Grammar Puss

Steven Pinker

Steven Pinker is a Professor in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT. This article is taken in part from his book [The Language Instinct] (Morrow, February 1994).

Language is a human instinct. All societies have complex language, and everywhere the languages use the same kinds of grammatical machinery like nouns, verbs, auxiliaries, and agreement. All normal children develop language without conscious effort or formal lessons, and by the age of three they speak in fluent grammatical sentences, outperforming the most sophisticated computers. Brain damage or congenital conditions can make a person a linguistic savant while severely retarded, or unable to speak normally despite high intelligence. All this has led many scientists, beginning with the linguist Noam Chomsky in the late 1950's, to conclude that there are specialized circuits in the human brain, and perhaps specialized genes, that create the gift of articulate speech.

But when you read about language in the popular press, you get a very different picture. Johnny can't construct a grammatical sentence. As educational standards decline and pop culture disseminates the inarticulate ravings and unintelligible patois of surfers, rock stars, and valley girls, we are turning into a nation of functional illiterates: misusing [hopefully], confusing [lie] and [lay], treating [bummer] as a sentence, letting our participles dangle. English itself will steadily decay unless we get back to basics and start to respect our language again.

What is behind this contradiction? If language is as instinctive to humans as dam-building is to beavers, if every 3-year-old is a grammatical genius, if the design of syntax is coded in our DNA and wired into our brains, why, you might wonder, is the English language in such a mess? Why does the average American sound like a gibbering fool every time he opens his mouth or puts pen to paper?

The contradiction begins in the fact that the words "rule" and "grammar" have very different meanings to a scientist and to a layperson. The rules people learn (or more likely, fail to learn) in school are called [prescriptive] rules, prescribing how one "ought" to talk. Scientists studying language propose [descriptive] rules, describing how people [do] talk -- the way to determine whether a construction is "grammatical" is to find people who speak the language and ask them. Prescriptive and descriptive grammar are completely different things, and there is a good reason that scientists focus on the descriptive rules.

To a scientist, the fundamental fact of human language is its sheer improbability. Most objects in the universe -- rocks, trees, worms, cows, cars -- cannot talk. Even in humans, the utterances in a language are an infinitesimal fraction of the noises people's mouths are capable of making. I can arrange a combination of words that explains how octopuses make love or how to build an atom bomb in your basement; rearrange the words in even the most minor way, and the result is a sentence with a different meaning or, most likely of all, word salad. How are we to account for this miracle? What would it take to build a device that could duplicate human language?

Obviously, you need to build in some kind of rules, but what kind? Prescriptive rules? Imagine trying to build a talking machine by designing it to obey rules like "Don't split infinitives" or "Never begin a sentence with [because]." It would just sit there. In fact, we already have machines that don't split infinitives; they're called screwdrivers, bathtubs, cappuccino- makers, and so on. Prescriptive rules are useless without the much more fundamental rules that create the sentences to begin with. These rules are never mentioned in style manuals or school grammars because the authors correctly assume that anyone capable of reading the manuals must already have the rules. No one, not even a valley girl, has to be told not to say [Apples the eat boy] or [Who did you meet John and?] or the vast, vast majority of the trillions of mathematically possible combinations of words. So when a scientist considers all the high-tech mental machinery needed to arrange words into ordinary sentences, prescriptive rules are, at best, inconsequential little decorations. The very fact that they have to be drilled shows that they are alien to the natural workings of the language system. One can choose to obsess over prescriptive rules, but they have no more to do with human language than the criteria for judging cats at a cat show have to do with mammalian biology.

So there is no contradiction, after all, in saying that every normal person can speak grammatically (in the sense of systematically) and ungrammatically (in the sense of nonprescriptively), just as there is no contradiction in saying that a taxi obeys the laws of physics but breaks the laws of Massachusetts. But still, this raises a question. Someone, somewhere, must be making decisions about "correct English" for the rest of us. Who? There is no English Language Academy, and this is just as well; the purpose of the Acade'mie Francaise is to amuse journalists from other countries with bitterly-argued decisions that the French gaily ignore. Nor was there any English Language Constitutional Conference at the beginning of time. The legislators of "correct English," in fact, are an informal network of copy-editors, dictionary usage panelists, style manual writers, English teachers, essayists, and pundits. Their authority, they claim, comes from their dedication to implementing standards that have served the language well in the past, especially in the prose of its finest writers, and that maximize its clarity, logic, consistency, elegance, precision, stability, and expressive range. William Safire, who writes the weekly column "On Language" for the [New York Times Magazine], calls himself a "language maven," from the Yiddish word meaning expert, and this gives us a convenient label for the entire group.

