Language – The Loaded Weapon

The use and abuse of language today

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When an American hears an Englishman say *They do you a very adequate hearing-aid on the National Health,*¹ and finally manages an interpretation, 'You can get a pretty good hearing aid from the National Health Service', he is puzzled at first, but respectful. These people have a strange way of turning a phrase, he thinks, but once you get the hang of it, it's OK. When the same American hears a Hawaiian say *This kind car better* or a Black child say *Some of them be big and some of them be small,* though he has no trouble understanding either sentence, he makes a mental note of the grammar.

On the other hand our American is delighted with the attractive French lady's remark to her companion, as he passes them and favors her with a stare, *Pour qui se prend-il?*,² uttered with a returning stare. He understands no French.

In all these instances there floats, along with the meanings of the words, the answer to a hidden question: *Who* is doing the talking?

Since everyone knows that people of different backgrounds speak differently, why this selective appreciation? Perhaps there is something in the millennia of exogamy that makes a foreign accent in someone of the opposite sex attractive. But even without the spur of biology we are often more forgiving toward someone who is harder to understand. Why?

In part it is sheer provincialism. Another American is supposed to be 'one of us'. He drives an American car, eats hamburgers, watches Saturday football on TV, and mows the lawn on Sunday. So he ought to TALK like us. A foreigner is not to be blamed for lack of opportunities to learn English; our fellow citizen has been offered grace and refused it.

This resentment of others' rejection of our kind of talk is found in speech communities everywhere. The linguist Eunice Victoria Pike tells of going with a companion from one Mazatec-speaking village in Mexico, Chalco, to another, San Marcos, after having already learned some Mazatec. In the second village a family of teenage girls took on the responsibility of teaching them to 'talk right'. They naturally made mistakes by transferring English grammar and meanings to Mazatec, and many of those the girls let pass. But they shouted us down when we used a phrase peculiar to Chalco speech.³

Attitudes toward a form of speech are hardly other than attitudes toward the speakers. Inferior people speak in inferior ways. Naturally, and the differences that mark their speech tend to be stigmatized. They are mostly trivial, as a rule, but are enough to activate a prejudice. They may be the only obvious signs of social status. You have an old friend in London, a successful plumbing contractor who now owns his own business. He looks and dresses like anyone else. You ask him to lunch at a posh restaurant. Even with your un-British accent you have no trouble getting what you want, but the waiter does not disguise his distaste at having to serve the broad Cockney demands of your friend.

Sometimes all varieties of a language except one are stigmatized to a certain degree. This happens in highly stratified societies and may bring on official attempts not only to teach the standard variety in the schools but to protect it by law. A 1975 French law applied the penalties of fraud (80 to 160 francs for the first offense, 90 to 5,600 for later offenses) to the use – by the 'media' – of forbidden terms in the language, which are those borrowings (mainly from English) for which a supposedly adequate equivalent already exists.⁴ Such drastic steps betray an undertone of chauvinism – laws against a form of language are usually aimed at political entities at home or abroad that are assumed to be wielding too much influence. But domestic social pressures, with their own inlay of politics, are generally more powerful. In Britain the standard – and until recently the sign of social position and the key to social advancement – has been a variety of Southern English called Received Pronunciation. As the name implies, the earmarks of RP are not in grammar or in choice of words but in the sounds. A mispronounced vowel is more serious than an *ain't* or a *he don't.*

In America the stigma is more selective, and therefore, sometimes, more tenacious. The dialects that were transplanted from Britain were not so different from one another that they were ever a great hindrance to communication, but a number of regional standards – for example those centered on Boston, New York, and Charleston – were nevertheless established as a result of varying patterns of immigration from Britain, and others crystallized with the expansion westward. People living near the confluence of the three great rivers were not apt to be much influenced by the speech of New York, but were too close not to be influenced by that of St Louis. The relative openness of American political life and the prestige of high office has led to the acceptance of many styles of pronunciation, most recently the clipped New Englandisms of John F. Kennedy, the Texan drawl of Lyndon Johnson, and the lower Georgian dialect of Jimmy Carter. In a popular television show during the Carter administration, a character representing a State Department official spoke conspicuously like a Georgian. When the New Yorker next to him called attention to it, he replied, 'We don't have an accent any more. You do.'⁵

The social groups whose speech is looked down upon can be stratified in any direction. There is the vertical stratum of homosexual speech, or
the slang of teenagers of all classes. Horizontal strata embrace the established poor as well as recent immigrants, including those who migrate from one part of the country to another. Count a person's prejudices toward others — Jews, Mexicans, Indians, landlubbers, farmers, clergy, Oklahomans, rock artists — and you have a measure of the forms of speech that will arouse his suspicion or his resentment, or serve as the butt of his humor.

