

TOPIC...COMMENT

Punctuation and human freedom

Geoffrey Nunberg tells me that the article he published in the December 1983 number of *Atlantic* attracted the biggest mailbag that any single article in the magazine has ever elicited. The topic of the article was grammar. Yes, plain old English grammar, such as people (quite wrongly) claim is not taught in the schools any more. It is the most incendiary subject in America today. In the wake of the publication of Nunberg's article (entitled 'The grammar wars'), Nunberg was flown to Boston for a startlingly high fee to be consulted by Houghton-Mifflin about a dictionary they are working on, and was subsequently sent on a tour of radio and TV stations by the same publishers to sit on panels and to guest on chat shows. Lines to the stations jammed and the call-in switchboards lit up like airport runways.

Nunberg feels he knows why. Take a much less incendiary subject like civil strife and governmental misdeeds in Guatemala, and a talk-show guest who purports to be an expert on the the subject will be taken as an expert; a few callers who either wish to be further enlightened by competent authority or who themselves have a claim to be called expert in the internal affairs of Guatemala will call in, but otherwise the expert will have the run of the airwaves. Like the mythical Mr Science of the American National Public Radio program *Morning Edition*, "He knows more than you do." But there is no general public recognition of experts on language. Everyone feels entitled to an opinion. Indeed, an astonishing range of people with absolutely no qualifications for the job are prepared to set themselves up as primary fountainheads of grammatical dogma.

How could we linguists have allowed this to happen? The situation bespeaks some real blunders in the public relations handling of our profession. We *are* experts, and it is demeaning that pontificating fools like John Simon, William Safire, Edwin Newman, and the other grammar columnists of the American press (to all of whom Nunberg is much too polite in his otherwise excellent article) should be telling the public where they can and can't use plural agreement. If anyone is going to tell them, it should be *our* job. Moreover, as experts, we linguists deserve certain courtesies, like high rates of pay, and blind trust in our competence on the part of John Q. Public. If auto mechanics, dentists, and Guatemala-watchers merit these things, I see no reason why someone who has sweated

through the long agony of producing a doctoral dissertation on linguistics doesn't deserve them.

Depressingly, the lack of firm authority vested in the linguistics profession is likely to hamper (though not too much, I hope) the progress of a campaign to change society that has latterly been taking up a large proportion of my political energies. The issue it is devoted to may initially seem a small one, but as Otto Jespersen once said, the world is made up of little things; what is important is to see them largely. I shall argue that an important human freedom is at stake.

I want you first to consider the string 'the string' and the string 'the string.', noting that it takes ten keystrokes to type the string in the first set of quotes, and eleven to type the string in the second pair. Imagine you wanted to quote me on the latter point. You might want to say (1).

- (1) Pullum notes that it takes eleven keystrokes to type the string 'the string.'

No problem there; (1) is true. But now suppose you want to say this:

- (2) Pullum notes that it takes ten keystrokes to type the string 'the string'.

You won't be able to publish it. Your copy-editor will change it before the first proof stage to (3), which is false:

- (3) Pullum notes that it takes ten keystrokes to type the string 'the string.'

Why? Because the copy-editor will insist that when a quotation mark ends a sentence, the quotation mark must follow the punctuation mark.

I say this must stop. Linguists have a duty to the public to use their expertise in arguing for changes to the fabric of society when its interests are threatened. And we have such a situation here.

First, let me establish that we are definitely talking about the fabric of society and not the biological endowment of the species in the present case. There are many crucial differences between the conventions of punctuation for printed English and the grammatical rules of the spoken (or informally written) language. Punctuation rules are everything that we teach our first-quarter undergraduates the grammatical rules of the language are not:

– Their general character is due to invention; it has not evolved along with the species – many advanced cultures show no signs of the superstitious awe with which we regard copy-editors.

– The rules constitute a learned, culturally imposed system; they are not effortlessly attained through casual exposure at an early age according to a biologically determined maturation schedule.

– Mastery of the rules is not common to essentially every non-handicapped member of a linguistically defined community; some people who ought to know them never get an adequate grasp of them, and I can show you term papers to prove it.

– Prescriptivism with regard to punctuation principles is right: there is a correct way to do things, as defined in standard books, and doing things a different way is simply mistaken.

Many of the rules are very sensible and proper; like the more reasonable laws of our national and local communities, they deserve our compliance and support; for example, the rule that a sentence does not begin with a numeral, a formula of any kind, a foreign symbol that does not have an upper-case correspondent, or a parenthesis that encloses only a proper substring of the sentence. This seems as sensible as a law against driving in New York state with a live moose on one's fender.

