

Preface

The first edition of this book appeared as a paperback on August 30, 2012, under the Create Space imprint and was based on the revised versions of material that had been posted on www.languagelore.net to that date. The readers' reviews that have appeared since the book's publication (on Amazon.com and elsewhere) have been unanimous in their praise, and it has become evident that an expanded second edition, incorporating material written in the intervening four years (including essays gathered under a seventh chapter, "The Psycholinguistic Pathos of Everyday Life"), is both warranted and bound to garner an even larger readership.

As with the first edition, glossaries have been provided for each new essay but have been broadened to define items for an audience that will include the readers whose first language is other than English. Judging by statistical data and the proliferation of usage manuals in the last decade, there is a great appetite among readers all over the globe for information about English as it is spoken and written in America, particularly in the media. This is only to be expected given that in the twenty-first century English—the American variety in particular—has become the world's *lingua franca*.

It is hoped that this book, which examines and analyzes linguistic phenomena of the most multifarious variety, will satisfy the interests of an ever-expanding international audience.

Michael Shapiro

Preface to the First Edition

This book is not a usage manual in the conventional sense. It is a *sui generis* series of compact, self-contained essays, arranged into chapters by broad topic categories of problematic points of linguistic usage in contemporary American speech and writing, and cast in an uncompromisingly analytical style that is nevertheless accessible to any educated reader with a love of words, an inquisitiveness about language and an appetite for exegesis.

The author's project has been motivated in large part by the assumption that there exists a huge and entirely untapped reservoir of interest among the listening and reading public in questions of pronunciation, grammar, and etymology that has not been satisfied by other sources.

It is based on the author's blog, www.languagelore.net, many of whose posts have been revised and adapted for the present purpose. Judging by the countries of visitors to the Web site, there is an audience for this book outside the anglophone world, particularly in Germany, Brazil, the Netherlands, Russia, and Ukraine.

The bias of the author is unabashedly prescriptivist. It is formed by a long-standing theoretical interest in and empirical observation of English usage, oral and written. Much of the material for analysis is drawn from the language of contemporary media, both print and broadcast. The discussion of examples frequently opens out on a perspective that takes in deeper questions of value and society in America as revealed in present-day language use.

The essays that comprise the chapters are what might be called linguistic vignettes. They call attention to the points of grammar and style in contemporary American English, especially in cases where the language is changing due to innovative usage, including what older generations of speakers would consider errors in speech and writing.

The chapter headings are not meant to be mutually exclusive, which results in a certain amount of overlap, as when pronunciations have stylistic as well as phonetic outcomes, or when word formation is included under syntax. There are no sub-chapters because the detailed index is meant to serve as a convenient way of facilitating any search for specific topics. This also allows for the order of entries within chapters to be similarly loose.

A book which deliberately mimics the miscellany genre and eschews the format of a strictly academic presentation driven by an argument will of necessity strike some readers as lacking guidance about the ordering and selection of its entries. The six chapter headings can only mitigate the impression of randomness in part, but the book is not meant to be read consecutively in any event but sampled repeatedly in no particular order.

Occasionally, the scope is broadened to subsume languages other than English (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Yiddish, German, French, Russian, Japanese), especially when a comparative perspective helps clarify a historical point of English usage. The brief concluding chapter on poetics is conceived as a pendant, since it deals mostly with Russian, the author's mother tongue and the lifelong focus of his activities as a scholar.

The mode of presentation differs significantly from conventional usage manuals by its self-consciously academic diction, which consistently recurs to scholarly formulations in furtherance of analytical acuity. In every case where an analysis contains technical or recondite vocabulary, a Glossary precedes the body of the essay so that a reader unfamiliar with the terminology of linguistics can more easily follow and make sense of the argument. In cases of doubt as to whether a particular item should be glossed—and glossed repeatedly—the decision has been to err on the side of redundancy, since the format of the book is aimed at inviting readers to browse through the self-sufficient entries rather than necessarily reading them in consecutive order. The Master Glossary, which provides a completely synoptic register of all items glossed in the text, can always be consulted in case any particular essay is opaque as to any item of its technical vocabulary.

The practice of glossing every text is abandoned only in the three epilogomena, which are meant to summarize the theoretical framework of the book for a strictly academic audience, while being of possible intellectual interest to the adventurous general reader as well. The gist of the second epilegomenon is also to be found in Chapter 2.

Only the epilogomena contain footnotes. In this respect, the text takes a leaf from Edward Sapir's classic *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*, whose author deliberately elided diacritic signs as burdensome to all but the initiate.

Occasionally, the glossaries notwithstanding, readers may find it necessary to consult a dictionary, but this is taken to be ineluctable, given the variable linguistic competence and background of the book's intended audience, which doubtlessly includes the readers for whom English is not a native or habitual language. The author's guiding principles in this respect are his own lifelong word gluttony and love of dictionary excavation, a delight in the richness of the English language, which undergirds his conviction that those who encounter unfamiliar words when reading this book will, more often than not, choose to look them up—and will, moreover, find the effort rewarding.

The unique form of the book's presentation is aimed at satisfying the natural curiosity of readers who are alert to the peculiarities of present-day American English as they pertain to pronunciation, grammar, and style, and who wish to be enlightened about them in a way that does not "dumb down" or compromise the

language in which the explanations are couched. This extends to the book's tone, which is guided not by the considerations of political correctness or politesse, which the author regards as having no bearing on the presentation's content, but by the aims that are first and foremost didactic, propaedeutic, and hortatory. At the risk of offending those readers who will recognize their own speech habits among the examples brought up for criticism, the tone of the essays is occasionally censorious, but that is unavoidable if the thrust is distinctly educative and not merely informative. In other words, no attempt has been made to buffer the book's stance on error.

It is hoped that a book which addresses itself to what is technically called ORTHOEPEY, the doctrine and study of correct speech in the broadest sense, will find a receptive audience among the readers of all ages and backgrounds.



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