＜研究ノート＞

IN NEED OF PRESCRIPTIVISM:

A Case for Establishing an International *Academie Anglaise* Based on Failed Media-based Descriptivist Grammatical/Semantic Regulation

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Abstract

This paper aims to present an overview of descriptivism at present in the evolution of the English language, as well as the tongue's ongoing degradation due in part to the failure of print media to regulate and govern over this descriptivism in light of an increasing tendency to ignore prescriptivism. Random examples of poor monitoring will be presented and a case made for dealing with the increasing use of faulty examples to uphold new mistakes and alterations in the English language that reinforce previous errors. Finally, a case will be made for the establishment of an academy, such as exists in France, to govern over and regulate correct English, given the plethora of dangers presented in the Age of (so-called) Information, whose title suggests an ostensible decline in the Age of Knowledge, as well as a growth in the number of non-native speakers around the world and the impact that various forms of English have on the principal language.

Key words: descriptivism, prescriptivism, *Academie Francaise,* Academy for the Preservation of Correct English, the American Dialect Society, grammar, syntax

I. OVERVIEW

When it comes to language, grammar prescriptivists tend to favor rules and standards for how people should use language. Descriptivists, on the other hand, tend to favor popular usage that is reflected in how people actually use language. The late author David Foster Wallace argued that language serves its community best when it is meaningful and clear, and moreover, he pointed out that the conventions of standard English aid in providing clarity. Flipping this around, one could surmise that an additional interpretive burden is placed on both native speakers of English and learners when descriptive rules are put into place, particularly in a pell-mell or haphazard fashion. Language rules do not necessarily need to be followed and upheld if a language is to carry out its primary function: to convey meaning. However, it would appear to be helpful, such as is the case with French, if there is a set and correct structure within which language can evolve and develop. (NOTE: The *Academie Francaise* was created in 1635 to govern over and adjudicate developments

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in the French language.) (Burgess, 1992, p. 225).

Anne Fadiman, in the August edition of *Harper's Magazine*, quite possibly the finest edited magazine available in the United States, wrote this regarding prescriptivism: "I like rules because they make me feel safe." Fadiman then goes on to cite the American Dialect Society's choice of Word of the Decade in 2020- the singular use of "they" as an item that "causes extensive bloodshed on the prescriptivist/descriptivist battlefront."(Fadiman, August, 2020, p. 52). (NOTE: In 2010, the Word of the Decade was the verb "google"; in 2000, it was "web." Both are clearly cultural markers, though one could argue they represent a steady decline in American academic culture and intellect as the world descends steadily into chaos that would seem to be just another negative by-product, along with the massive loss of jobs, of the Information Age- as suggested earlier, which constitutes, semantically, a logical move away from the Age of Knowledge in just about every sense. Moreover, with such choices of Word of the Year, one wonders why the association does not change its name from the American Dialect Society to the American Dilation Society.)

This highly questionable choice of "they" as a singular pronoun goes against virtually every style manual, though dictionaries were quick to back up the selection. *The Oxford English Dictionary* includes a definition for a singular form, as does *Merriam-Webster*. It should be noted that in all cases, it is emphasized that the change be made in light of non-binary identifiers. In other words, such people as transgender will identify themselves outside of the gender binary. To put it another way, a woman who was once a man may not prefer a person speaking about "her" stemming from the subjective pronoun form "she/he," but rather, "them."(Prescriptivist logic would dictate that because this person has chosen to become female, she would naturally prefer the pronoun "she.")

Fadiman concludes her essay with a neat outline of positions that may be taken on this issue ranging from conservative to radical.

1. A person refuses to use it in any way whatsoever. (The author would like to admit that he subscribes to this position.)
2. A person uses it only in the case of binary individuals (such as transgender people.)
3. A person uses it only with indefinite pronouns, such as *anyone* and *everybody*.
4. A person would use it for #'s 2 and 3, and for individuals whose gender is not known. (EX. That truck drove by too fast. The driver should know how to control their car.) (The author insists that this sentence would be better yet if it read, "…the driver should know how to control his or her car." It is ruled by logic and good sense. Also, who really cares if this alteration requires two additional, and may this author add, short words, particularly when it lends clarity to the utterance?)
5. A person uses it in every instance from now on, as was proposed in the *New York Times* last summer, making this prescriptivist alteration a steadfast rule.

