But

On Grammar

My husband is a musician, which means that I occasionally get invited to swank parties full of cool people with interesting hair. I go along for spousal support and mostly as a dorky foil; I plant myself near the food and start shoving as much of it in my mouth as I can in the hopes that no one will engage me in conversation.

Inevitably, someone with better social skills comes over and asks, "What do you do?"

"I write dictionaries," I will say, and then sometimes the inquisitor will brighten. "Oh, dictionaries!" they'll respond. "I love words! I love grammar!"

This is the point at which I will begin eyeing the room for exits and sending strong telepathic messages to my husband, who is deep in conversation across the room, talking about Schoenberg or electronica. I know what's coming, and here it is, uttered between sips of cheap box wine: "You must be great at grammar."

I will grab a handful of whatever snack is closest and cram it into my maw so all I can do in response is nod in a noncommittal sort of way. I hope that the head waggle does it and I am not required to say what I am actually thinking: one of the first things you encounter as a working lexicographer is the stark reality that you only *think* you're good at grammar, and the kind of grammar you are good at is—sorry—useless.

You might have been the sort of student who loved diagramming sentences, or the one who could theoretically hold forth at raging parties on the difference between the disjuncts and conjuncts (if people invited lexicographers to raging parties, that is). Maybe you're a polyglot, collecting languages like lucky pennies, cherishing their differences and similarities until you can evoke an entire language's feel and weight by running your thumb over the face of one word. People who become lexicographers are naturally interested in the

clockwork of English, but years of studying those little wheels and cogs can make you myopic. You don't realize how myopic until you back away from the bench and take a look around.

Your first training as a lexicographer, the Style and Defining classes, is that chance to push back from English and get your grammatical bearings. The Style and Defining classes I took as part of my orientation were held in a small conference room at the back of the editorial floor. The editorial conference room is really nothing more than a glorified storage space, a little nook left over after the freight elevator and the stairwell were built, but it has a window and so was deemed too nice to fill with cleaning supplies. It's currently stuffed with old dictionaries and a small table, around which four editors can sit comfortably and six in introverted terror, warily holding their elbows to their sides and breathing shallowly so as not to make unintentional physical contact with anyone else in the room.

The editor training us was E. Ward Gilman, or Gil as we called him. By the time I came around, he had been at Merriam-Webster for forty years and had trained at least two generations of definers. He was the editor who wrote most of our *Dictionary of English Usage* and was a regular sparring partner with *The New York Times*'s On Language columnist, William Safire. On paper, Gil was intellectually imposing, though in person he was amiable: ample of gut and with an unaffected, folksy manner, a bit like a nineteenth-century sea captain gone to seed. None of us knew that at the time, though, and so we sat across from him, eager and slightly cowed in the over-warm editorial conference room. Our Style and Defining notebooks were open to the section called "A Quirky Little Grammar for Definers" (third edition, fourth printing). The sun dawdled through the window, and the musty, vanilla fug of old dictionaries hung around us. Gil leaned back and sucked his teeth. "Grammar. Some of you," he warned, "are not going to like what I am about to tell you."

A lexicographer's view of grammar begins with the parts of speech, eight tidy categories we shunt words into based on their function within a sentence. If you survived the American educational system, you can probably rattle off at least four parts of speech—noun, verb, adjective, adverb—and here the nerds among us chime in with the remainder: conjunction, interjection, pronoun, and preposition. Most people think of the parts of speech as discrete categories, drawers with their own identifying labels, and when you peek inside, there's the English language, neatly folded like a retiree's socks: Person, Place, Thing (Noun); Describes Action (Verb); Modifies Nouns (Adjective); Answers the *W* Questions (Adverb); Joins Words Together (Conjunction); Things We Say When We Are Happy, Surprised, or Pissed Off (Interjection).

Your first disconcerting realization as a lexicographer is that you are the person who is responsible for sifting the language and placing individual words in those drawers. This is a sharp whack against your naive assumptions about how words come into being and exist. You mean words don't just appear ex nihilo in the drawer they're supposed to be in? Some slob in a beige office in Massachusetts is the one who decides what a word *is*?

Not quite. Your job as a lexicographer, and part of the reason why Gil is looking doubtfully in your general direction this afternoon, is to learn how to carefully parse English as it is used, sentence by sentence, and correctly classify the words within that sentence by their function. You don't decide what part of speech a word is—the general speaking, writing public does. You merely discern what its part of speech is and then accurately report it in the dictionary entry.

This should be a comfort, but it is not. English is a remarkably flexible language, and its grammar is not nearly as tidy as we have been led to believe. Those parts of speech are not discrete boxes keeping everything dust-free and separate but more like a jumble of fishing nets. Randolph Quirk, lead author of *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language,* calls this "gradience." Many words are caught easily in those individual nets: In the sentence "dictionaries are great," we can tell that "dictionaries" is a noun because it fits into the common, oversimplified paradigm we are all taught to identify nouns: person, place, thing. There are, however, plenty of words that live on the periphery of a part of speech, and they can get tangled between those fishing nets. Nouns can act like adjectives ("*chocolate* cake"); adjectives can act like nouns ("grammarians are the *damned*"); verbs can look like verbs ("she's *running* down the street") or adjectives ("a *running* engine") or nouns ("her favorite hobby is *running*"). Adverbs look like everything else; they are the junk drawer of the English language ("*like so*").

Even within one net, the catch is still eel slick: a lexicographer can look at the sentence "The young editors were bent to Webster's will" and, after some mental finagling, decide that "bent" is actually a verb here (the past tense of "bend"). Very good. Is this use of "bend" transitive (that is, it requires an object, as in "I bend steel") or intransitive (that is, it doesn't require an object, as in "reeds bend")? "Were bent" could be a passive use of "bend," where the force doing the bending is hidden from lexical view, and transitive verbs are generally used in passive constructions—but who is the actor? Webster's disembodied will? Older editors who were not going to take any young-upstart bullshit? It is all muddling in your mind. You put the end of your pencil in your mouth to keep yourself from muttering in exasperation and wonder if you're nonetheless

wrong: that "bent" here is actually the adjective we've formed from the past participle of "bend"—the adjective that appears in "go to hell and get *bent.*"[*1] You have pulled your notepad toward you and are scrawling all sorts of unintentionally creepy sentences on it—"the young editors were *subdued,*" "[someone] *subdued* the young editors"—trying to figure out whether this use is transitive or not, and the more you write, the less you know.