The negative attitudes lurk undetected till a social upheaval forces them to the surface. In America the most flagrant case is that of Black English. No other form of stigmatized speech in history has been discussed, written about, deplored, and justified as much as this. It deserves our attention as a classic of devilement.

In the beginning, the linguistic plight of the Negro slave was deliberate policy. In A New Voyage to Guinea, 1744, William Smith spoke of the dangers of having a shipload of captives all speaking the same language — they were sometimes able to overpower the crew. ‘But the safest Way,’ he wrote, ‘is to trade with the different Nations, on either Side of the River, and having some of every Sort on board, there will be no more likelihood of their succeeding than of finishing the Tower of Babel.’ There is evidence that at least some of the mixed tribesmen were able to communicate by means of a pidgin English that incorporated elements of Portuguese and African languages, but the main benefit of this, according to one theory, was to serve as a nucleus of a common creole in the New World, which absorbed more and more from English as contacts with whites increased — especially among Blacks employed as domestics rather than as field hands. Pockets of a creole remain; it survives in the Gullah dialect of the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina, protected by its isolation. And traces, possibly creole in origin (though some authorities deny this), are found in Black speech everywhere, especially among children who learn it from other children. Whatever their source, these traces — most in pronunciation but some in grammar — are enough to make Black English easy to identify and a ready target. Here are three of the most noticeable grammatical traits:

Omission of the copula is: You out the game.

Dropping of the present-tense inflection -s: He fast in everything he do.¹

Use of be to mean ‘repeated occurrence’, as in the example cited earlier: Some of them be big.

This use of be is often cited as evidence of semantic finesse in Black English. It is a distinction that the standard has difficulty making: He workin’ means that he is busy right now; He be workin’ means he has a steady job.² As for He John for He is John, the absence of the copula is no loss — other languages, including Russian, do without it, and even standard English omits it in expressions like George here? I can’t believe it!

A comparison of two dialects is always misleading when one is taken as a standard. A few lines up is the reference to ‘omission of the copula ’ in Black English. Does Black English omit it, or does standard English add it? The temptation is to single out certain features in the standard and to judge the other dialect deficient if it lacks them. If there is a radical failure to mesh, then one may simply overlook what is truly a rich array of communicative resources in the downgraded dialect. Black culture in some ways is more different from mainstream American culture than, say, Scottish or Irish culture is. The differences in the means and manner of communication are no doubt correspondingly great, perhaps more so in the nonverbal than in the verbal — with most white observers simply blind to them. One place where this comes to view is in school testing:

The older Black students have often learned to value wit as a means of self-protection and identity-projection, to parry questions with witty responses. The assessors’ attempts to solicit information, then, may be met with responses in the form of counter-questions, or statements to the effect that ‘you aren’t for real’. A favorite manipulative activity of this sort may be ‘running a game’ on the tester, delivering messages in some form of in-group language knowing full well that those who do not share the cultural orientation of the ‘hip’ world will be unable to decode the messages. Too often whites unable to decipher these messages conclude that Black students are unable to assert command of the appropriate English varieties and brand them as ‘linguistically deficient’.³

Black English in this respect is a form of secret language, promoting solidarity and intra-communication while excluding outsiders — a common phenomenon all over the world. (Every language is a secret language when it is used to exclude people who do not understand it. Some forms of speech — such as Pig Latin — are specially designed to serve that way.) Dialects clash not only in their forms but also in what their speakers may regard as appropriate settings for different kinds of discourse. Take questions. In the average urban white household, parents like to quiz their children about this and that. Black families are more reticent:

Questions seldom are encountered between adults and children, because there simply is little verbal interchange between the generations. When questions ARE asked, they generally arise from Mamma seeking quick information because of some failure in the smooth operation of the household. Thus, direct querying from adults to children tends to be associated, by Black children, with prospective threat in some accusation of wrongdoing.⁴ Counterbalancing the deemphasis of verbal interchanges is the increased reliance on nonverbal behavior or a greater interweaving of verbal and nonverbal. Most white Americans and white Britishers are
uncomfortable with a high level of gesture or bodily communication, and inept at interpreting it. So, when Black children in the average mixed classroom unbend to the point of showing interest, their manners 'are interpreted as restlessness, inattentiveness, and sometimes hostility'.11 Black culture is one to which sitting still in an audience while someone performs, and applauding in set ways at approved intervals, seems very strange.

