‘An Aggravating Situation’: What is ‘Correct’ English?

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Earlier this year there appeared an article by journalist Max du Preez in The Cape Argus entitled, ‘Let’s talk about things, like we did before 1999’. I pondered immediately on his use of like as a conjunction. Traditionalists have always decreed that this is not acceptable.

It made me recall a musical put on by a church in Port Elizabeth many years ago entitled, Tell it like it is. The principal of a girls’ school—a renowned English teacher in her time—agreed to allow the musical to be advertised at her school on one condition—that it was re-worded as Tell it as it is.

My background in Linguistics has always resulted in my being more tolerant than many other people regarding the issue of ‘correctness’ in language—which is why I ran into problems with some listeners when I participated in John Orr’s programme called, at that time, Strictly Speaking. They complained that I would not always commit myself as to what was ‘correct’ English. So, my reaction to Max du Preez’ headline did not cause me to go into linguistic paroxysms, although my personal preference (based on bias) would have been to use as. But I was curious to see what current lexicographers thought about it. So I turned to that venerable source, the Oxford Dictionary, to establish whether it supported my own empirical observation that the use of like as a conjunction had become acceptable.

What did I find? The entry for like in the Concise Oxford Dictionary includes the following: ‘Conj. informal 1 in the same way as that 2 as though’ (1999: 822). Note that, although the entry contains the register mark informal, this is still Standard English, which is not limited to formal registers. (I also found, in the same entry, by the way, the acceptance, in informal speech, of like as ‘meaningless filler’.)

If one pages through this edition of the Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD), one will find many other such linguistic holy cows which have been slaughtered—or are at least on the way to the abattoirs. Here are some examples:

Can vs may: The following notice appears in a Kwikspar store near to where I live: ‘We cannot, by law, sell tobacco products to anyone under the age of 16’. Cannot? May not? The Dictionary suggests that the management is not as illiterate as some may think: it lists, as one of the meanings of can, ‘be permitted to’ (may), without any register labels (202). So the familiar situation of the schoolchild who asks, ‘Can I go to the toilet?’—or, these days, ‘the bathroom?’—and who is told, ‘Yes, you can, but the question is whether you may’; will lapse into history. You can now use can to mean may.

Comprise of: May (can) we say, ‘The Council of the English Academy is comprised of a host of wise people’? Of course not, say the purists (presumably
intending no reflection on the quality of the people on the Council). The COD disagrees, declaring that ‘[the passive] use (as in the country is comprised of
the country comprises twenty states)’ (294).

SENSUOUS in the sense of SENSUAL: This is what the COD has to say; ‘The
words sensual and sensuous are frequently used interchangeably to
mean sensuous is the more neutral term, meaning “relating to the senses
rather than the intellect” (1306). Evidence suggests that the ‘neutral’ use of sensuous is rare in modern English; if a neutral use is intended it is advisable to use alternative
wording.

AGGRAVATE vs ANNOY: Can (may) one say that the woman with the squeaky
voice aggravates us? No, some would answer; besides being sexist, this is
the COD, on the contrary, points out that ‘Aggravate in the sense “annoy or exasperate” is in widespread use in modern English and dates
back to the 17th century, but the use is still regarded as incorrect by some
traditionalists’ (25). It was, in fact, used in this sense by no less a writer than
Charles Dickens! (“Well, I’m sure I’m very much obliged to you Misses Brown,”
said the unfortunate youth, greatly aggravated.) Its modern acceptance is

HOPEFULLY: In similar vein, the COD points out that 90% of the citations in
the British National Corpus accept the use of the word hopefully to mean ‘it is

By contrast with these examples, which indicate a clear shift in terms of
acceptance, some entries or notes in the COD indicate grey areas – items which
are not yet accepted by most but are possibly on their way to being accepted.
For example, the COD notes that “around 15% of citations in the Corpus
accept I am not adverse to helping out” (19). Similarly, it mentions that about 20%
of the Corpus use flaut when flout is intended (540) and that the Americans
already use alternate in place of alternative (39).

There are large numbers of intelligent people who would feel very
uncomfortable at this news, while others would be absolutely apologetic. The
English Language, they argue, is being auctioned off, with some correct items
going; some more going; and some gone! The grounds for their negative reaction
may, however, vary.