This paper aims to select examples from newspaper prose that indicate a failure on the part of the media to effectively prevent the dissemination of errors stemming from descriptivist usage. In the absence of a national academy such as exists in France to protect French (*L'Academie Francaise*), one could argue that English is under the threat of radical and reckless change based on misusage, which is particularly common given the ubiquity of electronic devices for communication. Newspapers stand on the battlefront, firefighters of sorts, if you will, aiming to protect English from

more extensive degradation over time, yet as Internet-generated prose increases exponentially, the capability of print news sources to deal effectively with the debauching of the English language decreases.

At the very least, media sources, though waning in influence, need to uphold the basic principles of English. Moreover, a failure to do so, as illustrated throughout this paper, reflects a loss of control over the process due to an absence of an International Academy for the Preservation of Sound English, a body desperately needed as regulation of the language becomes less and less common in this age of device proliferation. (NOTE: This point cannot be emphasized strongly enough.) Quite often, the reason given for the use of faulty grammar/syntax is that examples appeared previously in newspapers. In other words, writers cite examples of poor usage to uphold *their* poor usage, which lends a degree of legitimacy to such prose.

Finally, this disclaimer needs to be stated: English does reflect a relatively steady, but uncontrolled growth over the past five or six centuries. It has borrowed heavily in developing its massive vocabulary arsenal and grammatical/syntactic breadth. However, over the past century, a firm establishment of basic rules has become essential if English is to continue growing healthily. Otherwise, like a forgotten or abandoned town that has become overgrown and overridden with vegetation and foliage, it will become lost in an increasingly unregulated and unmonitored age. It should be noted that a battery of style books aims to steer users toward good usage, however, since the style books themselves vary widely in quality and content, it is impossible to look to style books for consistency. Additionally, style books appear to be on the wane, replaced by the Wild West, the Internet, for advice and suggestions that seem to be available from anybody and his brother, whereupon such advice may be totally devoid of authority of any kind.

It is consistency and a sense of uniformity that English badly requires at this stage in its evolution. This paper will examine a mere fragment of what is transpiring to prevent this from happening.

II. EMBRACING INCONSISTENCY/ROWING AGAINST THE CURRENT OF LOGIC

Troubles with Agreement, Upholding and Promoting Faulty Parallelism

The example in the previous section serves as the first example of illogical change or alteration in sound, acceptable grammar rules/practice. Grant Barrett (2016) attempts to argue for the following sentence, which is based on the logic outlined in the overview of this paper: "If someone from your department wants to interview me, they should call my cell phone." (Barrett, 2016, p. 155). Aside from the odd usage of "cell phone" over "cellphone" (after all, the word "telephone" exists, whereas "tele phone" does not; "cell", like "tele", ought to work as a prefix in this word, as a cellphone is merely another type of phone), Barrett argues that this is good English because "it has been around for at least 600 years." (Note that the telephone was invented in just 1876, when Alexander Graham Bell said, "Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you.")

It is clear that "someone" refers to one person, which would require a singular objective

pronoun in the second part of this sentence. “If someone wants to interview me, he or she should call my cellphone.” Moreover, Mr. Barrett should keep in mind that 600 years ago, people bathed once a year and often drained their blood when fighting an illness or disease. Neither is a very salubrious practice from that time period; in fact, let's say, with fair certainty, that little was good about knowledge at that time. Shall all such habits be resumed, given what we now know? (Recall that “shall” still serves an effective purpose in that it lays down a mandate.) I doubt that accepting “they” as a singular form would prove convincing because it was used during the Dark Ages...a period that was called dark because it was just that.

The title of Barrett's book is called *Perfect English Grammar*. Might this author suggest an alternative? *Perfect Descriptive English Grammar*, *Perfectly Outdated Grammar*, or *Near-Perfect English Grammar* might all work a bit better.

In the insightful, and up-to-date work, *Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay*, Richard Lederer and Richard Dowis (1999) offer a neat, sensible solution that teachers would do well to adopt: Cast such sentences in the plural form. “If any of the employees want to interview me, they should call my cellphone.” The pronouns are now parallel, a fundamental that should be a staple of grammar. Another idea is to substitute an ordinary noun for the pronoun. “If someone wants to interview me, that employee should call my cellphone.” This avoids identifying the gender and solves a grating case of faulty agreement: a singular subject with a plural objective pronoun. Moreover, it is so sensible and logical.

Elaine Bender (2003) says it perhaps most straightforwardly in her work, *Common Errors in English and How to Avoid Them*. “Someone...when used as a subject requires a singular verb; when used as an antecedent, it requires a singular pronoun.”(Bender, p. 40).

