CONTROVERSY OVER CORRECTNESS:
THE VIEW FROM 1980

by

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B.A., Montana State University, 1972

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements of the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1980

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The adoption by the Conference on College Composition and Communication early in the 1970's of the resolution that every student may use "the dialect of his nurture" in his classroom speech and writing seemed to mark the beginning of a revolution in grammatical language study. While the resolution did say students should be free to use their own dialects, it was primarily an attempt to make teachers and students aware of the differences between various dialects and the appropriateness of these to any particular situation. The resolution wanted teachers to be aware that students had a variety of backgrounds and dialects which needed to be acknowledged and appreciated rather than ridiculed and eliminated. The resolution also was directed toward students who used a dialect that differed from the "standard" expected in English classrooms in order that these students could become aware of the distinctions between their dialect and the standard and, finally, recognize when each was appropriate. The resolution was an attempt, therefore, to challenge teachers to help their students become multi-dialectal.

Following this resolution, a great number of articles appeared, such as Garland Cannon's "Multi-dialect: The Student's Right to His Own Language," which favored the resolution's position and upheld personal freedom in language. An equally great number of articles also began to appear which argued just as strongly for a set standard of English that should be common to everyone. Many articles, including John Simon's "Playing Tennis Without a Net" objected to the resolution's acceptance in the schools of "any kind of English that until recently was called substandard."[1]

This controversy over correctness is not a new phenomenon. A decade earlier an ever greater dispute raged over the acceptance of Webster's Third New International Dictionary. This debate was further complicated by the question of what the actual function or purpose of a dictionary should be. Many saw the dictionary--any dictionary, good or bad--as the sole authority in any question of usage. This may be, in part at least, because people seem to need or want some authority that they may consult when questions concerning correctness in language arise. Samuel Johnson was aware of this and stated in his Preface to A Dictionary of the English Language:

> Those who have been persuaded to think well of my design,
> require that it should fix our language and put a stop to
> those alterations which time and chance have hitherto
> been suffered to make in it without opposition.[2]

Other people, however, feel, as do Funk and Wagnall, that "The primary function of an English dictionary is to record the facts of usage as regards the form, the meaning, and the pronunciation of English words" and may regard the book as a "record of fact, not of opinion, dogma, or personal taste."[3] These people may feel that language is "ultimately a matter of conventional usage" with "no higher court of appeal.[4] But these same people are quick to point out that "this does not mean that the dictionary has no concern with what ought to be, in contradistinction to what is. . . . It must often pass judgment and give counsel, thus becoming an 'authority.' This is what the public expects and has a right to expect."[5]

This question of the dictionary's purpose has been raised for years,

generally with people agreeing that the purpose should be to determine what is correct in language. Since the publication of Dr. Samuel Johnson's famed lexicon in 1755, dictionaries have been mostly prescriptive in establishing correctness in meaning and pronunciation.[6] This authority that people expect the dictionary to have is evident when "With a child-like confidence they consult the dictionary. . . to find out what is correct in spelling, pronunciation, usage. . . or meaning."[7]

This new dictionary, Webster's III, attempted to present the language as it actually was used. This change away from the prescriptive to the descriptive approach to the facts of usage was not welcomed. People had come to rely on the prescriptive judgements of correctness. The descriptive approach of the somehow less noble or vulgar, common language usage was a radical change and a shock to those who felt secure with the idea that a dictionary could state absolute standards of correctness. People wanted to be told what was correct. This new dictionary that approved of any usage was seen as a traitor to the defenders of the standards of proper language. When the dictionary included, without condemnation, such words as ain't and a wide selection of popular slang words, the outcry was deafening. Dr. Philip B. Gove, editor in chief of Merriam-Webster, explained that the new volume recognized the informality of current English usage by drawing on "pungent, lively remarks" by modern persons. They are intended to make the language "come alive,"[8] he said. A look at a few statements from the articles that appeared which objected to Webster's III illustrate the reactions.

Everyday usage finally gave "ain't" and the ending preposition a place in Webster's book.[9]

Webster's Third New International Dictionary finds the
word "ain't" acceptable in cultivated conversation, . . .
Webster's to the contrary, ain't is not acceptable, except
when used ironically, in any educated conversation. What
Webster's has done is cast the mantle of its approval over
another example of corrupted English. . . . A dictionary's
embrace of the word "ain't" will comfort the ignorant, con-
fer approval upon the mediocre, and subtly imply that
proper English is the tool only of the snob.[10]

The Merriam-Webster unabridged dictionary, . . . contains a
number of startling revisions. They are revisions likely
to shock more than a few of us who happen, . . . to be tra-
ditionalists congenitally opposed to change just for change's
sake. In that respect, perhaps the most shocking thing in
the whole book is that it takes a rather respectful view of
"ain't" as a word that is now "used orally in the U.S. by cul-
tivated speakers." This is certainly a far cry from the
dictionary's 1934 edition, which bluntly--and correctly, in
our view--brands "ain't" as a "dialectal" and "illiterate"
expression employed by people on the fringes of polite
society.[11]

Webster's has, it is apparent, surrendered to the permissive
school that has been busily extending its beachhead on English
instruction in the schools. This development is disastrous
because. . . it serves to reinforce the notion that good
English is whatever is popular. At a time when complaints

are heard in many quarters that youths. . . are unequipped
to use their mother tongue and that the art of clear communi-
cation has been impaired, the publication of a say-as-you-go
dictionary can only accelerate the deterioration.[12]

What's the point of any writer's trying to compose clear and
graceful prose, to avoid solecisms, to maintain a sense of
decorum and continuity in that magnificent instrument, the
English language, if that peerless authority, Webster's
Unabridged, surrenders abjectly to the permissive school of
speech?[13]

Examination (of Webster's III) reveals that . . . it is out
to destroy . . . every surviving influence that makes for
the upholding of standards, every criterion for distinguishing
between better usage and worse.[14]

