A research study gauged the distraction potential of 45 written usage elements, traditionally considered errors, for systematic random samples of two different educated reading audiences: post-secondary business communication teachers and executive vice presidents in very large firms. Findings showed that the usage errors least distracting to both audiences were lexical elements such as use of "disinterested" for "uninterested," the verb "prioritize," and "data" as a singular, as well as the use of an adverbial phrase to complete a linking verb. The most distracting errors were primarily sentence-structure errors such as run-ons, fragments, danglers, and faulty parallel structure. The findings are useful in two ways: They describe the reactions of educated users to language elements that may be in process of change; and they offer instructors more information to use as a basis for emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain usage elements in an already crowded communication course.

Language in Change: Academics' and Executives' Perceptions of Usage Errors

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INTRODUCTION

Because language changes, writers and teachers of business and technical communication must sometimes make judgment calls on correctness and incorrectness of usage elements. Though dictionaries and usage experts both describe and prescribe usage, they do not always agree. On some elements of usage, correctness is sharply contested.

For many elements of American English usage, Cooperud (1980) has helpfully cumulated, compared, and recorded the opinions of important usage authorities both conservative and liberal, as well as judgments given in influential dictionaries.** Many of his entries cover disputed usages.

Many of the most hotly contested elements are matters of taste or personal opinion. With each published authority implicitly claiming to reflect a majority of educated persons' practice, more descriptive data are in order. The present project gauges the distraction potential of 45 usage elements, traditionally considered errors, for two different educated reading audiences: post-secondary business communication teachers and executive vice presidents in very large firms.
Related Literature

Many hundreds of descriptive and prescriptive books, articles, and monographs have been written on the broad subject of usage. Research in numerous scholarly specialties (e.g., speech act theory and semiotics) expands our understanding of usage; indeed, the bare term grammar has many different meanings depending on the specialty of the user. (Greenbaum, 1988, pp. 20-31). The present research is appropriately viewed, however, against a less specific and more familiar background, that of the debate among usage arbiters.

For several centuries efforts have been made to standardize the English language. Because English serves the differing needs of widely varying groups of speakers and writers, no one unchanging standard is possible. The "Standard English" of 1910 differs in many respects from that of 1990. However, not all educated speakers and users of the language agree on what has and has not changed.

Debate over "correctness" emanates from teachers, journalists, and others whose livelihood depends on using English competently. The language of their disagreement is often intemperate. Williams (1981) remarks on the "unusual ferocity" with which writers on language attack the supposed errors of others (p. 152). Williams' inquiry examines the nature of error in usage, noting "great variation in our definition of error, great variation in our emotional investment in defining and condemning error, [and] great variation in the perceived seriousness of individual errors" (p. 155).

Stalker (1985) discusses a category he calls death-of-language writers. Richard Mitchell (1979), John Simon (1980), and Edwin Newman (1975, 1977) are among the most influential of these and decry changes in language as anarchic, atrocious, immoral. In a similar vein, Bush (1972, p. 247) writes, "Language must be protected not only by poets but by the saving remnant of people who care." Baron (1982), Daniels (1983), and Greenbaum (1988), among others, counter the doomsayers with historical evidence demonstrating that the language is evolving, not deteriorating.

Language critics are especially severe on the subject of cliches; yet Pickrel (1985) challenges many received ideas about cliches and unsettles any certainty about what is and is not a cliche. The soundest ground can begin to quiver: Copperud's work surveys highly influential sources; yet Borroff (1985), writing about usage guides, warns, "In order to judge the judgments, we must judge the judges, in an endless regress," where sometimes "the total of countervailing opinions remains zero" (pp. 365-366).

Questions of correctness in language generate defensiveness. Neuleib and Scharton (1982), professors and veteran operators of a telephone grammar hotline, cite their callers' high anxiety, intolerance of others' perceived errors, conviction that English is deteriorating, and unwillingness to hear that some usage questions have several possible correct answers. Gould (1987) traces some of these anxieties to periodicals like Josephine Turck Baker's *Correct English*, which for many decades purveyed Baker's opinions about usage and heightened readers' fear of solecism. MacNeil (1986, p. 41) says, "Language reinforces feelings of social superiority or inferiority; it creates insiders and outsiders; it is a prop to vanity or a source of anxiety. And it is on both emotions that the language snobs play."