Yet time and again, this error persists. In the weekend edition of the *New York Times* (August 29/30, 2020) is the following sentence that gives one the impression that the *Times* no longer stands guard over good grammar:“Wasn't it risky marrying someone after knowing them for only a few days?” Granted, the writer identifies himself as transgender early on in the piece, but he also identifies himself as his mother's son. (Why not “my parent's son”, and avoid identifying the gender of the parent? Parallelism and consistency are both important in writing.)

The *New York Times* featured this quotation, which appeared via *Spotify*, a streaming platform that promises to pull young people away from more constructive pastimes and further debauch them with promotional messages that go out to millions of users, such as this:“You are one of Taylor Swift's top fans worldwide. You're one of their top fans. Hit Play on their radio and we'll provide an endless stream of their music.”(Bromwich, 2019, p. 8). After reading such material, one would get the impression that the executives at *Spotify* might want to seek editorial assistance with their writing. Not only did this message then get shared on social media with millions more, but the *New York Times* failed to “*sic*” the necessary places, to highlight the errors and draw attention to them, a practice that needs augmenting in this critical age of increased grammatical poverty. In other words, publications such as the *New York Times* and *The Japan Times* need to up their law enforcement roles in the educational sphere.

The Japan Times, in an article about Naomi Osaka, both follows and promotes a new, incorrect

writing practice when it offered this quote:"If I can get a conversation started in a majority white sport, I consider that a step in the right direction. Watching the continued genocide of Black people at the hand of the police is honestly making me sick to my stomach."(AP, *The Japan Times*, August 28, 2020, p. 6). Enduring comments such as these might make some readers of this particular paper sick to their stomachs as well. The word "genocide"(i.e., murder on a massive scale) might be reserved for, say, suitable situations such as the massacre of over 100,000 unarmed people in Nanking during World War II or the slaughter/torture of thousands upon thousands of young men during the Bataan Death March at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Army in 1942.

What exactly is the "genocide" to which Osaka refers? She seems to be alluding to the seven deaths at the hands of police officers in the United States, complicated situations in which several clear violators of the law in 2020 failed to comply with police requests/demands to cooperate, which hardly constitutes "genocide." Several cases of homicide, perhaps, if one wants to be semantically accurate, but the circumstances would have to be established before such a label could be applied. The term "alleged homicide" work best in her quotation, if accuracy is of any interest to this celebrity. It might be suggested here that Osaka confine her public comments to tennis. As a pop star/sports celebrity, she runs the risk of spreading idle, unfounded ideas to masses of people who think very little about anything, and are likely to be persuaded by anything Osaka says because she dons Nike gear at all times...and is paid dearly for the privilege of doing so, in all likelihood. Think back to Pascal's *Pensees,* and the foolishness and senselessness of people admiring judges merely because they wear robes or kings because they walk the streets adorned in crowns. Why fawn over a person simply because she is decked out in Nike insignias at all times? To this author, such insignias recall scenes of Tiger Woods' wife smashing in the windshield of his automobile with a golf club. This disturbing process is rendered all the more possible due to the ubiquity of device-based communication forms from which such misinformation and misdirected campaigns can be launched. Texting often on Twitter is the U.S. president, Donald Trump. Look at the effect his chicanery and mischief have on certain swathes of the population.

From time to time, there are problems between American and British forms of agreement. This appears to be one such instance: "One couple have traveled from Sydney three times to eat at the restaurant." (AFP-Jiji, 2020, p. 7). The term "couple" is singular:"One couple has traveled from Sydney three times..." would be correct here, but so often, people think of the couple not as a unit, but as two individuals. Such collective nouns should be treated as units;"family members" could be used for the plural form, or "A husband and wife have traveled from Sydney three times…" if this writer truly wishes to employ the plural agreement of the verb in this sentence. An academy could immediately regulate and straighten out such discrepancies.

Not Capital at All

Now we turn back to the Naomi Osaka story discussed in the previous section and to a grammatical problem with that sentence: Black people and white majority. Again, serving identical functions, these should be treated with the lowercase. Proper nouns indicating nationality/ethnic groupings, such as Japanese, Irish, and Swahili should be capitalized; races need not be. Native

American would be an exception because it needs to distinguish those of indigenous heritage from a guy like me, a native of the United States (of European ancestry). African American is properly handled as it is a compound of two proper nouns. However, caution goes out regarding use of a term with such widespread visibility. Recall a news item from an important American newspaper in the 1990s: "The car was stolen by two African American males, but the men remain at large."

