Browsing at my local newsstand the other day I was alarmed to see “The End of Linguistics” announced in large letters on a magazine cover. The magazine is the Winter 2001 issue of the American Scholar (motto: “Life is our dictionary”), published by the Phi Beta Kappa Society, and the article with the scary title is by Mark Halpern. Since I have a personal interest in linguistics carrying on for a few more years, I bought the magazine to see what the problem is.

To be honest, I was worried that it had something to do with the recent exchanges about the socio-scientific status of the minimalist program in the Topic...Comment section of Natural Language & Linguistic Theory (see Lappin, Levine & Johnson 2000a in volume 18, 3, and the replies to them by Holmberg 2000, Reuland 2000, Roberts 2000, Piattielli-Palmarini 2000, and Uriagereka 2000 with their response (2000b) in 18, 4). The field should be able to survive these pieces, which offer interesting insights into why linguists choose to pursue certain ideas and not others. But who knows what apocalyptic conclusions an unsympathetic observer might draw from all this?

Halpern, however, has other concerns. In the words of the subtitle of his article, they are about “taking the language back from nature – and linguists.” Halpern, who describes himself as a freelance editor and writer who has been a computer programmer, college instructor, soldier, and software designer, thinks that there is a titanic battle underway for the future of, not the minimalist program, but the (English) language itself. I think it will come as a surprise to most linguists, as it did to me, to discover in succession that there is a war going on about the laws of grammar, that we are deeply involved in this war, and that we are winning! Human nature being what it is, I don’t have to know what the war is about to cheer at this last disclosure, and I’m sure that readers of this column feel the same way.

We must not become complacent, however, because Halpern has a plan to reverse the tide. According to Halpern (2001), almost everyone these days is labouring under the Fallacy of Linguistic Autonomy, which holds that a language is “a living, growing thing”, and as such has a will of its own and follows its own developmental laws. Halpern vigorously denies that this is true of modern languages, though, astonishingly, he believes that it may have been true of languages in the past, the so-called “dead” languages. In modern times, we humans have taken charge of our languages just as we long ago took charge of our food supply and are about to take charge of our genetic makeup. Today, almost all language change of any interest is due to one of four negative forces. In order of increasing moral culpability these are Simple Ignorance, Social Climbing, Semantic Inflation, and Group Solidarity. I trust that Glot readers can imagine what these forces are supposed to be.

Halpern (2001) writes that people have the power to resist these forces, but their ability to do so is undermined by linguists who promote the above and other fallacies. Another is the Fallacy of Pedantic Persecution, which holds that language users are born free and creative, and therefore should not be subject to the “oppressive and irrelevant rules” of “pettifogging, narrow-minded, legalistic, reactionary, and mean-spirited pedants” such as himself. Particularly damaging to the cause of civilization has been the Fallacy of the OED. Halpern observes that usage experts objecting to a particular usage on the grounds that it is unhistorical have repeatedly been made to look foolish by linguists who find just that usage attested in the OED. The answer to this fallacy is to stop basing
usage judgments on usage. It doesn’t matter what Shakespeare or Dickens did, because things were
different then (i.e., when languages were still alive).

Finally, there is the Fallacy of Linguistic Nihilism, which is one part of the general revolt
against authority that characterizes our times. Scientific linguists succeeded in undermining the
confidence of writers of dictionaries, grammars, and other such reference works, and these latter
abdicated their authority to prescribe correct usage and tell right from wrong, and began turning out
mere descriptions of current and past usage. As a result, ordinary citizens, left leaderless in matters of
usage, have turned like feral dogs to rock stars, gangbangers, funeral directors, gossip columnists,
and telemarketing consultants (sic).

Halpern (2001) concedes that nineteenth century comparative/historical linguistics produced
“triumphs of learning and imagination”, but since the middle of the twentieth century linguistics has
accomplished nothing. Linguists have nevertheless been very busy studying a variety of increasingly
divergent and inconsequential topics, such as [reader, insert your topic here]. However, the future
for linguistics is dim, because people are now in control of their language—they have been to college,
own dictionaries, consult usage books, and find it amusing to feed linguists fabricated data—and
once we acknowledge the four types of language change listed above, there is simply nothing left for
linguists to discover about language.

As a result, in the future linguists will no longer be considered to be usage experts, and
linguistics itself will cease to be a field. The end of linguistics “will bring greater clarity, coherence,
and honesty to our cultural life”. Words will once again be used correctly. As an example, Halpern
hopes to reclaim the word progressive, which is now narrowly associated with “marxisant” views. I
doubt, though, that any amount of Social Climbing and Semantic Inflation will suffice to make the
word progressive describe Halpern’s views; why not try instead to rehabilitate reactionary?

