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CORRECTNESS AND ITS CONCEPTIONS: THE MEANING OF LANGUAGE FORM FOR BASIC WRITERS

ABSTRACT: *Over the past twenty years, we have come to see that errors are not simply flaws in a text. However, the need for correctness remains undiminished if only because of societal and institutional demands. Yet there is little consensus about correctness or even whether language can be described as correct or incorrect in the first place. This essay suggests a way out of this bind by looking at correctness in a sociolinguistic sense. In this way writers' different formal choices provide information about their identity and the identity of the text they are creating. Correct usage sends the sociolinguistic message the author desires; incorrect forms send undesired ones. The problem basic writers face is that their errors send the message that they are not college students and their writing is not academic. Correctness thus has a sociolinguistic role crucial to the field of basic writing and which helps differentiate that field from other types of writing instruction.*

Errors and Correctness

From the inauguration of the field of basic writing during the 1970s, "correctness" has been an awkward and enigmatic issue facing students, instructors, and researchers. At that time, several convergent factors, recounted in Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, began to undermine the time-worn consensus surrounding fundamental questions such as: 'What makes language correct or lacking in correctness?' 'How do writers achieve it?' 'Why does it matter so much to so many people?' Now, nearly two decades later, although we still evaluate students' writing in terms of correctness every day, we do so without having reformulated a consensus about what this concept means.

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Part of our confusion about correctness was created by the circumstances that surrounded the development of the field. The arrival in the academy of large numbers of nontraditional students whose essays contained what seemed to be massive numbers of incorrect forms coincided with radical changes in writing instruction. Traditional behaviorist approaches had considered errors as bad habits to be stamped out. This relatively simple understanding jived well with popular intuitive views that devalued the worth of any text which contained more than a minimal number of incorrect forms. Moreover, this view also was reflected in the marginal status of basic-writers in the academy and in educated society at large. Error and its importance seemed clear. However, the writing-process oriented approaches that were beginning to emerge at that time pointed out the misconceptions that lay behind that seemingly common-sense approach (see Shaughnessy and Bartholomae). Inspired by Chomskyan views of language acquisition as driven from within the learner, writing process theorists showed how and why errors are developmentally necessary. Slowly, errors came to be seen as the result of strategies and hypotheses about target patterns and so an integral part of language development (Elliot; Lindfors). As David Bartholomae put it: "Failed sentences, then, could be taken as stages of learning rather than the failure to learn, but also as evidence these writers are using writing as an occasion to learn" (254). Further, it became increasingly apparent that "correct" grammar was only a single component of the larger construct of "good writing" (see Atwell and Calkins, among many others).

These insights changed the emphasis of writing instruction from direct attention to mechanics to work on more global processes. While correctness never ceased to be a goal, it was evicted from center stage. In fact, emphasis on correctness began to be seen as potentially counter productive because, among other reasons, it made the students less likely to write. Yet outside the classroom—and at times in it—this more theoretically sound and pedagogically appropriate approach has not had much impact on people's views on the seriousness of error and the importance of avoiding it. Academic institutions, for example, still continue to classify basic writers as such, in whole or at least in large part, by their errors. The number and type of errors on placement, certifying, and program-exit exams remain, even today, the predominant criteria in the gatekeeping process (Janopoulis; Sweedler-Brown). From an institutional perspective the marginality of basic writing and basic writers has hardly changed at all. Moreover, a cursory glance at the content of language columns which advise readers about correct and incorrect usage (such as William Safire's or James Kirkpatrick's) shows how pervasive the belief in the importance of correct language still is. For their part, and in their own way, basic writers frequently appear to concur with the institutional and societal

view of the importance of correctness. In fact, as Shaughnessy pointed out, basic writers often become obsessed with error, sometimes to the point of believing that the entire object of writing is to do so correctly. Then, like a dancer who at all times worries about the position of their feet and so destroys the dance, they become so focused on words and syntax that their writing collapses into conceptual incoherence and communicative vacuousness.

Ironically, although basic writers may become obsessed with the formal side of language, error itself is not best understood as a grammatical notion. Linguists for many years have deliberately avoided the terms *correctness* and *error* in their scientific descriptions of language. Sentences that do not conform to the grammatical rules of a language are thus referred to as ungrammatical rather than *erroneous, incorrect, mistaken* or *wrong*. For linguists, the concept of error is too tied into value judgments to be of any use in language analysis. As Shaughnessy's title suggests, errors are better understood as matters of opinion — a product of differing expectations of what language users believe sentences should look like. So, for example, in the previous paragraph, if you, the reader, expect that pronouns should formally agree with their antecedents, you will see an error in my usage. I evidently do not think any such thing; through our divergent conceptions of acceptability we have created the error together.[1] The notion of error then depends more on discrepancy than on syntax.[2]