The first group would be those who generally react to change. They would
agree – although they might deny it – with the words of Lord Salisbury on the eve
of the Second Reform Bill in Britain. ‘All change,’ said he, ‘is for the worse, so let
us have a little change as possible.’ Jean Aitchison suggests that these people,
Canute-like, are ‘subconsciously reacting to the fast-moving world we live in, and
consequently resenting change in any area of life’ (1991: 7). She goes on to say
that ‘Every generation nominally believes that the clothes, manners and speech of
the following one have deteriorated’ (7). Such people need to accept that, as

Aitchison says, ‘Everything in this universe is in a state of change’ (3). Edmund
Spenser, in the 16th century acknowledged this when he spoke of ‘The ever
whirling wheel / Of change; the which all mortal things doth sway.’

Then there is the second group who would not claim that the world, that
civilisation as we know it, is necessarily going to the dogs but who nevertheless
react negatively to the concept of change in language. But why not language? As
the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure put it, ‘Time changes all things: there is
no reason why language should escape this universal law’ (1959: 77). This was
pointed out a century before that already by German Wilhelm von Humboldt, who
said, in 1836: ‘There can never be a moment of true standstill in language, just as
little as in the ceaseless flaming thought of man. By nature it is a continuous
process of development’ (1967: 63). We must accept that language, as with
everything else, shall, as Shakespeare says, ‘Within [Time’s] bending sickle’s
compass come’.

Finally, there are those who accept that change does and will occur, both in
general and in language - but who argue that this does not mean that we
necessarily accept the changes – that change entails, as suggested by von
Humboldt, ‘development’. Change, though inevitable, is a sign that the English
language is falling to bits, unless it is necessary to cope with new developments in
society (for example, to meet the demands of the cyber-age). Ogden Nash put their
case as follows in his poem, ‘Lament for a dying language’ (1962):

Coin brassy words at will, debase the coinage;
We’re in for an if-you-cannot-liek-them-join-age,
A slovenliness provides its own excuse age,
Where usage overnight condones misusage.
Farewell, farewell to my beloved language,
Once English, now a vile oranguiantage.

They will therefore tend to reject changes from the original meaning of a word, as
has happened in the aforementioned examples. But the question is why they should
be rejected. Changes have occurred throughout the ages without reducing the
efficiency of the language – the biological concept of ‘adaptation’ applies equally
to languages.

Where the arguments of the doom-watchers of English go particularly awry is in
their tendency to apply their argument only to recent, known, changes. As
Philip Howard puts it:

[The] worries never stop to ask when English was in the golden age, from
which it has declined so disastrously. If you ask them, they tend to reply that it
was when they were at school, and were taught old-fashioned English grammar
and spelling, and whisked when they got things wrong. (1984: xiii)

Thus it does not worry them that nice originally meant ‘silly’, that silly originally
meant ‘happy’ or ‘blessed’. And why not? Because they don’t know; or, even if they are etymologically unchallenged, they don’t bother, because they have never used the words with the original meanings. If they really believe in their cause, they should trace all words back to the original meanings and insist on these meanings as the only correct ones.

The same problems arise regarding grammatical changes. Research will show, for example, that until that meddling priest, Bishop Lowth, produced his idiosyncratic grammar in the 18th Century, no one objected to ending a sentence on a preposition—no wonder Churchill rejected the modern view as something up with which he would not put. Similarly, in his pursuit of proving the doctrine of original linguistic sin, Lowth rejected, on the grounds of Latinate grammar, the use of the objective case after the verb be as in ‘He is taller than me’, despite the fact that writers of renown used— and still use—this form and despite the fact that a language such as French which is directly descended from Latin does not observe this rule.

Lown’s misguided insistence on using Latin rules for English is evidenced in another linguistic quibble, the split infinitive. Yet another example of modern sloppiness, it is argued. What they don’t know is that, as David Crystal points out, the view that the ‘split infinitive’ is incorrect has only been around for about two hundred years (1984; 28). In this case it was Dryden who pronounced that we must be Latinate in our grammar. So, because you can’t split the infinitive in Latin, we must not do so in English. For example, amare (to love) cannot be split when adding an adverb, for example, semper (always). Because one can’t divide amare, it is argued that one must not divide ‘to love’. Besides the fact that English is not Latin (and is not even descended from the Italic branch of languages), the argument is nonsense: Firstly, the English infinitive consists of two words—which makes it easily splittable. Secondly, in English we would accept ‘I will always love you’, (which splits the verb phrase ‘will love’) despite the fact that, in Latin, the adverb cannot be inserted into the verbal structure (Ego te semper amabo—where amabo is the verb)—how inconsistent can we be!