To whom I say: Maven, shmaven! [Kibbitzers] and [nudniks] is more like it. For here are the remarkable facts. Most of the prescriptive rules of the language mavens make no

sense on any level. They are bits of folklore that originated for screwball reasons several hundred years ago and have perpetuated themselves ever since. For as long as they have existed, speakers have flouted them, spawning identical plaints about the imminent decline of the language century after century. All the best writers in English have been among the flagrant flouters. The rules conform neither to logic nor tradition, and if they were ever followed they would force writers into fuzzy, clumsy, wordy, ambiguous, incomprehensible prose, in which certain thoughts are not expressible at all. Indeed, most of the "ignorant errors" these rules are supposed to correct display an elegant logic and an acute sensitivity to the grammatical texture of the language, to which the mavens are oblivious.

 The scandal of the language mavens began in the 18th Century. The London dialect had become an important world language, and scholars began to criticize it as they would any institution, in part to question the authority of the aristocracy. Latin was considered the language of enlightenment and learning and it was offered as an ideal of precision and logic to which English should aspire. The period also saw unprecedented social mobility, and anyone who wanted to distinguish himself as cultivated had to master the best version of English. These trends created a demand for handbooks and style manuals, which were soon shaped by market forces: the manuals tried to outdo one another by including greater numbers of increasingly fastidious rules that no refined person could afford to ignore. Most of the hobgoblins of contemporary prescriptive grammar (don't split infinitives, don't end a sentence with a preposition) can be traced back to these 18th Century fads.

 Of course, forcing modern speakers of English to not -- whoops, not to split an infinitive because it isn't done in Latin makes about as much sense as forcing modern residents of England to wear laurels and togas. Julius Caesar could not have split an infinitive if he had wanted to. In Latin the infinitive is a single word like [facere], a syntactic atom. But in English, which prefers to build sentences around many simple words instead of a few complicated ones, the infinitive is composed of two words. Words, by definition, are rearrangeable units, and there is no conceivable reason why an adverb should not come between them: Space -- the final frontier ... These are the voyages of the starship [Enterprise]. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before. To [go boldly] where no man has gone before? Beam me up, Scotty; there's no intelligent life down here. As for outlawing sentences that end with a preposition (impossible in Latin for reasons irrelevant to English) -- as Winston Churchill would have said, it is a rule up with which we should not put.

 But once introduced, a prescriptive rule is very hard to eradicate, no matter how ridiculous. Inside the educational and writing establishments, the rules survive by the same dynamic that perpetuates ritual genital mutilations and college fraternity hazing: I had to go through it and am none the worse, so why should you have it any easier? Anyone daring to overturn a rule by example must always worry that readers will think he or she is ignorant of the rule, rather than challenging it. Perhaps most importantly, since prescriptive rules are so psychologically unnatural that only those with access to the

right schooling can abide by them, they serve as shibboleths, differentiating the elite from the rabble. Throughout the country people have spoken a dialect of English, some of whose features date to the Early Modern English period, that H. L. Mencken called The American Language. It had the misfortune of not becoming the standard of government and education, and large parts of the "grammar" curriculum in American schools have been dedicated to stigmatizing it as ungrammatical sloppy speech. Familiar examples are [aks a question], [ain't], [I don't see no birds], [he don't], [them boys], [we was], and past tense forms like [drug, I seen it, drownded] and [growed]. For ambitious adults who had been unable to complete school, there were full-page magazine ads for correspondence courses, containing lists of examples under screaming headlines like "DO YOU MAKE ANY OF THESE EMBARRASSING MISTAKES?"

 Frequently the language mavens claim that nonstandard American English is not just different, but less sophisticated and logical. The case, they would have to admit, is hard to make for nonstandard irregular verbs like [drag-drug] (and even more so for conversions to regularity like [feeled] and [growed]). After all, in "correct" English, Richard Lederer noted, "Today we speak, but first we spoke; some faucets leak, but never loke. Today we write, but first we wrote; we bite our tongues, but never bote." At first glance, the mavens would seem to have a better argument when it comes to the loss of conjugational distinctions in [He don't] and [We was]. But then, this has been the trend in Standard English for centuries. No one gets upset that we no longer distinguish the second person singular form of verbs, as in [thou sayest]. And by this criterion it is the nonstandard dialects that are superior, because they provide their speakers with second person plural pronouns like [y'all] and [youse], and Standard English does not.