In all respects - as far as it is possible to measure something as complex as a culture's whole means of expression - Black English is as good a working instrument for communication as any; but it has two faults: it is different, and it is spoken by Blacks.

Next to Black English, the most widespread stigmatized dialect in America is the Spanglish of the Southwest, spoken by the largest ethnic group in the country with a non-English background. Its users are in a linguistic no-man's-land: their speech is despised by English-speakers and Spanish-speakers alike. Among the dominant English-speaking majority, it is attitudes-as-usual: Spanglish is ' sloppy speech'; its speakers are not intelligent enough to learn a correct language.

Of course, Spanglish is learned as any language is learned - by the logical processes of abduction, deduction, and induction from the speech that children hear. No child is TAUGHT a language, except to the extent that elders - as a form of possibly instinctive play - model their speech: slowing it down, exaggerating the intonation, making sentences short, and mixing it with a richness of gestures, facial expressions, and clues from the context. On both sides, English and Spanish, Chicano children do their best with the means they have. Their Spanish, by comparison with that of speakers who have had the advantage of cultural continuity in a Spanish-speaking country, is full of grossly incorrect forms. Their English likewise. Yet when looked at in its own terms, each - and the blend between them - reveals the same organizing principles that characterize human linguistic ingenuity everywhere.

This does not exempt Chicano speech from being downgraded or its speakers from being judged as linguistically deprived - the 'deficit theory', as it is called. The children are classed as handicapped. A child who mispronounces English because of a Spanish background is given the kind of speech therapy designed for those who have something wrong with their physical equipment for speaking. In its crudest form this same theory charitably explains that the Black child is unable to pronounce correctly because of his thick lips. Other problems with language are put down to mental deficiencies, and the child - Black, Chicano, Navaho, Portuguese - ends up in a class for the mentally retarded. Everything is done, of course, to improve the lot of these unfortunate, except to understand the real cause of their plight. In one series of tests conducted by the California Department of Education a mere shift from the English to the Spanish version of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale resulted in an average mean gain in IQ of 13.15 points for pupils who had earlier been put in classes for the 'educable mentally retarded'.12

A misdiagnosed deficiency becomes self-fulfilling. The children are retarded because the schools help to retard them. A common experience is that the IQ of Black children declines with age. (Since intelligence is supposedly innate, it should remain the same, and tests are normed accordingly.) In one pair of tests, Black children were given questions specifically designed to eliminate cultural bias. The predicted drop in IQ still occurred between grades three and six.13 Among the things that contribute to this depressing effect may be the unconscious attitude of the teacher, who, on hearing 'poor English', expects the child to do badly.14

Not all is submission on the part of minority speakers. It is not easy to give up one's heritage, of which language is the most intimate part. Revolutions have been fought over less, and language has been the rallying cry for resistance everywhere in the world - a Catalon who opposed Franco in Spain, a Belgium where language riots unseated the government in 1968, a Quebec that in 1979 was threatening to secede from Canada, a Brittany that backs up its demands for autonomy by teaching Breton in defiance of French law and bombing French installations within its territory.15 The speakers of a dialect that is dispersed through an area all of which is controlled by a dominant culture are not able to operate from a secure geographical base, but there are other ways of surmounting the barriers. The United States in the 1960s and 1970s saw the surge of minority groups - Blacks and Chicanos especially - pressing for better education, for jobs and recognition. Concessions and painful adjustments had to be made in the schools; standards of performance were changed - lowered - in terms of middle-class norms - and a high school certificate or a college diploma no longer guaranteed that its bearer would have certain linguistic or mathematical skills. At the same time, the problems of social adjustment compelled the schools to make room for instruction in other things besides language and mathematics, such as mechanical arts, environmentalism, consumerism, and sex education. The result was a partial breakdown in the schools' operation as a transmission belt - or at least reinferrer - of middle-class norms. In 1900 - the approximate base line of the shaman's nostalgia - one could reasonably demand the standard language in high school or college because it was mostly standard-speakers who were enrolled there; they had learned it at home, and needed only a trim, not a new hair-style.16 And they were the ones who taught the next generation from grade school up. Today not a few teachers are themselves uncertain of their usage, and are hardly in a position to insist on more than a handful of formalities, where correctness is concerned.

