

## Words, Wolves, and Show Dogs

*Talk on the Wild Side: Why Language Can't Be Tamed*

Lane Greene (PublicAffairs 2018), 232 pages

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Is the Internet making writing worse? In one survey, more than two thirds of secondary-school teachers agreed that digital technologies allow students to “[t]ake shortcuts and not put effort into their writing.”<sup>1</sup> Some teachers report “a potential decline in vocabulary and grammatical skills among their students.”<sup>2</sup> Editors—both inside and outside of the world of legal writing—can feel “like the little Dutch boy in the story, who saved his town from destruction by plugging a flood-wall with his finger.”<sup>3</sup>

In *Talk on the Wild Side*, Lane Greene argues this fear of language in decline is largely unfounded. In the book, Greene examines language and grammar as an “ecosystem” rather than a list of unchanging rules.<sup>4</sup> While individual markers of grammatical proficiency may change or atrophy, a language’s ability to communicate persists.<sup>5</sup> As some rules die out, other rules emerge to ensure information can be adequately and accurately transmitted.<sup>6</sup>

The book’s central metaphor is that “[I]anguage is a wild animal.”<sup>7</sup> While “well adapted for its conditions and needs,” it can be “unstable,”

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<sup>1</sup> Kristen Purcell, Judy Buchanan, and Linda Friedrich, *The Impact of Digital Tools on Student Writing and How Writing Is Taught in Schools*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 32 (July 16, 2013), [https://www.pewinternet.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP\\_NWP-Writing-and-Tech.pdf](https://www.pewinternet.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP_NWP-Writing-and-Tech.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 36.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Wroe, *Why Keeping THE ECONOMIST’S Style Guide Up to Date Is a Battle* (June 1, 2018), <https://medium.economist.com/why-keeping-the-economists-style-guide-up-to-date-is-a-battle-ff5f72c21de2>.

<sup>4</sup> LANE GREENE, *TALK ON THE WILD SIDE: WHY LANGUAGE CAN’T BE TAMED* 95 (2018).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 125.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 6.

“inefficient,” or “fuzzy.”<sup>8</sup> In response to this wildness, Greene observes self-appointed “tamers” who seek to impose a logical system upon language and “make it behave properly.”<sup>9</sup> These tamers, though, “set themselves up for failure and disappointment” because they “misunderstand[] the deep nature of language.”<sup>10</sup> By erroneously insisting that language should be “efficient[] and logical,” language tamers “make themselves miserable by observing the real, natural, messy thing every day.”<sup>11</sup> For Greene, “language is not so much logical as it is useful.”<sup>12</sup> “It is not perfect. But it is amazing.”<sup>13</sup>

A prominent theme throughout the book is the division between descriptivists and prescriptivists. Greene defines the former as “those who look at the facts of language . . . and come up with generalisations about why . . . changes happen.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast, prescriptivists “are actively involved in trying to dictate what the language does.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than two irreconcilable camps, though, Greene recognizes the two positions represent a spectrum.<sup>16</sup> “[N]o sane person is a pure prescriptivist, declaring a rule to be valid even in the face of literally millions of high-quality citations from edited writing that show otherwise.”<sup>17</sup>

As both a language journalist and an editor, Greene sees language from both perspectives.<sup>18</sup> In his own writing, Greene seeks to describe language changes descriptively, like a linguist might.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, as an editor for *The Economist*, he also enforces the prescriptive mandates of the magazine’s style guide.<sup>20</sup>

A recurring target of criticism in the book is prescriptivists who are unmoored from actual usage. Neville Martin Gwynne, author of *Gwynne’s Grammar*, serves as a foil for the second chapter, which examines the logic (and illogic) of language.<sup>21</sup> Gwynne’s approach to grammar relies on the idea that “[i]f we do not use words rightly, we shall not think rightly.”<sup>22</sup> As an example of Gwynne’s approach, Greene cites his commentary on the use of the phrase “he or she” to replace the general “he.”<sup>23</sup> Gwynne finds

8 *Id.*

9 *Id.* “Language is a wild animal like a wolf, . . . [b]ut there are those who want to tame language.” *Id.* “Their ideal language would be a show dog, one that will come, sit, fetch, shake hands and roll over on command.” *Id.*

10 *Id.* at 7.