This controversy over correctness in language seen in both the recent
debate over the CCCC resolution and the reactions to Webster's III can
be traced back to the early eighteenth century and can be seen generally
as a conflict between the basic objectives of language study in regards
to correctness. The two sides to this argument can be generally classified
as the descriptive and prescriptive views. Those favoring a descriptive
approach feel that the purpose of the grammar of language is to describe
that language as it actually exists. In determining what is correct, the
descriptive grammarian assumes that what is used is correct. This more
objective point of view toward correctness has been discussed by many
of its followers, including such early grammarians as Henry Sweet, Otto

Jespersen, and others. Sweet explains:

> In considering the use of grammar as a corrective of what
> are called "ungrammatical" expressions, it must be borne
> in mind that the rules of grammar have no value except
> as statements of facts: whatever is in general use in a
> language is for that very reason grammatically correct.[15]

Jespersen sees a language as a living unit that changes according to those
who use it:

> It has been my endeavor in this work to represent English
> Grammar not as a set of stiff dogmatic precepts, according
> to which some things are correct and others absolutely wrong,
> but as something living and developing under continual fluc-
> tuations and undulations, something that is founded on the
> past and prepares the way for the future, something that is
> not always consistent or perfect, but progressing and per-
> fectible--in one word--human.[16]

A grammar, then, according to the descriptive view should serve merely
as a record of how the language is actually used. The proponents of
this view are primarily interested in studying the facts of usage,
determining their history and causes, and classifying them according
to valid criteria of their social effects in communication.[17] Charles
Fries adds his more recent explanation of descriptive grammar:

> A Grammar book does not attempt to teach people how they
> ought to speak, but on the contrary, . . . it merely states
> how as a matter of fact, certain people do speak at the
> time at which it is written.[18]

All of these grammarians favoring the descriptive view insist that it is unsound to take the rules of grammar as norms of correct English and then attempt to make all usage conform to those rules. This scientific view also expresses a clear affirmation of the principle that usage or practice is the basis of all the _correctness_ there can be in language.[19]

Those favoring the prescriptive view of language correctness advocate that the purpose of a grammar is to prescribe what the language should be and to set absolute standards of correctness in language. This point of view "assumes not only that there is a correctness in English language as absolute as that in elementary mathematics but also that the measures of this correctness are very definite rules."[20] This approach "assumes the power of reason to remold language completely, and appeals to various principles of metaphysics or logic, or even makes pronouncements on mere individual preference posing as authority, in the endeavor to 'correct, improve, and fix' usage."[21] This report will deal only with prescriptive notions concerning language correctness because it is these prescriptive notions which are the most concerned with the question of correctness.

A closer look at some of the recent articles clearly shows a variety of notions about correctness in language and its importance. A number of articles, such as Cannon's already mentioned "multi-dialects: The Student's Right to His Own Language," argue that students should be allowed to use their own language because there is no such thing as a standard language common to all. Those opposing this notion, for example Allen Smith in his article "No One Has a Right to His Own Language," argues that people cannot have their own language because "Language, by definition, is common to all who use or attempt to use it, and the use of a language is not an individual but a social act, particularly when the

individual takes the trouble to set his words down on paper."[22] The

argument between these two viewpoints involves the question whether a

common language and a common grammar for that language exist.

A second notion apparent in the recent articles is the belief that

correct, precise language is directly related to correct, logical thinking.

The advocates of this notion sometimes seem to feel that clear thinking

is a direct result of learning rules of grammar. Statements to this effect

can be seen in the following:

> Knowledge of the mechanics of the language and the function
> of words in the sentences, and sentences in the paragraph
> will further the student's ability to write well with clar-
> ity and precision.[23]

> As a result of the study of the sentence and practice in
> analysis, we should be able, not only to construct our sen-
> tences more clearly, but also to understand more easily
> what we read and what others say to us. As a result of the
> study of the different parts of speech and their uses, we
> should be able to speak and write correctly.[24]

> We will improve writing to the extent that we improve thinking
> . . . grammar refers to the structures used to convey meaning,
> so a study of grammar should help to improve thinking.[25]

In such statements language is seen as an orderly process of combining

words into sentences to express orderly thoughts. The purpose of grammar

in this argument is to maintain the logical order that is necessary in

our language if we are all to communicate with each other. The idea that

this logical order exists in language is seen in such concerns as the correct ordering of consequence and cause (as seen in such "incorrect" phrases as "born and bred" and "rushing torrents and descending rains"),[26] number agreement, and the use of analogy, especially Latin analogy, for determining "correct" forms of construction. This appeal to logic for correctness can be seen in such articles as Edwin Newman's "Language on the Skids" which argues against redundancy, failure to understand what words mean, and a tendency to exaggerate in order to increase the importance of whatever is being discussed. This desire for logical (and therefore orderly) elements in language is also seen in the articles which appeal for a back-to-the-basics approach to grammar. The orderliness wanted here is seen as a remedy to the chaotic or unordered state of our language that some now see. This is not a new desire, for grammarians since the eighteenth century have been praised for their strict rules of correctness that were intended to impose order on the language. Lindley Murray's work was praised and described as having "all the Quaker virtues, they were well ordered, helpful, quietly firm, blending instinct with sweet reasonableness" and promised "to assist young persons to read with propriety and effect, to improve their language and sentiments, and to inculcate some of the most important principles of piety and virtue."[27] The desire for such order is also seen in the following statements:

> A vast amount of wretched English is heard in this country.
> The remedy does not lie in the repeal of the rules of grammar;
> but rather in a stricter and more intelligent enforcement
> of those rules in our schools. . . . This protest against
> traditional usage and the rules of grammar is merely another

manifestation of the unfortunate trend of the times to lawlessness in every direction.[28]

The third notion concerning language correctness that is evident in recent articles is that which places a social and economic value on correct usage. The idea behind this notion is that correct language must be mastered if one hopes to advance in our society. It is assumed that a proper education results in correct speech which will further result in social or business advancement. Those favoring this notion stress the importance of correctness to the student because "if he wants to get a job better than that of his parents and peers, he had better at some point, for purely practical reasons, learn to speak and write in a manner acceptable to those who guard the entry points to passageways to upward mobility."[29] This notion of the social importance of correctness is not new either. A writing handbook published in 1904 stressed the social prestige of correct language:

> Accuracy and elegance in speaking and writing English are
> the hallmarks of good breeding . . . . Culture is revealed
> in daily speech . . . and in polite intercourse at home and
> abroad, the address and the language of ordinarily well-
> informed persons should be gracious.[30]

To fully understand these three notions concerning correctness in language that are apparent in recent articles, it is necessary to trace the development of these notions to their beginnings in the eighteenth century. The major notions concerning language and correctness that originated during the eighteenth century are those of a universal grammar, language as representation, and the social value of correctness. S. A.