You're not alone. Peter Sokolowski of Merriam-Webster now keeps a rare editorial artifact, passed down from editor to editor: the Transitivity Tester. The Transitizer, as some of us call it, is a pink with a sentence on it and a hole cut out where the verb of the sentence is so you can lay the card over your problem verb and read the resulting sentence to see if that verb is, in fact, transitive. The Transitizer reads, "I'ma _____ ya ass." I'ma <u>bend</u> ya ass (to Webster's will). There you go: this sense of "bend" must be transitive.

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This mayhem is possible in part because those hallowed parts of speech we hew to aren't inherent to English. In the West,[*2] they were first hinted at in the fourth century B.C. by Plato in *Cratylus,* where he names verbs and nouns as two parts of a sentence. Aristotle, never one to be left out of an opining party, added "conjunction" to Plato's two parts of speech but defines it in his *Poetics* as "a sound without meaning" (English teachers who have encountered one too many "and…and…and…" run-on sentences would heartily agree). The parts of speech we use today were established in the second century B.C. in a treatise called *The Art of Grammar,* which gives us our first incarnation of the eight parts of speech: noun, verb, participle, article, pronoun, preposition, adverb, and conjunction. This system has been futzed with over the centuries: article was dropped, interjection was added, participle was later considered a flavor of verb, and adjective was pried out of the noun class and became its own thing. By the time English lexicographers came on the scene in the late Middle Ages, our parts of speech were fixed and based entirely on Latin and Greek.

This occasionally presents problems, because English is not Latin or Greek. In Latin, for instance, there are no indefinite or definite articles, no "a," "an," or "the." Articles are generally implicitly understood from the context. The main literary dialect of ancient Greek, just to keep things spicy, has a definite article but no indefinite article. This seems as foreign as outer space to native English speakers—you're able to say "the lexicographer" but not "a lexicographer"? In Attic Greek, no, that's not possible. The indefinite article, as in Latin, was implied by context. However, if we go a little further back to Homeric Greek, then there are no articles at all, like in Latin. This is not particularly helpful for

English grammarians, because our language is lousy with articles.

Given that our parts of speech are modeled on Latin and Greek, and neither Latin nor Greek has the articles that English has, what part of speech should a lexicographer give "a"?

Gil's "Quirky Little Grammar" provides a cheat sheet with quick paradigms to help clarify common uses. These paradigms are often dotted liberally with warnings about the many pitfalls awaiting lexicographers as they begin pulling this sticky mess of a language apart to peer at its entrails. Here is the paragraph on articles in the "Quirky Little Grammar":

> 4.2 Article. There are three: the indefinite articles *a* and *an* and the definite article *the*. Not much room for confusion here, right? All three are also prepositions (six cents *a* mile; 35 miles *an* hour; $10 *the* bottle), and *the* is an adverb (*the* sooner *the* better). In more sophisticated grammars, articles are one kind of determiner.

The entirety of Gil's grammar is like this: here is a part of speech, and here are all the ways that this particular part of speech will drive you crazy as you attempt to parse its uses. The main sections explain the basic attributes of one part of speech, and the subsections list all the possible deviations from those basic attributes.

The reality is that your high-school English teachers lied to you about what words can do because doing so makes English much, much simpler. Yes, conjunctions connect two clauses ("this is stupid *and* I'm not listening anymore"), but certain types of conjunctions show a subordinate relationship between the clauses, and those conjunctions look a lot like adverbs ("she acts *as if* I care"). Prepositions, you learned, always introduce a noun or a noun phrase ("he let the cat *inside* the house"). But your teacher didn't tell you that sometimes prepositions don't introduce a noun or a noun phrase, because that noun or noun phrase is understood ("he let the cat *inside*"). Everyone knows that adverbs answer the questions "who?" "what?" "when?" "where?" "why?" and "how?" but few people realize that conjunctions and prepositions can do the same thing. Gil notes that no one has bothered to provide a compendious description of what a noun is because everyone is supposed to know what a noun is. "Person, place, thing" is wholly inadequate: "hope" is a noun, as is "murder." Are those people, places, or things?

The hardest words to sort grammatically are the ones that no one ever notices—the small ubiquities of English. Ask any lexicographer who has been at this gig for a while what word had them hunched over their cubicle at 6:00 p.m. on a Friday, hands clutched to their temples, the office copy of Quirk open on their desk while the night janitor loudly scrummed with the big recycling bin,

and the answer will not be a polysyllabic hummer like "sesquipedalian." The answer will be "but," "like," "as." They are sly shape-shifters that often live between parts of speech; they are the ones you will keep coming back to throughout your career to parse and re-parse, the ones that will give you a handful of uses that you stare at for days and days before muttering "to hell with it" and labeling them as adverbs. And because English is so flexible, two lexicographers with the same training can look at the same sentence, refer to the same grammars, tear out the same amount of hair, and yet place the target word in two different parts of speech. What can they do *but try*?

That damned "but." What is it? As I read that sentence, Quirk to hand, this "but" must be a conjunction. Admittedly, I've backed into this decision: in order to know what "but" is, I first have to figure out what "try" is. I do all manner of nerd pyrotechnics to figure this out: I diagram the sentence, I substitute other verbs after "but" to see if they substantially change the grammatical feel of the word, I stare into the middle distance and give my sprachgefühl time to rattle the bones of "but try." In the end, I decide that this "try" is the verb of a clause ("they try") which has an implied subject. If this "try" is a clause, then "but" is a conjunction, because in function that "but" is joining two clauses—even if that second clause is just one stated word and one implied word. This is not an easy determination. It comes after another cup of coffee and thirty minutes of flipping through all 1,779 pages of Quirk, muttering curses.

