

Our rightful business as English teachers includes helping students learn to unpack vague, airy abstractions. Instead, Curzan crams politically convenient ones like “social justice” down students’ (and readers’) throats even while pressing students to challenge conventions that should be mastered as such. A standard is just that—in Curzan’s words, “a shared form”: stop at the red lights, go on the green lights, and get on with life’s business. No students are empowered by following their English teacher’s lead in challenging standards for punctuation, syntactic alignment, and word usage. In supposing otherwise, Curzan seems merely to be confusing privileged United States teenagers with Paulo Freire’s destitute, illiterate, passive Brazilians.

In our cultural context, at least, mastering prose standards as such suggests no general disposition to bow to authority and no commitment to the political status quo. Consider the following sentence: “The utterly horrifying tone of Kearney’s address should not conceal the fact that she invoked theories that had become quite familiar within the movement.” Hegemonic white male style, right? The oppressor’s language? The author, however, is a revolutionary black female communist writing from jail. Why does Angela Davis write this way? All razzmatazz about “prestige dialect” aside, Davis is serious about getting complex matters right and reaching out to a serious-minded audience whose assent and support she is eager to win. Unlike Curzan, Davis does not romanticize educational deficit, and she is simply above mispunctuating and miswording her sentences.

Students benefit from the systematic, whole-hearted teaching of Standard English grammar. Beyond helping them not make mistakes (as defined by every reader in a position to influence their public lives), such training gives them a self-aware command of the revision process as they come to know their syntactic options and appreciate wherein the beauties of the English sentence lie. When Curzan retards this process with ideological excrescences, she is derelict of duty, working against the interests of students, colleagues, and literacy itself. If she is right that

“most of us” similarly pervert our teaching, that goes a long way toward explaining why our students read and write as poorly as they do.

Jeff Zorn

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TO THE EDITOR:

Anne Curzan’s essay is a masterpiece of logic and should be de rigueur reading for all those teaching English or writing-intensive classes in English. As an instructor newly appointed to the Queens College department of comparative literature, I teach classes in the most diverse county in the country, and the students in my classes reflect that diversity. Their native languages, often the languages they speak at home, range from Spanish and French to Hindi, Urdu, Japanese, Korean, and Russian.

Curzan’s suggestion that an instructor write “[C]ome talk to me about this construction” on a student’s paper rather than mark something “incorrect” speaks volumes about her desire to help students master written English without belittling the spoken-language skills they already possess (878).

Curzan’s insights are invaluable.

Raymond E. Skrabut

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TO THE EDITOR:

While not disagreeing with the basic tenor of Anne Curzan’s comments in “Says Who? Teaching and Questioning the Rules of Grammar,” I believe they reflect a somewhat myopic view of the rewards for being in grammatical control of one’s spoken and written language. To many students, especially Americans, grammar has loomed as the *bête noire* of English and foreign language studies. It should not! Here, to know is to conquer. Count your blessings. Compared with *Beowulf*’s Anglo-Saxon, with its noun declensions sporting six cases, dual coexisting with singulars and plurals, verb endings vying for interminable space, our modern

English grammar is now almost anorexic. For would-be English speakers and writers to be confidently in control of their native language should reflect a loftier goal than merely to secure passing grades from some picayune, nit-picking English or foreign language teacher. Ages ago, one such teacher, the supervisor of Spanish teaching assistants, berated me in front of my students for omitting one out of eleven uses of the Spanish *se* as listed in Ramsey and Spaulding's Spanish grammar—her bible, evidently, but with more commandments. I was told never to repeat such faux pas. I have taught French, German, Russian, and Spanish grammar at seven American universities and English grammar at Yunnan Normal University in China. I commend Spain for naming 1492 its *annum mirabile*, or “miracle year,” commemorated for marking the expulsion of the Moors, the discovery of America, and last, but not least, the publication by Elio Antonio de Lebrija, or Nebrija (1441–1522), of a Castilian grammar credited as the first published Romance language grammar. It was said that as a scholar Nebrija suggested to Columbus that he capture the New World by way of the language of the place rather than by arms and weapons.

With English our task is not insurmountable. At least know when a noun or pronoun is the subject or object of verbs and prepositions. Don't say *between you and I* when you'd never dream of saying *between he and she*, *between I and they*, *between they and we*. Unlike Anne Curzan, I prefer for stylistic reasons not to use *hopefully* as an exclamation, when it essentially is an adverb desperately looking for a verb to hitch itself to. We use it in the sense of the Spanish interjection *ojalá*, meaning “I hope so,” “Let's hope so,” “God willing.” The Germans have besides *hoffnungsvoll*, our *hopeful*, a similar term, *hoffentlich*, listing it as an adverb, when it rather plays the role of an interjection. I also believe that semantically speaking, with regard to their etymological origin, all adverbs are not created equal. Stylistically, I don't have a problem with *Presumably my lottery ticket will win*. However, etymologically the German *hoffen*, “to hope,”

is related to *hüpfen*, “to hop.” Given this original semantic relation, a sentence that begins, “Hopefully,” suggests to me an image of someone jumping up and down in hopeful, wildly excited expectation. Hence, for stylistic rather than strictly grammatical reasons I find *Let's hope, I hope, God willing* preferable to *hopefully*. Admit it! *I hope to fall in love with her* is better than *Hopefully I will fall in love with her*. “The style is the man” and, I might add, “the woman.”

Max Oppenheimer, Jr.

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TO THE EDITOR:

I am writing to take exception to Anne Curzan's decision to allow students to, as she says, “choose not to follow the prescriptive usage rule that forbids treating *they* as singular as long as they demonstrate” what she calls “audience awareness in explicitly recognizing their choice . . .” (870). She apparently has them footnote this choice, citing herself as their referential authority. However, when she goes on to discuss “[d]escriptive grammar” as “what speakers actually do” and “prescriptive grammar” as “language etiquette” or what she claims other linguists call “table manners,” she negates her own argument (871).

What is wrong with table manners, particularly at a university, where the students in question are doing their writing? Students, in fact, come to a university to obtain table manners. Curzan seems imbued with a kind of misplaced empathy with speakers whose use of language she thinks reflects that of their communities. She even admits that “the teaching of grammar and usage conventions should follow an additive model—an expansion of students' repertoires—rather than a replacement model” (873). Accordingly, it ought to be incumbent upon those in a university who are in a position to do so to expand and not restrict a student's language repository.

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