11 *Id.*

12 *Id.* at 8.

13 *Id.*

14 *Id.* at 5.

15 *Id.*

16 *Id.* at 41.

17 *Id.*

18 Lane Greene, *Who Decides What Words Mean?*, AEON (Dec. 6, 2018), <https://aeon.co/essays/why-language-might-be-the-optimal-self-regulating-system>.

19 *Id.*

20 *Id.*

21 GREENE, *supra* note 4, at 32.

22 *Id.* at 33 (quoting N.M. GWYNNE, *GWYNNE’S GRAMMAR: THE ULTIMATE INTRODUCTION TO GRAMMAR AND THE WRITING OF GOOD ENGLISH 5* (2014)).

23 *Id.* at 32–33 (quoting GWYNNE, *supra* note 22).

the phrase to be “offensive to logic and common sense and shockingly illiterate.”<sup>24</sup> Even worse for Gwynne is the use of “they” or “their” as a singular pronoun.<sup>25</sup> Gwynne ironically proclaims, “Anyone who considers this modern practice acceptable has lost their mind.”<sup>26</sup>

For Greene, this “grammatical sticklerism” is “ahistorical and ungrammatical.”<sup>27</sup> For a descriptivist like Greene, an examination of actual usage—both modern and historical—is the appropriate means to evaluate the singular “they.”<sup>28</sup> As it turns out, this usage has a significant pedigree, dating back to 1375.<sup>29</sup> It has been adopted by esteemed authors, including Lord Byron, George Bernard Shaw, and Jane Austen.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, descriptivism alone has its limits. Most writers can’t resolve every grammatical question with “a long historical survey of messy evidence.”<sup>31</sup> Fortunately, Greene sees an “an increase in good prescriptivist usage and grammar books based on evidence.”<sup>32</sup> In particular, Greene endorses the “descriptive prescriptivism”<sup>33</sup> of Bryan Garner, who has periodically sparred with Greene about linguistics.<sup>34</sup> Greene finds the lawyerly skill of “amass[ing] evidence to make [a] case” well-suited to the task of developing evidence-based prescriptive rules.<sup>35</sup> Greene is most impressed with Garner’s commitment to incorporating actual usage into his prescriptions, including using graphs developed by Google Books.<sup>36</sup>

Returning to the example of the singular-form “they,” Greene finds Garner’s answer superior to Gwynne’s.<sup>37</sup> Garner recognizes English’s lack of an epicene pronoun is an “inadequacy” rather than a reflection of “a ‘logic’ invisible to all but the classically educated.”<sup>38</sup> Still, even as Garner

24 *Id.* at 33 (quoting GWYNNE, *supra* note 22).

25 *Id.*

26 *Id.* (quoting GWYNNE, *supra* note 22).

27 *Id.*

28 *Id.* at 35.

29 *Id.* (citing OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY ONLINE, *they*, pron., I.2, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/200700> (last visited Apr. 1, 2019)).

30 *Id.* at 36.

31 *Id.* at 52.

32 *Id.*

33 *Id.* at 53; see Bryan A. Garner, *Making Peace in the Language Wars*, 7 GREEN BAG 2D 227, 230 (2004), [http://www.greenbag.org/v7n3/v7n3\\_article\\_garner.pdf](http://www.greenbag.org/v7n3/v7n3_article_garner.pdf) (describing himself as a “descriptive prescriber”).

34 Bryan Garner & Lane Greene, *Which Language and Grammar Rules to Flout*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 27, 2012), <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/09/27/which-language-and-grammar-rules-to-flout>.

35 GREENE, *supra* note 4, at 53–54.

36 *Id.* at 54 (citing BRYAN GARNER, GARNER’S MODERN ENGLISH USAGE 822 (4th ed. 2016)).