Recognizing that snobbery exists does not obviate the problem. To succeed in the work world, one needs to be able to use the language competently (Anderson, 1981). The language must seem "correct" to the ear and eye of the business audience but must not seem unnatural or pretentious.

Connors (1985) chronicles the rise and decline of prescriptivism in English composition pedagogy. While most writers in composition journals now view contested elements of usage as a matter of situation, purpose, and other variables, most journals in business communication and business education have evinced less change in what they consider correct usage. Similarly, many business communication courses and texts have retained a list of shoulds and shouldn'ts generated decades ago. These rules continue to underlie assumptions in journal articles about writing errors. (See Andera & Condon, 1986; Supnick & Rooney, 1985, pp. 117-118; and Goodin & Swerdlow, 1987.)

Shaughnessy in *Errors and Expectations* (1977) offers a wholesome perspective on her topic. She says errors count, but not as much as most think (p. 120), that some errors are more disorienting to a reader than others, and that some incidence of error is tolerable to readers (p. 122). Endnotes to Williams (1981) contain Williams' observations about specific rule infractions that probably bother few readers. Sklar (1988) offers a
thorough examination of a single "error" made in speech by virtually all speakers of English, the problem of verb or antecedent agreement with the indefinite pronoun (everyone, anybody, each).

Finegan (1980, pp. 75-108) reviews the usage surveys performed between 1875 and 1952. Connors and Lunsford (1988), in a good-humored article, updated earlier research on error frequency in college students' writing. (See Harap, 1930.) They generated a list of the most common errors but also pointed out the inconsistency of teachers' methods of marking and suggested several elements that might account for the variation. Meyers (1972) analyzed the 500 prose samples in the Brown University Corpus of American English to trace the occurrence of 29 debatable usage elements. In England, researchers Mittins, Salu, Edmonson, & Coyne (1970) surveyed 500 people in varying occupations to elicit their judgments on 55 elements of contested usage. And usage surveys underlie the preparation of major dictionaries.

The present study builds upon research published by Hairston (1981). Members of her convenience sample of business and professional persons showed wide differences in their reactions to common language and usage errors. As did her study, the present project asked respondents to indicate the level to which various usage infractions bothered them.

**Need for the Study**

As certain language elements change, the distinctions between what is correct and what is incorrect can become blurred or even disappear. As this occurs, readers of business prose are bothered only by those language elements they perceive as incorrect. They are NOT bothered by those language elements they continue to perceive as correct or of minimal "wrongness." Where readers are bothered by elements of what they are reading, they are likely to make some adverse judgment about the content, the writer, or both.

From executives in business and technical organizations, teachers frequently hear that new graduates cannot write well. The teachers themselves, like the various published authorities on English usage, do not always agree on what is and is not correct. And as Hymes (1980, p. 19) says, "Linguists...are well aware that none of us has accurate awareness of all that we say, and that a person may deny a feature that he or she nonetheless uses." Both teachers and executives will sometimes utter one questionable usage element in criticizing a second questionable usage element.

With no intent to ambush or traduce either group, this study is an effort to describe and compare the extent to which certain questionable
usage elements bother each of these two groups of readers: business communication teachers and business executives.

It is expected that the results will have implications for the teaching of business and communication. Based on the findings, teachers may wish to reconsider the emphasis they place on a few of the usage elements that appear to have undergone the most change, while continuing to emphasize strongly the errors that bother readers most.

**Problem, Scope, and Limitations**

This research gauges the distraction potential of 45 usage elements, traditionally considered errors, for two different educated reading audiences: post-secondary business communication teachers and executive vice presidents in very large firms. For each usage element the study will offer overall figures and examine differences between the figures for the two groups.

This study relates to written, not oral, usage, and does not attempt to divide formal written from informal written usage. No attempt is made to define "educated practice," nor to rule on who should and should not determine educated practice. The purpose of the study is the gathering of descriptive data to assist teachers charged with the difficult task of prescribing usage intelligently.

In the development of questionnaire items, every effort was made to compose a natural-sounding sentence in which the error was neither egregious nor nearly invisible. Despite these efforts, content, structure, and sometimes mere length of example are likely to affect somewhat the degree to which a reader notices or is bothered by some of the errors.