I e-mail my colleague Emily Brewster and ask her to weigh in. Emily is one of our current grammar mavens; after Gil's retirement in 2009, Emily was tapped to help write the usage notes and paragraphs for our dictionaries. She has a degree in linguistics and is whip smart, the sort of woman who can give you an offhand, spot-on grammatical analysis of just about anything and do it in plain English. If anyone could confirm this "but" was a conjunction, it'd be Emily.

She wrote back fairly quickly. She called "but" a preposition.

But, but, but, I responded, look at that "try," doesn't it make sense if you read it as a clause with an implied subject? (This was less a challenge and more a cri du coeur: I spent thirty minutes in Quirk, isn't that worth something?) If that "but" is a preposition, then explain why "try," a verb—one of the parts of speech that isn't supposed to be the object of a preposition—is there?

Emily was happy to give me a fuller answer; she needed a break from her current defining batch anyway, as she'd been staring at citations for "ball gag" since lunch.

After doing some of her own nerd pyrotechnics on that sentence, Emily decided that there's not so much an implied subject in that stupid "try" as there is a hidden infinitive: "What can they do but [to] try?" Emily and I both knew how that shakes out: infinitives don't need the "to" to be an infinitive; infinitives *can* be taken as noun substitutes, which are one of the things that *can* be the object of a preposition; that means the "but" here is a preposition if you tilt your head and squint a bit.

There's a lot of squinting going on, I complain. Is there anything in that sentence that hints that "try" is a noun substitute except for its appearing at the ass end of "but"?

It took Emily a bit of time to respond. Her verdict: "Ack."

We were both sure of our decisions until we began talking to each other, and now we're dabbling with grammatical agnosticism, not sure of anything anymore. Now you know why we like to shorten "part of speech" to "POS." The abbreviation also stands for "piece of shit," and we find it a fitting, oddly comforting double entendre.

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If lexicographers and linguists had their way, English would have twenty-eight parts of speech, enough that we could shoehorn most of those grammatical outliers into some tidier containers. (Linguists have proposed even more complicated systems, and they tend to use them within their publications.) But there's enough grammatical variation in English that it's unlikely that twenty-eight parts of speech would be enough. There are roughly a dozen different types of *pronouns* in English alone. The harmless drudges can talk fluently about them, because that sort of esoteric knowledge is always the province of the eccentric. But I am unconvinced that the vast majority of English readers and speakers need to know the difference between them or would care if they did. Even lexicographers can only delve so deep.

"My feeling is," says Steve Kleinedler, executive editor of *The American Heritage Dictionary,* "it really doesn't matter what you call it. If you're defining how it's used, and you're showing what frame it's used in, whether you call it a conjunction or a preposition or an adverb—that's just a category. The parts of speech exist for categorization purposes, to make it easier to find. When it doesn't fit exactly, or when it bleeds—as long as the definition is there, you're well served."

A few years after my training, I was proofreading in the letter *T* and saw we

listed "the" as an adjective. I thought it might be a mistake, so I checked the entry in our unabridged dictionary, *Webster's Third:* adjective. Setting aside the proofs, I saw Gil leave his office and cornered him at the coffeemaker to ask about it. I knew our options for parts of speech were limited, I explained, but "adjective" seemed a little random. Not entirely random, he said—"the" *did* modify nouns, like adjectives, and we had tradition on our side in case of complaints: "the" had been entered in dictionaries as an adjective since the nineteenth century. But, I said, it seemed like an imperfect fix. The point is to accurately describe how a word is used, and that includes its part of speech. If we can't get that right…Gil sighed. He had just come out of his office for coffee, and now someone who thought they were Webster's gift to grammar was accosting him about the English articles. "Well," he harrumphed, "given that your options are limited, where else are you going to put the damn things?"

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Lexicographers and linguists claim to be peeveless—we are, after all, objective scholars of language—but that is disingenuous. Emily Brewster confesses to caring about the distinction between "lay" and "lie," and even after all these years stumbling across "impactful" in prose makes me blanch, and this is *after* I have had to goddamn define "impactful." But there's one ur-peeve, one particular and incredibly minor complaint, that lexicographers and linguists indulge in with all the zeal of a convert defending the one true faith: everyone but them uses the word "grammar" wrong.

To linguists and lexicographers, the word "grammar" has generally referred to the way that words interact with each other in a sentence or the systematic rules that govern the way those words interact. Grammar, to the lexicographer, tells us why we say "He and I went to the store" and not "Him and I went to the store," or why we stick the verb between the subject and the object (usually) and not at the end like German does (as in, "why we the verb between the subject and the object stick," which is perfectly grammatical and normal in German). Lexicographers are pretty decent with this sort of grammar, which is (ostensibly) objective and factual.

But when people who aren't linguists and lexicographers talk about "grammar," that's not what they mean. They're not talking about the systematic rules that govern where the verb goes in a standard English sentence; they're talking about a much broader view of language. To them, "grammar" is a loose conglomeration of stylistic word choices that get codified into right and wrong, misspellings that every English speaker has made at some point in their life and yet are branded as "bad grammar," half-remembered "rules" about usage

shamed into them by their middle-school English teachers, and personal, sometimes irrational, dislikes. This is the grammar that shows up on Internet memes about "your" and "you're," the sort of grammar that people are referring to when they claim you can't end a sentence with a preposition, the grammar that is invoked when people complain that the "10 items or less" sign at the grocery store is "bad grammar."

This sort of grammar is likely something you, dear reader, value highly, because it takes work to master and you've likely devoted a measurable chunk of your waking hours to mastering it (as have we all). Think of this sort of grammar like building blocks. The earliest stuff we learn is laid unconsciously and underground: when there's more than one of a noun, we generally mark that by adding an -s to the end of the word; verbs go in the middle of a sentence, between a subject and an object; verbs can change their form when they refer to different speakers; and so on. This becomes the foundation that we start with.