Worse, there are newly confident elements that refuse to wear neckties and avoid double negatives while still demanding a share in middle class benefits. If test scores are interpreted to mean that Black or
Chicano candidates are not entitled to be admitted to the freshman class of a university, many of those rejected claim it is not they who are at fault but the scores. The minority protest is one threat to middle class order. ‘Language is a class weapon,’ writes the British journalist Henry Fairlie, ‘and the triumph of the middle class in the past few centuries has made our language a middle-class instrument. This is why the aristocrats and the underprivileged protest.’ One such protest, from a Black educator: ‘Language conventions in America are based on a preoccupation with what is correct English, not what is dynamic, not what is vivid, not what is truthful, but simply what is correct.’ As the middle-class educator, publicist, or politician looks at the declining test scores and hears the accents he does not understand, he condemns as frills the courses that crowd the three R’s and calls for a return to the basics.

But a return to a strictly enforced standard becomes more and more difficult as the gap between generations widens. It was thought for a time that the rate of linguistic change stayed more or less the same, and statistical techniques were developed to determine how many hundreds or thousands of years ago two languages diverged, measuring the numbers and amounts of difference between them against a constant scale. Now we are fairly sure that change speeds up at some times, slows down at others. In American society and to some degree in other societies the effect of two generations of television-viewing is beginning to be felt. Radio began the process, but television has brought a range of dialects into the average home that would never have been heard in the first half of this century. And it is cumulative – the more the bonds are loosened, the greater the freedom to speak before the camera in the same tone and idiom as with friends. In one sense this leads toward uniformity as speakers unconsciously imitate one another across the old boundaries – predictions that British and Americans would no longer understand each other by the end of the twentieth century have not only been disproved but turned upside down: the two varieties of English have drawn closer together. But in another sense – the generational one – there is greater diversity. Children are bound to speak more differently from their parents than they would have if their models had been only the members of their own older generation and their friends and neighbors. The different parts of the English-speaking world converge even as their amalgam pulls away from each of the separate local standards and semi-standards. As part of the general loosening up, usages that were fairly widespread but had been held in check by some traditional regulation begin to occur freely. (A trivial example is the use of the word “kids” for “children”, which in the 1960s and 1970s began to crowd “children” out of its position as a generic. Of course it had been used for a long time, but always with a degree of affection or humor. Now it appears a new generation of speakers has drawn the inference, from hearing it so frequently, that it is the neutral term.)

One is always wise after the fact where linguistic change is concerned.

Fifty years from now it will be possible to judge whether the second half of the twentieth century was a time of speeding up. We can only say at the moment that it seems to be, and remark the difficulty that this poses to maintaining a more or less literary standard. The first two of the three-R basics are reading and writing, whose medium inevitably lags behind speech – and a speech more and more liberated by audio and video devices tends more and more to shear off from the anchor of writing. Television and its congeners have begun to reverse the process that started with the invention of the printing press. Before Gutenberg, information was by word of mouth; even afterward, for several centuries, the press served a very limited and mostly scholarly public. But with the popular revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the press came into its own – the DAILY press in particular, as the channel of universal information. This in turn gave the schools the heavy assignment of universal literacy. Reading and writing were no longer educational luxuries but necessities, and as they were increasingly integrated with speaking skills, speech was more and more affected by them. The conservatism of writing put a brake on some forms of linguistic change and speeded up others (most notoriously, spelling pronunciations – see page 41). By mid-twentieth century the process had reached its peak with literacy not only spread across the whole population but pushed to higher levels as graduates of secondary schools began to throng the colleges. It is ironic that at the very point of almost achieving the ideal, the immediate practical need for literacy has begun to decline (though our lives will depend on it for the foreseeable future, and without it we lose our history). The ‘declining literacy scores’ deplored by educators and editors reflect the television watershed: ‘Who needs to read?’ Shirley Brice Heath reports one of her students asking, ‘I can learn all I need to know by keeping my ears and eyes open.’ A generation of youth will learn what it needs to know and not much more.