Halpern might be extreme in his hostility to linguists, which may have been fuelled by
critical replies to an earlier piece of his (Halpern 1997) in the Atlantic Monthly (“A war that never
ends”) by Geoffrey Nunberg, Geoffrey Pullum, and Frank Anshen. But he is hardly alone in his
attitude towards linguistics. Consider the online Vocabula Review (motto: “A society is generally as
lax as its language”), a free online journal about the state of the English language published by
Vocabula Communications Company, a provider of editing and writing services. Some indication of
the tone of this journal can be obtained from its regular features, which include “Grumbling About
Grammar”, “Elegant English”, and “On Dimwitticisms”. This is the call for articles: “The review
invites readers to submit articles about issues related to the English language. Perhaps you'd like to
rail about how shoddily it is so often used, or if you have a more descriptive approach to language,
perhaps you'd like to present your case.” Halpern is in good company here, as is his contribution
(Halpern 2000), “Why linguists are not to be trusted on language usage”.

As it turns out, the “Usage Wars” are also prominently featured in the April 2001 issue of
Harper’s, in the form of a long article by David Foster Wallace (2001), another editor and writer.
Wallace’s views, which are informed by some knowledge of linguistics, are more nuanced than
Halpern’s, but he also portrays linguists as partisan combatants in “a hurricane of controversies” over
usage. Though Wallace makes some sensible points about language, he misconstrues the position of
linguists.

At the root of this misconstrual, I believe, is an incorrect appreciation of the term
“descriptive” in descriptive linguistics. On the first day of any course in introductory linguistics
students are told that linguistics deals with descriptive, not prescriptive, notions of grammar. The
questions we want to answer concern the actual grammars that have been internalized by speakers:
how can they be characterized, and how can they be acquired? These are scientific questions and
have very little to do with the sorts of usage questions that bedevil editors and writers (is it the data is
or the data are?). As to such questions, it is worth noting that linguists, too, have style sheets.
Writers on usage go wrong in thinking that linguists’ concerns are the same as theirs except that they are prescriptivists and we are descriptivists, and therefore, so they assume, against prescriptivism in all its forms. Consider, for example, the following passage by Bryan A. Garner (1998), a lawyer and lexicographer whose *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* Wallace praises highly: “I don’t shy away from making judgments...Linguists don’t like it, of course, because judgment involves subjectivity. It isn’t scientific.” But linguists are like everyone else, we are not looking for science in a usage guide. Wallace writes that Descriptivists claim that “so-called correct English usages such as *brought* rather than *brung* and *felt* rather than *feeled* are arbitrary and restrictive and unfair...” “Arbitrary,” yes. “Restrictive” is a word we use, but in a different context. But “unfair”? We are not in that business.

It is true that linguists have undermined most of the reasons formerly advanced by prescriptivists in support of their rules. It is a real success of linguistics that not even Halpern can claim that a particular usage is to be preferred because it is more logical, or more historical, or “better” in any objective sense than nonstandard usages. On the contrary, Emonds (1986) and Kroch (1982) have argued that it is the “prestige” constructions of English that are more likely to be grammatically deviant. Sobin (1997) elaborates on this approach, arguing that such constructions are the product of “grammatical viruses”. These are empirical issues that linguistic theory has something to say about. But it does not follow that we have declared war on the very idea of a common standard of usage. On the contrary, Sobin (1994) argues that prestige constructions *should* be explicitly taught, because their very unnaturalness makes them hard to acquire in any other way.

Other aspects of the “Usage Wars” that Wallace discusses concern dictionaries (should they be guides to usage or records of usage?) and approaches to teaching writing (grammar drills or free expression?). The “liberals” in these debates may appeal to linguistics in advancing their arguments, but linguistic theory does not dictate one answer or another to such questions.

Why is anxiety about “correct” usage so high these days, at least among editors and magazine writers? This is an interesting question, but whatever the answer (insecurity caused by the increasing pace of “globalization”, a political reaction against “liberalism”, or whatever), the linguists and the editors can be friends. Editors and writers of usage manuals have nothing to fear from the continuing existence of linguistics.

* * *

Editors’ note: Shortly after the above column was filed we received the following memo:

Date: April 1, 2001
At: Cambridge, Mass., USA
From: The Supreme Council of Linguists
To: Editors, writers, librarians, instructors, etc.

It has come to our attention that certain “prestige” constructions of English are linguistically deviant and infected by viruses (Sobin 1997). To halt the spread of these viruses, we order that all usage guides that contain them (i.e., all usage guides) be immediately placed in quarantine. We also direct that all publications be disinfected as soon as possible by executing global replacements on the model of the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virus</th>
<th>Amend to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Mary and I left early</td>
<td>Me and Mary left early.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*It was I.</td>
<td>It was me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?There are five books on the table.</td>
<td>There’s five books on the table.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examples like (3) are under review, taking into account Schütze (1999). Until further notice, we will levy heavy fines and other penalties on any editors, writers, computer programmers, college instructors, soldiers, and software designers who refuse to abide by this edict.

References