Leonard's work, <u>The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700-1800</u>, is a major source for this investigation. The following summary of the eighteenth century notions of correctness is based on this book with page references referring to the 1929 edition.

Universal Grammar

The notion of a universal grammar was based on the idea that universal reason had provided a language when the need for such arose. Robert Baker explains how he felt this ordering by reason to have occurred, as Leonard explains:

> Why was Grammar invented, but that for want of it . . . Men
> were unable to convey their thoughts to each other in a clear
> and distinct Manner . . . . If we neglect those (few rules)
> we have already, we shall come in Time to understand one
> another no better than our Ancestors did before the Language
> was brought into any Form (p. 47).

Thus this universal grammar had to be shaped by universal reason. Harris explains this: "It may afford perhaps no unpleasing speculation, to see how the SAME REASON has at all time prevailed; how there is ONE TRUTH, like one Sun, that has enlightened human Intelligence through every age and saved it from the darkness both of Sophistory and Error" (p. 48). Harris, therefore, defines "GRAMMAR UNIVERSAL: that Grammar, which without re-garding the several Idioms of particular languages, <u>only respects those</u> <u>principles, that are essential to them all</u>" (p. 48).

The first edition of the <u>Encyclopaedia Britannica</u> article concerning grammar explains:" . . . supposing a language introduced by custom defines

grammar as an art, as a just method of furnishing certain observations
called rules, to which the methods of speaking used in this language may
be reduced" (p. 48). The article then continues to define grammar as a
science which "examines the analogy and relation between words and things;
and thus furnishes a certain standard by which different languages may be
compared, and their several excellencies and defects pointed out" (p. 48).

By the eighteenth century, this "certain standard" had come to refer
to the Greek and later Latin languages. Many testimonies to the superi-
ority of Greek and Latin can be found, including Harris's statement that
"the Greek language . . . is of all the most elegant and complete" (p. 49).
Romance languages, far below the great standards of Greek and Latin, were
simply vulgar dialects or corruptions of these two. Swift offers one reason
for the inferiority of English, explaining that "the Latin tongue in its
purity was never in the Island" (p. 50). Dr. Johnson explained his re-
liance on Latin:" It is, seriously, my opinion, that every language must
be servilely formed after the model of some one of the ancient, if we wish
to give durability to our words" (p.50). And Walpole deplores the bar-
barity of the Saxon language:" Never did exist a more barbarous jargon
than the dialect, still venerated by antiquaries, and called Saxon. It
is so uncouth, so inflexible to all composition, that the monks, retaining
the idiom, were reduced to write in what they took or meant to be Latin "
(p. 50).

Because of these views concerning the origin and nature of language
in the eighteenth century, the universal grammar was based on a purely
classical pattern. Rules of English grammar were written to follow those
rules of the Latin and Greek languages. A few examples of classical
Latin patterns of grammar that were imposed on English can be seen in the

pronoun case in such phrases as "It is I," the objection to split in-
finitives, and the objection to ending a sentence with a preposition.
All of these examples are based on Latin rules of grammar that were im-
posed on English. The extent to which Latin was regarded as the perfect
grammar to follow can be seen in the statement made by Buchanan when he
comments on the "argument that Swift, Addison, and Pope 'had scarcely a
single rule to direct them,' . . . 'Had they not the Rules of Latin Syntax
to direct them?'" (p. 50). Grammarians of the time felt English grammar
could be improved by following Latin rules of grammar. In cases where Eng-
lish use differed from that of Latin, grammarians favored the Latin form.
An example of this can be seen in Lowth's dislike of the placing of the
preposition at the end of the sentence, commenting "this is an idiom which
our language is strongly inclined to" (p. 98). (Obviously these grammarians,
while advocating the use of Latin rules for correct English constructions,
did not always follow them.) The only English constructions that were con-
sidered acceptable were those which conformed to the classical model. The
only deviation from this is found in the use of the English indefinite
article which was not present in Greek.

There was some opposition to this reliance on Latin and Greek analogies
with respect to English grammar. The eighteenth century saw objections
to the futility of the "various distinctions of the learned languages,
which have no Existence in our own" and the "needless, perplexities which
it is only ignorance to parade . . . to teach or pretend much advantage
there from a mere English scholar" (p. 52). William Ward pointed out
the differences between Latin and English, especially concerning verbs,
and stated that English is free, "so far as the verb is concerned, from
the Latin rule" (p. 52). Priestley felt that the technical terms in

English grammar are "exceedingly awkward and absolutely superfluous" (p. 53). Lowth also objected to the use of Latin rules and felt that such use of Latin analogy was "forcing the English under the rules of a foreign language" (p. 53). Bentley agrees with this forcing and calls it "an ugly and deformed fault" (p. 53).

There was some attempt to develop an analogy with French grammar for English. This also met with resistance. Campbell disapproves, saying, "The argument drawn from the French usage (which, by the way, hath no authority in our tongue) is not at all apposite" (p. 54). Priestley also opposed the use of a French analogy, explaining,

> "If I have done any essential service to my native tongue,
> I think it will arise from my detecting in time a very
> great number of gallicisms, which have insinuated them-
> selves into the style of many of our most justly admired
> writers; and which, in my opinion, tend greatly to in-
> jure the true idiom of the English language, being con-
> trary to its most established analogies" (p. 54).