So the schools are caught in a double confusion. On the one hand, the language is being destabilized on the literary side – the standard loses its grip as fewer and fewer learn to read and write well. On the other hand, there is as yet no regeneration of speech. Heath describes an earlier period in our history:

Stump meetings, the lyceum movement, debating clubs, and literary societies give evidence of the... emphasis on talk for exchange of information. Conversation across various sectors of society was highly valued for the immediate review and challenge of ideas it offered.

The lyceums in the first half of the nineteenth century and the Chautauqua in the latter half were among the great diffusers of oral culture, and the skills they represented were cultivated in the schools, where DICTION was as much a part of learning English as reading and writing. But with the triumph of literacy, oral delivery has been neglected – there is less debating, the reciting of poetry is no longer part
of the general culture, and a class in oratory would probably have to be canceled for lack of students. Speaking skills are not taught for themselves nor for what they have in common with writing: clarity, eloquence, logical organization, standards of correctness. Speech goes its own way, and speakers drift farther than ever from a literary standard. Shamans and traditionalists of all camps sense the general subversion, and it pains them.

If the average middle class white schoolchild is out of touch with the literary standard, the minority child is doubly so. There is a colloquial standard to learn on the playground and a literary standard to learn in class. To satisfy all communicative needs, both standards have to be learned, and the burden is a heavy one, for all that it may be eased by remedial and bilingual classes. The desired uniformity could be achieved by adopting the forms used by the underprivileged, but it never is—they are the ones who must demote their own language and learn a new one, replacing the threads that join their minds and their feelings to reality—like the operation of reconnecting the flesh and nerves of a severed limb. The task is hardest for those most distant from the standard and those whose exclusion for other reasons—such as color—has imbued them with feelings of defiant loyalty to their inheritance.

Nevertheless a society needs a standard and a fairly uniform one, whether it wells up from below or is imposed from above. The alternative can easily be worse. How vital a single mode of communication can be is seen in countries divided by language where, until the division is healed, government is impossible. If one of the rival languages is made official, speakers of the others complain of favoritism. If together they have enough political power, they may be able to prevent the enforcement of a native standard. This has happened in various countries since the Second World War, chiefly former British colonies with inherited English-speaking bureaucracies. In Nigeria, the number of indigenous languages, possibly running into the hundreds, makes it impracticable to adopt any one of them as the national language. English therefore by its neutrality recommends itself as the only choice available for adoption as a national language. No one ethnic group can feel cheated through its use as it naturally would if the language of another ethnic group were adopted.21 In India, English is still the language that trains the armed forces, examines students in the universities, conducts foreign affairs, and opens the way to a business career.22 In Nigeria even the nursery schools are taught in English. Though English is hardly a native language to any of them, the Indian—like the Nigerian, the Malayan, the Ghananian, the Ceylonese, and the Filipino—accepts the burden for its practical benefits. Maintaining a standard in a country like England or America where most speakers already command a variety of the same language comes cheap by comparison. To what extent this promotes economic power would be hard to estimate, but the two are certainly not unrelated.

But what makes it easy also raises the question of its necessity. If all

The Wonderful English Teacher is too good a disciple of the shaman not to be wrong a good part of the time, but this happens to be one solution for which there is a problem. Of course people know that a train is bigger than an envelope—but that sentence suggests the opposite (especially in writing), which makes it funny, which is distracting—and distractions are best avoided. Most readers are well aware that murder victims, once dead, are incapable of further action; nevertheless—and therefore—their thoughts are apt to wander from what the writer intends when they read a sentence like the following, with its dangling participle: Then all three victims were shot execution style with a large-caliber weapon before cleaning out a safe and fleeing.24

