternative is the notion that good language is a simple matter of following the logical patterns established by tradition and that bad language is simply due to laziness, stupidity, social decay, bad influences, and the decline of standards. In rejecting this, I adopt what I call the realist position. The realist view is that standard language is important not because it represents the language of the best-educated speakers but because it is a cultural touchstone of the social history of the English language. It is crucial for educated people to understand that social history and the many factors that influence and modify the standard. These include competition among dialects and styles and relationships between native and nonnative speakers. A realistic view of language also means understanding the inevitability of grammatical norms, of etiquette, and of a tradition of public writing. None of these can be ignored or dismissed by those seeking full participation in commerce, culture, and civic life. But variation and innovation cannot be ignored either. Realism thus lies in understanding the constructed nature of the standard and the role of linguistic variation.

This introduction has aimed at raising some broad issues of tradition versus innovation in culture in order to place the discussion of realism in perspective. The remainder of this work is organized as follows. Chapter 2 further introduces the realist position by looking at prose style, with the aim of showing that good writing is a relativistic concept. Chapter 3 then examines traditional grammar, attitudes toward grammar, and the correctionist approach to usage. Chapter 4 discusses contested vocabulary—coarse words, slang, and politicized language (so-called political correctness)—to illustrate how the comfort level of a perceived mainstream helps to define good language. Chapters 5 and 6 shift the focus slightly to consider how language varieties other than mainstream English have been viewed as targets of assimilation. Together chapters 3–6 examine social forces that determine what is good and bad language—correctionism, conventionalism, and assimilationalism. Chapter 7 concludes, summarizing prevailing misconceptions about language and usage and the images of language that underlie such misconceptions. The conclusion also gives some final suggestions for ways to foster a culture of engagement with language rather than a standoff between tradition and nihilism.