Such a sentence needs to be re-read and thought over carefully. If the men had not been caught, which was the case, then how could their nationalities be determined? Could they have been two black men from Sweden, which would make them non-American black males of African descent? Or Naomi Osaka's brother (assuming she has one) and Ryu Hachimura, two black men from Japan? Without determining this information concerning nationality, the label "African American" cannot be used here. However, since an eye-witness did note the color of their skin, "black males" could be used. Not Black males, which highlights the problem at present: "white people" appears in lowercase whereas "Black people" is capitalized. There is no plausible logic for doing this, unless the rule is applied uniformly to white, black, brown, red, and yellow people.

In the August 12 edition of *The Japan Times*, the following sentence appeared: "There's nothing like being a Dad." Though it was a quotation, was it the newspaper's responsibility to convey Mike Trout's comments in a correct manner? Here, the word "Dad" needs no capital as it is standing in for "father." Christians would capitalize "father" only when speaking of the Supreme Being or deity; Mike Trout might be a very good athlete, but God he is not. This quotation was in need of a *sic* citation...or was it? (NOTE: *Sic* is a Latin word meaning "so" or "thus"; it is used in publications to indicate the error in print is that of the person quoted, not one made by the journalist or resulting from poor editing.) Mike Trout merely spoke these words, unless he was interviewed by e-mail. It was clearly the writer/the journalist who was at fault here.

One more example of this involves proper nouns whose capitalization is often abused by writers both amateur and professional. When Junpei Yasuda arrived back in Japan after being held hostage for 40 months, he must have been ecstatic. The shared delight of grammarians probably dimmed when they came across this sentence in *The Japan Times* at the start of the article: "Yasuda arrived at Narita airport on Thursday evening."(Reuters, Kyodo, 2018, p. 1). Narita Airport is a proper noun; the word "airport" is part of the formal name. "On Nov. 19, Carlos Ghosn, the board chair and former CEO of Nissan, was arrested at Haneda airport."(Thakur, p. 7). Once again, a proper noun has been improperly capitalized, though this time it was Haneda, not Narita. At least there was parallelism to the degree that both Tokyo area airports got mentioned. Thakur might have made the extra effort to spell out November all the way as well.

Classic Errors: Fewer vs. Less, Neither/Nor vs. Either/Or, "Old" Adages

Via a Reuters wire piece, *The Japan Times* could have corrected congressional representative Pramila Jayapal on July 3, 2020, when it reported on hearings involving the tech giant Facebook. "How many copies did Facebook end up copying? Less than five? Less than 50?" Her comment is neatly conveyed in terms of numbers: five is spelled out as a word, whereas 50 is written as a numeral. Note that this author firmly believes this should be a steadfast rule in English.

However, one winces at the use of "less," a glaring and basic error that required a "*sic*" citation. A quick glance at the *Harbrace College Handbook* confirms the rule:"Fewer, used with plural nouns, refers to number and less, used with singular nouns, to amount. There were fewer dogs in the yard today, so we used less dog food."(Hodges, 1990, p. 219). Again, a congressional representative is in a high profile position. It is important to uphold good grammar practices in front of the entire nation, particularly one that desperately needs better grammar skills, such as the United States. (The former U.S. president will be dealt with further on in this paper.)

The "neither/nor, either/or" quandary would appear to fit this category. "And neither Senator Paul D. Ryan nor Representative Kevin McCarthy have stepped forward."(Martin, 2018, p. 5). The problem in this instance is with agreement. "Neither A nor B is…" This construction takes the singular. Just two months before this, the following construction appeared in the same publication: "Since neither the traditional left or right blocs won a majority…"(Cordenius, 2018, p. 12). It is a basic and accepted rule that these two correlative conjunctions go together: Neither/nor, either/or. In this case, the editors missed this erroneous construction, though this author wonders just how many readers noticed.

The following sentence contains yet another common error:"This is essentially the old adage about generals fighting the last war."(Landler, 2018, p. 5). This sentence was attributed to former ambassador to Germany John Kornblum, and certainly deserves a *sic*. An adage is old by definition. To call it old is to be redundant. It is simply not necessary. It belongs to the Department of Redundancy Department. (That was a joke.)

"The old adage is, if you're a president, don't talk about the stock market."(Ponczek and Hajric, 2018, p. 10). Again, the word is, as often happens, misused in print media. This classic error helps to segue nicely into the next section, as it doubles as a word used incorrectly.

Incorrect Word Usage

YouTuber John Daub offers a classic mistake when he says the following, again in *The Japan Times*: "I got to meet the people who I impacted with my videos."(Michel, July 31, 2020, p. 12). It is good that he identifies himself as a cheerleader of popular Japanese culture rather than a promoter of good language usage; his impact might be somewhat less than impressive. Note that the word *impact*, a noun, refers to the force of an object hitting another. It is more often than not used in a figurative way, but it **cannot** be used as a verb. (Longman, 1983, p. 345). (NOTE: Emphasis the author's.)

