

Are 'grammar Nazis' ruining the English language?

Split infinitives make them shudder and they'd never end a sentence with a preposition. But linguist Geoffrey Pullum has a message for all grammar pedants: you're wrong



By Tom Chivers

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Imagine a world in which biology was taught using no textbooks written later than 1795; a world in which the advances of the science since the publication of *On the Origin of Species* – or even since Charles Darwin was born – were ignored. The theory of evolution would remain untaught; the existence of bacteria would never be mentioned. Biologists would be furious. So imagine how Prof Geoffrey Pullum feels when he sees the same thing happening in his own field every day.

His field is linguistics: the study of the rules of language. “Linguistics is a scientific subject,” he says. “It’s of a rather peculiar kind, but it is a science.” Pullum has been taking language apart to see how it works since the early Seventies, after a career as a rock’n’roll pianist failed to live up to the glamour it

promised. He toured France and Germany in the Sixties with Sonny Stewart and the Dynamos, and shared a stage with the Kinks and the Rolling Stones with his later outfit Geno Washington and the Ram Jam Band. But life on tour was “tedious” and so, seeking glamour and excitement, he became an academic linguist.

He has, paradoxically, found a kind of celebrity in academia that he couldn't in music. His rock'n'roll career took him to two foreign countries; as a linguist, he has been to 22, and 24 US states. The Ram Jam Band enjoyed moderate success in the Sixties, but now millions read about the complex facts of linguistics on Pullum's blog, **Language Log**, probably the most-viewed linguistics website in the world. He is the author, with Rodney Huddleston, of **the award-winning Cambridge Grammar of the English Language**, one of the most respected descriptions of the rules of English in the world.

Despite what many people think, the rules of a language – any language – are only defined by how people use that language. When you think about it, that has to be the case: the rules of English are different now from how they were in Milton's time, let alone Chaucer's, and no one has ever sat down and deliberately changed them; they've changed because the language has evolved, through changing use. Pullum's job is determining what those rules are.

Many rules are obvious, so obvious that we don't even think about them, such as: “most verbs take an -ed on the end to form the past tense” or “plural nouns usually take an S on the end”. Others are more subtle. For instance, there is a rule to how you order adjectives before a noun. In English, adjectives describing size and shape generally come before those describing age, which come before those describing colour, and then place of origin, and so on. It would be very unusual to say “the old little pot”, instead of “the little old pot”, unless there are two little pots and you wanted to distinguish between the old one and the new one.

Rules such as this have been discovered through careful study of how English speakers actually use the language. “An enormous amount more is understood today than it was in, say, 1900,” says Pullum. “There have been discoveries that make the pattern of things easier to grasp.”

But instead of this sort of discovery making it into popular consciousness, he says, the national discussion of grammar and language is stuck in half-remembered dictates and daft shibboleths. “What is taught in schools, and in popular books for laypeople, is the same as it was in 1900, and much the same as it was in 1800. The public is denied all of it.”

The first popular grammar book was Lindley Murray's *English Grammar*. It sold more than a million copies after publication in 1795. Many of its proscriptions would be approved nowadays: never leave a preposition at the end of a sentence, don't use "who" as the subject of a sentence. Towards the end of the 19th century, grammarians added more, such as the injunction against "splitting infinitives" – that is, putting a modifier between "to" and the verb, such as "to boldly go". These rules are still taught: last year, a little book called **Gwynne's Grammar**, by a self-taught grammarian named Nevile Gwynne, became a surprise bestseller.



The trouble is, most of these rules are wrong. "I've never seen a **book** so bad on my subject," says Pullum of Gwynne's *Grammar*. "It's the familiar old nonsense, modified through 200 years of rubbish, from teachers who didn't quite understand it to students who understood it less." Split infinitives, for instance, have been commonly used for hundreds of years. Another myth is that the word "none" is always singular (so you can't say "none of them are coming to the party", you have to say "none of them is coming to the party"), even though it's been used since the 1640s and the plural version was the more common form for 300 years. There's a similar ruling against using "they" to refer to a single thing. "That would mean that you're not allowed to say 'nobody seems to think the rules apply to them'," Pullum says. None of these are uneducated mistakes or modern slang: as Pullum points out, **William Shakespeare** and Jane Austen use singular "they". But still, a certain kind of person insists that it's bad English.

In the early years of this millennium, Pullum and his fellow linguist Mark Liberman began *Language Log*

to provide a forum where this sort of nonsense could be debunked by professionals, and where the real findings of scientific linguistics could be discussed. “It’s a shoestring operation,” he says. But now tens of thousands of people read it every day. It made a particular splash in 2004, when Pullum stumbled across Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* in an airport and gleefully tore it to shreds in a series of blog posts: “one of the worst prose stylists in the history of literature,” he wrote. “I had such fun writing about his novels, and I almost feel it’s unfair,” he says. “But then I think, he’s got so much money that he doesn’t ever need worry about what I think. He could run me down in his Lamborghini. His style is dreadful, his metaphors are awful and sometimes he picks words out of a thesaurus, but he made a good living out of it, and I think he deserves credit for that.”