**Definitions**

For this study, several terms need narrowed definitions.

**Usage**

The customary manner in which a language is written. This study includes elements of grammar, punctuation, word form, and lexical meaning.

**Questionable Usage Element**

An element of usage considered wrong by many but appearing often enough in writing to suggest that it MAY be in process of gradual change to Standard English. For brevity, the word "error" will sometimes be used.
Distraction Potential

The degree to which a questionable usage element bothers a reader as he or she scans a business letter, memo, or short report. This definition was placed in the questionnaire directions to maximize validity. The study did NOT seek to test respondents on how well they knew traditional English usage, but instead sought a rough measure of the degree to which the perceived usage infraction might distract from the business message.

RESEARCH METHODS

To generate responses from an academic and a business sample, two systematic random samples were drawn for a questionnaire survey. The first sample selected 400 members of the Association for Business Communication. The second sample selected 400 executive vice presidents from among the 1000 largest industrial and the 500 largest service firms in the United States, using a nameslist purchased from Research Projects of America. The executive vice president position title was chosen based on the assumption that persons having reached that high a position in a very large firm are likely to be effective communicators and to represent well the practice of educated persons in organizations.

A four-page questionnaire was developed. To test business readers' reactions to the questionable usage elements, the researchers used Hairston's three-point "does not bother me / bothers me a little / bothers me a lot" response scale.

The questionnaire contained 58 sentences, all such as might appear in a business context. Each sentence contained a questionable usage element. The researchers chose only those usage errors seen frequently in their business students' writing. Those errors Hairston referred to in her study as status markers (e.g., "he brung") were not included.

Demographic questions asked job title, sex, age range, and income range. The questionnaire was pilot-tested in a senior-level management communication class at Arizona State University and was subjected to the criticism of ten business communication faculty members. Minor modifications were made.

A cover letter explained the study's purpose, stressing that this research was NOT asking whether the respondents would MAKE the errors in the various items. The letter tried both to motivate response and to reassure respondents that this was in no way a test. This was done in order to minimize any demand characteristics or auspices effect that might occur because university letterhead was used.
One reminder was sent. Responses were coded, tabulated, and treated using SAS and the computer resources of Arizona State University.

"Does not bother me" was coded and data-entered as a 0 response, "bothers me a little" as a 1 response, and "bothers me a lot" as a 2 response. Though, strictly speaking, these data are ordinal, not interval, assigning these values to them is useful in permitting calculation of response frequencies and means, in ranking the items according to distraction potential, and in comparing responses by profession, age, and sex. The discussion that follows is based on these calculations, rankings, and comparisons.

FINDINGS

After reporting response rates, this section will list the usage elements exemplified in the questionnaire. Using overall mean responses and mean responses of the two groups, comparisons will be made. The ten most distracting usage elements and the ten least distracting elements will be shown, with comparisons to Hairston's findings where appropriate. The two respondent groups will then be chi-square tested with respect to the elements on which they most disagreed. Additionally, statistical differences by age and sex will be reviewed. Also, because some errors were tested by multiple examples, responses to the multiple examples will be compared. Finally, some cautious inferences will be drawn with respect to which language elements appear to have undergone the most change.

Response Rate

From the sample of 400 executive vice presidents, 133 usable responses were received, for a 33 percent response rate. Of the 400 ABC members, an even 200 returned a usable response, for a 50 percent response rate. The overall response rate was 42 percent.

Usage Elements Tested

Though the tables of findings will contain many of the actual sentences used, Table I presents a list of the questionable usage elements included in the questionnaire's 58 items. Some are tested more than once. No suggestion is intended that all these elements are equally "wrong." Obviously, testing examples of 45 errors does not exhaust the range of writing ills. These were selected because they recur in college-level student writing and in business writing.
Table I