 At this point, defenders of the standard are likely to pull out the notorious double negative, as in [I can't get no satisfaction.] Logically speaking, the two negatives cancel each other out, they teach; Mr. Jagger is actually saying that he is satisfied. The song should be entitled "I Can't Get [Any] Satisfaction." But this reasoning is not satisfactory. Hundreds of languages require their speakers to use a negative element in the context of a negated verb. The so-called "double negative," far from being a corruption, was the norm in Chaucer's Middle English, and negation in standard French, as in [Je ne sais pas] where [ne] and [pas] are both negative, is a familiar contemporary example. Come to think of it, standard English is really no different. What do [any], [even], and [at all] mean in the following sentences? I didn't buy any lottery tickets. I didn't eat even a single french fry. I didn't eat fried food at all today. Clearly, not much: you can't use them alone, as the following strange sentences show: I bought any lottery tickets. I ate even a single french fry. I ate fried food at all today. What these words are doing is exactly what [no] is doing in nonstandard American English, such as in the equivalent [I didn't buy no lottery tickets] -- agreeing with the negated verb. The slim difference is that nonstandard English co-opted the word [no] as the agreement element, whereas Standard English co-opted the word [any].

 A tin ear for stress and melody, and an obliviousness to the principles of discourse and rhetoric, are important tools of the trade for the language maven. Consider an alleged atrocity committed by today's youth: the expression [I could care less]. The teenagers are

trying to express disdain, the adults note, in which case they should be saying [I couldn't care less]. If they could care less than they do, that means that they really do care, the opposite of what they are trying to say. But if these dudes would stop ragging on teenagers and scope out the construction, they would see that their argument is bogus. Listen to how the two versions are pronounced: COULDN'T care I LE CARE i ESS. LE could ESS. The melodies and stresses are completely different, and for a good reason. The second version is not illogical, it's [sarcastic]. The point of sarcasm is that by making an assertion that is manifestly false or accompanied by ostentatiously mannered intonation, one deliberately implies its opposite. A good paraphrase is, "Oh yeah, as if there were something in the world that I care less about."

 Sometimes an alleged grammatical "error" is logical not only in the sense of "rational," but in the sense of respecting distinctions made by the logician. Consider this alleged barbarism: Everyone returned to their seats. If anyone calls, tell them I can't come to the phone. No one should have to sell their home to pay for medical care. The mavens explain: [everyone] means [every one], a singular subject, which may not serve as the antecedent of a plural pronoun like [them] later in the sentence. "Everyone returned to [his] seat," they insist. "If anyone calls, tell [him] I can't come to the phone."

 If you were the target of these lessons, you might be getting a bit uncomfortable. [Everyone returned to his seat] makes it sound like Bruce Springsteen was discovered during intermission to be in the audience, and everyone rushed back and converged on his seat to await an autograph. If there is a good chance that a caller may be female, it is odd to ask one's roommate to tell [him] anything (even if you are not among the people who get upset about "sexist language"). Such feelings of disquiet -- a red flag to any serious linguist -- are well-founded. The logical point that everyone but the language mavens intuitively grasps is that [everyone] and [they] are not an antecedent and a pronoun referring to the same person in the world, which would force them to agree in number. They are a "quantifier" and a "bound variable," a different logical relationship. [Everyone returned to their seats] means "For all X, X returned to X's seat." The "X" is simply a placeholder that keeps track of the roles that players play across different relationships: the X that comes back to a seat is the same X that owns the seat that X comes back to. The [their] there does not, in fact, have plural number, because it refers neither to one thing nor to many things; it does not refer at all. On logical grounds, then, variables are not the same thing as the more familiar "referential" pronouns that trigger agreement ([he] meaning to some particular guy, [they] meaning some particular bunch of guys). Some languages are considerate and offer their speakers different words for referential pronouns and for variables. But English is stingy; a referential pronoun must be drafted into service to lend its name when a speaker needs to use a variable. There is no reason that the vernacular decision to borrow [they, their, them] for the task is any worse than the prescriptivists' recommendation of [he, him, his]. Indeed, [they] has the advantage of embracing both sexes and feeling right in a wider variety of sentences.

 Through the ages, language mavens have deplored the way English speakers convert nouns into verbs. The following verbs have all been denounced in this century: to caveat to input to host to nuance to access to chair to dialogue to showcase to progress to parent

to intrigue to contact to impact As you can see, they range from varying degrees of awkwardness to the completely unexceptionable. In fact, easy conversion of nouns to verbs has been part of English grammar for centuries; it is one of the processes that make English English. I have estimated that about a fifth of all English verbs were originally nouns. Considering just the human body, you can [head a committee, scalp the missionary, eye a babe, stomach someone's complaints], and so on -- virtually every body part can be verbed (including several that cannot be printed in a family journal of opinion).