As we go through life (and particularly through school), we collect more blocks to stack on our foundation: don't end sentences with prepositions; don't use the passive voice; use "were" for "was" in conditional clauses (though not always, and the exceptions are more blocks to collect later). The blocks become smaller, able to be wedged into any noticeable gaps in our walls. "Lay" is used with a stated object ("lay the book on the table") and "lie" is used without a stated object ("I'm going to lie down on the sofa"); "who" is only used in reference to people and "that" only in reference to things; definitely do not ever, under any circumstances, use "ain't." We scrabble at these and mortar them into place, building our towers higher and higher and always comparing ourselves with people who have found fewer bricks or have built their towers sloppily. It's all reckoned as "grammar" to us, by which we inevitably mean "good grammar" and by which we measure ourselves against others.

This is also the sort of grammar that young lexicographers are steeped in, and so when Steve Perrault asks if we have a "good grasp of English grammar" in the interview, we puff and preen a bit. Of course, we say, we have a *great* grasp of grammar; we have spent an entire life fortifying this tower with as many bricks as we could find.

Alas for us. One of the first things every lexicographer must do in their Style and Defining class is face their own linguistic prejudices and be willing to suspend or revise them in light of evidence to the contrary.

For me, this came down to the word "good." In one of our early Style and Defining classes, Gil bellowed the word at us. "Adjective or adverb?" he asked.

There was a pause—*everyone knows the answer to this,* I thought; *is this a trick question?*—and I stepped into the breach. "It's an adjective," I said, memories of some language arts teacher from years past barking *"Well! Well!"* at me every time I said, "I don't feel good." You feel *well,* because "well" is an adverb; you don't feel *good,* despite what James Brown proclaims, because "good" is an adjective.

"What about 'I'm doing good'?" he asked. "Isn't that adverbial?"

I felt not so good: that *was* adverbial. "But," I reasoned, "you're not supposed to say that. You should say 'I'm doing well.'"

He smacked his lips. "And do you say 'I'm doing well,' or do you say 'I'm doing good'?" He looked pointedly at me. We both knew that I had—just five minutes earlier!—answered his question about how I was doing with the grammar practice with "I'm doing good." I was fairly certain he was about to fire me, or perhaps unhinge his jaw and swallow me whole, and so I tried my level best to melt into the floor. He ignored my discomfort and went on. "Good" has been used for almost a thousand years as an adverb, even though usage commentators and peevers have condemned this use. Dictionaries, he explained, were records of the language as it is used, and so we must set aside our disdain for the adverb "good" (and here he looked over his glasses at me) and record its long use in our dictionaries in spite of the rather pointless foofaraw around its existence.

Then Gil sat back and smiled broadly. And my tower—bricks began falling all over the goddamned place.

Gil made his speech in part because the whole notion that the dictionary merely records the language as people use it grates against what we generally think dictionaries do. Many people—and many people who think they'd be good at this lexicography gig—believe that the dictionary is some great guardian of the English language, that its job is to set boundaries of decorum around this profligate language like a great linguistic housemother setting curfew. Words that have made it into the dictionary are Official with a capital *O,* sanctioned, part of Real and Proper English. The corollary is that if certain words are bad, uncouth, unlovely, or distasteful, then folks think that the dictionary will make sure they are never entered into its hallowed pages, and thus are such words banished from Real, Official, Proper English. The language is thus protected, kept right, pure, *good.* This is commonly called "prescriptivism," and it is unfortunately not how dictionaries work at all. We don't just enter the good stuff; we enter the bad and the ugly stuff, too. We are just observers, and the goal is to describe, as accurately as possible, as much of

the language as we can. This approach is "descriptivism," and it is the philosophical basis for almost all modern dictionaries. All a word needs to merit entry into most professionally written dictionaries is widespread and sustained use in written English prose. You'd be surprised how many "bad" and "unlovely" words make it into written English prose on a consistent basis.

You'll notice all the scare quotes I'm throwing around, but I throw them around advisedly: uses that fall outside what we think of as Standard English are given a moral charge. Well-meaning parents tell kids that "ain't" is bad English; people sneer at those who use "irregardless"; we've each survived that one high-school teacher who has, throughout your paper, circled every preposition that appears at the end of a sentence and commented at the top of your essay "an A+ idea corrupted by C- grammar."[*3] There are tons (literal imperial tons) of books about improving yourself through better grammar, books with titles like *When Bad Grammar Happens to Good People* and the honest-to-a-fault *I Judge You When You Use Poor Grammar* (and note the use of "poor" here instead of the slightly more informal but more common "bad." The idea that "poor" marks quality whereas "bad" marks morality is truly a peeve beyond all other peeves— a real peever's peeve. Well done). This attitude goes to extremes: an acquaintance recently shared with me his belief that when words gain new meanings, it is not just linguistic and educational degradation but an active work of Evil (with a capital *E*) in our world.

Prescriptivism and descriptivism have been shoehorned into this moral dualism as well. The former purportedly champions the "best practices" of English and eschews the newfangled linguistic relativism of descriptivism.[*4] Prescriptivism, then, must be good—how can the "best practices" of English be anything but good? And if prescriptivism is good, then descriptivism, its principles, and its practitioners must perforce be bad. In a letter to his publisher, E. B. White, the second half of the famous Strunk and White responsible for the best-selling writing guide *The Elements of Style,* beautifully expresses the modern complaint against descriptivism:

> I have been sympathetic all along with your qualms about "The Elements of Style," but I know that I cannot, and will-shall not, attempt to adjust the unadjustable Mr. Strunk to the modern liberal of the English Department, the anything-goes fellow. Your letter expresses contempt for this fellow, but on the other hand you seem to want his vote. I am against him, temperamentally and because I have seen the work of *his* disciples, and I say the hell with him.

Descriptivists, those anything-goes hippies: we have seen their work, and right-thinking people everywhere say to hell with them.

Now, as a lexicographer, you are one.