USAGE ELEMENTS TESTED

1. "reason is because" (adv. clause as complement of linking verb)
2. preposition ending sentence
3. "myself" neither intensive nor reflexive
4. comma splice
5. less / fewer
6. who / whom
7. "feel" instead of "believe"
8. affect / effect
9. criteria / criterion
10. parenthetical expression without commas
11. run-on sentence
12. principal / principle
13. "between three buyers"
14. comma splice
15. "everyone . . . their . . ."
16. "most unique"
17. parallel construction error
18. "quote" instead of "quotation"
19. disinterested / uninterested
20. "everybody . . . they"
21. sentence fragment
22. "enthused"
23. dangler
24. "different than"
25. no commas between short independent clauses
26. possessive noun without apostrophe
27. "impact" used as verb
28. parenthetical expression without commas
29. "an executive . . . them"
30. no comma in series of adjectives
31. "situation is when" (adv. clause as complement of linking verb)
32. "I" as object of verb
33. sentence fragment
34. "felt badly"
35. "prioritize"
36. no punctuation between long dependent clause and main clause
37. "data" used as singular
38. relative pronoun "that" used to refer to human beings
39. "which" used indefinitely to refer to whole clause
40. anxious / eager
41. "These kind"
42. "If I was"
43. its / it's
44. "would be if" (adv. clause as complement of linking verb)
Table I, continued
USAGE ELEMENTS TESTED

45. objective rather than possessive pronoun modifying gerund
46. no punctuation between long dependent clause and the main clause
47. "consensus of opinion"
48. no commas around parenthetical insertion
49. subject-verb agreement in inverted sentence
50. subject-verb agreement with "either"
51. "every . . . they"
52. parallel construction error
53. farther / further
54. comma splice
55. objective pronoun as complement of linking verb
56. its / it's
57. affect / effect
58. amount / number

Ten Most Distracting Elements

Table II presents the ten questionnaire items that most bothered both academics and executives. They are listed in the order of highest to lowest overall mean; that is, the first one listed is the one that bothered respondents most of all.

Seven of the most bothersome errors, in the eyes of these respondents, fell into the category of basic sentence-structure errors: run-ons, faulty parallel structure, sentence fragments, and danglers. Similarly, Hairston's "very serious" error category included run-ons, faulty parallel structure, and sentence fragments. In her study, dangling modifiers and the use of "I" as an objective pronoun fell into the "fairly serious" category. (Beyond her "very serious" was the "outrageous" category, into which fell only the status-marker errors such as "he has went" and "he don't," which the present study did not include.)

Item length may have accounted for the high distraction level of the two sentence-fragment examples. Since the questionnaire items were purposely kept fairly short, the sentence fragments may not have received the same level of camouflage accorded the other questionable usage elements in the study.

Ten Least Distracting Elements

Table III shows the ten items that bothered these respondents least, arranged from the lowest overall mean to the tenth lowest overall mean.
Table II
Questionnaire Items which Bothered Both Academics and Executives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Grand Mean</th>
<th>Mean for Academics</th>
<th>Mean for Executives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. He focused all his energies on his personal goals he never wavered from his chosen path.</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. When the time came for the representatives to sign the contract however the bid was withdrawn.</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. Good presidents require three qualities: courage, perseverance, and dedicated.</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. She knew she was headed for a major conflict. A serious fight against determined opponents.</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Looking very tired and worn, a decision was finally reached by the committee.</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Most people he encounters are impressed by his calm manner, meticulous attire, and being ambitious.</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. The vice-president directed my associate and I to submit reports to the executive committee.</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Small companies suffer in a tight labor market. One of their problems being that they can’t compete for qualified personnel.</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. Employee pilferage though it can jeopardize a company’s survival is often ignored by management.</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I voted against the provision as a matter of principal.</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many readers of this article may wonder why some of these usage elements are even represented as errors. "Feel" for "believe," the clipping "quote" from "quotation," "anxious" as interchangeable with "eager," the coinage of "prioritize" by adding a regular verb-forming affix to "priority," and "data" as a singular form are widely considered Standard English, yet their acceptance is not universal. Other readers will agree with some of the most conservative usage manuals, which recommend that all these should be avoided by careful writers. While careful writers do still
preserve the distinction between forms such as "disinterested" and "uninterested," the figures from this study suggest few readers of business messages are concerned when other writers do not.

It should be stated here that the researchers do not suggest that careful writers should become careless ones, nor that they discard these distinctions in their own writing. However, it is being suggested that several of the distinctions cited in the preceding table will matter less as time goes on. Trying to impress them upon students may become progressively less meaningful and productive.