 What's the problem? The concern seems to be that fuzzy-minded speakers are slowly eroding the distinction between nouns and verbs. But once again, the person in the street is not getting any respect. A simple quirk of everyday usage shows why the accusation is untrue. Take the baseball term [to fly out], a verb that comes from the noun [a pop fly]. The past tense is [flied], not [flew]; no mere mortal has ever [flown out] to center field. Similarly, in using the verb-from-noun [to ring the city] (form a ring around), people say [ringed], not [rang], and for [to grandstand] (play to the grandstand), they say [grandstanded] not [grandstood]. Speakers' preference for the regular form with [-ed] shows that they are tacitly sensitive to the fact that the verbs came from nouns. They avoid irregular forms like [flew out] because they intuitively sense that the baseball verb [to fly] is different from the ordinary verb [to fly] (what birds do): the first is a verb based on a noun root, the second, a verb with a verb root. Only the verb root is allowed to have the irregular past-tense form [flew], because only for verb roots does it make sense to have [any] past-tense form. The quirk shows that when people use a noun as a verb, they are making their mental dictionaries more sophisticated, not less so -- it's not that words are losing their identities as verbs versus nouns; rather, there are verbs, there are nouns, and there are verbs based on nouns, and people store each one with a different mental tag.

 The most remarkable aspect of the special status of verbs-from-nouns is that everyone feels it. I have tried out examples on hundreds of people -- college students, volunteers without a college education, and children as young as four. They all behave like good intuitive grammarians: they inflect verbs that come from nouns differently from plain old verbs. So is there anyone, anywhere, who does not grasp the principle? Yes -- the language mavens. Uniformly, the style manuals bungle their explanations of [flied out] and similar lawful examples.

 I am obliged to discuss one more example: the much-vilified [hopefully]. A sentence like [Hopefully, the treaty will pass] is said to be a grave error. The adverb [hopefully] comes from the adjective [hopeful], meaning "in a manner full of hope." Therefore, the mavens say, it should be used only when the sentence refers to a person who is doing something in a hopeful manner. If it is the writer or reader who is hopeful, one should say [It is hoped that the treaty will pass], or [If hopes are realized, the treaty will pass], or [I hope that the treaty will pass.]

 Now consider the following:

1. It is simply not true that an English adverb must indicate the manner in which the actor performs the action. Adverbs come in two kinds: "verb phrase" adverbs like [carefully], which do refer to the actor, and "sentence" adverbs like [frankly], which indicate the attitude of the speaker toward the content of the sentence. Other examples of sentence adverbs are [accordingly, basically, confidentially, happily, mercifully, roughly, supposedly], and [understandably]. Many (like [happily]) come from verb phrase adverbs, and they are virtually never ambiguous in context. The use of [hopefully] as a sentence adverb, which has been around for at least 60 years, is a perfectly sensible example.

2. The suggested alternatives [It is hoped that] and [If hopes are realized] display four famous sins of bad writing: passive voice, needless words, vagueness, pomposity.

3. The suggested alternatives do not mean the same thing as [hopefully], so the ban would leave certain thoughts unexpressible. [Hopefully] makes a hopeful prediction, whereas [I hope that] and [It is hoped that] merely describe certain people's mental states. Thus you can say [I hope that the treaty will pass, but it isn't likely], but it would be odd to say [Hopefully, the treaty will pass, but it isn't likely].

4. We are supposed to use [hopefully] only as a verb phrase adverb, as in the following: Hopefully, Larry hurled the ball toward the basket with one second left in the game. Hopefully, Melvin turned the record over and sat back down on the couch 11 centimeters closer to Ellen. Call me uncouth, call me ignorant, but these sentences do not belong to any language that I speak.

I have taken these examples from generic schoolmarms, copy editors, and writers of irate letters to newspaper ombudsmen. The more prominent language mavens in the popular press come in two temperaments: Jeremiahs and Sages.

The Jeremiahs express their bitter laments and righteous prophesies of doom. An eminent dictionary editor, language columnist, and usage expert once wrote, quoting a poet: As a poet, there is only one political duty and that is to defend one's language from corruption. And that is particularly serious now. It is being corrupted. When it is corrupted, people lose faith in what they hear, and that leads to violence. The linguist Dwight Bolinger, gently urging this man to get a grip, had to point out that "the same number of muggers would leap out of the dark if everyone conformed overnight to every prescriptive rule ever written."

