

Bad Grammar in Context

Malcolm D. Hyman
Brown University

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Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein.

— Walter Benjamin, “Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen”

On October 23, 2001 the FBI released photographs of letters contaminated with anthrax that had been sent to Senator Tom Daschle and to NBC anchor Tom Brokaw. Various aspects of these letters have provoked interest. Yet I suspect that what immediately caught the attention of many language teachers (notorious sticklers in such matters) was certain peculiarities of spelling and grammar: *penacilin* (for *penicilin*) and the monition “You die now.”

Everyone who has taught writing (either to native speakers or in a second language) will have seen such mistakes. And, despite the protestations of those who would assert with Horace that *aetas parentum, peior avis, tulit nos nequiores, mox daturos progeniem vitiosorem*, such mistakes have always been with us. In 1914 Walter Bronson, after examining compositions written by eighteenth-century graduates of Rhode Island College (now Brown University), remarked: “When we examine their spelling, grammar, and other beggarly elements, it is something of a shock to find that these students, of native American stock and of classical nurture, are far from impeccable.”¹ And if we go back to classical antiquity, we find that

¹W. Bronson, *The History of Brown University, 1764–1914* (Providence, 1914), 122. Quoted by Robert Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English* (New Haven, 1998), 5.

even then such errors were a bugaboo for language teachers (*grammatici*). In the jargon of the ancient grammarian, *penacilin* would be a barbarism, and “You die now” a solecism.²

Ancient language textbooks (*artes grammaticae*) typically contain a section on grammatical errors (*vitia orationis*). These are almost always divided into two main categories: barbarisms and solecisms. Although several controversies existed about how to define the vices, most authors’ definitions are quite similar.³ Here I quote those of Donatus — a grammarian whose influence was so far-reaching that his name became a common noun (Tuscan *donadello*) meaning ‘introductory Latin textbook’:⁴

A *barbarism* is a single word that contains a mistake and occurs in ordinary language.

A *solecism* is a mistake where words are put together contrary to the norms of grammar.⁵

The distinction between errors involving a single word and those involving multi-

²I might also have begun this essay by quoting Ralph Wiggums’ famous “Me fail English? That’s impossible!” from *The Simpsons*. But in so doing I would probably have endeared myself to one sort of reader while alienating another.

³Among the most useful works of scholarship in this area are: Stanley F. Bonner, *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny* (Berkeley, 1977), 198–211; Louis Holtz, *Donat et la tradition de l’enseignement grammatical* (Paris, 1981), 136–62; Pierre Flobert, “La théorie du solécisme dans l’Antiquité: De la logique à la syntaxe,” *RPh*, ser. 3, 60 (1986): 173–81; Marc Baratin, *La naissance de la syntaxe à Rome* (Paris, 1989), 261–322; Raija Vainio, *Latinitas and Barbarisms According to the Roman Grammarians* (Turku, 1999). Georg Schepss’ 1875 Strasbourg dissertation *De Soloecismo* remains of fundamental value.

⁴Paul F. Gehl, *A Moral Art: Grammar, Society, and Culture in Trecento Florence* (Ithaca, 1993), 83.

⁵*Ars Maior* 653.1, 655.4–5; I cite the edition of Holtz (above, n. 3). Translations throughout this essay are my own, unless I note otherwise.

ple words seems well-suited to the classroom — easy to remember, easy to apply. Viewed from a theoretical standpoint, however, it amounts to a distinction between two levels of language: barbarism is an error at the phonological level, solecism at the (morpho-)syntactic.⁶ Characteristic examples of barbarism are *Ruma* (instead of *Roma*) or *columa* (instead of *columna*); of solecism: *multi mihi homines iniuriam fecit* (instead of *fecerunt*) or *sub lucem* (instead of *ante lucem*).⁷ In the case of barbarism, a particular word is defective (you won't find *columa* in the Latin lexicon); in the case of solecism, the words maintain their integrity, but the utterance as a whole is ungrammatical. Grammarians emphasize that both types of error can occur in written *or* spoken language.⁸

The study of barbarisms and solecisms — in other words, of what to avoid in language — constituted a substantial portion of the ancient grammatical curriculum; and many scholars devoted a significant portion of their research to these subjects. What was the social context for all this negative prescriptivism? What

⁶Some grammarians distinguished *semantics* as a separate level and consequently added a third vice alongside barbarism and solecism: *acyrologia* (Latin *improprium*), the semantically inappropriate use of a word (cf. Augustine *Ars Breviata* 29). Servius gives as an instance *clangor* in reference to the sound of wings (ad *Aen.* 3.226). Scholars compiled special works that explained the *differentiae* between sets of parasyonyms: see Lodewijk Caspar Valckenaer, *Ammonius De Differentia Adfinium Vocabulorum* etc. (Leipzig, 1822); Myra L. Uhlfelder, *De Proprietate Sermonum vel Rerum: A Study and Critical Edition of a Set of Verbal Distinctions* (Rome, 1954).