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*1 **bent** *adj…*—**get bent** *slang*—used as an angry or contemptuous way of dismissing someone's statement, suggestion, etc. <I try to call him the next morning to apologize, but he tells me to *get bent.*—Chuck Klosterman, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs,* 2003> (*MWU*)

*2 Like many things that are claimed as Western inventions, grammar was first practiced in the East. According to scholars, there is a rich tradition of grammatical typology in Sanskrit that dates back to at least the sixth century B.C. and probably the eighth century B.C.

*3 I had that teacher, and that comment still chaps my hide.

*4 Modern linguistic relativism goes back at least two thousand years: "Multa renascentur quae iam cercidere, cadentque / quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus, / quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi." (Many words shall revive, which now have fallen off; / and many which are now in esteem shall fall off, if it be the will of usage, / in whose power is the decision and right and standard of language.) Horace, *Ars Poetica,* A.D. 18. What a commie hippie liberal.

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On "Grammar"

T he bloody battle to defend English and champion "good grammar" hasn't always been in existence; in fact, prior to about the middle of the fifteenth century, there was very, very little thought given to English as a language of discourse, officialdom, and permanence. Prior to that, most official documents were recorded in Latin (the gold standard for Languages of Record) or French.[*1] Sure, there had always been anonymous writers (and a few onymous[*2] ones, too, like Geoffrey Chaucer) who chose to preserve their wisdom—or fart jokes, in the case of Chaucer—in English, but it wasn't taken seriously as a literary language until Henry V suddenly began using it in his official correspondence in 1417. Within a few decades, English had become the language of the English bureaucracy, replacing French and Latin almost completely.

The problem with this shift was that both French and Latin, having been used as languages of record for a while, were already comparatively standardized, and English was not. Latin and French had written forms that stood independent of their pronunciation; English, on the other hand, was entirely phonetically spelled. That meant that while Medieval Latin had one way to spell the word that we know as "right" (*rectus*) and Old French as used in English laws and literature had six (*drait, dres, drez, drettes, dreyt,* and *droit*), Middle English, the form of English in use when it became an official language of record, had a whopping *seventy-seven* recorded ways to spell "right."[*3] The *Merriam-Webster's Concise Dictionary of English Usage* puts it best: "English now had to serve the functions formerly served by Latin and French…and this new reality was a powerful spur to the formation of a standard in written English that could be quite independent of variable speech."

The key words here are "in written English." The pronunciation of English continued to be wildly variable, but starting in the fifteenth century, a standard written form began to emerge. (It should be noted that though this movement

began in the middle of the fifteenth century, English spelling wasn't fully standardized for at least another five hundred years, give or take.) The focus was on making English a suitable language of record; you couldn't have official court and legal documents written in whatever form of the language the local scribe had at hand. The type of English used among the clerks of the chancery[*4] (called, appropriately, Chancery English or Chancery Standard) became the seed around which Early Modern English was able to form.

It wasn't all the law clerks. The printing press came to England in the fifteenth century, which helped speed along the standardization process. William Caxton and Richard Pynson, the two most well-known British printers at that time, adopted the Chancery Standard.

While Chancery Standard was spreading throughout the realm in the form of books and printed pamphlets, trying its level best to regularize English spelling, English itself was growing like gangbusters. In the sixteenth century, English was established as a language of record; now it was time to make it a fully literary language.

The problem was that plenty of England's best writers thought English wasn't quite up to the task. This wasn't anything new: complaints about the fitness of English have practically been a national pastime since at least the twelfth century, and if the written record were more complete, I'm sure we'd find scrawled in the corner of some Old English manuscript a complaint that English is horrible and Latin is way better. John Skelton wrote a poem that most likely dates to the early sixteenth century in which he claims that "our naturall tong is rude" and really not up to the task of poetry, and he was the *damned poet laureate of England*. If English was going to be a literary language, it had a lot of work to do.

Vocabulary boomed in the sixteenth century, and many of those new words were words borrowed from lovely, literary languages on the Continent—Latin, Italian, and French. The Romance-language borrowings weren't without controversy—Shakespeare himself made fun of people who piled on the highfalutin foreignisms just to sound smart[*5]—and by the end of the century the language was growing so quickly, both with borrowed words from other languages and with foreign speakers attempting to get their mouths around this burgeoning language, that a handful of native speakers stepped in to provide order. In 1586, William Bullokar, a man who was interested in regularizing and reforming English, published the first English grammar (appropriately titled *Bref Grammar for English*); in 1604, Robert Cawdrey published what is held to be the first monolingual English dictionary.

The concern was that English was becoming terribly unruly, and it needed some reining in. Some called for a large-scale remedy—an academy of English that would not only prescribe good usage but proscribe bad stuff out of English. By "bad stuff," they meant not just words that people thought were uncouth but all forms of the language—styles, uses, poetic meters, the whole kit and caboodle—that were deemed inelegant and unlovely. Daniel Defoe loved the idea of an English academy: he thought it would be best not only for English but for English identity and interests. The job of the academy would be "to encourage Polite Learning, to polish and refine the English tongue, and advance the so much neglected faculty of correct language; also, to establish purity and propriety of style, and to purge it from all the irregular additions that ignorance and affectation have introduced; and all those innovations of speech, if I may call them such, which some dogmatic writers have the confidence to foster upon their native language, as if their authority were sufficient to make their own fancy legitimate."

Don't think Defoe didn't like English. He goes on to say, "By such a society I daresay the true glory of our English style would appear; and among all the learned part of the world be esteemed, as it really is, the noblest and most comprehensive of all the vulgar languages in the world."

This desire to see English exalted wasn't Defoe's alone: Jonathan Swift longed for it; John Dryden strove for it. A grammar was no longer a book used to teach foreigners how to speak English but a book used to teach native English speakers how to speak English.

If that seems presumptuous, realize this: literacy (particularly formal education) was booming in the eighteenth century, and it wasn't too long before "good grammar" became the dividing line between the educated, well poised, polite, and morally upright and the ignorant, vulgar, and morally compromised. English, the grammarians claimed, was a system that could be reduced to a set of logical rules and expectations, and these logical rules expressed right thinking. This weird connection between morality and English usage didn't just appear ex nihilo: England and its colonies were beginning to undergo a huge social shift in which middle-class merchants (many of whom traditionally had a rudimentary education but nothing beyond) were making enough money to buy their way into polite society, and members of the aristocracy (most of whom had an exemplary education) were losing lands, money, and therefore influence. People moving up the social ladder have always aspired to the manners and education of the rank above them, but they need help in doing so; the eighteenth century was no exception. Merchants who were suddenly flush with cash were expected to behave as if they had always been so, particularly when it

came to business.