In recent years the loudest Jeremiah has been the film and theater critic John Simon. Here is a representative opening to one of his language columns: The English language is being treated nowadays exactly as slave traders once handled the merchandise in their slave ships, or as the inmates of concentration camps were dealt with by their Nazi jailers. What grammatical horror could have inspired this tasteless comparison, you might ask? It was Tip O'Neill's redundantly referring to his "fellow colleagues." Speaking of the American Black English dialect, Simon says, Why should we consider some, usually poorly educated, subculture's notion of the relationship between sound and meaning?

And how could a grammar -- any grammar -- possibly describe that relationship? As for "I be," "you be," "he be," etc., which should give us all the heebie-jeebies, these may indeed be comprehensible, but they go against all accepted classical and modern grammars and are the product not of a language with roots in history but of ignorance of how language works. This, of course, is nonsense from beginning to end (Black English Vernacular is uncontroversially a language with its own systematic grammar), but there is no point in refuting this malicious know-nothing, for he is not participating in any sincere discussion. Simon has simply discovered the trick used with great effectiveness by certain comedians, talk show hosts, and punk-rock musicians: people of modest talent can attract the attention of the media, at least for a while, by being unrelentingly offensive.

 The Sages, on the other hand, typified by the late Theodore Bernstein and by Safire himself, take a moderate, common-sense approach to matters of usage, and they tease their victims with wit rather than savaging them with invective. I enjoy reading the sages, and have nothing but awe for a pen like Safire's that can summarize the content of an anti-pornography statute as, "It isn't the teat, it's the tumidity." But the sad fact is that even Safire, the closest thing we have to an enlightened language pundit, misjudges the linguistic sophistication of the common speaker and as a result misses the target in most of his commentaries and advice. To prove this charge, I will walk you through parts of one of his recent columns, from the October 4, 1992 [New York Times Magazine.]

 The first story was a nonpartisan analysis of supposed pronoun case errors made by the two candidates in the 1992 US presidential election. George Bush had recently adopted the slogan "Who do you trust?," alienating schoolteachers across the nation who noted that [who] is a subject pronoun and the question is asking about the object of [trust]. One would say [You do trust him], not [You do trust he], and so the question word should be [whom], not [who].

 In reply, one might point out that the [who/whom] distinction is a relic of the English case system, abandoned by nouns centuries ago and found today only among pronouns in distinctions like [he/him]. Even among pronouns, the old distinction between subject [ye] and object [you] has vanished, leaving [you] to play both roles and [ye] as sounding completely archaic. [Whom] has outlived [ye], but is clearly moribund, and it already sounds pretentious in most spoken contexts. No one demands of Bush that he say [Whom do ye trust?]. If the language can bear the loss of [ye], using [you] for both subjects and objects, why insist on clinging to [whom], when everyone uses [who] for both subjects and objects?

 Safire, with his enlightened attitude toward usage, recognizes the problem, and proposes Safire's Law of Who/Whom, which forever solves the problem troubling writers and speakers caught between the pedantic and the incorrect: "When [whom] is correct, recast the sentence." Thus, instead of changing his slogan to "Whom do you trust?" -- making him sound like a hypereducated Yalie stiff -- Mr. Bush would win back the purist vote with "Which candidate do you trust"?

Telling people to avoid a problematic construction sounds like common sense, but in the case of object questions with [who], it demands an intolerable sacrifice. People ask questions about the objects of verbs and prepositions [a lot]. Consider the kinds of questions one might ask a child in ordinary conversation: Who did we see on the way home? Who did you play with outside tonight? Who did you sound like? (Imagine replacing any of these with [whom]!) Safire's advice is to change such questions to [Which person] or [Which child]. But the advice would have people violate the most important maxim of good prose: Omit needless words. It also subverts the supposed goal of rules of usage, which is to allow people to express their thoughts as clearly and precisely as possible. A question like [Who did we see on the way home?] can embrace one person, many people, or any combination or number of adults, babies, children, and familiar dogs. Any specific substitution like [Which person?] forecloses some of these possibilities. And how in the world would you apply Safire's Law to the famous refrain Who're you gonna call? GHOSTBUSTERS! Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice. Safire should have taken his observation about the pedantic sound of [whom] to its logical conclusion and advised the president that there is no reason to change the slogan, at least no grammatical reason.

Turning to the Democrats, Safire gets on Bill Clinton's case, as he puts it, for asking voters to "give Al Gore and I a chance to bring America back." No one would say [give I a break], because the indirect object of [give] must have objective case. So it should be [give Al Gore and me a chance.]