Matches with Hairston's findings were fewer at the low end of the scale, partly because different items were tested. However, "data...is"
bothered very few in both studies, and Hairston's next to lowest category included "situation is when. . . ."

Response Differences Between Executives and Academics

The overall mean response for all ABC member responses was 1.30. The overall mean response for all vice presidents was 0.96. An F-value of 104.74 indicates that there is a significant difference between the mean for academics and the mean for executives. Table IV presents the response frequencies, means, and chi-square values for the ten items that showed the greatest variation in responses of academics and executives.

It is not surprising that the academic respondents were more bothered by all of the items in Table IV than were the executives. What may be somewhat surprising, however, is the homogeneity of the items that distracted the academics so much more than the executives. Four were punctuation related, four dealt with sentence structure, and the remaining two included the affect/effect distinction.

Of the four that were punctuation related, two (the top two on the list) violated the its/it's rule. The other two presented a missing comma and a missing apostrophe. Of the four that dealt with sentence structure, two included sentence fragments and two included comma splices. The presence of eight multiply tested items in Table IV suggests a certain consistency in respondents' reactions. That consistency will be treated in greater depth later in this article.

Responses by Sex

Table V presents the mean responses by sex for all respondents and for academics and executives separately, along with the associated F values.

For all respondents, the F value of 25.34 indicates a significant difference in the mean responses of males and females. Executives, however, displayed no significant difference in responses by sex. And an F value of 1.96 indicates a marginally significant difference in responses by sex of the academics. The difference by sex for all respondents is partly attributable to the very small number (15) of female executives.

Responses by Age Groups

Respondents were initially categorized according to the following age groups: under 25, 25-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56-65, and over 65. No respondents fell into the lowest age group. When all responses were analyzed by age
### Table IV
Respondents' Response Frequencies by Type (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Mean Response</th>
<th>Chi Square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Its great to see Charlene hard at work.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Specific Dynamics claims that it's agreement with our company has been violated.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Small companies suffer in a tight labor market. One of their problems being that they can't compete for qualified personnel.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>40.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Never expose your marketing strategies to competitors, they will beat you to the customers.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Our firms performance has been excellent.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Research has proven that Christmas bonuses do not effect the quality or quantity of work done by recipients.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>I have always wanted to learn more about that subject, now I will have the chance to do so.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Although Chambers has been with the company for only two years she has a good chance of getting the promotion.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>She knew she was headed for a major conflict. A serious fight against determined opponents.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The comments made in the editorial had little affect on the outcome of the merger vote.</td>
<td>Exec.</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acad.</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The chi-square cut-off for two degrees of freedom at a .01 level of significance is 9.21.
Table V
Responses by Sex of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Response</th>
<th>F value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>25.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

groups, no significant differences in responses were found. The age groups were then collapsed into 35 and under, 36-55, and 56 and over. Again, no significant differences in responses by age were found.

Individually, however, the items did reveal some significant differences in responses. Table VI presents response frequencies and chi-square values for the five items that brought forth the most significant differences in responses by age groups.

Generally, the older the respondents, the more bothered they were by redundancy, pronoun / antecedent number or case disagreement, and a linking verb followed by an adverbial clause.

Results of Multiple Examples for Single Usage Elements

The final step in the analysis involved a comparison of questionnaire items that gauged responses to the same usage element. A T-test was conducted on the differences in responses for each questionnaire between and among the sentences that dealt with the same error. The null hypothesis was that there would be no significant differences between and among reactions to the same rule infraction. If the T value exceeds 2.96 at the 95 percent level of confidence, the null hypothesis must be rejected. In the groups with more than two examples, a comparison was conducted in combinations of two until each item had been compared to all other similar items.

Table VII lists the clusters of multiply tested items and the pairs that drew consistent responses as well as the pairs that received significantly different responses.