⁷*Ruma*: Servius *GL* 4.444.5; *columa*: Pompeius *GL* 5.283.11; *multi . . . fecit*: *ibid.* 283.17; *sub lucem*: Donatus *Mai.* 657.12.

⁸Donatus *Mai.* 653.5. Generally, ancient grammarians are concerned with systematic and habitual errors, rather than slips of the tongue or other errors of performance. But the latter type is acknowledged in an interesting passage of Aquinas: “Knowing grammar doesn't mean that a person always speaks correctly — since it's possible for a grammarian to commit barbarisms and solecisms” (*Summa Theologica* I-II.56.3).

was the pedagogic rationale? The author of a treatise *On Solecism and Barbarism*, ascribed (falsely) to the illustrious Greek grammarian Herodian (2^d c. C. E.) writes with much eloquence:

All language in which there is inexact usage bears the evident hallmark of an insufficient education. And so it is necessary that aspirants to grammar make the sentences they utter free from solecism and free from barbarism; and that they be aware of a mistake that does arise in their utterance. For grammar is the mother of philosophy and of rhetoric and of every science and systematic activity that really deserves so to be called; and it is its natural root and origin. It is able to nurture what is virtuous in a child; and through technical practice, it leads to an exact linguistic expertise, which is free from errors — and from that, one obtains all praise and approval.⁹

By no means, however, would all philosophers have accepted these claims. The following is reported of Zeno, the founder of Stoicism (335–263 B. C. E.):

He used to say that the very exact expressions used by those who avoided solecisms were like the coins struck by Alexander: they were beautiful in appearance and well-rounded like the coins, but none the better on that account. Words of the opposite kind he would compare to the Attic tetradrachms, which, though struck carelessly and inartistically, nevertheless outweighed the ornate phrases.¹⁰

There is no doubt that the linguistic habits one learned in school helped to maintain

⁹August Nauck, ed., *Lexicon Vindobonense* (St. Petersburg, 1867), 294.

¹⁰Diogenes Laertius 7.18; here I have used the translation of R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, 1931). A bit of numismatic background may be helpful: “Alexander made his silver directly interchangeable with the most widely used trade coins of his time, the Athenian ‘owl’ tetradrachms, and increased its acceptability throughout the Mediterranean world. Within a few decades . . . this silver currency superseded the Athenian coins as the leading trade coinage of Alexander’s empire and far beyond its borders” (Otto Mørkholm, *Early Hellenistic Coinage from the Accession of Alexander to the Peace of Apamea (336–188 B. C.)* (Cambridge, 1991), 43).

status differentials and to preserve social stratification.¹¹ Speaking in a certain way indicated that one possessed a certain education, a certain amount of cultural capital; speaking otherwise indicated that one lacked such capital.¹² But the Stoics eyed all this with indifference, dreaming instead of a utopian society. Epictetus (55 to c. 135 C. E.), who had once been a slave, imagines the reaction of certain members of his audience:

“We’re passing through, and while we’re hiring our ship, we can see Epictetus. Let’s see what he has to say.” Then having left: “Epictetus was nothing. He committed solecisms and barbarisms.”¹³

This devaluation of pedantically correct language resurfaces in Christian writers.

Saint Augustine remarks:

What is called a solecism is simply what results when words are not combined according to the rules by which our predecessors, who spoke with some authority, combined them. Whether you say *inter homines* or *inter hominibus* does not matter to a student intent upon things. Likewise, what is a barbarism but a word articulated with letters or sounds that are not the same as those with which it was normally articulated by those who spoke Latin before us? Whether one says *ignoscere* with a long or short third syllable is of little concern to someone beseeching God to forgive his sins.¹⁴

¹¹See Dirk M. Schenkeveld, “The Impact of Language Studies on Greek Society and Education,” in *History of the Language Sciences*, vol. 1, ed. Sylvain Auroux, E. F. K. Koerner, Hans-Josef Niederehe, Kees Versteegh (Berlin, 2000), 430–8; Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1988), 11–31.

