



The Lexicographer's Dilemma: The Evolution of 'Proper' English, from Shakespeare to South Park

By Jack Lynch

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In its long history, the English language has had many lawmakers-those who have tried to regulate or otherwise organize the way we speak. *The Lexicographer's Dilemma* poses a pair of questions-what does proper English mean, and who gets to say what's right? Our ideas of correct or proper English have a history, and today's debates over the state of the language-whether about Ebonics in schools, the unique use of language in a South Park episode, or split infinitives in the *Times*-make sense only in historical context. As historian Jack Lynch has discovered, every rule has a human history, and the characters who populate his narrative are as interesting for their obsessions as for their erudition. Charting the evolution of English with wit and intelligence, he provides a rich historical perspective that makes us appreciate a new the hard-won standards we now enjoy.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Lynch's highly readable book will appeal to all users of the English language, from word buffs to scholars alike." ?*Library Journal*

"Lynch recognizes that grace, clarity, and precision of expression are paramount. His many well-chosen and entertaining examples support his conclusion that prescriptions and pedantry will always give way to change, and that we should stop fretting, relax, and embrace it." ?*Boston Globe*

"In his sprightly new history of the notion of 'proper' English ... Lynch [asks] us all to calm down, please, and recognize that 'proper' English is a recent and changeable institution." ?*Salon*

About the Author

Jack Lynch is a professor of English at Rutgers University and a Johnson scholar, having studied the great lexicographer for nearly a decade. In addition to his books on Johnson and on Elizabethan England, he has written journal articles and scholarly reviews, and hosts a Web site devoted to these topics at <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/18th/>. He is the author of *Becoming Shakespeare* and *Samuel Johnson's Insults* and the editor of *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary*. He lives in Lawrenceville, NJ.

From The Washington Post

From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com Reviewed by by Carolyn See This delightful look at efforts through the centuries to define and control the English language turns out to be a history of human exasperation, frustration and free-floating angst. People tend to go nuts around the English language. Of course, most of us are nuts anyway, but the language is always there, in the ether, or staring at us from a page, and if we're feeling particularly cranky, it never fails to provide a ready excuse for us to fly off the handle. I get afflicted with that crankiness when a television anchor describes a Chihuahua rescued from drowning as "very unique," or a woman I scarcely know pronounces "forte" as "fortay," or when a close relative of mine, when she descended (with enthusiasm!) into the life of the underworld, began to say, "He don't." I wanted to tell her, "Commit any crime you like. Just don't murder the language while you're at it!" Many of us are irritable most of the time (unless we're in love or just bought a motorcycle), and our language continually offers up imperfections and anomalies for us to be irritable about. In the words of a waiter who once brought me a menu in a way-too-authentic Chinese restaurant, there's always "something in there you're not going to like!" Jack Lynch, who also has written on Shakespeare and edited Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, gives us not a history of the English language but a history of those who have tried to make sense of it. He divides them into "prescriptive" and "descriptive" linguists: The former try with all their might to purge the language of undesirable words and constructions; the latter, acting on the theory that the language is untamable, simply try to describe its current use. (That, too, seems futile often enough -- like describing a tidal wave as it booms by.) After an amusing and very interesting introduction, Lynch begins with John Dryden. (Don't worry: Lynch dutifully goes back later to 1066, the Norman Conquest and the "marriage" of Anglo-Saxon and French.) But Dryden -- famous, esteemed by all (or most, anyway) -- was one of the first English writers to revisit his work and revise it in accordance with certain rules of Latin grammar. One of the reasons this book is so much fun is that you get to see how relatively new and recent and lively modern English is. At the end of the 17th century, Latin grammarians were just becoming influential in English

society. The English language itself didn't have a formal grammar, but Latin did, and it seemed sensible to think that the rules of this revered dead language might easily be applied to bumptious, wildly growing, very-much-alive English. Dryden set about lopping prepositions off the ends of his sentences (they're not called prepositions for nothing!) and spent time sticking his split infinitives back together. The idea of "good" English as opposed to "bad" was coming into play. This, Lynch says, had to do with the rise of the middle class -- a set of interlopers who had had the luck and nerve to earn some money, and thus aspired to fake their way into the outer realms of the ruling elite. One of the necessary tools for this was knowledge of how the language was spoken and written by those who lived at the top. For those who have taken their share of English classes, all this material might seem familiar, but that doesn't diminish the pleasure of seeing Jonathan Swift, in the 18th century, being driven ape-crazy by the use of contractions like "wouldn't" and trendy abbreviations like "mob" for the Latin "mobile vulgus" (fickle crowd). "Mob" had the effect of "very unique" on Swift, and years after he first wrote a screed on the topic, he still flung himself into a rage when a woman he knew used the word in conversation: "Why do you say that?" he railed, "never let me hear you say that word again." When the woman asked what she should say instead, he answered, "The rabble, to be sure." People are crazy, that's the long and the short of it, and even with one of the biggest, most imaginative and attractive languages on the planet, they will discover ways to fiddle with it. After Samuel Johnson's Dictionary, which, although certainly opinionated, was largely descriptive, there arose those pesky, prescriptive Latin grammarians who did everything they could to hammer English into a Latin mold. Then, when the American Revolution came along, a patriot named Noah Webster compiled a uniquely American dictionary, taking the opportunity to thumb his nose at Johnson in the process. Then came the long decades in which a group of dedicated scholars labored to put together the Oxford English Dictionary. The first installment appeared in 1884, the last in 1928. A lot of very learned people got sick and died during the execution of this valiant project, and as soon as it was finished -- sooner, even -- it required extensive revision. And more revision. And then came the hordes of people with nothing better to do with their lives than to carp about the differences between "who" and "whom" and a mountain of split infinitives, because the language, besides providing a convenient subject to be enraged at, also offered a refuge for otherwise unemployable cranks. The unseemly squabbling never lets up, actually. The author revisits the tempest in a teapot that recently surrounded the teaching of ebonics in the Oakland, Calif., school system. (The critics went out of their way to be both racist and smug.) And before that, there was the scorn heaped upon the editor of Webster's Third New International Dictionary, a man who thought it helpful to include words that people were using by the dawn of the '60s, like "hipster" and "drip-dry." Scholars went berserk, of course. And that's what this book is about: humans going berserk. In the end, this language mania is probably preferable to sitting on the couch watching television, enduring an angst-attack over how Kate Hudson lets her jaw go slack when she smiles. That's truly crazy, which is why we're fortunate to have a language over which to pitch our fits. bookworld@washpost.com

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Do you have favorite book? In case you have, what is your favorite's book? Publication is very important thing for us to be aware of everything in the world. Each guide has different aim or perhaps goal; it means that book has different type. Some people truly feel enjoy to spend their time and energy to read a book. These are reading whatever they acquire because their hobby is usually reading a book. What about the person who don't like reading a book? Sometime, particular person feel need book whenever they found difficult problem or even exercise. Well, probably you'll have this *The Lexicographer's Dilemma: The Evolution of 'Proper' English, from Shakespeare to South Park.*

Belinda Tenney:

In this 21st millennium, people become competitive in every way. By being competitive at this point, people have to do something to make themselves survive, being in the middle of the actual crowded place and notice simply by surrounding. One thing that sometimes many people have underestimated the item for a while is reading. That's why, by reading a publication your ability to survive enhance then having chance to endure than other is high. For you personally who want to start reading a book, we give you this specific The Lexicographer's Dilemma: The Evolution of 'Proper' English, from Shakespeare to South Park book as basic and daily reading publication. Why, because this book is more than just a book.

Robert Shaw:

This book untitled The Lexicographer's Dilemma: The Evolution of 'Proper' English, from Shakespeare to South Park to be one of several books this best seller in this year, here is because when you read this book you can get a lot of benefit in it. You will easily to buy this particular book in the book shop or you can order it by way of online. The publisher of the book sells the e-book too. It makes you quicker to read this book, because you can read this book in your Smart phone. So there is no reason to you personally to past this reserve from your list.

Gloria Quinones:

Spent a free time and energy to be fun activity to try and do! A lot of people spent their spare time with their family, or their friends. Usually they performing activity like watching television, likely to beach, or picnic from the park. They actually doing same every week. Do you feel it? Do you need to something different to fill your own free time/ holiday? Can be reading a book is usually option to fill your cost-free time/ holiday. The first thing you will ask may be what kinds of guide that you should read. If you want to consider look for book, may be the e-book untitled The Lexicographer's Dilemma: The Evolution of 'Proper' English, from Shakespeare to South Park can be great book to read. May be it might be best activity to you.

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