Out of a total of ten clusterings of multiple testings, four elicited consistently similar reactions from respondents and one drew some
### Table VI
Responses by Age Groups
(in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>Chi Square</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The reason I fired him after two years with our company is because he was incompetent.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>The most unfortunate situation is when the employees ignore standard safety procedures.</td>
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<td>When an executive is transferred every two years, one cannot expect them to become heavily involved in civic affairs.</td>
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The chi-square significance cut-off for a .05 significance level with eight degrees of freedom is 15.51.
### Table VII

Similarities and Differences in Responses to Multiply Tested Items

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<tr>
<th>Common Testing Clusters</th>
<th>No Significant Differences in Responses</th>
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T-value cutoff = 2.96

p = .05

similar and some different responses. The other five brought forth significantly different reactions from respondents. Stated differently, of the 19 pairs of jointly tested usage items, 8 drew consistent reactions from respondents and 11 did not.

Despite efforts to make each questionable usage element equally natural-seeming, sentence form and content probably affected somewhat the degree to which readers noticed or were bothered by some of the errors. For example, four questionnaire items contained the use of “they,” “them,” or “their” to refer to a singular noun or pronoun. These four items appear below, ranked in order of most distracting to least distracting, with actual rankings given in parentheses.

29. When an executive is transferred every two years, one cannot expect them to become heavily involved in civic affairs. (17th most bothersome)

51. To Dwight, every worker is an individual, and they should be treated as such. (21st most bothersome)
15. Everyone who goes to the convention this year will have to cover their own travel expenses. (34th most bothersome)

20. Just about everybody enjoys her company; they say she is a caring person. (53rd most bothersome)

To some extent, the differences can be accounted for by meaning. In item 20, it is possible to construe “they” as not referring to “everybody.” A sentence often begins with the indefinite “they say”; the subject of the example’s second clause could be understood in that sense. In the other three examples, the plural pronoun unmistakably refers to the singular pronoun or noun. In the first two, the nouns “individual” and “executive” may draw extra attention to ideational singularity and thus make the nonagreement more noticeable than it is in the third example.

Hairston’s study, with four examples of this error, drew similarly disparate responses: “Two brought only mild objections, one brought a moderately strong objection, and one a strong objection.” She concluded, “Most of the time readers do not regard the construction as a terribly serious error.” (1981, p. 797).

Another usage element yielding high differences in mean response to multiple items was the omission of punctuation after a long adverbial clause.

36. When the time came for the representatives to sign the contract however the bid was withdrawn. (2nd most bothersome)

46. Although Chambers has been with the company for only two years she has a good chance of getting the promotion. (42nd most bothersome)

Here structure, as well as content, probably made substantial difference. The adverbial clause in the first-listed example contains an infinitive phrase and a parenthetical expression. The phrase is in essence a complete thought, transformed and embedded. Its presence, together with the unpunctuated parenthetical “however,” makes the first example more difficult to understand than the second example, and the error more bothersome probably for that reason.

CONCLUSION

This study tested the level to which 45 selected questionable usage elements bothered two response audiences: a random sample of members of the Association for Business Communication and a random sample of executive vice presidents from the nation’s 1000 largest industrial and the 500 largest service firms. These audiences were asked to make their judgments in the context of seeing the examples in a business letter, memo, or short report they were reading quickly.
Summary

Of those tested, the errors with the highest distraction potential for these audiences were sentence-structure errors such as run-on sentences, fragments, danglers, and faulty parallel structure. Where comparisons could be drawn between this study and Hairston's (1981), results were quite similar. In both studies, brevity of the examples may have made sentence-structure problems more distracting than they might have been if embedded in a paragraph.

Of those tested, the questionable usage elements with lowest distraction potential were "feel" instead of "believe," "quote" for "quotation," "anxious" instead of "eager," the verb "prioritize," "data" as a singular, the use of a plural pronoun to refer to a singular such as "everyone," and the use of "disinterested" for "uninterested." Completing a linking verb with an adverbial phrase also appeared not to bother respondents greatly.

In general, the responses of academics differed significantly from those of the executives, with the academics being more bothered on all but two of the questionnaire items. Of the ten items with the most significant differences in responses, four were punctuation related, four dealt with sentence structure, and the remaining two included the affect/effect distinction.

When the two sample audiences were combined, the females were significantly more bothered than were the males. Separately, however, the female academics’ responses were only marginally significantly different from those of the male academics; and there was no difference between the responses of male and female executives. Hairston’s survey found female respondents much more bothered by the errors in her study than male respondents were.