The notion of a universal grammar based on universal reason that provided a language when the need for it arose was a widely accepted view in the eighteenth century. The grammarians felt the classical languages, especially Latin, were the perfect models for any grammars and advocated the use of Latin constructions in English. While these grammarians may have used English constructions that violated Latin rules, as can be seen in Lowth's comment on sentences ending with prepositions, they nevertheless felt that only those constructions which did follow the Latin forms could be considered really correct. The English grammar

rules based on Latin usages that were stated by these grammarians in the eighteenth century soon found their way into grammar texts and were reprinted throughout not only the eighteenth century but the nineteenth century as well and continued to be reprinted during the twentieth century.

Language as Representation

The notion that language is representative refers to the idea that our language reflects our world. This idea is related to the idea of divine intervention in the creation of language, which was the prevailing idea concerning the origin of language in the eighteenth century. Language was believed to have been created by the deity and passed down to man. The dispersal of language at Babel accounted for the origin of the various languages. This dispersal produced the need "for grammarians to remold languages, especially so remote and barbarous a dialect as English, nearer to the original perfectly logical pattern" (p. 19). This perfect language is produced to follow "a consistent and logical plan, so as perfectly to mirror actuality or the precise reasoning processes assumed for the mind of man" (p. 19). Leonard provides several quotations from the eighteenth century that uphold this belief, including:

> Words must be joined together according to the nature
>
> of the things that they stand for (p. 20).

> Those parts of speech unite of themselves in grammar,
>
> whose original archetypes unite of themselves in
>
> nature (p. 20).

> Words then are the names of particular ideas, and are
>
> consequently as various in their structure, as the ideas
>
> themselves (p. 20).

The holders of these opinions spent little time on scientific studies or observations of the language, but rather, as Leonard explains, "clearly showed a tendency to substitute remotely metaphysical explanations for the difficult and necessary scientific processes of observating and recording the facts of the language," (p. 21). The grammarians of the eighteenth century looked primarily for logical patterns in the grammar in constructions of sentences, word order, and word choice.

Several areas are considered in this discussion of logical constructions including parallel construction and pronoun reference. In the discussion of parallel constructions, the grammarians were often carried to extremes in suggesting various forms of parallelism. Lowth used the sentence "Socrates and Plato were wise; they were the most eminent philosophers in Greece," for which he is criticized by Buchanan for using more than one degree of comparison in a sentence: "It is inelegant to vary the Construction of the Members of the same Period" (p. 87). Leonard discusses several more types of parallel problems which exercised these grammarians.

Logical pronoun reference was also discussed, although there was some confusion regarding this rule because, as Murray explains, "a pronoun is also used to represent an adjective, a sentence, a part of speech and sometimes even a series of prepositions" (p. 85). With all of these possibilities for pronoun antecedents, there is little wonder why some grammarians found it difficult to find a logical explanation for the use

of pronoun references.

Other areas of consideration in the examination of logical con-
structions include redundancy; improper omissions of particles; con-
structions using different from, to, and than; misuse of either-or and
neither-nor; and mixed comparisons. (While nearly all the grammarians
of the time complained of the misuse of one or more of these forms, these
same grammarians were guilty of the misuses themselves and, indeed, much
of their criticism of the misuses consists of examples of errors gathered
from each other's writings concerning grammar.)

Word order or syntax was also part of this logical analysis and we
find several examples of grammarians arguing for or against various con-
structions. Priestley disliked what he called the "split verb". Harris
and Baker objected to splitting verbs from their modifying adverbs.
Campbell objected to the placing of some adverbs, only in particular.
These grammarians did help correct problems in clarity and understanding
to some extent, but their failure to view problems in actual context apart
from purely abstract constructions caused some problems, as explained by
Leonard:

> Eighteenth century grammar . . . considered words and sen-
>
> tences apart from actual uses--as it were in a vacuum under the
>
> microscope. Thus, what they had to say about syntax . . .
>
> has to be retested in relation to living uses of language--
>
> genuine problems of speaking and writing and understanding.
>
> And above all, no principle of sentence structure--whether
>
> parallelism or order of modifiers or what not--is of much
>
> value when stated as an inflexible rule, in the fashion
>
> which the eighteenth century developed and handed down to

later makers of handbooks. The fruitful use of prin-

ciples of syntax is likely to be as general counsels for

revision, but not as dogmas of "correct and incorrect"

use (p. 101).

Logical considerations in the choice of words was also a part of this

controversy. Verbal criticism was not new to the eighteenth century but

grew in popularity, as Leonard explains, during this time "into what John-

son describes as a 'rage for emendatio' including incessant subtle dis-

tinctions of synonyms and quibbling niceties of diction" (p. 105). Robert

Baker offers his explanation for this: "These seeming Minutiea are by no

Means to be despised, since they contribute to the intelligibleness of

Language" (p. 105). This debate over word choice in the eighteenth cen-

tury saw the rise of many "revised" editions of pieces of literature in

which the grammarian expert re-wrote or substituted his choice of words in

the language of the piece. Perhaps the best examples of this can be seen

in the Bentley editions of Milton. Works of this nature met with severe

criticism and, by the time of Blair and Campbell, the trend had turned away

from the "corrected editions" to the more profitable endeavor of compiling

lists of errors, especially those of the more prominent authors, in order

to instruct people toward a better language. The extent to which Blair

saw the importance of such efforts can be seen in his lectures in which he

devoted four lectures covering eighty-five pages of his first volume to

the "minute criticism of the style of certain numbers of the Spectator and

of Swift's Proposal" (p. 106).

It is during this period of exactness in word choice that distinctions

such as can-may, want-wish, hanged-hung, lie-lay, sit-set, and others

appeared. Grammarians held that these distinctions were necessary for greater clarity in language. Baker expressed this when he stated: "Different Meanings ought undoubtedly to be expressed in different Words; without Which, the Intention of language is not answered" (p. 115).

There were a few opposed to these widely accepted eighteenth century beliefs. One of the most outspoken in his opposition to the belief in the divine nature of language and to its influence on correctness was John Locke. Although his ideas on the rational basis of language received little acceptance in the eighteenth century, it is interesting to consider his theory. His Essay on the Human Understanding, 1688, provides the necessary philosophy for a scientific, objective study of language and correctness problems. Working from the premise that "ideas are not innate in the mind," his third book considers the nature of language. His position can be summarized as follows:

> Articulate sounds . . . words . . . came to be made
> use of by men, as the signs of their ideas; not by any
> natural connection that there is between particular, ar-
> ticulate sounds and certain ideas . . . but by a volutary
> position, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the
> mark of such an idea (p. 23).