37 *Id.*

38 *Id.* at 52.

recognizes the rise in the acceptability of singular “they,” he advises readers to avoid it because the form continues to annoy many readers.<sup>39</sup> While Garner’s usage guidance is still based on his personal judgment, it is nonetheless transparent with its evidence.<sup>40</sup> Greene describes Garner as a “language tamer” who acknowledges the “rules of grammar [do not] descend from heaven on a cloud.”<sup>41</sup>

The third chapter continues examining the relationship between language and logical rules through the decades-long process of teaching computers to understand language.<sup>42</sup> Initial attempts to create machine translation, in the 1950s, relied on distilling language to a system of rules and creating programs based on those rules.<sup>43</sup> This programming, though, turned out to be much harder than expected.<sup>44</sup> Any attempt to incorporate all the rules, exceptions, and irregularities inherent in natural language quickly caused the programs to begin “wheezing under the weight” of all the necessary computation.<sup>45</sup>

As an example, Greene gives the phrases “the pen is in the box” and “the box is in the pen.”<sup>46</sup> A human translator has the necessary contextual knowledge to understand that “a normal-sized [writing] pen can fit into a normal-sized box, but not the other way around.”<sup>47</sup> A rule-based computer program, though, lacks this context.<sup>48</sup> Recent developments in machine translation have only been possible because programmers have moved away from rule-based programming toward analysis of “Big Data.”<sup>49</sup> Instead of trying to develop translation programs from the rules up (i.e., prescriptively), modern translation relies on feeding an artificial intelligence system a large corpus of writing and letting the computer deduce the appropriate usage from context.<sup>50</sup> This approach—with its obvious parallels to Greene’s preferred descriptivism—has resulted in significantly better machine translation.<sup>51</sup>

39 *Id.* at 54 (citing GARNER, *supra* note 36).

40 *Id.* at 55.

41 *Id.* at 54–55.

42 *Id.* at 65–91 (entitled “Machines for talking”).

43 *Id.* at 69–70.

44 *Id.* at 70–71.

45 *Id.* at 73.

46 *Id.* at 73. While “pen” can mean either a writing instrument or an animal enclosure in English, there is no equivalent homonym in French. *Id.*

47 *Id.*

48 *Id.*

49 *Id.* at 83.

50 *Id.*

51 *Id.* at 83–86.

Importantly, Greene recognizes that language evolution is not always organic. Sometimes attempts by “tamers” to dictate the rules are effective, often to the misfortune of minority populations.<sup>52</sup> In Chapter Five, “Language tamers with armies and navies,” Greene surveys how language has shaped—and in turn been shaped by—politics and power.<sup>53</sup> For centuries, dominant languages “crushed” dialect diversity “in the name of building cohesive nation-states.”<sup>54</sup> Colonialism brought another wave of “linguistic steamrollers” that spread colonial languages through the Americas, Arabia, and East Asia.<sup>55</sup>

Language’s relationship with power has serious implications for writing teachers, especially those who interact with students from disenfranchised communities. Greene identifies the so-called “One Right Way principle” as a key fallacy underlying the type of grammar prescriptivism he finds objectionable.<sup>56</sup> This fallacy has two parts: (1) “there is One Right Way to use an expression” and (2) “there is One Right Way to express a meaning.”<sup>57</sup> This error, however, “fail[s] to understand the basic linguistic concept of register,” or the idea that appropriate usage varies by audience and situation.<sup>58</sup> A speaker’s register choices create an important “second channel,” allowing communication “about the occasion, the speaker, the person spoken to, and the perceived relationships.”<sup>59</sup> Far from reflecting laziness or ignorance, varying register is an efficient way to communicate important, subtextual messages.<sup>60</sup>

For teachers of legal writing—who specialize in a very formal register—it is important to remember that formal language is only one type of communication and not an objectively superior choice for all environments. Not only does this embrace the advocacy potential of Greene’s “second channel” of communication in an informal register, it also helps students accept instruction in the formal register.<sup>61</sup>

For students, constant critiques rooted in the presumed superiority of the formal register can amount to “a repeated minor humiliation.”<sup>62</sup> When

52 *Id.* at 131–32 (describing nationalistic attempts after the breakup of Yugoslavia to “split the formerly unified language”).