But in certain seaside towns on the East Coast of the United States, actions such as being barefoot at the beach in the evening have been made criminal offences for various reasons (e.g. in order to protect the city against lawsuits brought by the unshod), and the legislation is used for harassing young people. (A young man was recently arrested on Fire Island, NY, for eating pizza in the street outside a pizzeria.) Masturbation has carried a life imprisonment penalty in Indiana throughout most of this century (I have not found it possible to determine whether this penalty has been repealed because the process of inquiring on the topic at libraries and police stations has proved too embarrassing). Sometimes laws are intolerable, and need to be changed – by organized legal protest if possible, but otherwise by actual resistance and civil disobedience. I believe we must take the issue of transposing quotes and periods to the streets if need be.

No copy-editor should have the right to switch the order of two punctuation marks when it can change truth-conditions, as (1)–(3) show that it can. And the cases when such transposition could reasonably be interpreted as changing truth-conditions are commoner than you would think. Consider the following:

- (4) Shakespeare's *King Richard III* contains the line
 "Now is the winter of our discontent."

This is false (though I believe many people have the impression that it is true). However, (5) is true:

- (5) Shakespeare's *King Richard III* contains the line
 "Now is the winter of our discontent".

This is the first of two lines in the play which together make up the sentence "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of York." In this sentence, "Now is the winter of our discontent" is not even a constituent, of course. But the period-before-quotes convention would make it look as if it were.

This issue arises, though less strikingly, in a large percentage of the cases in which words are directly quoted from print. We do not have to put up with this. I say we should change this rule, and we should start now the campaign of direct action it will take. To begin with, we should each work on the copy-editors we are currently having dealings with. I will be sending back today the typescript of an article in which the copy-editor has transposed some of my quotation marks. I am going to object, and insist on keeping the logically correct sequence; I will stand my ground at proofreading time, and I will not submit.

Those of you who wish to make similar protests to copy-editors will find it useful to know that section 5.10 of the thirteenth edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the copy-editor's *grimoire*, actually sanctions the logically correct placement in the case of single quotes around 'special terms'. Even more significantly, Mr William George of Reidel's editorial department has pointed out to me that the 1983 edition of *Hart's Rules for Compositors and Readers* (Oxford University Press), pp. 45-48, explicitly endorses the principle of punctuating "according to the sense". What a fine example of British level-headedness, and what an important ally to my cause. These precedents can be used in our struggle as the thin end of the wedge. I have also noticed that many copy-editors will already concede the point for semi-colons; that is, a typescript containing (6a) is not corrected to (6b).

- (6)a. Bolinger never said "Accent is predictable"; he said
 "Accent is predictable – if you're a mind-reader."
 b. Bolinger never said "Accent is predictable;" he said
 "Accent is predictable – if you're a mind-reader."

This is clearly a glimmering of good sense, and a weakening of the blind stupidity of the standard policy. I believe we can win the battle to change the policy once and for all, even for commas and periods.

And I have broader plans for the campaign, soon to be formally registered as a national organization, the Campaign for Typographical Freedom. In a few months (watch the national press), a huge rally will take place at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. There will also be an

international day of protest on which demonstrations will be organized in all the great publishing cities of the world – London, Paris, Rome, New York, San Francisco, Cambridge (the real one), Cambridge (the sub-standard imitation in Massachusetts), Oxford, and yes, Dordrecht too. I will also be publishing the home addresses of a number of top copy-editors to be used in postcard intimidation work.

Response so far has been gratifyingly enthusiastic. Even I, with my fingers on the very pulse of the linguistic community, could not have foreseen the extent of the upwelling of popular support for the campaign that has already begun in response to private circulation of a dittoed manifesto last year. Direct action has already begun. In one month alone, *Linguistic Inquiry* copy-editing supremo Anne Mark received over eighty thousand postcards at her home in Reading, Massachusetts, essentially all of them supportive of the campaign. (One was from a linguist vacationing in Wyoming who had apparently misunderstood the point of the postcard campaign and merely reported that he was “having a great time” touring the Grand Tetons with his family.)

Checks and money orders have poured in to provide a solid financial base of support for the Campaign for Typographical Freedom. I want to assure the linguists who have so generously made these fully tax-deductible contributions to campaign funds that the resources they have provided are being responsibly administered by the volunteer staff here at the TOPIC . . . COMMENT office. The rapid upsurge in the activities of the campaign has necessitated my doing quite a bit of travelling, and the Executive Committee has decided that it was appropriate for a 1985 Toyota Celica Supra to be purchased in order that I should be able to meet my travel commitments in a timely manner. A certain amount of entertaining has also proved necessary in the pursuit of further fund-raising objectives, and to this end the poolside facilities at my residence have been improved (by the addition of a pool).