Locke continues his discussion and defines the "ends of language, in our discourse with others . . . first, to make known one man's thoughts and ideas to another; secondly, to do it with as much ease and quickness, as possible; and thirdly, to convey thereby the knowledge of things. Language is either abased or deficient, when it fails in any of these three" (p. 23).

Locke and his followers provided clear statements that language is a "form of behavior" determined in form and meaning by convention. Matters of correctness, they felt, should be determined by the extent to which meaning was confused by the use of an improper word.

There was more support, however, for the notion of the importance of the logic in language that most of the grammarians of the time favored, than for the ideas of Locke. The connections between precise language and logical thinking were widely accepted. In a time when elocution was regarded as a fine art, the need for ordered thoughts and precise language was very important. This notion has persisted since the eighteenth century and is regarded with as much importance today, as can be seen in the following recent statements:

> Exercises growing out of structural and transformational
> theory can also help students develop fluency, style, and
> coherence, as well as contribute to correctness and elim-
> ination of faulty syntax.[31]

> Clear thinking. . . stems from reading with eyes and mind
> open and a continuous internal critical dialog, and this
> demands knowledge of the fundamentals of our language.[32]

> Concerted efforts to increase students' abilities to think
> logically and critically, to express themselves coherently
> need to become a classroom priority . . . . Critical and
> logical thinkers whose voices resound with confidence
> and persuasion . . . are the kind of leaders our schools
> must shape for the future.[33]

The association of correctness with logical thinking is also evident in today's English textbooks, as can be seen in this statement from the introduction of a current text: "The goals of teaching the language arts are . . . to think clearly and honestly, to read thoughtfully, (and) to communicate effectively . . ."[34]

The notion there exists some form of mathematical logic in grammar is a special instance of the grammar-logic association. This notion comes in part from the idea that language is representative of our world and therefore should clearly and logically reflect nature. The notion also comes in part from an attempt to find or impose some order on the language. The clearest example of the mathematical logic that was attributed to language can be seen in the discussion of the double negative. The debate over the double negative began early in the eighteenth century and continues even today. Nearly all the grammarians of the period comment on this question, including Zachary Grey, who states that "two Negatives don't always make an affirmative, but deny more strongly, as is well known from the Greek and French languages" (p. 92). The natural tendency in English to use the double negative was puzzling to the logicians. This puzzlement is apparent in the rules concerning double negatives stated by Mennye, who claims that "two negatives may make an affirmative but cannot express a denial," and by Clarke, who states that they "absolutely prove what you mean to deny" (p. 93). Clearly a logical analysis is not possible in this case.

Social Value of Correctness

The notion of the social value of correct language also appeared and grew in importance during the eighteenth century. The grammarians of this time were concerned with the language of gentlemen and the upper classes. To some extent, the grammars that were proposed were meant to

fix a standard of speech that would eventually be adopted by the lower classes. A few of the grammarians saw their work as a means of advancing the language of the lower classes. Examples of this include the following statement:

This GRAMMAR contains a Method so easy, that every Female Teacher in the British Dominions may open an English Grammar School, and render themselves much more useful to the public (169).

Leonard offers the following illustration of other statements along the same line, including Buchanan, who stated that his book "was fitted to advance the English of Tradesmen, that they 'may not be stigmatized even by foreigners' for their barbarous speech," and John Ash who stated that grammar is important "for young Gentlemen designed merely for Trade" (p. 169).

The majority of grammarians, however, saw their grammars as a tool of the gentlemen to protect them from the use of vulgar, lower class language. Such statements as the following illustrate this purpose:

My Animadversions will extend to such Phrases only as People in decent Life inadvertently adopt. . . Purity and Politeness of Expression . . . is the only external Distinction which remains between a Gentleman and a Valet; a Lady and a Mantua-Maker (p. 169).

Common speech, or vulgar usage as it was described, was strongly attacked in the Art of Speaking in such statements as:

The best Expressions grow low and degenerate, when profaned by the populace, and applied to mean things . . . But it is no hard matter to discern between the depraved

Language of common People, and the noble refin'd ex-

pressions of the Gentry, whose condition and merits

have advanced them above the other (p. 170).

The idea then that common, vulgar speech is a characteristic of the lower

class while the more elegant, correct speech is representative of a gen-

tleman of the upper class is quite apparent. The grammars that were

written during the eighteenth century were to either instruct the lower

classes so they could advance their position in life or to serve as re-

inforcements for the upper class to help preserve their language from the

corruptions of the lower class language.

The eighteenth century saw an increasing interest in the study of

language, particularly in regard to the question of correctness. As we

have seen, the principal areas of interest were in considerations of three

major notions concerning language and correctness. These can be labeled

the notions of a universal grammar, language as representation, and the

social value of correctness.

While the eighteenth century saw the emergence of these major notions

concerning language and correctness, the nineteenth century saw these

ideas move from the grammars written by the leading grammarians into the

textbooks written by the followers of these grammarians and thereby into

the school system. These notions discussed by the scholars of the eight-

eenth century had now found their way into the hands of the educators of

the nineteenth century. These educators were to follow, for the most

part, rule by rule, the grammar that the early scholars had provided. The

same notions concerning correctness were followed for the same reasons

the grammarians had provided. In addition, these notions now had the added support of the supposed "authority" of the eighteenth century scholars, and the added strength of tradition.

