Language and authority
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The dictionary says . . .

what does this mean?

which dictionary?

why is the dictionary seen as a language authority?

what other “final authorities” for language questions do you know?
The standard metre
What is standard English?

We have standards for weights and measurements. How is a standard language different?

The French Academy: founded in 1635 to compile an official dictionary, grammar, and usage guide for French.

It did publish a dictionary, eventually, but the dictionary updates are so slow to appear that most people rely on commercial dictionaries.

It did publish a grammar, of sorts, in the 17th century. Commercially-printed grammars of French are more up to date.

It does issue statements about what words, expressions, and grammatical constructions are incorrect and in need pf reform

And it campaigns against the use of borrowed English words.
Spain has a language academy, and several South American countries have one as well. Italy has one. England does not.

Do we need an academy for the English language?

Why do people find things wrong with the language as others use it, and try to change things for the better?

Does language get better or worse over time?
Who are today’s language authorities?

Does mastering the rules of language have a payoff in terms of better jobs, more secure social prestige, more influence in the world of ideas?
defining standard English

most definitions are fuzzy

associated with written English; formal writing and speech; news presentation;

certain level of education assumed

often defined negatively: it avoids class, regional, or socially-stigmatized forms, slang, and tends to be free of “mistakes”

or it is the prestige dialect of a region, the one associated with those at the top of the social ladder, rather than those at the lower end

while we tend to think of it as formal, it can also be informal
most people regard it as positive or neutral, rather than stuffy or pretentious
variation in StdE: by country; by variant (hopefully, proved/proven, hung/hanged)

in any case, StdE is a dialect that has been elevated to a prestige form seen as a convenient, or as convenient, fiction

users of stdE regularly violate it for the purposes of style, or making a point:

examples (*it ain’t necessarily so; who’a a thunk it?*)

the notion of style: emphasizes *choice*

when enough respected language users choose a particular variant, it can no longer be considered nonstandard
What do you want your politicians to sound like?

Ronald Reagan was called “the great communicator,” but he was an actor who knew how to read a script.

George W. Bush was criticized for making too many language errors. But he was also praised for sounding like an ordinary person.

Barack Obama has been criticized for sounding too much like a professor.

What’s your opinion of the language — not the positions, but the language — of the current crop of presidential candidates?

Does your opinion of their speech correspond in any way with your opinion about their positions?
descriptive v. prescriptive rules

the difference between describing what people do when they use language and telling people how to use their language

this has nothing to do with formal/informal or standard/nonstandard!
**prescriptions:** what are some of the things you’ve been told NOT TO DO?

who told you, and in what circumstances?

don’t end a sentence with a preposition. why not?

the double negative as an example – Lowth’s first statement of the rule, in 1763, and Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella, sonnet 63, proving that it doesn’t work

*ain’t:* < *an’t,* a contraction of amn’t, aren’t appears in 17th c, later expanded to include *isn’t.* John Witherspoon condemned all the contractions: *isn’t,* *aren’t,* *shouldn’t.* Later commentators defended *ain’t* for am not, since that form has no other contraction, but condemned it for *isn’t,* *aren’t.* Finally it was universally condemned.

if there’s nothing wrong with *ain’t,* why can’t you use it in a paper?

*who/whom* – what’s the deal with *whom?*
There’s always a gap between the prescriptive rule and what speakers and writers actually do

How should we negotiate this gap?

When do we follow the rule, and when can we (safely) ignore it?

What happens when we try to apply the “rule,” but do it wrong?
**descriptive grammar:** descriptive rules attempt to model a speaker’s competence and performance;

evaluating the well-formedness of an utterance, not its appropriateness or correctness

eg, adjectives in English (mostly) precede the nouns they modify

regular nouns form plurals by adding –s

indefinite pronouns like *everyone* often take plural pronouns because they *seem* plural in reference

Descriptive rules are not found in style guides/usage books because they are so basic we all observe them

Prescriptive rules focus on points of variation and pick one of the options to promote
Most correctors make mistakes as well:

Baron’s law –

Whenever a language critic complains about something you can be sure 1) it's already too late to do anything about it and 2) the language critic already uses the form he or she is complaining about.

The role of prescription: Deborah Cameron argues that all speech communities self-regulate and regulate others, that this is natural.
Case study: multiple negation

used to be common – Shakespeare and Chaucer use it. But grammarian Robert Lowth (1762) says two negatives cancel one another out.

One usage guide from 1873 actually laments the loss of the double negative

We don’t misunderstand double negatives; we disapprove of the social class and educational level of people who use them.

Case study: ain’t

many dialects use it regularly, many other speakers used it for style

why is ain’t worse than don’t or can’t?