Then there are relatively recent grammatical changes which are rejected but which are, in fact, simply the continuation of age-old trends. Take, for example, that threatened little word, whom. There’s the story of the official from the South African Council for the English Education who answered the telephone. ‘To whom do you wish to speak?’ she asked. ‘Sorry, man,’ said the caller. ‘I don’t know any therefore, would not be happy with the COD’s comment on the pronoun whom: employing who in all contexts; today this use is broadly accepted in standard English’ (1999; 1634).

‘Just sloppiness,’ say the members of what Aitchison calls ‘the anti-slovenliness brigade’ (1991: 7). Once again, they are trapped in the ‘not-in-my-time’ warp. The reduction in the variations on the forms of words is simply part of a long tradition of the English Language, which has moved, over the past 10 centuries, from an inflectional to a positional language. The inflexions of Old English started with the Norman Conquest, and still continue to do so. For example, the second person pronoun in Old English had two different forms for the subjective and the objective case, as is the case for ‘who/whom’, ‘he/him’, etc. Thus they would have said:

SUBJ: Pu lufast me (You love me)
OBJ: Ic luffe pe (I love you).

If I am right that the pe form fell away in favour of pu (later you) as the only form for the subjective and objective forms (and, if not, then it nevertheless illustrates my point), I can imagine how, somewhere along the line, there were those singing lamentably Where have all the pe’s gone? Gone to pu every one. When will they ever learn?

And, of course the same fate has befallen nouns and adjectives, which used to have different forms for subjective and objective case (as well as gender). Thus one would say:

SUBJ: [My] god nama
OBJ: Ic haebbe [a] gode naman.

In similar vein, there is the rejection of plural forms such as syllabuses and memoranda, both of which are accepted by the COD as alternative forms to syllabi and memoranda respectively (1999: 1450, 88). Such advocates fly in the face of the tendency for foreign words to conform, in time, to English inflection rules. Thus, for example, we speak of veldskoens in English, rather than veldskoene.

Then there are the complaints about the Americans’ tendency to ‘verb’ nouns—eg ‘to target’—but they do not quibble about the use of ‘interview’ or ‘highlight’ as verbs. Why not? Because these were verbed in the 19th Century.

And what about using singular verbs with such words as media or data? It is argued that the verb needs to be plural because these are plural nouns. But the COD indicates that it has become acceptable to use singular verbs (884, 365). The inconsistency in the arguments emerges when the same objectors do not complain if someone says ‘Maths is easy’. The tendency in English for the meaning of a noun to prevail over its form the purposes of concord is conveniently forgotten.

The basic flaw underlying the arguments of these people—the linguistic Cassandras—is the view that there is what Jeremy Warburg calls a “transcendental” notion of correctness (1962: 315)—that there is a fixed, canonical, Platonic standard of ‘correct’ English—or at least a definite ‘standard’ which must be protected. Their view is not new, as we have indicated. Its extreme form is epitomised by the view of Jonathan Swift, who, in the early 18thC, stated...
that what he most wanted was 'that some method should be thought on for ascertaining and fixing our language for ever' – although he did allow for doing this only 'after such alterations are made in it as shall be thought requisite'.

Therefore, in terms of meaning, as Warburg pointed out, 'certain forms are held to be "correct" which are rarely, if ever used at all; while many other forms, "incorrect"' (315). They need to accept that, as Robert Hall put it over 40 years ago:

"The meaning of any specific linguistic item is purely arbitrary. There is no underlying connection, no inherent and inescapable relationship, between any linguistic form and what it signifies... It is wholly a matter of social convention; the meaning of words is something determined by the usage of the speakers of language... not by some divine fiat" (1960: 125-124).

Similarly, with the grammar of a language, Hall argues that 'there is no such thing as a body of rules, which are as fixed and unchangeable as the laws of the Medes and Persians, which are called "grammar" and to which all language must conform or else be condemned as "ungrammatical"' (124). Philip Howard sums up this point as follows: 'Grammar codifies the language as it exists today; it does not superimpose and predetermine a code of language. Grammar, in short, was made for man [and woman], not man for grammar' (1984: 119).

What is 'correct' is what the majority of (educated) native users of the language actually use – some kind of international basis with local variations. This standard is one which matches experience and does not falsify the linguistic facts of life. A vague concept, but nevertheless the only authentic guideline, which incorporates a tension between what is current and what is becoming current.