Perhaps the two most notable examples of the influence and continuity in the nineteenth century of those ideas from the eighteenth century can be seen in the works of Lindley Murray and Adams Sherman Hill. Murray, for the most part as Judy points out, followed the grammar of Bishop Lowth in producing his text English Grammar, Adapted to the Different Classes of Learners.[35] This was the best selling grammar text during the first third of the nineteenth century.[36] This text begins with the definition: "English Grammar is the Art of speaking and writing the English language with propriety." While Murray does not explain or justify this statement, it is clear that he was more concerned with the teaching of rules than with their application. A.S. Hill, in his text Principles of Rhetoric, states "Correctness (or Purity) is, then, the first requisite of discourse, whether spoken or written."[37] Apparently the grammarians and teachers of this time felt that merely being able to memorize rules of grammar and recite them was not only more important but was the only requirement for good composition. Moreover, educational theories of the time which viewed the mind as a muscle that needed to be exercised and strengthened, stressed the need for mental discipline. The faculties of memory and reason were most important and therefore, subjects used for developing these skills required "a clearly defined structure, methodology, and set of facts with rules to organize them."[38] Grammatical rules and vocabulary of Latin and Greek fit these requirements.

The major concern in the study of language during the nineteenth century was that of correctness. While some emphasis was placed on

literature and composition, the bulk of the time was devoted to grammar

for the purpose of learning correct English. During most the nineteenth

century, the only "literature" in English which secondary students

studied consisted of short textbook selections which they read in connection

with lessons in "grammar, rhetoric, elocution, or other aspects of lan-

guage study."[39] This correctness that was so important was taught using

a very prescriptive approach to grammar. This concern with correctness

was not limited to the primary and secondary schools but also was quite

evident in the universities.

The concern with correctness in the universities during the eighteenth

century, can be seen in the development of the English departments and

their curriculums. A look at the development of Harvard's English depart-

ment gives us a good example of what was occurring around the country

in varying degrees. This concern with correctness continued throughout

the century, and indeed, continued to gain importance with the passage

of time.

In the Annual report for 1872-1873, Charles William Eliot, Harvard's

President, objected to the poor quality of language possessed by most of

the young men entering the university:

> The need of some requisition which should secure on the
>
> part of the young men preparing for college proper
>
> attention to their own language has long been felt. Bad
>
> spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of ex-
>
> pression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of
>
> punctuation and almost entire want of familiarity with

English literature, are far from rare among young men

of eighteen otherwise well prepared to pursue their

college studies.[40]

The result of this outcry was that Harvard catalog for 1873-1874

announced a new entrance examination in English that included a "short

English Composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and ex-

pression, the subject to be taken from such works of standard authors

as shall be announced from time to time."[41]

Other universities soon adopted entrance examinations. These ex-

aminations were much more concerned with surface correctness in language

than with content. Students did not even need to write on the assigned

topic if they could demonstrate a command of correct English, as this

statement points out:

> In June, 1887, two or three boys passed who had never read
>
> the book from which the subjects were drawn, and who
>
> substituted subjects of their own choice from the other pre-
>
> scribed books. They would not have passed if their own Eng-
>
> lish had not been good and the correctness of bad English
>
> (exercises) intelligent.[42]

Perhaps the most influential voice at Harvard was that of A.S. Hill.

Harvard's President Eliot appointed Hill in 1872 to the faculty to

"begin improving both the students' use of English and also the place of

English, the subject, in the curriculum."[43] Hill went on to create

courses in Freshman English. His text was used for over thirty years at

Harvard. His influence on the countless people who were exposed to his

texts and who thus got at least some of their notions about language from

him is clearly significant. Hill's texts definitely follow the pre-
scriptive approach to language correctness. In the Introduction to
Our English, Hill discusses the two thoughts that he wished to clarify
with his book: "First, the difficulty which every American must find in
speaking and writing his mother-tongue uniformly well; secondly, the
duty which devolves upon each of us to further the cause of good English
by precept or example, or both."[44] He continues this discussion by
stressing the necessity for keeping the language pure and correct:

> Strenuous and united efforts on the part of all who love
>
> good English are needful to preserve the treasures of
>
> our noble language and literature intact. If our
>
> classics are to remain intelligible; if Shakespeare and
>
> Milton, . . . are still to be read with ease, . . . are
>
> to be readily understood by our children's children as
>
> by us;--we must, each in his sphere, try to keep pure
>
> the language in which they wrote.[45]

Hill continues his discussion on correctness and states that in order to
preserve the purity and goodness of correct English language "Students .
. . must be urged to keep constantly in mind that whatever they write
should always and under all conditions, be their best . . . ."[46] Those
students "who know all that Murray and Blair can teach them" and who
use the language "not as an end in itself, but as a means to something
more important," may not only keep that language "in its purity" but
"may also make it felt in his little world as a purifying and inspiring
force."[47] Hill seems to feel that there is something noble or of in-
trinsic value in correct English. He discusses vulgar examples of bad

English found in popular or common writing such as newspapers and novels, and feels this bad English to which we are exposed can soon corrupt our good English. "For the sake of our English, if for no other reason, we should all try to like something better than reading of this class, and should persist in the effort until we succeed. . . . Is there no way of keeping the poison out of the system? If not, what hope can we cherish that pure English will hold its own . . .?"[48]

Hill discusses at great length how the purity or correctness of the language is maintained and also decided upon. Correct usage, or "reputable use" as he terms it, "is fixed, . . . but by that of those when the world deems the best, . . . those who are in the best repute. . . . The practice of no one writer, however high he may stand in the public estimation, is enough to settle a point; but the uniform, or nearly uniform, practice of reputable speakers or writers is decisive . . . . and their use, . . . helps to fix the forms they adopt."[49] He continues this discussion of how matters of correctness are decided upon in regard to matters of pronunciation and accent, "the standard, . . . can be found in the concurrent practice of the most approved poets and public speakers and of the most cultivated social circles."[50]

After these matters of correctness have been determined by the approved authorities, Hill then explains that it is

> the business (of grammarians and lexicographers) to record
> in a convenient form the decisions of every case in which
> recent writers and speakers of national reputation are
> agreed; but they have no more right to call in question

such a decision than the compiler of a digest has to
overrule a legislature or a court.[51]

Hill explains the importance not only of correct language but also the
importance of every person being both aware of correctness in language
and capable of using that correct form:

> . . . but of English an educated man should know more than
> the rudiments, because . . . everybody deems himself
> capable, not only of criticising the English of others,
> but also writing good English himself. Therefore, educated
> men should arm themselves at all points against the
> numerous foes that beset pure English on every side, in
> these days of free speech and a free press . . . Superior
> advantages bind those who have enjoyed them to superior
> achievement in the things in which self-taught men are
> their competitors as well as in the work of scholarship.[52]

Hill admits, certainly, that language is subject to change, but
he feels we must always be aware of what words are acceptable at the
time:

> English is, no doubt, growing, and it will continue to grow
> so long as it is a living language; but if the growth be
> really growth, and not corruption or decay, if it consist
> in the flowing in of fresh sap and the putting forth of
> new branches, it will not injure, but will preserve those
> parts of the old tree which are best worth preserving.
> Growth we cannot, if we would, arrest; but we can do

something to make it healthy and vigorous.[53]

In the discussion presented by Hill of the importance of knowing what is correct in the language at any given time, he offers an interesting list of phrases or words that are considered unacceptable during his time. The following list is part of the larger list he offers of incorrect (in this case, vocabulary) phrases and words:

I guess (I realize)	right away (immediately)
to wire or to cable (telegraph)	to stop (to stay)
shaky (unstable)	right here (at this point)
vest (waistcoat)	a smart boy (a bright boy)
folks (people or family)	lumber (timber)[54]

Examples of incorrect constructions offered by Hill include:

<u>who</u> did you see?	try <u>and</u> think
I've <u>gone and</u> done it	<u>those</u> kind
between you and <u>I</u>	it is <u>me</u>
I am <u>very</u> pleased	it is <u>her</u>[55]

From these examples of unacceptable words, phrases, and constructions, it is evident that language does indeed change, and, as Hill stated, we must be aware of these changes in order to be aware of what is acceptable at any given time. Because languages do change, it is possible for questions to arise concerning correct usage of two forms of expressions that are both equally supported by authority. Then the question should be determined, Hill explains, "in the light of the general principles of language."[56] The basis for the "general principles"

according to Hill is Campbell's Canons of good usage which include per-
spicuity, analogy, brevity, euphony, and ancient usage.[57]

Although Hill was a major force in the prescriptive attitudes toward
correctness during the nineteenth century, opposing voices were also
heard, with perhaps the loudest being that of Fred Newton Scott. In his
article on "Verbal Taboos," Scott discusses the folly of allowing "au-
thorities" to set up standards of correctness and dictate which words or
phrases are acceptable or unacceptable. The folly comes, he explains,
because of the arbitrary reasons for which these "authorities" condemn
certain usages, placing what he calls verbal taboos against certain spoken
words. He explains how some people develop "individual aversions" or dis-
likes to a word because of some childhood or early incident in connection
with the particular word which somehow causes the person to associate a
bad happening with the particular word. One example of this is clear in
the following statements:

> I have had a peculiar horror of the word <u>fled</u> since I was
>
> a very small child. I was once riding in the country with
>
> my parents when we passed a house which had recently been
>
> destroyed by fire. Upon asking where the people were who
>
> had lived there, I was told they had "fled." Being ig-
>
> norant of the true meaning of the word, I at once connected
>
> it with this scene of ruin and desolation. Whenever I
>
> hear the word now this unwelcome picture presents itself.[58]

F.N. Scott explains how public taboos become attached to a particular word,
when he states "There are persons, however, in each generation who,
because they are exceptionally self-assertive and aggressive in matters of

language, do not hesitate to impose their personal antipathies upon their neighbor. It is from these persons that verbal taboos proceed."[59] As Scott explains, these people tell the public, "I don't like these words; I never did like them. Therefore, _you_ shan't like them, or at any rate you shan't use them"[60]

The arguments represented by both Hill and Scott are evidence that the controversy over correctness in language continued to rage throughout the later part of the nineteenth century. Although the end of the nineteenth century saw educators placing more emphasis on English literature and composition, as a part of English study, the importance of correctness that had been so evident during the century still played such an important part in English study that William Dean Howells cautioned English teachers to beware of the dangers that "the makers of reading-books have always run: that of deforming the delightfulness of literature by making it the subject of too much (linguistic, grammatical, rhetorical, and elocutionary) analysis and dissection."[61] While both literature and language were seen as subjects of English study, language with emphasis on correctness in language, clearly had the more prominent position in the nineteenth century. This is the pedagogical separation that passed from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century, that can be seen in the following summary by Judy:

> Although the general principle of "learn by doing" had
> been articulated as early as 1850, the great concern for
> surface correctness emphasized in the college preparation
> uproar, led to the establishment of a rule-based "tradition"
> in writing instruction, one which persisted throughout

the first two thirds of the twentieth century and
even threatens to reestablish itself in the "back-to-
basics" of today.[62]

As Botts points out, English instructors of the early twentieth cen-
tury felt that an application of scientific notions to the English
curriculum would allow "theorists to specify precisely what should be
taught and the practitioner to teach that with maximum efficiency and
minimum waste."[63] One of the major areas that came under the scrutiny of
the "scientific" notion was the language of the students. The goal was
for educators to "determine precisely what errors people made in usage
(and) after identifying and classifying them, they would then prescribe
precisely what grammar should be taught in order to eliminate them."[64]
The extent to which this concern with correctness was carried is evident
in the number of error studies that appeared: In the period during 1908
through 1930, results of error studies were published at the rate of
over one per year.[65] One of the largest of these studies was done by Wen-
dell Werrett Charters. He gave teachers precise instructions on how to
gather the data on errors, including "how many days and during what hours
to record errors, the form to put them in, and in what circumstances to
make a recording."[66] As Charters worked with the results of the error
study, ranking the errors in order of importance, he decided that it was
possible that "as an error became more frequent, its importance as an
error diminished."[67] In an attempt to test this notion, Charters polled
a number of Pittsburgh teachers. They felt that the worst errors were
those which were the most common and, therefore, should receive the
most attention.