There will be a prestige variety so long as speakers and writers must take account of the needs and desires of hearers and readers. And if producing messages and receiving and decoding them are psychologically opposed operations, as some linguists think,25 then that accountability will always be with us. Speakers naturally prefer to sing their half of the duet with no more effort than necessary—to use the words and constructions that come first to mind, to speak at low
volume, to slur the sounds. Hearers just as naturally want comprehension to require no more effort than necessary — to be favored with background information, unambiguous sentences, and reasonably crisp articulation. The speaker or writer of course is the one who has to make most of the concessions, especially if he has an audience of more than one and most especially if the audience is remote in space or time. This explains why a prestige variety is so needed in writing. There is no feedback. The audience may run in the thousands, with a demonry of misunderstandings waiting to pounce on every ambiguity. The lessons in what works best, learned by trial and error, can be put together in a sort of code, and taught. This is rhetoric, in the original meaning of the term. It is by definition conservative, because innovations do not spread immediately or evenly, and may threaten communication if they are admitted too soon. Though he probably offered it on esthetic rather than practical grounds, John Ciardi’s advice deserves a hearing: ‘It will not do to resist uncompromisingly. Yet those who care have a duty to resist. Changes that occur against such resistance are tested changes. The language is better for them — and for the resistance.’ The PRESTIGE STANDARD is better for them, but if a standard is needed, then what is good for the standard is good for the language.

Though speaking is not the same as writing, there is a standard there too, and since the motives are the same — to do as you would be done by if you were the reader or hearer — the two standards often coincide. With speaking, the consideration that must be shown is not only intelligibility and avoidance of distraction but regard for status. Societies differ in the signs of deference they expect, but there is always some degree of formality when one speaks to a stranger, an employer, a clergyman, or someone of rank. In some languages the forms of courtesy are rigidly stylized. In English they tend to be added on rather than manifested in the grammatical structure — as they are for example in the verb forms of Romance and Germanic languages that distinguish a more distant vous from a more intimate tu in the endings of the verb (as English once did with its thou mayest, you may). In one area the verb still retains a courtesy marker, the use of the past to soften a request: a clerk in a store may ask deferentially Was there something you were looking for? rather than Is there something you’re looking for? Elsewhere, courtesy is shown in English mostly by choice of words (addressing someone as sir or madam rather than you there) and tone of voice — especially in intonation, by toning down the accents. Of the following, the first, with its accent on leave at a lowered pitch, is more restrained:

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  it   Leave
  Leave       it
    there.  there.
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Other indicators of relationship between speakers — intimacy, for example, or condescension — are just as important to know but less important to teach. The child grows up with intimate forms of speech, but requires the deferential forms in later contact with the world.

A hearer or reader sensitive to these marks of consideration is apt not to be cooperative if they are disregarded. No matter how democratic the society, they will always exist in some form. Americans in this century have tended to overlook them because of long indoctrination in the ethic of equality, which in its extreme form even denied that social classes existed in the United States. (It was still a new idea in the nineteenth century, when numerous manuals of good conduct explained for the benefit of men, women, or children how to speak and behave with persons of a different age, sex, or class.) Many young people of the 1960s went further and scorned courteous behaviour as insincere, sometimes going out of their way to use profane language (at the University of California in Berkeley it was the ‘Free Speech Movement’ — FSM, dubbed Filthy Speech Movement by their opponents). Rules of respect, condescension, intimacy, and avoidance — what to say when and to whom — are learned along with the rest of language. One may break some of them, on whatever pretext (to ‘show that I don’t have to kowtow to those people’, ‘to let this humble person know that I respect him as much as I do an aristocrat’), but they are there to be observed for the most part, and to the extent that the standard is explained and taught, they have to be made explicit. No one wants to break all of them at all the time — a conversation that did would probably stall before it got started.

This leaves us with a dilemma. If the shaman’s scapegoat rules are off the mark, must we still observe them to avoid offending him? It all depends. The fact is that we humor some of his prejudices as a matter of course — the ones that have been so insisted on that everyone’s eye is caught when they occur, to the confusion of the message. One example is ain’t: the proscription against it was unreasonable, yet most people avoid the word or use it to be consciously funny. Another is the double negative, as in They don’t have no money, which goes back to Chaucer and beyond and is the rule in many languages. It is common today, and is avoided or not depending on the speaker and the audience. If rules are to be broken, it is better done from knowledge than from ignorance, even when ignorance ultimately decides the issue.