Whenever linguists point out that the rules of language can’t be what the “grammar Nazis” think they are, people claim that they’re saying anything goes. Not at all, says Pullum. “We grammarians who study the English language are not all bow-tie-wearing martinets, but we’re also not flaming liberals who think everything should be allowed. There’s a sensible middle ground where you decide what the rules of Standard English are, on the basis of close study of the way that native speakers use the language.”

As an example of something that’s simply wrong, I point to something I’d read in a book recently – someone writing that “much of the data that needs processing are corrupted”. Pullum agrees: “Flatly ungrammatical.” Data can be a mass noun (“much of the data is”), or a count noun (“many of the data are”), he says, but that sentence has been caught between the two. I ask him if he has any personal dislikes, which aren’t “wrong” but which annoy him. “I have bugbears. But I like to think I have a healthy attitude towards them: they’re my bugbears, so I regulate my own usage, not yours. For example, I’ve always disliked the term ‘people of colour’. I refused to use it even when I was a graduate dean working on affirmative action in the Eighties in California.” The key, he says, is to realise that your preferences – using “fewer” instead of “less” when referring to plural objects, for instance – are just preferences, and claiming that they’re “wrong” is false.

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However, there are good reasons to teach the rules of Standard English to children who speak different dialects. “I’m conservative on educational matters,” says Pullum. “It’s entirely to the benefit of all of us that newspapers’ editorials are written in Standard English, and that we can all speak it in situations such as business and air traffic control, and understand each other.” Because this particular form of English, and not northern British English or African American Vernacular English, is the language of prestige and

power in much of the world, children who can master it are likely to do better in life than children who can't.

Pullum is far from a triumphalist, British-is-best type – he left the country in the Eighties and moved to the United States to teach; his then wife and their son are black, and he was alarmed by the anti-immigrant “repatriation” rhetoric of the time. (Pullum has never corrected his son's grammar. “It never occurred to me. He spoke London English impeccably from being exposed to it, then switched to American English at eight.”) English is the most important language on the planet, he says – not because it's better but because, by historical accident, it happens to have spread around the globe. “It's not that English has won out because of its virtue,” he says. “In some ways, English is highly unsuited to its role; it has 200 irregular verbs, where Swahili, for example, has none. It would have been wonderful to have Swahili as a global language, but it didn't happen.”

Plenty of people do have a triumphalist view of Standard English, however. While few would say that our language is “better” than, say, French or Hebrew, people do think that Standard English is the true form, while dialects are somehow degraded versions. Pullum can barely contain his contempt for this view. “Other, non-standard English dialects aren't bad or inferior. Saying that African American vernacular English is Standard English with ignorant mistakes is as stupid as thinking that Dutch is just standard Berlin German with ignorant mistakes.”

Dialects are proof that language changes. But it doesn't change as fast as people think. “The changes you get over a century are trivial,” says Pullum, because there's a long history of literacy and a large body of users, both of which keep it stable. “Dracula was published in 1897. When you read it, you don't have difficulty.” Pullum says we don't realise how old some words are. “People think the new expression they've noticed has just popped into use in the past few months, and they're always wrong, usually by decades, and sometimes by a century or more.”

One change people might have noticed is the reduction in the use of “whom”: “It's marginal now,” says Pullum, “but still firmly ensconced wherever a preposition precedes a human-gender relative pronoun, as in ‘the employee to whom it was assigned’; it's the clause-initial uses – ‘Whom do you mean?’ – that are now rare and unbearably pompous.”

When language does change, it's not for the worse. It was recently reported that the **Oxford English Dictionary had noted**, under its definition of the word “literally”, that the word could be “used for

emphasis rather than being actually true”, such as in the sentence, “We were literally killing ourselves laughing”. That was an example of the slow death of the English language, said some. But language isn’t “degrading”, or we’d have lost the ability to communicate in the 50,000 years or so that we’ve been using it. Sometimes new meanings leave ambiguity – but that’s nothing new. “Real languages love ambiguity. They actively seek out words with multiple meanings, which is called ‘polysemy’. And they’re happy with sentences that have more than one interpretation, such as ‘Visiting relatives can be a nuisance.’ It’s not falling apart. And, of course, you can just say ‘I mean literally literally’, and then they’d get what you mean.”

Pullum lives in Edinburgh now – the “most intellectually lively place on the planet” – where he goes for walks with his girlfriend and her two Dalmatians and spends “a lot of time vacuuming the couch”. (“Those two things are connected,” he explains. “Never keep a dark-coloured sofa in the same house as Dalmatians, because they’ll negotiate their own rules about whether they’re allowed to use it, and they won’t necessarily be your rules. See how similar to grammar that is?”)

The battle between the English-is-decaying brigade and the scientific linguists who want to record the real rules of the language has been going on for decades. The two sides even have names: “prescriptivists” and “descriptivists”. And it is unlikely to end in our lifetimes. But Pullum has a message for the other side. “American bigots, whenever you have any criticism of America, like to say: if you don’t like it, you can leave. So I want to say, if you don’t like Standard English the way it is, talk sump’in else. Don’t mess with our language. If you don’t like it, sod off. Talk French.”



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