This emphasis on correctness has continued throughout the twentieth century. While attempts may be made from time to time to focus more attention on the creative side of language, the importance of correctness in language is never lacking in support. As soon as someone suggests a move toward more personal freedom in language choice, as some felt the CCCC resolution of the early 1970's did, someone else is quick to point out that correctness is a vital part in our use of language and must not be ignored because "language" is not just a matter of communication. It is a way of expressing one's fastidiousness, elegance, and imagination. . ."[68]

Of the three notions concerning language correctness that have been discussed here, perhaps the one that most accounts for the continued importance of correctness is that of the social and economic value seen in the correct use of language. The eighteenth century scholars stressed correctness as a means of separating the classes. Only through the learning of the correct language of the upper class could a member of the lower class hope to advance himself. The nineteenth century grammarians and the educators following these grammarians continued to accept this social value for correctness. These educators, for the most part, had gained acceptance into a higher social class through their own knowledge and use of correct language. They were eager to better themselves further, and at the same time to help their students rise to a better position by instructing them in the correct forms of language. Educators today are no different. No matter how much persuasion there may be toward creativity or personal freedom for the student's "right to his own language," the practical value of the correct use of language is quickly pointed out.

Even those educators who feel students should be aware of their own dia-
lects and language differences admit that the students must also be able
to converse in acceptable (correct) forms of English, as is evident in
this statement:

> They (students) can understand increasingly as they grow
> older that home and local dialect which may be adequate
> there can close the doors to social and economic oppor-
> tunities in a wider setting.[69]

Those who would argue that people using non-standard English can com-
municate with their "incorrect" speech agree that the social stigma at-
tached to non-standard English may not allow the communication to take
place, as shown by this statement:

> Speakers whose dialect is labeled non-standard are
> capable of communicating the same sort of information as
> those using the standard language, although in many in-
> stances their social position prohibits them from making
> such communications.[70]

The socio-economic value of correct language is being emphsized
more as education becomes more vocationally oriented. Students are de-
manding they be taught the skills that will help them obtain the jobs
they want. The skill of being able to use correct language is one of
top priority. A person's knowledge of language is important because,
as Landau explains:

> A person's use of language is often taken, rightly or
> wrongly, as a measure of his native intelligence, his

ability to engage in various occupations . . . even

his honesty, reliability and trustworthiness . . .

the glaring misuse of language often spells the dif-

ference between obtaining and not obtaining what you

want, whether it is in business, in social relations,

or in personal affairs.[71]

This emphasis on the social and economic value of correct English seems to be a never-ending cycle. As more importance is given to correct language, the need for teaching this correctness increases. With this increase in the teaching of correctness, whether for practical or other reasons, the importance of correct English is increased. If the use of correct language will benefit its user, then the need for being able to use language correctly will increase. The more this need increases, the greater the respect for this correct language will be. This is evident in the following statement: "English will be better respected if it can help an individual get a better job, express his or her opinions, and improve relationships with neighbors."[72]

Current textbooks for teaching English stress the social value of correctness, as can be seen in this statement: "one basic obligation of English teachers is to make sure that non-standard English will not hold their students back."[73]

In conclusion, we have seen that attitudes concerning correctness—based on the notions of universal grammar, language as representation, and the social-economic value of correctness—developed in the eighteenth century, continued through the nineteenth century while working their

way into the textbooks of the schools, and have gained even more impor-
tance during this century. Articles appearing today as well as current
textbooks continue to champion positions and views based on these notions.
Although it is not possible to predict the future with certainty, the
fact that these three notions continue to form the basis of arguments
concerning correctness that are present today, clearly suggests that these
attitudes will continue in the decades to come.

Endnotes

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[5] Funk and Wagnalls, in ed. Sledd and Ebbit, p. 40.

[6] "Webster's Way Out Dictionary," (Newspaper article) in ed. Sledd and Ebbit, p. 57.

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[8] McCandish Phillips, "Webster Soups Up Its Big Dictionary," in ed. Sledd and Ebbit, p. 50.

[9] "Saying Ain't Ain't Wrong:" See Webster, in ed. Sledd and Ebbit, p. 51.

[10] "The Death of Meaning," in ed. Sledd and Ebbit, pp. 53-54.

[11] "It Ain't Good," in ed. Sledd and Ebbit, pp. 55-56.

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[14] Wilson Follett, "Sabotage in Springfield," in ed. Sledd and Ebbit, p. 113.

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[23]Ian Pringle, "The Case for Restoring Grammar," The English Quarterly, 9, No. 3 (Fall 1976), p. 20.

[24]Pringle, p. 20.

[25]Bob Ireland, "The Case for Speculative Grammar," English Journal, 65, No. 9 (Dec. 1976), p. 42.

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[34]Henry I. Christ, Modern English in Action (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1978), p. 1 of Teacher's Edition.

[35]Stephen Judy, "Composition and Rhetoric in American Secondary Schools 1840-1900," English Journal, 68, No. 4 (April 1979), p. 36.

[36]Judy, p. 36.

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[38]Ruth Windhover, "Literature in the Nineteenth Century," English Journal, 68, No. 4 (April 1979), p. 28.

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[49] Hill, _Principles of Rhetoric_, p. 6.

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Controversy Over Correctness:

A View from 1980

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1980

ABSTRACT

The publication of <u>Webster's Third International Dictionary</u> in 1961 and the resolution adopted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1973 that every student may use the "dialect of his nurture," touched off a new round in the continuing controversy over the importance of correctness in language. Recent articles have been divided on the question of correctness. Some favor the CCCC resolution and agree that students should indeed be allowed to speak and write in their own dialect. Others argue that basic standards of correctness must be upheld and every student must be not only aware of this standard but must also be able to speak and write fluently in this standard language.

This report looks at a few of the more recent articles and attempts to determine some of the philosophies and notions about correctness in language that are the bases for the attitudes expressed in these articles.

The report also traces the history of various notions concerning correctness to their beginnings in the eighteenth century. The notions discussed include those of universal grammar, language as representation, and the social value of correctness. These notions are traced from their roots in the eighteenth century through the nineteenth century when the ideas were carried into the textbooks of the public schools. The report concludes with a look at where these notions are today and a tentative prognosis concerning attitudes toward correctness which may be expected in the coming years.