One word that currently gets abused in modern usage is "literally." The definition means, "Exactly, according to the words and not the intentions."(Longman, 1983, p. 397). "Giving words their ordinary sense, not metaphorical or figurative or rhetorically exaggerated."(Fowler, 1969, p. 469). "That movie literally blew me away." When hearing such a sentence, one wonders: The person uttering that sentence is still there, alive. He claimed to have been detonated into multiple pieces and fragments.

I wish such poor usage of English would be blown away, figuratively or literally.

Daub was joined by Reuters News Agency in promoting this creative use of "impact.""Our goal

is to spread out the cancellations across our entire system to impact the least amount of customers." (Reuters, 2019, p. 5). This violates several categories. First, "impact" is used as a verb. Second, "the least amount of customers" is grating. It would have been far easier to just say, "The fewest number of customers." Customers is a countable noun.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that Daub made an additional "classic error":"I got to meet the people **whom** I influenced with my videos." Now the sentence reads more correctly.

Rochelle Kopp (2019) astounded probably more than one reader with this sophomoric error: "Alright, waiting for the other shoe to drop?"(NOTE: Microsoft editing, which had been installed in this computer without the consent of the author, did not indicate that "alright" was incorrect.) According to Edward Johnson, "Alright is never right."(Johnson, 1983, p. 229). In a poll taken for the *Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* some two decades back, 86% of a panel of distinguished writers and communication experts ruled that it was not all right to use alright when one should use all right. (Lederer and Dowis, 1999, p. 32).

However, using inversion logic to examine this, it means that 14% considered it all right. This is a staggering number of educated people, meaning that descriptive dictionary work is having a strong effect on the public. However, let's perform one more inversion. Would the opposite of alright be alwrong? (NOTE: This time, Microsoft editing software has underlined that word, *alwrong*, in my manuscript, whereas it has left *alright* unvarnished.)

There is yet one more explanation by which this word could be acceptable, however. Recall the lyrics to a popular *Beatles'* song, "Revolution." The refrain went: "You know it's gonna be, alright!" Many argue that this is not the equivalent of "all right", as in fine, but a synonym for the word "cool."

Alright, oops, all right, let's move on. "Our little group on this game drive- me and two delightful retirees-missed seeing the leopard and his kill that night."(Yuan, 2018, p. 20). A simple exercise, removing the first part of the sentence, will reveal the error here: "Me and two retirees missed seeing the leopard." Remove the retirees and we have the clumsy, "Me missed seeing the leopard." One could argue that it is an elliptical error as well: "Our little group on this game drive, which consisted of me and two retirees, missed…" Such a solution, writing the sentence in full rather than opting for the concise often works wonders as well.

The following word choice somehow got past proofreaders at *The Japan Times*. "Highlights included her biking across the Seto Inland Sea in a race."(Daimon, 2018, p. 1). (NOTE: The article is about Caroline Kennedy, former ambassador to Japan.) The question is: How does one cycle across water?

In referring to Donald Trump, AT&T chairperson, called a "chairman" in the article, which seems a bit outdated and which points to a positive development in language, the inclusion of both genders in a single occupation form, such as police officer, firefighter, homemaker, etc. Randall Stephenson said, "This tax reform will drive economic growth and create good-paying jobs." (Tankersley, 2018, p. 6). The job pays well; it does not pay good. This poor usage should have received a *sic* citation, but did not. In fact, the correct word would have been "well-paying jobs." A quick trip to any good dictionary would have solved the problem. "Well-paying"(or "well-paid") could

be located while nowhere is "good-paying" or "good-paid" to be found.

Moreover, the following two sentences appear: "Apple, Walmart and other large companies have increased their capital investment after the tax cuts." "Executives have cited automation, outsourcing and product-line restructuring to explain why they reduced unemployment." There should be a universal rule laid down, such as the 2-6 in *The Handbook of Good English,* which reads as follows:"Use a comma before ***and***, ***or***, or ***nor*** preceding the last of a series of three or more words or phrases."(Johnson, 1983, p. 73). There are two good reasons to do so (many publications at present do not): First, it is clearly heard in a sentence. Second, it will help avoid ambiguity from time to time. Take this example: "Those mornings in Paris in the 1950s were unforgettable: I remember the sheen of the streets, the sound of the streetcars, the smell of baguettes baking and her simplify tousled hairstyle." Did her hairstyle smell? It could, unless a comma is inserted before the final conjunction. To avoid rare examples such as these, the rule should be steadfast. The *New York Times,* however, seems to follow this rule consistently, as it did again in this article about Finland in 2018: "If a stranger smiles at you in the street, they are either drunk, foreign or crazy."(Kingsley, 2018, p. 4). In addition to sloppily omitting the final comma in the series, "a stranger" becomes "they" in the second clause of the sentence, which is clearly an error. "That stranger" has to be a "he or she is…", unless, of course, the writer re-works the sentence to read "If strangers smile at you in the street…" This would be a simpler solution to correct this sentence's agreement.