So standards are inevitable — and their champions are eternal. William Caxton wrote in 1490, ‘For in these dayes, every man that is in ony reputacyen in his conte will utter his commynencye and maters in such termes that few men shall understondem them.’ And Thomas Sheridan in 1780: ‘Some of our most celebrated writers . . . have been guilty of great solecisms, inaccuracies, and even grammatical impro-prieties, in many places of their most finished works.’ And Charles Morgan in 1948: ‘The area of experience which cannot be described in the ordinary language of cultivated men extends year by year. . . . In part the loss of communication is due to loss of craftsmanship in language, to the belief that if some abandon rules sometimes (as all artists do), all
may abandon rules all the time.' When language changes it always seems to be going to the dogs, because we are more aware of the discomforts, of the inconvenience to our habits, than we are of the benefits. We are distressed by the loss of a distinction (disinterested is ruined because of confusion with uninterested, gay is ruined by homosexual associations), by a shift in pronunciation that puts a greater burden on inferring meaning from context (pepper and pauper), by a reflection of new attitudes that make our courtesy formulas obsolete. But human ingenuity and intelligence, plus what may amount to an instinct for symbolism, comes to the rescue. Today’s amenities are not yesterday’s, and the language must keep pace. When one distinction is lost, another is gained – occasionally even through the unwitting efforts of the shaman. Insistence on well rather than good in such contexts as Shake it well (good) has created a semantic split related to the adjective-adverb distinction but extending beyond it: good has become emotionally charged. well is colorless. He treats me good expresses more appreciation than He treats me well, and She scolded him, but good can hardly be expressed with well at all. Years of railing against sure in sentences like He’s sure must want it have specialized the word to imply that the hearer will agree (He surely must want it is indifferent – it can be used to counter disagreement). Anything that creates linguistic debris is an invitation to recycle. More new meanings find expression this way than by almost any other process. Language could not live without it. Errors and slippages are like the mutants in biology – from them are made the selections essential to survival. This is happening before our eyes with the each other construction. It was plural (They all took each other’s classes) but now is becoming indifferent to number (Everyone took each other’s classes instead of Everyone took everyone else’s classes); any kind of reciprocal action may soon be allowed (examples where this has already happened: Every policeman will be able to communicate with each other; Banks now move money between each other electronically).

The durability of standards and their defenders probably reflects, somewhere inside us, hatched no doubt by the lesson we learned as children that some things are said and others not, a deep craving for authority. There are cultures in which people characteristically prefer to hear a political speech or an expository lecture or a recitation of poetry in H [higher level] even though it may be less intelligible to them than it would be in L [lower level]. The same is true of our own subcultures. Many devout people have objected to each new version of the Bible, and when a decree of Pope Paul in 1963 introduced the vernacular languages to the Roman Catholic ritual, it kindled a reaction that still smolders: in 1976 Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre was forbidden to celebrate Mass after he refused to give up the Tridentine Latin service – but he celebrated it anyway, with the support of French traditionalists. Just the way something sounds is important to many people; language is a mainstay of ritual, being itself the High Church ritual of communicative behavior.

Even the populations that might seem to benefit most from a relaxation of authority often reject it. At the very time some educators and many linguists were trying to understand Black English and draw out the stigma, others, even including the officials of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, were denouncing the move: ‘Black parents throughout this nation should rise up in unanimous condemnation of this insidious conspiracy to cripple their children permanently,’ said an editorial in the NAACP journal in 1971 – an understandable reaction on the part of those who see ability to use the standard fluently as the only way to get ahead. And when schools that lack the resources in money, teachers, and materials to do the job properly (try to meet the needs of their minorities by offering special instruction in non-standard languages and dialects, they may disrupt other programs and do more harm than good.

As long as precepts are inevitable, they had better be made sensible. Lost causes should be abandoned. Useful changes should be recognized for what they are worth, even if they force the older among us to adapt ourselves to new conditions. The standard should accommodate a reasonably wide variation. Above all, the public and its policy-makers have a right to demand accurate information in this field as they demand it in those of health, public safety, and the cost of living. We need to be able to point to the rule-givers and say, ‘We know you are a necessary evil, but we know enough about language to recognize the charlatans among you.’ Authority is fine when not made of whole cloth and trimmed with lunatic fringe.