Help came in the form of letter-writing guides written specifically for the benefit of the rising middle class. Daniel Defoe released one such guide, *The Complete English Tradesman in Familiar Letters,* in 1725. The book is filled with all manner of business advice for the middle-class merchant, along with some solid moralizing: "I cannot allow any pleasures to be innocent, when they turn away either the body or the mind of a tradesman from the one needful thing which his calling makes necessary, and that necessity makes his duty."

The eighteenth-century English grammars were thus the linguistic complements to the etiquette books. Robert Lowth, the bishop of London, wrote *A Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes* in 1762 and explains in the preface,

> It is with reason expected of every person of a liberal education, and it is indispensably required of every one who undertakes to inform or entertain the public, that he should be able to express himself with propriety and accuracy. It will evidently appear from these notes, that our best authors have committed gross mistakes, for want of a due knowledge of English grammar, or at least of a proper attention to the rules of it.

In Lowth's grammar, we have the beginnings of our popular notion of what constitutes "grammar." The first line of his book reads, "Grammar is the art of rightly expressing our thoughts by words," and his grammar doesn't just cover actual grammar, like the difference between a preposition and an adverb, but also what we moderns call "usage," like when to use "will" and when to use "shall" ("*Will,* in the first person singular and plural, promises or threatens; in the second and third persons, only foretells; *shall* on the contrary, in the first person, simply foretells; in the second and third persons, promises, commands, or threatens") and how important it is to use "who" and "whom" correctly, because confusion between the two means that you have not mastered the subjective and objective cases yet.[*6]

This is not grammar for grammar's sake, however. To Lowth's mind, propriety and accuracy of expression become the hallmarks of a gentleman. Good manners, good morality, and good grammar all go hand in hand.

The moralizing continues to this day, in no small part because we like to be correct and because bombast sells. Lynne Truss released her book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* in 2003, and it was full of outsized, near-biblical smiting of people who misused punctuation:

> The confusion of the possessive "its" (no apostrophe) with the contractive "it's" (with apostrophe) is an unequivocal signal of illiteracy and sets off a simple Pavlovian "kill" response in the average stickler. The rule is: the word "it's" (with apostrophe) stands for

"it is" or "it has." If the word does not stand for "it is" or "it has" then what you require is "its." *This is extremely easy to grasp.* Getting your itses mixed up is the greatest solecism in the world of punctuation. No matter that you have a PhD and have read all of Henry James twice. If you still persist in writing, "Good food at it's best," you deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave.

Though Truss must certainly be joking regarding the unhappy fates of those who use the wrong "its," some of her readers seem to have missed the joke. One online review begins, "I proudly consider myself a punctuation martyr." Truss's book was a runaway hit in spite of the fact that I'd wager every person who read that paragraph has, at some point in their life, misused "its" and "it's." And it's not as though the genre reached its hand-waving apotheosis in Truss. In 2013, N. M. Gwynne released a book called *Gwynne's Grammar: The Ultimate Introduction to Grammar and the Writing of Good English,* in which Gwynne (a businessman turned autodidactic schoolmarm) begins his grammar with a logical proof that one cannot be truly happy unless one uses what he considers "good grammar": "In summary of the proof: grammar is the science of using words rightly, leading to thinking rightly, leading to deciding rightly, without which—as both common sense and experience show—happiness is impossible. Therefore, happiness depends at least partly on good grammar."

So what is the grammar that leads us to true happiness? It's consistent with the grammar we find in other books: avoid splitting infinitives because some of your readers may find them inelegant; ending a sentence with a preposition is wrong because the word "preposition" literally means "to position before something"; get your "its" and "it's" straight because it's not that difficult.

The biggest problem with this sort of grammar, however, is that it sounds logical but it's based on a faulty logic. Take the oft-repeated injunction to get "its" and "it's" straight. Everyone claims it's remarkably easy to remember that "its" is possessive and "it's" is a contraction. But logic tells us that in English, *'s* attached to a noun signals possession: the dog*'s* dish, the cat*'s* toy, the lexicographer*'s* cry. So if English is logical, and there are simple rules to follow, why doesn't "it's" signal possession? We know that *'s* also signals a contraction, but we don't have any problems with differentiating between "the dog's dish" and "the dog's sleeping"—why should we suddenly have problems with "it's dish" and "it's sleeping"?

This type of grammar often completely ignores hundreds (and, in some cases, well over a thousand) years of established use in English. For "it's," the rule is certainly easy to memorize, but it also ignores the history of "its" and "it's." At one point in time, "it" was its own possessive pronoun: the 1611 King James Bible reads, "That which groweth of it owne accord…thou shalt not

reape"; Shakespeare wrote in *King Lear,* "It had it head bit off by it young." They weren't the first: the possessive "it" goes back to the fifteenth century.

But around the time that Shakespeare was shuffling off this mortal coil, the possessive "it" began appearing as "it's." We're not sure why the change happened, but some commentators guess that it was because "it" didn't appear to be its own possessive pronoun, like "his" and "her," but rather a bare pronoun in need of that possessive marker given to nouns: *'s.* Sometimes this possessive appeared without punctuation as "its." But the possessive "it's" grew in popularity through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until it was the dominant form of the word. It even survived into the nineteenth century: you'll find it in the letters of Thomas Jefferson and Jane Austen and the speechwriting notes of Abraham Lincoln.

This would be relatively simple were it not for the fact that "it's" was also occasionally used as a contraction for "it is" or "it has" ("and it's come to pass," Shakespeare wrote in *Henry VIII,* 1.2.63). Some grammarians noticed and complained—not that the possessive "it's" and the contractive "it's" were confusing, but that the contractive "it's" was a misuse and mistake for the contraction "'tis," which was the more standard contraction of "it is." This was a war that the pedants lost: "'tis" waned while "it's" waxed.