Back to poor word usage in his article, "How Japanese is Naomi Osaka?"(This is a question that failed baseball star Hideki Erabu could have given Mr. Miyake a quick answer for: Not much, once one starts producing less than spectacular results in the public sphere of celebrity in Japan.)"In the coming decade or two, we will have millions of people like Osaka who will enrich and evolve the Japanese nation."(Miyake, 2019, p. 7). Firstly, she might help the Japanese nation to evolve (develop), but she herself cannot evolve the nation. This usage is incorrect. Moreover, Mr. Miyake would have done well to use "such as Osaka." He is referring to as an example of what the millions of people will be similar to.

I believe she will be considered very Japanese as long as her sponsors are Japanese and she generates a good deal of prize-money. (Again, I refer you to the Hideki Erabu example above.)

Franz Sedelmayer (2020) missed an excellent chance to educate the public on a disappearing, critical pronoun: whom, which could have helped out John Daub, as indicated earlier on in this paper. "Mr. Putin, who I once knew and trusted."(Sedelmayer, 2020, p. 1). Simply inverting this sentence, or substituting the subjective/objective pronouns, will easily and quickly reveal the error and the correct form (useful for those who believe that teaching the distinction between the two, who and whom, is difficult.)"Mr. Putin, I once knew and trusted he." That clearly does not work, so obviously, "who" is incorrect. "I once knew and trusted him." Now it is evident that the correct pronoun form ought to be "whom."

"For whom does the bell toll?" It tolls for him, us, or me. It is baffling that teachers insist this difference is hard to convey to learners of English, both native and non-native. There are simple techniques, such as the two that have just been presented, that would make teaching the distinction easy and clear.

Articles: A Bit of Good News to End this Section

Occasionally reporters offer lessons that stand to correct swathes of the population or uphold a good principle. Colin Innes, who reports in paragraph three of a story on Hiroshima (Innes, 2020, p. 3) that he translated diaries along with along with Michiko Yoshitsuka's granddaughter, produced this sentence that serves just this purpose: "…and I jumped on my usual train in the nick of time." The expression, "the nick of time"(the opportune moment), is used widely as "a nick of time." Bravo, Mr. Innes. (He is British, by the way.)

III. AVOIDING SLOVENLY HABITS

Elliptical Omission

"More people in Japan are living in areas with potential risks of flooding compared with two decades ago."(Kyodo, p. 3). Oh, really?"Two decades ago are living in areas with less risk of flooding." Though this anonymous writer cannot be blamed for this poor sentence, at least this person can be praised for using "compared with" correctly, rather than "compared to", as often happens.

In comparisons, elliptical phrases are critical in eliminating ambiguity. Newspapers should strive not to use terminology sparingly, thus upholding this ambiguity, but have a duty to deliver correct sentences. "More people in Japan (today) are living in areas with potential risks of flooding compared with Japanese people two decades ago." Now the sentence has grammatical balance.

Poor Proofreading

Proofreading clearly must be one of the costs on which newspaper companies currently strive to save. "Ichiro's decision to walk away ends a career that will land him the Baseball Hall of Fame in two countries."(Coskrey, 2019, p. 1). My goodness, he will be busy with two halls of fame on his doorstep! "…land him in the Baseball Hall of Fame in two countries" would have been the correct sentence had the proofreader caught the missing preposition. It would have been nice, too, if Ichiro had walked away from his Daikin advertisements, in which he, clad in suit and top hat and dancing with a cane, encouraged the public to, "Take the Ichiro challenge!"(i.e., borrow money at roughly 18%, which is, reputedly, just 2% under the rate it costs to borrow money from the Japanese mafia.)

