

## THE TERMS WE USE

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An apology is in order for the whimsical manner of speaking that we grammarians use, not only in the classroom and in private discussion, but frequently even in published material. When we say, for example, that English th is sometimes a voiced sound and sometimes voiceless, it may not be clear to the uninitiated that this apparently meaningless statement is only our peculiar way of saying that there are two interdental spirants, one voiced and the other voiceless. It is our preoccupation with the conventional orthographic representation of these sounds that leads us to take the written symbols as the point of departure for our statement about the sounds.

It might be argued that in order to be completely scientific in talking about a language we ought to revamp our modes of expression to say exactly what we mean. And probably all would agree that considerable care in this regard should be exercised in the deliberate formulation of phonetic and grammatical propositions. But in everyday discourse it is difficult and not particularly necessary to avoid our customary figures of speech in the interests of strict accuracy. As long as the hidden implications of our informal statements can be readily inferred, we permit ourselves to use a number of metaphorical turns of phrase.

It is our usual practice to refer to the articles in English as "a, an, and the." And in using this formula, we realize that the forms [ɛ, ə, æn, ən, ði, ðə] are all included. Obviously, we say both a and an because these forms are distinguished in spelling; but we do not say both [ði] and [ðə], because these forms are not distinguished in spelling, even though they are actually as distinct as a and an. If our audience is aware of the variations in form of the articles, we can use the conventional formula "a, an, and the" with the tacit implication that all involved forms are included.

Another example, used more often by laymen than grammarians, is the expression "dropping the g." We can readily

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translate this into stricter terms by saying that final unstressed [in] becomes [ən]. But we tolerate the looser expression because it is readily translated.

Some of our statements about syntax are not so easily translated into strict terms. An example is our use of the word "omit" in such statements as this: The relative pronoun may be omitted when it is followed by a subject and predicate. The precise meaning and implications of the word "omit" are difficult to see. If it implies that the relative pronoun was always expressed in this construction at some earlier historical period, we should be prepared to show that such was actually the case. It is more likely that our use of "omit" in this and other instances is not intended to involve any historical assumptions, but is simply a convenient word for stating the existence of two equivalent constructions, one with and one without the word "that." Occasionally the word "omit" seems to carry an implication that the fuller form of expression is better or more frequent.

In this connection it might be worthwhile to consider the term "correct" or "proper." Some of us have developed an inordinate timidity about using these terms, probably because there is so much difference of opinion as to their meaning. Some grammarians lean heavily on historical considerations for the establishment of a standard; some depend on the authority of reference books; some appeal to the observed practice of one or another class of native speakers. Whatever conventional standard is adopted — and it is only fair that, as teachers, we inform our students what standard we are going by — it is quite reasonable to use the term "correct" in the sense of conforming to this standard. Thus we may be permitted to label words, pronunciations, or grammatical constructions as correct or incorrect, provided the audience has been informed of what we mean by these labels.

Some of the shortcomings of the grammarian would be difficult to defend. We often obscure a simple idea by embellishing it with technical language. We often give a rule or a long historical discourse as the reason for a fact of usage. But we can defend our favorite figures of speech, and we need not give them up as long as it is clear that they are capable of restatement in unequivocal terms.