Probably no "grammatical error" has received as much scorn as "misuse" of pronoun case inside conjunctions (phrases with two parts joined by [and] or [or]). What teenager has not been corrected for saying [Me and Jennifer are going to the mall]? The standard story is that the object pronoun [me] does not belong in subject position -- no one would say [Me is going to the mall] -- so it should be [Jennifer and I]. People tend to misremember the advice as "When in doubt, say 'so-and-so and I', not 'so-and-so and me'," so they unthinkingly overapply it, resulting in hyper-corrected solecisms like [give Al Gore and I a chance] and the even more despised [between you and I].

But if the person on the street is so good at avoiding [Me is going] and [Give I a break], and even former Rhodes Scholars and Ivy League professors can't seem to avoid [Me and Jennifer are going] and [Give Al and I a chance], might it not be the mavens that misunderstand English grammar, not the speakers? The mavens' case about case rests on one assumption: if an entire conjunction phrase has a grammatical feature like subject case, every word inside that phrase has to have that grammatical feature, too. But that is just false.

[Jennifer] is singular; you say [Jennifer is], not [Jennifer are]. The pronoun [She] is singular; you say [She is], not [She are]. But the conjunction [She and Jennifer] is not singular, it's plural; you say [She and Jennifer are], not [She and Jennifer is.] So a conjunction can have a different grammatical number from the pronouns inside it. Why, then, must it have the same grammatical [case] as the pronouns inside it? The answer is that it need not. A conjunction is just not grammatically equivalent to any of its parts. If

John and Marsha met, it does not mean that John met and that Marsha met. If voters give Clinton and Gore a chance, they are not giving Gore his own chance, added on to the chance they are giving Clinton; they are giving the entire ticket a chance. So just because [Al Gore and I] is an object that requires object case, it does not mean that [I] is an object that requires object case. By the logic of grammar, the pronoun is free to have any case it wants.

The third story deconstructs a breathless quote from Barbra Streisand, describing tennis star Andre Agassi: He's very, very intelligent; very, very, sensitive, very evolved; more than his linear years. ... He plays like a Zen master. It's very in the moment.

Safire first speculates on Streisand's use of [evolved]: "its change from the active to passive voice -- from `he [evolved from] the Missing Link' to `He [is evolved]' – was probably influenced by the adoption of [involved] as a compliment."

These kinds of derivations have been studied intensively in linguistics, but Safire shows here that he does not appreciate how they work. He seems to think that people change words by being vaguely reminded of rhyming ones -- [evolved] from [involved], a kind of malapropism. But in fact people are not that sloppy and literal-minded. New usages (like [to fly out]) are based not on rhymes, but on rules that change a word's part-of-speech category and its complements in the same precise ways across dozens or hundreds of words.

Thus Safire's suggestion that [very evolved] is based on [involved] does not work at all. For one thing, if you're involved, it means that something involves you (you're the object), whereas if you're evolved, it means that you have been doing some evolving (you're the subject). The problem is that the conversion of [evolved from] to [very evolved] is not a switch from the active voice of a verb to the passive voice, as in [Agassi beat Boris] --> [Boris was beaten by Andre]. To passivize a verb you convert the direct object into a subject, so [is evolved] could only have been passivized from [Something evolved Andre] -- but this transitive form of [evolve] does not exist in contemporary English. Safire's explanation is like saying you can take [Bill bicycled from Lexington] and change it to [Bill is bicycled] and then to [Bill is very bicycled].

This breakdown is a good illustration of one of the main scandals of the language mavens: they show lapses in elementary problems of grammatical analysis, like figuring out the part-of-speech category of a word. In analyzing [very evolved], Safire refers to the active and passive voice, two forms of a verb. But the preceding adverb [very] is an unmistakable tipoff that [evolved] is not being used as a verb at all, but as an adjective. Safire was misled because adjectives can look like verbs in the passive voice, and are clearly related to them, but they are not the same thing. This is the ambiguity behind the joke in the Bob Dylan lyric, "They'll stone you when you're riding in your car; They'll stone you when you're playing your guitar ... Everybody must get stoned."

This discovery steers us toward the real source of [evolved]. There is a lively rule in English that takes the participle of certain intransitive verbs and creates a corresponding

adjective: a leaf that has fallen --> a fallen leaf a testicle that has not descended --> an undescended testicle a man who has traveled widely --> a widely traveled man a window that has stuck --> a stuck window snow that has drifted --> the drifted snow a writer who has failed --> a failed writer Take this rule and apply it to [a tennis player that has evolved], and you get [an evolved tennis player]. This solution also allows us to make sense of Streisand's meaning. When a verb is converted from the active to the passive voice, the verb's meaning is conserved: [Dog bites man] = [Man is bitten by dog]. But when a verb is converted to an adjective, the adjective can acquire idiosyncratic nuances. Not every woman who has fallen is a fallen woman, and if someone stones you you are not necessarily stoned. We all evolved from a missing link, but not all of us are evolved in the sense of being more spiritually sophisticated than our contemporaries.