Run-on sentences could easily be avoided. "Prosecutors described him as a 47-year-old Italian citizen of Senegalese origin and said he told authorities he wanted to vindicate Europe-bound migrants who have died in the Mediterranean Sea but did not plan to hurt anyone."(AP, 2019, p. 5). In addition to being too long and poorly organized, this sentence flaunts ambiguity: Does this bus driver want to help migrants who have died in the Mediterranean Sea, or only migrants who have died in the Mediterranean Sea but did not plan to hurt anyone? In other words, he expresses no sorrow for migrants who died in the Mediterranean Sea, but planned to hurt someone.

The point is this: A comma is necessary before that final conjunction to prevent the entire latter part of the phrase from becoming restrictive. It is *doubly* sloppy.

"Mueller is not match for Fox News." This headline indicates poor proofreading. (Mueller is no match...would be one correct alternative). (Jurecic, 2018, p.7). Another is the boldface quotation

in an article that appeared on Christmas Day, 2018, in *The Japan Times*:"Trump is shamelessly betrayed one of America's closest allies in the fight against IS- the Syrian Kurds."(Ben-Meir, 2018, p. 9). ("Trump *has* shamelessly betrayed…" would be correct.)

The Omitted Comma

As will be discussed later in this paper, restrictive/parenthetical usage is important. Quite often, a comma serves an important role in a sentence. Its omission can result in ambiguity. Once again, Junpei Yasuda appears to have been an unwitting victim of poor proofreading:"He arrived back in Japan on Thursday night, greeted by his delighted wife and parents who brought him homemade Japanese food to celebrate."(AFP-Jiji, 2018, p. 2). Was he greeted by his wife and parents who brought him food, as opposed to parents who did not bring him food? Here the comma is essential as the word parents does not need restriction: he has just one set of parents. And by the way, they brought food with them to the airport. That would have been Narita Airport, incidentally, just to reinforce a rule covered earlier on capitalizing proper nouns. A comma is needed to show this.

"When Abe traveled to Papua New Guinea in July 2014, he offered flowers at a memorial for those who fell in the war including Japanese soldiers."(Kyodo, 2018, p. 1). Without a comma between "war" and "including", the meaning of the sentence changes. It means that Japanese soldiers fought in just one war, and that is the war for which he will lay flowers. He means that he will offer flowers for those who fell in World War II, which includes Japanese soldiers. It is an important detail that needs emphasizing in a parenthetical, non-restrictive clause. For the sake of avoiding ambiguity, such commas are necessary.

IV. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Can good English be saved from descriptivists? Given the economic fallout from the coronavirus and the lack of ostensible interest in intellect in the U.S. (the popularity of electronic devices and the Age of Information would indicate otherwise), it is unlikely that an academy will ever arise, one that will stipulate and govern the correct usage of the English language.

One can argue that grammar is being monitored by Internet services and highlighted/corrected. However, no such service seems to be able to yet distinguish between the proper use of the relative pronouns "that" and "which." Again, Lederer and Dowis provide sage advice. If you are not presently under the influence of Spotify's streaming services, here it is:"Most modern writers make a distinction between the two, and it is useful because it helps to prevent ambiguity." The logic here is lovely. However, there is more:"When the relative clause is defining, restrictive, or essential, always use *that* and never precede it with a comma. When the relative clause is non-defining, non-restrictive, or non-essential, introduce it with *which* and precede it with a comma."(Lederer and Dowis, 1999, p. 11). By this logic, the following sentences make sense:

1. "I am going to wear the suit that I bought at Aoki Men's Store." The restrictive clause, "that I bought at Aoki Men's Store" designates one particular suit. The writer may have many suits, but he is going to use the one from Aoki Men's Store, not the one from UNIQLO.

2. “I am going to wear the blue suit, which I bought at Aoki Men’s Store.” This offers a parenthetical example. It could be written as follows: “I am going to wear the blue suit. (I bought it at Aoki Men’s Store.) It is just that: essential, additional information that is tacked onto the sentence.

It therefore leads to a logical rule that would be easy to follow, but which teachers in Japan ignore: “With a comma, use *which*; without a comma, use *that*.” A set of International Guidelines for English would make this rule so easy to implement. Proscriptive as well as prescriptive rules need to be established before descriptivism degenerates into the acceptance of just about any exception or error that winds up once in print, and is therefore cited as correct simply because it *did* wind up in print.