"Its" and "it's" began to diverge in the nineteenth century, likely as a way to distinguish the possessive form from the contraction. But old habits die hard: The possessive "it's" still shows up with regularity in print, and not just in hand-lettered flyers for local garage sales. Our files have recent evidence of the possessive "it's" in everything from *Vogue* to *The New York Times Magazine* to *Gourmet* to *Time* magazine (which is quoting Ronald Reagan), and then some. They are, of course, typos, but the fact remains that each "it's" was unobtrusive enough that it slipped slyly by the two people most invested in an error-free article: writer and editor.

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So where do these rules come from, if not from actual use? Most of them are the personal peeves, codified into law, of dead white men of yore.

Take, for example, the rule that we're not to end sentences with prepositions. It's one that is drummed into most young writers at some point in their careers, and failing to heed it will result in some teacherly knuckle smacking (literal or figurative). If you ask a modern adherent to this rule why, exactly, you aren't supposed to end a sentence with a preposition, they merely goggle at you as if you had just asked why you aren't supposed to lick electrical

sockets. Because it's *objectively better* not to, that's why.

The rule itself was first articulated by the seventeenth-century poet and literary critic John Dryden. He had used the terminal preposition in his early works, but as he aged and gave himself wholly over to the glories of Latin, he decided against its use:

> I cast my eyes but by chance on Catiline; and in the three or four last pages, found enough to conclude that [Ben] Jonson writ not correctly….The preposition in the end of the sentence; a common fault with him, and which I have but lately observed in my own writings.

When his works were reprinted later in his life, he took the opportunity to tidy up some of the follies of youth, and the terminal preposition was one such folly. Later editions of his work are carefully scrubbed of terminal prepositions: "the age which I live in" became "the age in which I live" and so on.

Why the fuss? Dryden was a son of the Renaissance, and as such was a fan of all things classical: a classical liberal arts education, which placed an emphasis on grammar and rhetoric; the classical (and mostly Latin) authors; the elegance, concision, and precision of Latin itself. It wasn't just a passing fancy: Dryden often translated his sentences into Latin to see how concise and elegant they were, then translated them back into English with Latin's lovely grammar in mind. This is likely what led Dryden to deplore the terminal preposition—in Latin, prepositions can't come at the end of sentences, and Latin is the ne plus ultra of elegance, refinement, and—most important—longevity. Dryden's distaste for the terminal preposition was repeated and reinforced by usage writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until it became a rule.

The problem with this rule is a familiar one: English grammar is not Latin grammar. The languages are cousins, but not close ones, because they come from different branches of the Indo-European language tree. English has a grammatical structure similar to other Germanic languages, and Latin has a grammatical structure similar to other Italic languages. Blending grammatical systems from two languages on different branches of the Indo-European language tree is a bit like mixing orange juice and milk: you can do it, but it's going to be nasty.

One of the grammatical hallmarks of English is that you can stick a preposition at the end of a sentence without any deleterious effect whatsoever. In fact, the terminal preposition isn't just possible, but is and has been standard operating procedure for prepositions from the very beginnings of English. The terminal preposition had been in continuous, easy use seven hundred years before John Dryden was in short pants, and it continues in easy, idiomatic use.

You can, of course, choose not to end your sentence with a preposition, but that is a stylistic choice, not a grammatical diktat from on high.

The fact is that many of the things that are presented to us as rules are really just the of-the-moment preferences of people who have had the opportunity to get their opinions published and whose opinions end up being reinforced and repeated down the ages as Truth. Many of the rules that make up the sort of grammar that Gwynne and others care about actually go against a long and established track record of use by the very authors who are championed as the practitioners (and, yea, defenders) of Proper English. In plain language, even peevers mess it up.

David Foster Wallace, modern literary titan, described himself in a famous *Harper's* essay as a "snoot," a "really extreme usage fanatic, the sort of person whose idea of Sunday fun is to look for mistakes in Safire's column's prose itself." He was a prolific writer and a very careful one, too; he used "nauseated" instead of "nauseous" to mean "to feel sick," for instance, an old grammatical peccadillo to be sure, and one that even the most prescriptivist usage commentators today merely shrug over. Bryan Garner, one of Wallace's prescriptivist heroes, has even almost given up on this one: in his *Garner's Modern American Usage,* he rates this a Stage 4 on his Language-Change Index: "The form becomes virtually universal but is opposed on cogent grounds by a few linguistic stalwarts." Be that as it may, good usage mattered to Wallace. So it is a surprise to see, in one of his stories published in *Harper's,* an instance of the oft-bemoaned object of snooty scorn, the figurative "literally":

> The moment hung there between us, borderless and distendent, my impulse to clear my own throat blocked only by a fear of appearing impertinent; and it was in that literally endless expectant interval that I came to see that I deferred to the infant, respected it, granted it full authority, and therefore waited, abiding, both of us in that small and shadowless father's office, in the knowledge that I was, thenceforth, this tiny white frightening thing's to command, its instrument or tool.

Did he mean to use it in an ironic way? Were we supposed to divine some sort of smirk in it? It's impossible to say: all we have is this instance of the figurative "literally" in the work of an author who is known for his self-professed snoothood and his lexical precision. Another piece of evidence for the figurative "literally," supplied by someone who would probably deplore such a hyperbolic use in anyone else's prose.