 Safire then rebukes Streisand for [more than his linear years.] [Linear] means "direct, uninterrupted"; it has gained a pejorative vogue sense of "unimaginative," as in [linear thinking], in contrast to insightful, inspired leaps of genius. I think what Ms. Streisand had in mind was "beyond his chronological years," which is better expressed as simply "beyond his years." You can see what she was getting at -- the years lined up in an orderly fashion -- but even in the anything-goes world of show-biz lingo, not everything goes. Strike the set on [linear]. Like many language mavens, Safire underestimates the precision and aptness of slang, especially slang borrowed from technical fields. Streisand obviously is not using the sense of "linear" from Euclidean geometry, meaning "shortest route between two points," and the associated image of years lined up in an orderly fashion. She is using the sense taken from analytic geometry, meaning "proportional" or "additive." If you take a piece of graph paper and plot the distance traveled at constant speed against the time that has elapsed, you get a straight line. This is called a linear relationship; for every hour that passes, you've traveled another 55 miles. In contrast, if you plot the amount of money in your compound-interest account, you get a nonlinear curve that swerves upward; as you leave your money in longer, the amount of interest you accrue in a year gets larger and larger. Streisand is implying that Agassi's level of evolvedness is not proportional to his age: he floats above the line that fits everyone else, with more evolvedness than his age would ordinarily entitle him to. Now, I cannot be sure that this is what Streisand had in mind (at the time of this writing, she has not replied to my inquiry), but this sense of [linear] is common in contemporary techno-pop cant (like [feedback], [systems], [holism], [interactive], and [synergistic]), so it is unlikely that she blundered into a perfectly apt usage by accident.

 Finally, Safire comments on [very in the moment]: This [very] calls attention to the use of a preposition or a noun as a modifier, as in "It's very [in]," or "It's very [New York]," or the ultimate fashion compliment, "It's very [you]." To be very [in the moment] (perhaps a variation of [of the moment] or [up to the minute]) appears to be a loose translation of the French [au courant], variously translated as "up to date, fashionable, with-it" ... Once again, by patronizing Streisand's language, Safire has misanalyzed both its form and its meaning. He has not noticed that: (1) The word [very] is not connected to the preposition [in]; it's connected to the entire prepositional phrase [in the moment]. (2) Streisand is not using the intransitive [in], with its special sense of "fashionable"; she is using the conventional transitive [in], with a noun phrase object [the moment]. (3) Her

use of a prepositional phrase as if it was an adjective to describe some mental or emotional state follows a common pattern in English: [under the weather, out of character, off the wall, in the dumps, out to lunch, on the ball], and [out of his mind]. (4) It's unlikely that Streisand was trying to say that Agassi is [au courant] or fashionable; that would be a put-down implying shallowness, not a compliment. Her reference to Zen makes her meaning entirely clear: that Agassi is good at shutting out distractions and concentrating on the game or person he is involved with at that moment.

 So these are the "language mavens." Their foibles can be blamed on two blind spots. One is a gross underestimation of the linguistic wherewithal of the common person. I am not saying that everything that comes out of a person's mouth or pen is perfectly rule-governed (remember Dan Quayle). But the language mavens would have a much better chance of not embarrassing themselves if they saved the verdict of linguistic incompetence as a last resort, rather than jumping to it as a first conclusion. The other blind spot is their complete ignorance of the modern science of language -- and I don't mean just the often-forbidding technicalities of Chomskyan theory, but basic knowledge of what kinds of constructions and idioms are found in English, and how people use them and pronounce them.

 So what should be done about usage? Unlike some academics, I am not saying that instruction in grammar and composition are tools to perpetuate an oppressive white patriarchal status quo and that The People should be liberated to write however they please. Some aspects of how people express themselves in some settings [are] worth trying to change. What I am calling for is a more thoughtful discussion of language and how people use it, replacing [bubbe-maises] (old wives' tales) with the best scientific knowledge available. It is especially important that we not underestimate the sophistication of the actual cause of any instance of language use: the human mind.