But the most striking thing about the developments so far has been the emergence of a clear focus for the anger and resentment (quite justified in my opinion) against one thing above all others, namely, cruel bibliographic practices. The editorial staff of the New York office of Academic Press, Inc. has been much cited as an example of what we have to fight against, but in fact MIT Press policies are very similar. Let me list a few examples of the kind of brutal and unreasoning policies that are imposed on the bibliographies that linguists so carefully and thoughtfully prepare. (The catalog that follows is not for the squeamish; those who felt a bit faint while watching *Gremlins* might care to abandon this column and turn to something less upsetting.)

Gratuitous capitalization. The harsh yoke of AP copy-editing currently imposes on authors (but strangely, did not always in the past) pointless and information-destructive capitalization of 'significant' words (roughly, words that belong to the categories N, A, or V) in titles. *LI* does this too, but *Language* follows the French style in abjuring the practice. Notice that from the *Language* format it is possible immediately to predict what the AP format would be, should one wish to, but the converse is not true, because gratuitous capitalization destroys distinctions: consider the contrast between the words *Xerox* (the name of a corporation) and *xerox* (a verb that the Xerox Corporation has tried desperately to eliminate, and forbids its staff to use), or between *french toast* and *French toast*, or between *big Ben* and *Big Ben*, or (for a linguistic example) between *case* and *Case*.

Redundancy in place names. Many publishers insist on state names spelled out in full after every city name in a place of publication. Thus one often has to endure several repetitions of a phrase as long as "*Papers from the Nineteenth Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society, Chicago Linguistic Society, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois*" peppering one's bibliography. The place name "Chicago" itself is redundant here, but they cruelly insist on it, and will also insist that "Illinois" be added – in full, MIT Press requires, not with the official US Postal Service abbreviation "IL" – even though there is nowhere in the entire world a place called Chicago other than the city at the southern end of Lake Michigan, and people who cannot place Chicago on a map cannot place Illinois either. (Catherine Ringen has a T-shirt with a slogan making fun of people who have trouble with the names of States that begin with *I*; it says: "UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, IDAHO CITY, ILLINOIS".)

Reduction of names to initials. For utterly mysterious reasons, although they are prepared to waste thousands of characters on redundant names in some contexts, AP and MIT Press refuse to permit mention of first names of authors even when they expressly use their first names and suppress some of their initials. Thus they will accept "Chomsky, N." or "Chomsky, N. A." or "Chomsky, A. N." (is it Noam Avram or Avram Noam, incidentally?), but that is not how Chomsky styles himself; he publishes as Noam Chomsky, so it should be "Chomsky, Noam". But no; AP change known names to obscure initials, thus inextricably mixing up, for example, Neil Smith (London) and Norval Smith (Amsterdam). And if you thought that full use of middle initials would sort things out, think again: there are pairs such as John M. Anderson (Edinburgh) and James M. Anderson

(Calgary), and W. Sidney Allen (the eminent Cambridge classicist and Caucasologist) and W. Stannard Allen (the applied linguist). AP will even invade the sanctity of text with its policy on not mentioning first names; Arnold Zwicky and Jerry Sadock still positively fume with anger at the way AP, in 1975, changed "is due to Dennis Stampe" (crediting the University of Wisconsin-Madison philosopher of language) to "is due to Stampe" (ambiguous, but likely to be read as crediting his brother, Zwicky's colleague David Stampe at Ohio State University) in footnote 6 of 'Ambiguity tests and how to fail them' (in *Syntax and Semantics* 4).

Redundant editors' names. Having saved characters at the cost of introducing ambiguity by suppressing authors' first names, AP then wastes characters by enforcing a policy of requiring all the editors to be listed whenever a Chicago Linguistic Society or Berkeley Linguistics Society volume is cited. Thus what could have been "Papers from the sixth regional meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society," or even just "CLS 6" with an appropriate abbreviation explanation, becomes, almost unbelievably (but see e.g. *Syntax and Semantics* 4 (1975), page 34):

M. A. Campbell, J. Lindholm, A. Davison, W. Fisher, L. Furbee, J. Lovins, E. Maxwell, J. Reighard, and S. Straight (Eds.), *Papers from the sixth regional meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society*.

These unwarranted infringements on our freedom of expression must be stopped. And if we are united in our dedication to the cause, I believe they can be. We are experts. We know more than they do. We cannot be defeated. Send checks and money orders to the Campaign for Typographical Freedom, c/o:

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Note

The views expressed in TOPIC . . . COMMENT are those of the author. They should not be construed as representing either the editors or the publishers of *NLLT*.