And thus it ever was: Jonathan Swift disparages the use of contractions as evidence of "the deplorable Ignorance that for some Years hath reigned among our English Writers; the great Depravity of our Taste; and the continual Corruption of our Style," then turns around and uses them all over the place in

his *Journal to Stella.* E. B. White says in *The Elements of Style* that "certainly" is "used indiscriminately by some speakers, much as others use very, to intensify any and every statement. A mannerism of this kind, bad in speech, is even worse in writing"; it shows up in his *Second Tree from the Corner* ("You certainly don't have to be a humorist to taste the sadness of situation and mood"). Lynne Truss's book "eloquently speaks to the value of punctuation in preserving the nuances of language," slobbers one adoring reviewer—one among many—and yet Truss commits oodles of punctuation errors throughout her own usage book on punctuation, including one on the cover: there should be a hyphen between "Zero" and "Tolerance." Humanity sets up rules to govern English, but English rolls onward, a juggernaut crushing all in its path.[*7]

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This is what you, the lexicographer, must contend with as you go through your Style and Defining classes with Gil: the realization that most of these little bits of information that you've hoarded to fortify your defenses against linguistic and moral attack are rubbish. It is a betrayal—*I wasted how many years of my life trying to master the difference between "between" and "among" when I could have been dating exciting people instead?*—but one you must get over quickly. The lexicographer's job is to tell the truth about how language is used and, in doing so, set down their own poniards. As you go through the written record, you'll find that Shakespeare used double negatives and Jane Austen used "ain't." You'll find that new and disputed coinages have come in and have not taken away from the language as it was used, but added to it; that words previously considered horrendous or ugly—words like "can't"—are now unremarkable. In spite of all this apparent error, the lexicographer must conclude—indeed, must *believe*—that English is not only still alive but flourishing.

Many of the rules that have been codified into "grammar" uphold an ideal, not a reality. The grammarians of the seventeenth century onward weren't interested so much in preserving the language as it was used as in perpetuating a re-formed idea of what language should be. The first soldiers in the fight to preserve English radically changed English, not according to the best practices of the great writers of the language, but according to their own views of elegance and correctness. What they wanted to preserve and promote didn't, for the most part, actually exist: it was a convenient fiction that was painted in moral terms, thereby ensuring its own propagation. Let me say that again: *Standard English as it is presented by grammarians and pedants is a dialect that is based on a mostly fictional, static, and Platonic ideal of usage.* Under this

mentality, the idea that the best practices of English change with time is anathema. It doesn't preserve English so much as pickle it. It's a circle unbroken: in every age, some learned pedant discovers all over again that English is a clunker, and they race to the rooftops to shout it to the unwashed, stupid masses and begin fomenting for a walkback. Even Samuel Johnson gets into the act:

> If the changes that we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure. Life may be lengthened by care, though death cannot be ultimately defeated: tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language.

We think of English as a fortress to be defended, but a better analogy is to think of English as a child. We love and nurture it into being, and once it gains gross motor skills, it starts going exactly where we don't want it to go: it heads right for the goddamned electrical sockets. We dress it in fancy clothes and tell it to behave, and it comes home with its underwear on its head and wearing someone else's socks. As English grows, it lives its own life, and this is right and healthy. Sometimes English does exactly what we think it should; sometimes it goes places we don't like and thrives there in spite of all our worrying. We can tell it to clean itself up and act more like Latin; we can throw tantrums and start learning French instead. But we will never really be the boss of it. And that's why it flourishes.

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*1 Plenty of the monarchs that we think of as fair, ruddy Englishmen and Englishwomen were actually French. King Richard the Lionheart (rule, 1189–1199), the absent monarch during Robin Hood's fictional reign and brother to the rotten prince John, couldn't speak a lick of English and spent most of his time in the Duchy of Aquitaine when he wasn't smashing the Holy Land to bits or being locked up in an Austrian prison. The first truly "English" king to take the throne after the Norman Conquest was Henry VII, and he was really Welsh.

*2 **on·y·mous** \ˈänəməs\ *adj* **:** bearing a name; *especially* **:** giving or bearing the author's name <an *onymous* article in a magazine> *(MWU)*

*3 reʒt, reght, reghte, reht, reit, rethe, reyʒt, reyght, reyt, reyte, rʒt (which was likely a transmission error because there's no vowel where there should be), rich, richt, ricth, riʒ, riʒght, riʒht, riʒhte, riʒt, riʒte, riʒth, riʒtt, riʒtte, riʒty (another transmission error with that extra *y*), righte, rigt, rigth, rigthe, rih, rihct, rihht, rihst, riht, rihte, rihtt, rihtte, rijʒt, rist, rit, rite, rith, rithe, ritht, ritth, rothes (plural, another transmission error with that whopper of an *o*), rycht, ryde, ryʒ, ryʒght, ryʒht, ryʒhte, ryʒt, ryʒte, ryʒth, ryʒthe, ryʒtt, ryʒtte, ryʒtth, ryʒtthe, ryg, rygh, ryghe, ryght, ryghte, ryghtʒ, rygt, rygth, ryht, ryhte, ryt, ryte, ryth, rythe, rytht, wryght (*w-,* probably another transmission error), ziʒt (*z-,* definitely a transmission error), and, of course, right.

*4 ¹**chan·cery** \ˈchan(t)-s(ə-)rē, ˈchän(t)-\ *n* **-ies**…**2 :** a record office originally for issuance and

preservation of a sovereign's diplomas, charters, and bulls and later for the collection, arrangement, and safekeeping of public archives and ecclesiastical, legal, or diplomatic proceedings *(MWU)*

*5 MOTH [aside]: They have been at a great feast of languages, and stolen the scraps.

COSTARD: O! they have lived long on the alms-basket of words. I marvel thy master hath not eaten thee for a word, for thou art not so long by the head as "honorificabilitudinitatibus": thou art easier swallowed than a flap-dragon. (*Love's Labour's Lost,* 5.1.36–42)

*6 Lowth hammers this home by noting that even translators of the Bible can't get this right: for "Whom do men say that I am?" (Matt. 16:13, Mark 8:27, Luke 9:18), Lowth sighs, "It ought in all these places to be who."

*7 "Juggernaut" is an adaptation of one of the Hindi names for Vishnu, Jagannāth, "lord of the world." Supposedly, a giant avatar of Jagannāth would be drawn through the streets on a cart during a festival, and some devotees would allow themselves to be crushed by the cart's wheels as it passed by them. "Supposedly" is the key word in the previous sentence. For more etymological dubiosities, see the chapter "Posh."