¹²It is revealing how often words denoting a lack of education (*amathia*, *apaideusia*) occur in connection with solecism. E. g.: Hdt. 4.117; Sextus Empiricus *M.* 1.176; Lucian *Soloecista* 1, *Salt.* 80; Eustathius *Od.* 1673.40–1.

¹³Epict. *Diat.* 3.9.14.

¹⁴*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.13.9; translation: R. P. H. Green (Oxford, 1995). Cf. *Confessions* 1.18.28.

On the other hand, the maintenance of linguistic norms may reasonably be held, in particular contexts, to serve some important function. Comparison with some other ancient grammatical traditions is instructive.

Sanskrit grammar arose in an attempt to preserve the correct text of the Vedas. Given the variety of vernaculars, which became increasingly distinct from the Vedic language, it was felt necessary to preserve both the correct pronunciation and a knowledge of the correct meaning. A story in the *Śatapatha-Brahmaṇa* (1.6.3.8) illustrates the importance of grammatical correctness. The divine craftsman Tvaṣṭṛ, involved in a vendetta with the god Indra, wishes for a son who will slay Indra, and thus he recites a mantra to accomplish this purpose. But he mistakenly chants not *indra-śatru* ‘slayer of Indra’ but rather *indra-śatru* ‘he whose slayer is Indra’. And so a small phonetic change (metathesis of the anudātta and udātta accents) results in the destruction of his son Vṛtra.¹⁵ Grammatical correctness is necessary for any ritual language to be efficacious, and, indeed, knowledge of correct language is in itself a source of merit (*dharma*).¹⁶

In the Muslim world, a desire to keep the text of the Koran free from corruption provided the impetus for the development of a grammatical tradition. As Islam ex-

¹⁵For commentary, see Pierre Filliozat, *Le Mahābhāṣya de Patañjali*, PIFI 54.1 (Pondichéry, 1975), 41–4; brief mentions: Madhav M. Deshpande, “Ancient Indian Phonetics,” in *Concise History of the Language Sciences from the Sumerians to the Cognitivists*, ed. E. F. K. Koerner and R. E. Asher (New York, 1995), 72; Alain Daniélou, *Hindu Polytheism* (New York, 1964), 375–6.

¹⁶Patañjali *MBh.* 1.11.2; cf. George Cardona, *Pāṇini: His Work and Its Traditions, I: Background and Introduction* (Delhi, 1988), 629–39; Peter M. Scharf, “Early Indian Grammarians on a Speaker’s Intention,” *JAOS* 115 (1995): 73 n. 41, 74.

panded, an increasing number of converts were not native speakers of Arabic. They introduced linguistic corruption (*lahn*) into the Arabic language, which spread in turn even to native speakers.¹⁷ When individuals whose speech was defective recited the Koran, there was the real and serious threat of distortion to a text which was both the literal, revealed word of God and the exemplar of the Arabic language. Such distortion could not be tolerated, and a normative science of grammar had to be created as an antidote.

In the development of the Sanskrit and Arabic grammatical traditions we see the central role that is played by religion. Religious language is inherently conservative, because it must preserve the *certa verba* that are known to be efficacious. If one is going to do things with words, then not just any words will do. Verbal precision is a prerequisite for felicity. (Servius's remark that "in prayers there ought to be nothing ambiguous" is apposite.¹⁸) Thus a salient feature of religious texts (as well as legal texts, etc.) is a large amount of repetition, restatement, and synonymy. These safeguards are universal in liturgical language.¹⁹ One doesn't wish to make *any* mistakes; but if one does slip up, the repeated or rephrased clause gives an opportunity to repair the damage.

¹⁷Yasir Suleiman, "Arabic Linguistic Tradition," in *Concise History* (above, n. 15), 28–9; Mohamed Sami Anwar, "The Legitimate Fathers of Speech Errors," in *The History of Linguistics in the Near East*, ed. Cornelis H. M. Versteegh, Konrad Koerner, Hans-J. Niederehe (Amsterdam, 1983), 13–29.

¹⁸ad *Aen.* 7.120.

¹⁹The interested reader might compare the *carmen arvale* (*CIL* I 2² = *ILS* 5039) with the incantation of the Trobriand Islanders quoted by Bronisław Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic, II: The Language of Magic and Gardening* (New York, 1935), 237.