It is important that newspapers punish poor grammar in quotations with *sic* citations. (NOTE: To reiterate, *sic* is a Latin word meaning “so” or “thus”; it is used in publications to indicate the error in print is that of the person quoted, not one made by the journalist or resulting from poor editing.) This empowers journalists, in the absence of an international body governing over language, with policing violators, but it would help to educate a public whose grammar skills are clearly eroding. Should Donald Trump Jr. be corrected or hit with a *sic* citation for the following sentence: “I think there’s still plenty of people that are still old-school, established people that want those things back.” (Haberman, 2018, p. 8). This sentence might require three *sic* citations; it would certainly be helpful to the public in general. His father could use some correcting in publications as well. “I had a great relationship with President Xi. I like him. But I don’t feel the same way now.” (Johnson, 2018, p. 1). Should the president be hit with a *sic* citation for his mistaken use of tense? (“I had a great relationship. I liked him.” *Past tense*. But I don’t feel the same way now. *Present tense*. This would have been the correct way to express this.)

V. CONCLUSION

Most decidedly, English is a hodge-podge compendium of “borrowings” from other languages. The term “borrowed,” it should be pointed out, should not logically exist, as these are words, such as piano, yurt, wampum, mosquito, steppe, bayou, karaoke, etc. that we do not intend to return to their languages of origin, but rather language “adoptions.” However, in the early 1300s, English threatened to vanish as a language. Firstly, the Norman Conquest had posed an enormous threat. English could have been stamped out by legal decree. Secondly, it could have been stamped out had there been more extensive economic development at the time. People would have been more likely to attempt a class upgrade had mobility been an option. 200 years should have been sufficient to instill such a temptation; it did not. Many years later, Voltaire, during his exile in England, would cleverly pen essays praising the English for placing mercantilism so highly within their societal/royal structure of priorities, whereas French royalty, with its insistence on snubbing the association of economic well-being with established royal position, failed to advance France overall. One could argue that 500 years earlier, the same refusal led to a segregation in language that actually resulted in the salvation of English. Thirdly, the Black Plague killed off one in every three people in England. Following the departure of the Norman French from England, this led to an acute shortage of labor,

which in turn saved English as a language in all likelihood. School teachers were needed from lower ranks. French was abandoned as a medium of instruction and English thereafter prevailed.

It is this final point that brings us around full circle to the present. Given the relative standstill economically that the coronavirus has wrought on the world since its outbreak in Ischgl, Austria, this might be an ideal time to once again save English by establishing a thorough set of guidelines. A consortium of countries for which English is a national language could gather to draft such guidelines: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Great Britain would suffice for such purposes. The drafted guidelines could then be supplemented by suggestions from academic/scholarly committees from other nations for which English is a native language.

A set of prescriptive guidelines could then exist against which random cases of descriptive change could be rebutted or thwarted. It would no longer be the ailing newspaper industry that would need to take on this Sisyphean task of thwarting attempts to descriptively alter English. It is true that English will grow in vocabulary, terminology, and breadth. It will doubtlessly change over time, however, such change should be monitored and approved within an established framework. The fundamental language should be retained in its largely documented, but erratic form. Consistency needs to be established in the language. The plot has grown wildly, amuck one might say, for the past millennium. This may be a good time to imitate France (nearly 400 years after the French launched this sage initiative) and bring a permanent degree of order to English.

"Consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds," is a quotation one is likely to point out in combatting this suggestion. However, this broad consistency is necessary in preserving the core of English, even if so little of English actually exists in what we call English. In this Age of Information, language rules go ignored, dismissed, and refuted by Internet users who point to the existence of errors in print as evidence that a new, correct form exists.

In the wake of the economic depression the coronavirus is sure to deepen, countries should be urged to generate the public funds necessary to save the English language from further descriptive degeneration and degradation. It is imperative that an International Association for Guidelines of the English Language and Grammar be established as soon as possible.

The French banned slavery in 1794. It was not until many years later that the Americans followed suit. (One wonders if it ever really was abolished completely.) It was clearly the correct path to take. A noteworthy opportunity was missed from 1066-1360 when an *Academie Anglaise* failed to materialize in occupied England. It is unlikely that a second occupation will ever occur again in the foreseeable future during which the French may properly establish a set of guidelines for the English language.

Needless to say, a prescriptive set of guidelines is necessary. In the meantime, newspapers should work as hard as they can, before they vanish completely, to uphold the standards of good English.

Most importantly, however, is what we the people can do to assuage and ameliorate this evisceration. By 2037, according to one estimate, print journalism will have vanished. Print media cannot be blamed for the downfall of grammatical standards, though it doubtlessly serves as an important window onto the problems grammar and syntax currently face. Speakers of English for

whom English is not a mother tongue now outnumber the number of native speakers of English in the world. Newspapers can do their utmost to uphold the integrity and accuracy of English, but a more permanent and lasting solution is required. Working in tandem with an academy whose primary function is establishing prescriptive rules for English would be the best way to do this.

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