Generally, with regard to the entire questionnaire, there were no significant differences in reactions of respondents categorized by age. Individually, however, the questionnaire items did reveal some significant differences in responses by age. The older the respondents, the more bothered they were by redundancy, number or case disagreement between pronoun and antecedent, and a linking verb followed by an adverbial clause.

Finally, a comparison was made of the ten groupings of questionnaire items that gauged the responses to the same usage element. This comparison yielded mixed results. Despite efforts to make each questionable usage element equally natural-seeming, form and content apparently affected somewhat the degree to which readers noticed or were bothered by some of the errors.
Conclusions

As stated earlier, the findings of the study do not suggest that usage standards are unimportant or unnecessary. Language changes, and it changes at different rates depending on the group of users, the medium, the purpose it is used for, and numerous other factors. Exactly when a given usage element has changed “among most educated users” is not always possible to establish by consulting one style guide. This is, linguistically, a pluralistic society.

This study gives an instructor strong evidence for motivating students to avoid in their writing the errors most distracting to these groups of readers. The study also suggests that some usage elements traditionally considered errors are not perceived as very serious by considerable numbers of these respondents.

That executives were less bothered than academics by most errors should not lead anyone to label the executive response group careless or ignorant. The study tested botheration level of errors, not how literate the response groups are. To be sure, one of the reasons why an error is not bothersome is that the respondent does not perceive the error as an error; however, a person can ignore an error for a number of other reasons.

As the word “consensus” in the title of Copperud's book suggests, usage is a set of conventions based on consensus of the users. As more and more people cease perceiving the error as error, it gradually becomes acceptable usage.

A second reason why an error is not bothersome is that the reader may simply attach much less importance to it than to other elements of the message. To many business and technical readers, meaning is likely to be more important than usage, so long as the meaning is clear and the error not too egregious.

Recommendations

It is suggested that because class time is scarce, it may be a good idea to spend little or no time trying to eradicate “quote,” “prioritize,” and “data” used as a singular. This study's findings indicate that these forms bother almost no one. Similarly, since few see a problem with not distinguishing between “anxious” and “eager” or between “I feel” and “I believe,” insistence that they are wrong may be unproductive and may diminish credibility.

“Everybody . . . they” and its many correlates will probably one day be standard for written English just as it is already almost universally
used in spoken English. The findings do not support our assuming it to be standard now. Another candidate for eventual recognition as standard in writing is the use of an adverbial clause to complete a linking verb. Hundreds of anomalies in grammar and usage already exist—the many "exceptions" to rules.

Teachers, charged with prescribing usage, should continue to impress on students the need to write for a variety of readers, which will include some highly discriminating ones. A common-sense blending of the linguist's and the traditionalist's perspectives, however, will suggest that some distinctions become outdated. As Daniels (1983) explains, intelligent users of the language do not follow the death-of-language writers' lead in equating all perceived usage lapses, nor in labeling infractions as "illiterate" or "monstrous."

Most of all, users and teachers of business communication should watch the living language and read the work of today's writers about language, who continue to attract wide readership. These writers, and their readers, debate spiritedly matters of correctness and language change. This study tested only a few of many contested elements. It did not, for example, test "hopefully" as sentence modifier, "like" as conjunction, the split infinitive (which some believe has never been an error), or "impact" as a verb — used, says Williams (1981) since 1601. If a given element of contested usage seems ubiquitous, it may be in process of change. There is no last word in the usage debates. The last word would signify that the language itself is dead.

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**NOTE**

**Usage authorities cited by Copperud are the following:** The Careful Writer, by Theodore M. Bernstein; Current American Usage, by Margaret M. Bryant; Dictionary of Usage and Style, by Roy H. Copperud; A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage, by Bergen and Cornelia Evans; The ABC of Style, by Rudolf Flesch; Modern American Usage, by Wilson Follett and others; A Dictionary of Modern English Usage, by H. W. Fowler, Second Edition; Encyclopedic Dictionary of English Usage, by Mager and Mager; and the Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage, by William and Mary Morris.

Dictionaries cited by Copperud are Webster's New International Dictionary, Third Edition (unabridged), the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (unabridged); The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language; the Standard College Dictionary, the American College Dictionary; Webster's New World Dictionary; and the Oxford English Dictionary.
REFERENCES