Up to now I have been talking in terms of a monolithic linguistic cocon – where it is assumed that all are first-language users. The situation is even more complicated when one is dealing with English in a multilingual society such as South Africa. I believe that the more liberal notion of 'correctness' enables us to language can boast of such wonderful words borrowed from Afrikaans such as "slapgar" and "ganrol" – don't the sounds of these words alone convey their meaning? And what of doooodui (also spelled "dooduooi")? What other variety of the language has the luxury of at least four words for a 'formal deliberation'? We can boast of "boesbiet, saamtrek, indaba, and, correctness would regard this as the depurification of the language. But when was doooodui a word from just about every language.

Another South Africanism which raises linguistic eyebrows is illustrated by the story of my son who, when he was about four years old, came home from preschool. 'Daddy, Daddy,' he exclaimed, 'do you know what they say at my school?' I waited, thinking that the dirt sets in at an ever younger age these days. His answer was, 'They say "come with"!' It is argued that 'with' is a proposition, and must therefore be followed by a noun or pronoun. These same critics, however, would argue that an auxiliary verb should be followed by a main verb. Yet they would accept, in answer to the question, 'Is he coming?', 'He is'. So what about the rule that an auxiliary verb must be followed by a main verb? In both cases, it is only in the deep structure that it is necessary to have an item following. So why accept this in one case but not the other?

And then there are those who get hot under the collar about the kind of English spoken on SABC (for that, read 'spoken by black people in the SABC'). Of course, one wants clarity of speech, and one wants a level of standardisation – but within what one linguist many years ago called 'a range of tolerance'. Thus, for example, one may accept 'develoopp', but prefer broadcasters not to say 'DEvelop', or in similar vein, 'eCONomic'. And one should definitely correct pronunciations which result from mother-tongue interferences which could be ambiguous or open to ridicule. This one would prefer that people do not speak of Mboke's 'leadership'; or, as I heard in January this year, 'the roof had fallen on the diseased'.

I believe we should celebrate the wonderful diversity of our dialect – or our dialects. This does not, however, mean that there is no standard, but that the standard must be upheld for the right reasons, and in the right way. The reason is social, not linguistic. We should ignore what Philip Howard calls the 'hypochondriacs of language' (1988: xiv) who, like the Biblical poor, we will always have with us. As Howard points out, 'the linguistic reactionaries are wrong when they prophesy as angrily as Minor Prophets on a bad Monday that the language itself is dying.' People, he says, 'die; not languages'.

No form is inherently good or bad; it is society which decides this. If, for example, over the years, respectable English-speakers said 'I is', then 'I is' would become the 'correct' form, in much the same that 'pe' and 'pu' gave way to 'you'. The standard is based on what people use, not on rules laid down by self-appointed protectors of the language. Implicit in this is also the fact that, as time goes by, what is regarded as 'correct' changes constantly, which means that we need to keep alert to all this before judging the way people speak.

In sum: Not only is the 'standard' one which is based on fact and one which is changing constantly, but it is also a flexible measure – what is regarded as 'correct' falls within the bounds 'a range of tolerance', which takes into account both the background of the speaker (eg level of education, first/additional language, etc.) and the context (eg spoken/written, formal/informal). Examples of the first have been given. Regarding contextual factors, one may, for example, build on the use of doooodui in a textbook on cookery, whereas one would accept it in a casual conversation; one may allow sentences to end on prepositions
casual speech but may prefer not to do so in formal writing.

So, yes, it could be argued that teachers and parents need to correct, but only on the grounds of social disapproval of certain forms – provided that it is current social disapproval. As Hall puts it, ‘if my child is likely to run into trouble later for saying I done it … (and I would add come with) I will try to keep him from getting into the habit of using those forms which are actually not acceptable socially and which may cause others to react unfavourably towards him. But, if I am sensible about it, I will realise that the reason I want him to avoid these “incorrect” forms is not any inherent badness or evil character that they may have, but purely practical consideration of their social acceptability’ (1960: 13-14). This approach is neither ‘prescriptive’ or ‘descriptive’ – it is, in fact, both: ‘descriptive prescriptivism’. It is, therefore, neither hidebound nor permissive.

In short, the attitude of speakers of the language towards what is ‘correct’ and how they handle people who use ‘incorrect’ English, should not be one which set up barriers to communication and self-esteem because of simplistic notions of correctness and social snobbery, but one which empowers all to interact with confidence in an open, democratic society.

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Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper delivered at the English Academy Conference, 4-6 April 2002, University of Pretoria.
2. For example, Roald Dahl, in his autobiography, Boy, published originally by Jonathan Cape in 1984, writes as follows: ‘my ancient half-sister, who was twelve years older than me’.

References