 It is ironic that the jeremiads wailing about how sloppy language leads to sloppy thought are themselves hairballs of loosely-associated factoids and tangled nonsequiturs. All the examples of verbal behavior that the complainer takes exception to for any reason are packed together in one unappealing mass and coughed up as proof of The Decline of the Language: teenage slang, sophistry, regional variations in pronunciation and diction, bureaucratic bafflegab, poor spelling and punctuation, pseudo-errors like [hopefully], badly-crafted prose, government euphemism, nonstandard grammar like [ain't], misleading advertizing, and so on (not to mention deliberate witticisms that go over the complainer's head).

 I hope to have convinced you of two things. Many prescriptive rules are just plain dumb and should be deleted from the usage handbooks. And most of standard English is just that, standard, in the sense of standard units of currency or household voltages. It is just common sense that people should be given every encouragement and opportunity to learn the dialect that has become the standard one in their society and to employ it in many formal settings. But there is no need to use terms like "bad grammar," "fractured syntax," and "incorrect usage" when referring to rural and Black dialects. Though I am no fan of "politically correct" euphemism (in which, according to the satire, "white woman" should

be replaced by "melanin-impoverished person of gender"), using terms like "bad grammar" for "nonstandard" is both insulting and scientifically inaccurate.

 As for slang, I'm all for it! I don't know how I ever did without [to flame] (protest self-righteously), [to dis] (express disrespect for), and [to blow off] (dismiss an obligation), and there are thousands of now-unexceptionable English words like [clever], [fun], [sham], [banter], [mob], and [stingy] that began life as slang. It is especially hypocritical to oppose linguistic innovations reflexively and at the same time to decry the loss of distinctions like [lie] versus [lay] on the pretext of preserving expressive power. Vehicles for expressing thought are being created far more quickly than they are being lost.

 The aspect of language use that is most worth changing is the clarity and style of written prose. Expository writing for the benefit of absent strangers requires language to express far more complex trains of thought than it was biologically designed to do. This makes writing a difficult craft that must be mastered through practice, instruction, feedback, and probably most important, intensive exposure to good examples. There are excellent manuals of composition that discuss these skills with great wisdom, like Strunk and White's [The Elements of Style] and Joseph Williams's [Style: Toward Clarity and Grace]. But note how removed their practical advice is from the trivia of split infinitives and slang. For example, a banal but universally acknowledged key to good writing is to revise extensively. Good writers go through anywhere from two to twenty drafts before releasing a paper. Anyone who does not appreciate this necessity is going to be a bad writer. Imagine a Jeremiah exclaiming, "Our language today is threatened by an insidious enemy: the youth are not revising their drafts enough times." Kind of takes the fun out, doesn't it? It's not something that can be blamed on television, rock music, overpaid athletes, or any of the other signs of the decay of civilization. But if it's clear writing that we want, this is the kind of homely remedy that is called for.

 Finally, a confession. When I hear someone use [disinterested] to mean "apathetic," I am apt to go into a rage. [Disinterested] (I suppose I must explain that it means "unbiased") is such a lovely word: it is ever-so-subtly different from [impartial] or [unbiased] in implying that that the person has no stake in the matter, not that he is merely committed to being even-handed out of personal principle. It gets this fine meaning from its delicate structure: [interest] means "stake," as in [conflict of interest] and [financial interest]; adding [-ed] to a noun can make it pertain to someone that owns the referent of that noun, as in [moneyed], [one-eyed], or [hook-nosed]; [dis-] negates the combination. The grammatical logic reveals itself in the similarly-structured [disadvantaged, disaffected, disillusioned, disjointed] and [dispossessed]. Since we already have the word [uninterested], there can be no reason to rob discerning language-lovers of [disinterested] by merging their meanings, except as a tacky attempt to sound more elevated and high-falutin'. And don't get me started on [fortuitous] and [parameter] ...

 Chill out, Professor. The original, 18th Century meaning of [disinterested] turns out to be -- yes, "uninterested." And that, too, makes grammatical sense. The adjective [interested] meaning "engaged" is far more common than the noun [interest] meaning "stake," so [dis-] can be analyzed as simply negating that adjective, as in [discourteous], [dishonest],

[disloyal], and the parallel [dissatisfied] and [distrusted]. But these rationalizations are beside the point. Every component of a language changes over time, and at any moment a language is enduring many losses. But since the human mind does not change over time, the richness of a language is always being replenished. Whenever any of us gets grumpy about some change in usage, we would do well to read the words of Samuel Johnson in the Preface to his 1755 [Dictionary], a reaction to the Jeremiahs of his day: When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, and clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation. With this hope, however, academies have been instituted, to guard the avenues of their languages, to retain fugitives, and to repulse intruders; but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been vain; sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength.