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SKEPTICON 2019

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so you've corrected someone's  
grammar on the internet...

Lee Murray, Monash University

we've all done it.

*\*my partner and I.*

CORRECTING OTHER PEOPLE'S GRAMMAR

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it's not a new thing

AN INTERLUDE

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'native'

# 'CANTAB'

If "Another Native" goes to Dublin he will certainly hear more good English than in most places—I am not Irish—but he would certainly hear more uniformly good English in any town in England than he can in Melbourne if he goes among the so-called well-educated classes.

# 'AN AUSTRALIAN'

Sir,—If a definite and practical result comes of the present discussion, you will have done colonial society a good service in permitting it. The pernicious habit, so fully

# 'ENGLISHMAN'

Sir,—With reference to the correspondence at present going on in your columns regarding the pronunciation of "young Victoria," while having to acknowledge with regret that our English tongue as spoken here is often very obnoxious to the ears of the educated, still, at the same time, it is rather amusing to read some of your correspondents' letters in to-day's issue.

To take, for instance, the first letter, signed "Cantab." It is to be presumed from the *nom de plume* adopted that the writer has had the benefit of a Cambridge education; yet he, while criticising the Victorian manner of speaking, appears to be neglecting the proper application of the subjunctive mood (in more than one place) he has himself been guilty of murling "Queen's English" in a most atrocious manner.

Take, for example, the sentence, "If another native *goes* to Dublin." Surely "Cantab's" education must have been sadly neglected if he were not taught that the subjunctive mood should follow the word "if," and that the third person singular of the present tense, subjunctive mood, of the verb "to go" is "if he *go*," not "if he *goes*."

Again further on, "Cantab" makes the same error, for he says, "If the nostrils are closed," using again the present indicative instead of the present subjunctive, *viz.*, if the nostrils *be* closed.

Another correspondent, "An Australian," gives himself away at once in his opening sentence by committing the same fault, *viz.*, "If a definite and practical result *comes*," instead of "if a definite and practical result *come*."

This is to be regretted, as it rather tends to spoil the effect of the writer's great command of words, which he undoubtedly possesses.

I must say, Sir, that being an Englishman, I like to see fair play, and may call your correspondents' attention to the old proverb, "People in glass houses," &c.—I am, &c.,

Jan. 10.

ENGLISHMAN.



CORRECTING GRAMMAR

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not particularly productive

... so, why?

CORRECTING GRAMMAR

---

we're not doing it for the reasons we  
think we're doing it

SOME BAD NEWS

---

there's no such thing as  
'correct' English

CORRECT ENGLISH?

---

varieties of English

VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

---

standard (Australian) English

STANDARD ENGLISH

---

how does a standard variety become a  
standard variety?

STANDARD ENGLISH

---

it's about power

STANDARD ENGLISH

---

but isn't it just more logical?



STANDARD ENGLISH

---

... **no.**

AN EXAMPLE

---

*youse*

**singular**

**plural**

**first person**

*I*

*we*

**second person**

*you*

*you*

**third person**

*she/he/it*

*they*

**singular**

**plural**

**first person**

*I*

*we*

**second person**

*you*

*you*

**third person**

*she/he/it*

*they*

**singular**

**plural**

**first person**

*I*

*we*

**second person**

*you*

*youse*

**third person**

*she/he/it*

*they*

YOUSE

---

*youse* resolves an ambiguity

SO

---

what's going on?

CONSIDER

---

who uses *youse*?



STANDARD ENGLISH

---

not objective value, just social value

so

---

what are we reacting to?

WHAT ARE WE REACTING TO?

---

... our own social biases

NOW

---

but what of our friend 'Englishman'?

# 'Englishman': not as good at this as he thought he was

Sir,—After the overwhelming testimony which has been brought to light in your valuable paper, I think, Sir, it cannot be with fairness denied that the charge of "faulty pronunciation" has been fully proved and brought home to "Young Victoria," who now penitently awaits for some kind hand to conduct her out of the quagmire of linguistic impurity into which she has strayed.

I am, Sir, really surprised at the tone of "Englishman's" letter. One would think the writer had "entered" for a straw-splitting competition, and if such were the case he would assuredly be victorious, as your "Englishman" ever is.

It could have been only the spirit of hyper-criticism which prompted him to attack "Cantab" for his omission of that rapidly disappearing usage, the subjunctive mood.

If "Englishman's" knowledge of grammar were co-extensive with that of "Cantab's" he would probably be aware of the fact that the subjunctive mood does not always follow "if," and that only where futurity is combined with contingency is the employment of that mood strictly correct.

This subjunctive devotee also censures "An Australian" for the same heinous offence. It is to be regretted that correspondents wander from the main point of the argument to the uncharitable criticism of each other's letters.—I am, &c.,

Jan. 12.

SYDNEY.

TO SUM UP

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there's no such thing as a 'correct'  
variety, just a prestigious one

engage with ideas, not grammar

thank you

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