53 *Id.* at 127–55.

54 *Id.* at 136.

55 *Id.* at 138–39.

56 *Id.* at 158–59 (citing Arnold Zwicky, *One Right Way*, ARNOLD ZWICKY’S BLOG (June 28, 2009), <https://arnoldzwicky.org/2009/06/28/one-right-way/>).

57 *Id.*

58 *Id.* at 161.

59 *Id.* at 163.

60 *Id.* Greene demonstrates the effectiveness of this second channel by comparing the persuasive impact of formal and informal register choices by George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. *Id.* at 163–67.

61 *Id.* at 170.

62 *Id.*

students are taught that “grammar is a set of rules for torturing natural sentences into an unnatural form that will satisfy a teacher,” the student “has not just a humiliation, but a humiliator.”<sup>63</sup> Greene finds that the “far more sensible” approach is to “use the differences between registers as a pedagogical tool.”<sup>64</sup>

Greene rejects the idea that grammar instruction can be boiled down to “teach them the rules.”<sup>65</sup> Instead, he urges an approach combining two ways of learning: “apply[ing] rules to abstract mental symbols” and “inductive, patient strengthening of the recognition of certain patterns.”<sup>66</sup> The key to developing this intuitive understanding is reading. Students need to “become comfortable with what the good stuff looks like.”<sup>67</sup> At the same time, teachers should avoid the temptation to “confuse an explicit knowledge of rules . . . with an ability to write.”<sup>68</sup> “Lousy writing can be grammatical; good writing can have errors.”<sup>69</sup>

Even as he recognizes the need for prescriptive grammatical education, Greene critiques several individual rules. Some of these are commonly recognized as “myths” that are belied by the actual usage of great writers<sup>70</sup> (e.g. don’t end a sentence with a preposition<sup>71</sup> or don’t split infinitives<sup>72</sup>). More daringly, Greene questions some widely-accepted rules, such as the distinctions between “that” and “which,”<sup>73</sup> “can” and “may,”<sup>74</sup> and even “who” and “whom.”<sup>75</sup>

Again, though, Greene’s day-job is editing a world-renowned magazine with its own style guide,<sup>76</sup> so he is not endorsing a completely laissez-faire approach to language.<sup>77</sup> Rather, he objects to prescriptivist guidance that argues in the “authoritarian abstract” to repeat “rumour and hearsay.”<sup>78</sup> This type of prescriptivism is especially problematic when the endorsement of the formal register is coupled with a dismissal of other dialects as inferior or “politically correct barbarism.”<sup>79</sup> Instead, Greene advocates a scholarly approach to grammar that relies on examining the language used by native speakers.<sup>80</sup>

63 *Id.*

64 *Id.* at 174.

65 *Id.* at 89.

66 *Id.* at 90.

67 *Id.*

68 *Id.*

69 *Id.*

70 *Id.* at 159–61.

71 *Id.* at 156–58.

72 *Id.* at 37–38, 40–41.

73 *Id.* at 160–61.

74 *Id.* at 167–69.

75 *Id.* at 2–6, 13–14, 93–94, 125–26, 173, 182. But see *id.* at 89 (recognizing that mastering the use of “whom” is “still a part of producing high quality prose”).

76 Greene, *supra* note 18.

77 GREENE, *supra* note 4, at 40.

78 *Id.*

79 *Id.*

80 *Id.*

Overall, *Talk on the Wild Side* is an interesting (and quick) read providing an entertaining overview of modern linguistics and the dynamic nature of language. While it may provide some general inspiration for pedagogical approaches to legal writing, its primary utility is in revealing the beauty inherent in language's dynamic nature. For language lovers, it's a fascinating reminder that loving language does not mean embracing grammar pedantry. In addition, for those who have become discouraged by the "decline" in grammar skills exhibited by modern students, perhaps the discussion can ward against encroaching cynicism.