Now we come back to Rome. The conservative and legalistic aspects of Roman religion are familiar.²⁰ Witness a famous passage of the Elder Pliny (23/24–79 C. E.):

We see too that senior magistrates make their prayers using a precise form of words: someone dictates the formula from a written text to ensure that no word is omitted or spoken in the wrong order; someone else is assigned as an overseer to check (what is spoken); yet another man is given the task of ensuring silence; and a piper plays to prevent anything else but the prayer being audible. There are records of remarkable cases of both types of fault — when the actual sound of ill omens has spoilt the prayer, or when the prayer has been spoken wrongly.²¹

Quintilian (1.6.41) observes, “Religion prohibits these [sc. words of prayers] from being changed, and we must treat them as sacred things.”

What connecting lines can we draw between these aspects of Roman religion and the Latin grammatical tradition? Several intriguing possibilities suggest themselves. The Roman polymath Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 B. C. E.), arguably the most important ancient theorist of the Latin language, was also an avid and remarkably influential encyclopedist of religious customs.²² In the etymological sections of *De Lingua Latina*, Varro deals with many words from the religious sphere. Nigidius Figulus (*praetor* 58 B. C. E.; best known now for his cameo at

²⁰Frances V. Hickson, *Roman Prayer Language: Livy and the Aeneid* [sic] *of Vergil* (Stuttgart, 1993), 7–9.

²¹*N. H.* 28.10–1; translation: Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, II: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge, 1998), 129. For reports of occasions on which prayers were rendered invalid owing to verbal slip-ups, see Livy 41.16.1 and Cicero *Dom.* 139–40.

²²Daniel J. Taylor, *Varro De Lingua Latina X* (Amsterdam, 1996), 1–10.

Lucan 1.638) wrote a lengthy work *On the Gods* as well as treatises on various other religious topics. He composed in addition at least twenty-nine books of *Commentarii Grammatici*, containing many prescriptions for correct linguistic usage.²³ A fragment quoted by Aulus Gellius deals with “rustic language” (*rusticus sermo*) — which term, Gellius tells us, early authors used for barbarism.²⁴ The Elder Pliny, from whose discussion of religious language I have quoted above,²⁵ wrote a work entitled *Dubius Sermo* (now lost), which dealt with questions of linguistic correctness. Later grammarians cite Pliny’s definitions of barbarism and solecism, which appeared in this work.²⁶ Thus three figures who came to be regarded as fundamental authorities in the Latin grammatical tradition were also eminent scholars of religion.

I should like to turn now from traditional Roman religion to Christianity. The Church required (by the sixth century) that baptisms be accompanied by the trinitarian formula *in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti*. But what if this formula were garbled? Was the baptism valid? I cite a passage from the notes to John Ozell’s 1750 edition of Rabelais:

²³E. Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic* (Baltimore, 1985), 123–4, 309–12.

²⁴*N. A.* 13.6.3 = *GRF* 21.

²⁵Pliny show extensive knowledge of religion at various places in the *N. H.* — see e. g. the chronological data he furnishes on the development of extispicy at Rome (11.186). He is an especially rich source on the subject of magic.

²⁶122–3 Mazzarino; the extracts in question come from Servius in *Don. GL* 4.444.3–4 and Pompeius *GL* 5.283.20.

Ask [the Canonists] whether it is a Baptism to say *omine atris & ilii*, &c. instead of *nomine patris & filii*, &c. They'll tell ye *No*, and that such a Diminution hinders it from being a Baptism: for, say they, the Sense and Meaning is remov'd and chang'd, for *atris* does not signify Father; nor *ilii* Son; *ergo*, such Baptism is null. But if this Diminution be at the End of the Word, as if the *s* be taken from *patris*, by saying *patri*, or the like, such Diminution does not hinder the Baptism: for one and the same Sense remains in the Words, but then the Intention of saying them right must go along with them. Of this we have an example in a Decree, *de Consecr. dist. 4. cap. retulerunt*: A Priest, ignorant in the Latin tongue, baptizeth a Child thus, *in nomina patria & filia & Spiritum sancta amen*. In this Decree the Pope [Zacharias, 741–52] says, the Priest was a very devout Man, and had an Intention to speak aright, and only fail'd thro' Ignorance and Inscience.²⁷

What is striking here is the implicit use of the traditional categories of grammatical error. The first sort of deviation — *omine atris et ilii* — is barbarism, of the species which the Roman grammarians classified as *detractio litterae* 'removal of a letter'. These are simply not Latin words.²⁸ The second sort of deviation — which is valid, provided the correct intention is there — is solecism. The words are Latin words, but they are misinflected; together they form no comprehensible Latin sentence. And yet, they correspond, somehow, with the intention of the priest who spoke them.