Ain’t arises as a contraction of am not, are not (as does amn’t). Later spreads to cover is not

John Witherspoon objects to contractions in general in 1781
status of prescriptive rules

Prescriptive rules are often created based on personal preference of language guru

By the time a rule is formulated, it’s often too late to change popular practice so, can you use *ain’t* in college papers? No, even though it’s not wrong.

the prescriptive rules are socially constructed, and if you don’t conform to them you could have problems in cases where they are expected

some speakers will always tell others how to speak (or write)

In assessing prescriptivism, we must see who prescribes for whom, what do they prescribe, and for what purpose?
Everybody wants to be correct; nobody wants to be corrected.

It’s a free country. Who made you the boss of me?
speech v. writing

writing is easier to regulate than speech [why is this?]

which is primary, speech or writing?

which is more permanent?

are there hybrid speech/writing forms of language?

speech and writing are processed differently

speech is acquired naturally, while writing must be taught

speech is older than writing
spoken languages exist w.o. written forms [is the reverse true? Latin?]

writing, when introduced, is typically mistrusted. so how did writing become more “prestigious” than speech?

why do we say, “I want that in writing”?

why do we write things down if we want to remember them?

do new forms like email, IM, text, blur the distinction between speech and writing?
spoken langs vary more than written
speaker tends to know audience more
speech more interactive (clear up misunderstandings)
written language has context as well
speech more immediate, writing may involve a delay
we process speech and writing differently
we are taught to write more sophisticated prose when we write
we live in an overwhelmingly literate world, and many feel more comfortable writing than speaking
writing often carries more authority than speech
Dictionaries of English

dictionaries are new – only about 250 years old – how did they become so authoritative?

dictionaries of hard words
dictionaries for foreigners
dictionaries of general English

Bailey one of the first comprehensive dictionaries, about 40k words

Johnson, 1755, also about 40,000 words; used illustrative quotes.

Webster’s 1828 dictionary had 70,000 words

American dictionaries
  Webster’s emphasis on an American language
  Worcester’s insistence on British norms

the OED, relying on volunteer readers, a Wiki of its day

ain’t in W3, MW11, AHD5
In addition to defining words,

should dictionaries accede to demands that may contradict how words are actually used?

should dictionaries warn users about negative senses of words?

should they warn users that some usages may be viewed as incorrect? substandard?

should dictionaries include taboo words? and if so, how should they treat them?
grammar, usage and style

English is not a prestige language until at least 14th c.

the fact that dictionaries and usage books of English arise indicates the growing prestige of the language

grammars were prescriptive: no one saw the need to include variants

Alistair Campbell: usage should be national, not local; contemporary, not old-fashioned or new-fangled; and reputable

Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*: guide for self-improvement

Are usage books like diet books?
Usage guides are not the only way to determine how speakers of English use their language.

Corpus linguistics studies large data sets of spoken and written English to determine what contemporary English is really like.

What should we do – as teachers, as users of English – when that data conflicts with the “advice” or rules of the guide books?
This is Paloma’s question: What’s the good of grammar?

Standardization is a fact, but it is socially constructed, so ...

*what is the role of the classroom in teaching about language?*

is it to correct?

to initiate nonstandard speakers into the secret knowledge of the standard so they can share in its power and other benefits?

Does standard English come with benefits, or only myths?

Are you punished for not using it, but not necessarily rewarded for using it?

All change begins in variation, often seen as error. at some point that error becomes standard: bird < bridde, by metathesis; third < thridde (cf. three). Those must have been perceived originally as mistakes, but now they are the standard forms.

Should we treat all variation that way?
Hypercorrection

the avoidance of a form one thinks is wrong, because previously corrected in school or at home, leads to a new mistake

a common example: *between you and I; she gave it to my brother and I.*

in 1781 John Witherspoon labels *between you and I* as a clear mistake, “the phrase is altogether a vulgarism and therefore not to be used, except in particular circumstances, describing familiar chat.”
Summary:

Despite there being no official language authority, a loose network of authorities unofficially govern language standards:

- teachers, editors, pundits, grammar books

Standard English is a prestige social dialect: it is neutral if not good English, not associated with a region.

- But it is a loose concept, not something that can be defined clearly.

Prescriptive grammar – dictates how to behave, what words or expressions to use or to avoid

- Descriptive rules: models what speakers/writers do

Prescription is more easily enforced in written language
language change typically happens in spoken English (but consider the use of LOL, OMG, WTF in speech)

grammar and style are distinct concepts

dictionaries are created as descriptive, but they used prescriptively

grammar and usage books are (typically) prescriptive

Standard English, and its prescriptive rules, are all socially constructed, elevated for social reasons, not because they are intrinsically better, more logical, more historically accurate, etymologically accurate, or more beautiful.

Standard English is said to be critical for social mobility in the US. Is it?

BUT: is there one Standard English or does it vary by region and by country? And if this variation exists, how are we to reconcile standards and variation?