

Tense Present: Democracy, English, and the Wars over Usage (Excerpt)

By David Foster Wallace

Well-known fact: In neither K-12 or college English are systematic [Written English] grammar and usage much taught anymore. It's been this way for more than 20 years. The phenomenon drives Prescriptivists nuts, and it's one of the big things they cite as evidence of America's gradual murder of English. Descriptivists and English-Ed specialists counter that grammar and usage have been abandoned because scientific research proved that studying [Standard Written English, or SWE] grammar and usage simply doesn't help make kids better writers. Each side in the debate tends to regard the other as mentally ill or/and blinded by political ideology. Neither camp appears ever to have considered whether maybe the way prescriptive SWE was traditionally taught had something to do with its inutility.

By way here I'm referring not so much to actual method as to spirit or attitude. Most traditional teachers of English grammar have, of course, been dogmatic SNOOTs, and like most dogmatists they've been incredibly stupid about the rhetoric they used and the Audience they were addressing¹. I refer specifically to their assumption that SWE is the sole appropriate English dialect and that the only reasons anyone could fail to see this are ignorance or amentia or grave deficiencies in character. As rhetoric, this sort of attitude works only in sermons to the Choir, and as pedagogy it's just disastrous. The reality is that an average U.S. student is going to go to the trouble of mastering the difficult conventions of SWE only if he sees SWE's relevant Group or Discourse Community as one he'd like to be part of. And in the absence of any sort of argument for why the correct-SWE Group is a good or desirable one (an argument that, recall, the traditional teacher hasn't given, because he's such a dogmatic SNOOT he sees no need to), the student is going to be reduced to evaluating the desirability of the SWE Group based on the one obvious member of the Group he's encountered, namely the SNOOTy teacher himself.

I'm not suggesting here that an effective SWE pedagogy would require teachers to wear sunglasses and call students "Dude." What I am suggesting is that the rhetorical situation of an English class — a class composed wholly of young people whose Group identity is rooted in defiance of Adult-Establishment values, plus also composed partly of minorities whose primary dialects are different from SWE — requires the teacher to come up with overt, honest, compelling arguments for why SWE is a dialect worth learning.

These arguments are hard to make — not intellectually but emotionally, politically. Because they are baldly elitist². The real truth, of course, is that SWE is the dialect of the American elite. That it was invented, codified, and promulgated by Privileged WASP Males and is perpetuated as "Standard" by same. That it is the shibboleth of the Establishment and an instrument of political power and class division and racial discrimination and all manner of social inequity. These are shall we say rather delicate subjects to bring up in an English class, especially in the service of a pro-SWE argument, and extra-especially if you yourself are both a Privileged WASP Male and the Teacher and thus pretty much a walking symbol of the Adult Establishment. This reviewer's opinion, though, is that both

¹ There are still Some of these teachers around, at least here in the Midwest. YOU know the type: lipless, tweedy, cancrine — Old Maids of both genders. If you had one (as I did, 1976-77), you surely remember him.

² (Or require us openly to acknowledge and talk about elitism, whereas a dogmatic SNOOT's pedagogy is merely elitism in action.)

students and SWE are better served if the teacher makes his premises explicit, licit and his argument overt, presenting himself as an advocate of SWE's utility rather than as a prophet of its innate superiority.

Because this argument is both most delicate and (I believe) most important with respect to students of color, here is one version of a spiel I've given in private conference³ with certain black students who were (a) bright and inquisitive and (b) deficient in what U.S. higher education considers written English facility:

I don't know whether anybody's told you this or not, but when you're in a college English class you're basically studying a foreign dialect. This dialect is called 'Standard Written English. ... From talking with you and reading your essays, I've concluded that your own primary dialect is [one of three variants of SBE common to our region]. Now, let me spell something out in my official Teacher-voice: The SBE you're fluent in is different from SWE in all kinds of important ways. Some of these differences are grammatical — for example, double negatives are OK in Standard Black English but not in SWE, and SBE and SWE conjugate certain verbs in totally different ways. Other differences have more to do with style — for instance, Standard Written English tends to use a lot more subordinate clauses in the early parts of sentences, and it sets off most of these early subordinates with commas, and, under SWE rules, writing that doesn't do this is "choppy." There are tons of differences like that. How much of this stuff do you already know?

[STANDARD RESPONSE: some variation on "I know from the grades and comments on my papers that English profs don't think I'm a good writer."]

Well, I've got good news and bad news. There are some otherwise smart English profs who aren't very aware that there are real dialects of English other than SWE, so when they're reading your papers they'll put, like, "Incorrect conjugation" or "Comma needed" instead of "SWE conjugates this verb differently" or "SWE calls for a comma here." That's the good news — it's not that you're a bad writer, it's that you haven't learned the special rules of the dialect they want you to write in. Maybe that's not such good news, that they were grading you down for mistakes in a foreign language you didn't even know was a foreign language. That they won't let you write in SBE. Maybe it seems unfair. If it does, you're not going to like this news: I'm not going to let you write in SBE either. In my class, you have to learn and write in SWE. If you want to study your own dialect and its rules and history

³ (I'm not a total idiot.)

and how it's different from SWE, fine — there are some great books by scholars of Black English, and I'll help you find some and talk about them with you if you want. But that will be outside class. In class — in my English class — you will have to master and write in Standard Written English, which we might just as well call "Standard White English," because it was developed by white people and is used by white people, especially educated, powerful white people.

[RESPONSES by this point vary too widely to standardize.]

I'm respecting you enough here to give you what I believe is the straight truth. In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is How It Is. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can believe it's racist and unjust and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something: If you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our country uses to talk to itself. African Americans who've become successful and important in U.S. culture know this; that's why King's and X's and Jackson's speeches are in SWE, and why Morrison's and Angelou's and Baldwin's and Wideman's and West's books are full of totally ass-kicking SWE, and why black judges and politicians and journalists and doctors and teachers communicate professionally in SWE. Some of these people grew up in homes and communities where SWE was the native dialect, and these black people had it much easier in school, but the ones who didn't grow up with SWE realized at some point that they had to learn it and become able to write in it, and so they did. And [INSERT NAME HERE], you're going to learn to use it, too, because I am going to make you.

I should note here that a couple of the students I've said this stuff to were offended — one lodged an Official Complaint — and that I have had more than one colleague profess to find my spiel "racially insensitive." Perhaps you do, too. My own humble opinion is that some of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair, and that pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever actually changing them.

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