Mispronunciation in church may have diabolical consequences. In the *Sermones Vulgares* of Jacques de Vitry (*ca.* 1220), we find this *exemplum*:

²⁷J. Ozell, ed., *The Works of Francis Rabelais, M. D.*, 2^d ed. (London, 1750), ad 1.19, n. 8. This passage serves as the model for a chapter of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (book 4, ch. 29). See W. G. Day, "Sterne and Ozell," *English Studies* 53 (1972): 434–6.

²⁸Or else, as in the case of *omine*, they are entirely different words from those intended.

I have heard that a certain holy man, while he was in choir, saw a devil truly weighed down with a full sack. When, however, he commanded the demon to tell what he carried, the evil one said: “These are the syllables and syncopated words and verses of the psalms which these very clerics in their morning prayers stole from God; you can be sure I am keeping these diligently for their accusation.”²⁹

This demon (who later goes by the name Tutivillus) collects syllables that are slurred, mumbled, or skipped in prayers — and hence stolen from God. We learn from verses in another sermon:³⁰

A skipped letter or a murmured syllable; a word that’s not right; if the reading is read badly: Satan collects all these.

Note the devil’s interest in the entire linguistic hierarchy, from letter to syllable to word to entire text. In the context of prayer, barbarism is not just a sin against language, but a sin against God.

I’ve focused on religion as a paradigmatic case of an area where extreme conservatism in language is often demanded. In examining materials from diverse times and places, my method has been not historical, but comparative. I’ve suggested that there are some meaningful parallels between the development of grammar in the Roman world and in the Hindu and Arab traditions. One shared factor, to which attention must be drawn, is the increasing linguistic diversity of the Roman

²⁹Translation: Margaret Jennings, “Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon,” *Studies in Philology* 74.5 (1977): 11. Cf. Suzanne Reynolds, *Medieval Reading: Grammar, Rhetoric, and the Classical Text* (Cambridge, 1996), 9.

³⁰Öffentliche Bibliothek of Basel, MS A-I, 20, fol. 150^b (date 1435); see Jennings *op. cit.*, 19–20. (Translation mine.)

Empire — especially acute in late antiquity, whence almost all of our surviving grammatical texts. Fourth- and fifth-century authors such as Augustine and the grammarians Consentius and Pompeius comment on non-standard features in the Latin spoken by Africans, Gauls, Greeks, etc.³¹ Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636) writes that in the imperial age “new customs and peoples came into the Roman state, corrupting the proper nature of words with solecisms and barbarisms.”³² It is to be expected that prescriptive grammar emerges in response to some set of social forces. As Renate Bartsch puts it, “notions of correctness are not employed for their own sake, but are developed and employed only when they are really necessary.”³³

Let me conclude by sketching the “big picture,” as I see it. Language is constitutive of institutions — such as religion and law — that serve to produce social cohesion. Given that spoken and written language are the media par excellence for communication, the importance of linguistic norms in maintaining group identity should be evident. Conservatism in language preserves the social status quo. But society is not a static entity; it must adjust continually to changing situations and

³¹Frank Frost Abbott, “Vulgar Latin in the *Ars Consentii de Barbarismis*,” *CP* 4 (1909): 246–7; R. Vainio, “Causes of Barbarisms and Threats to *Latinitas*: The View of the Roman Grammarians,” in *Annales Universitatis Turkuensis*, ser. B, vol. 219 (1997): 142–6; József Herman, *Vulgar Latin*, tr. Roger Wright (University Park, 2000), 29.

³²*Orig.* 9.1.7; translation: R. Wright, *Late Latin and Early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France* (Liverpool, 1982), 267.

³³R. Bartsch, “Correctness and Norms of Language,” in *On Language: Rhetorica, Phonologica, Syntactica: A Festschrift for Robert P. Stockwell*, ed. C. Duncan-Rose and T. Vennemann (London, 1988), 10.

modes of living. Revolutionary movements (such as Stoicism and early Christianity) aim toward an upheaval of traditional institutions; and so it is not surprising to see their depreciation of the prescriptive stance of the grammarians. These two linguistic attitudes — the prescriptive and the anti-prescriptive — exist in a dynamic that shapes, at any historical moment, the form of cultural life.³⁴

³⁴I am grateful to those who shared expertise of one sort or another with me: Michael Fontaine, Phoebe Pettingell, Peter M. Scharf, Mark Schiefsky, and Philip Thibodeau. I also thank William Wyatt for his editorial advice.