Investigations of Correctness

One issue that arises from this view of error is the question of applying the term "correctness" to language in any useful way even in the classroom. The essential problem is that if correctness is only definable in terms of conformity or divergence of expectations, are we not unjustifiably imposing our expectations on others by fiat when we use that term? Quite apart from the ethical considerations involved, there also arises a problem of intellectual coherence. If our use comes down to dictum: "This is correct because I say so!" then the application of the word correct to language seems a rather strained metaphor at best. The problem lies in the notion of correctness itself as it is used generally. It seems to require reference to some more solid criterion than simple expectations regarding language forms. The need for some outside anchor can perhaps be most succinctly seen in the dictionary definitions of the word. For example, the third edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* gives two definitions for the adjective form of correct. The first is "*Free from error or fault; true or accurate.*" This definition gives an understanding of correctness as conformity to reality; it is supported by that most transcendental and enigmatic of concepts: truth.[3] It may be significant to note that on a mundane level we apply

this sense of *correct* to what a person says or writes not via the idea of *correct language* but *correct statement*. We use *correct*, in this sense, to evaluate the content not the form of a message. In fact, it is hard to see how, it would be possible to apply this understanding of the term *correct* at all to form as opposed to meaning.

The second definition given in the *American Heritage*, "conforming to standards; proper: *correct behavior*," seems more promising. By putting it in second place the lexicographers may have meant to imply that this definition is derived from the first, and it is easy to see why it should be so considered. The grounding in this definition is made by reference to *standards*, which could be seen in some sense as a surrogate for the truth mentioned in the first sense because they are so much less absolute. This definition seems more promising for the purpose of judging texts because of the conventional nature of language. Furthermore, as Wittgenstein said, "language is an instrument," and instruments are not portrayals of reality, but they can be measured against standards. It may be significant, on this point, that the adjective, *standard* is so intimately associated with correctness in language. Correct language, then, could be seen as language which is judged to have fulfilled standards of some kind or another.

Yet the appeal to standards does not, in the end, solve the problem but only postpones it. Measuring in relation to standards implies an evaluation in terms of quality, and the notion of quality is very difficult to uphold with regard to language, at least when it is done without regard to meaning. There seems to be at least a tacit understanding of that fact in English composition. Many instructors, after all, go to considerable effort to try to extricate the notion of 'good,' or even 'effective' writing from 'correct' writing.

One way around the awkwardness involved with *correctness* is to eliminate it by substituting the more relativistic notion of *appropriateness* Some teachers of basic writing take essentially this approach with language features. They tell students that they respect their native dialects of English and that these dialects are fine for use outside class, but that features of the dialects are not *appropriate* for academic prose. This tactic has considerable appeal. Consider, for example, how it becomes possible to discuss the third person singular -s, a morpheme sometimes omitted in nonstandard varieties. Whereas traditionalists are hard pressed to come up with any coherent reason why "*she thinks*" should be more correct than "*she think*," composition teachers who use the notion of appropriateness sidestep the need to make any explanation whatsoever. They can respond much as they might to advisees who complain about some annoying and purposeless registration procedure. They can say, in effect, "Hey, I didn't make the rules. This is just the way things are. If you want to play the game, this is what you have to do." In fairness, that may be enough for many. Yet there is the

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uncomfortable fact that if we take this approach, the appropriateness we ascribe to a usage seems to hang there with no justification like the registration procedure, awaiting the inevitable day in which it will be eliminated to everyone's relief. Such abolition furthermore seems improbable in the case of language prescription. Thus, there have been attempts to justify correctness in language by tying it to descriptions of actual usage. This approach seems to make intuitive sense, and certainly statements such as, 'the vast majority of native speakers use this form' might supply the necessary criteria for canonization of a usage as correct. Certainly this easily handles second language errors.

Unfortunately, however, basing correctness on usage has its difficulties too. First, traditionalists would decry this approach because it challenges prescriptive rules such as 'no split infinitives,' '*between* for only two,' and 'pronoun-antecedent agreement' since they are so rarely used in spontaneous discourse. The dumping of prescriptive rules has not always been seen as a drawback, however. In fact, during the first half of the century Charles C. Fries in the U.S. and Daniel Jones and Henry Wyld in England, proposed 'descriptive standards,' as they might be called, for just this purpose (see Crowley). Yet the apparent advance that came from the elimination of a number of illogical and widely flouted rules ran into a second problem: differences in usage (such as with third person singular verbs). To deal with variation, proponents of descriptive standards needed to use the language of a specific population as a model. The group chosen had to be quite small because language variation increases proportionally with the size of the population. As Fries noted, "the educated," the candidate group that immediately suggests itself as the model, was simply too large and difficult to define to function practically in that role. This fact, combined with questions of social status, led the proponents to select small elite groups. The most extreme case was Wyld, who, according to Crowley, actually began his career quite open to acceptance of various dialects. As time went on, however, he steadily narrowed his model population impelled by the inexorable logic of looking for an ever more consistent standard. The end result, as described in the following quote, would be more frightening were it less quaint:

> If I were asked among what class the 'best' English is most consistently heard at its best, I think, on the whole, I should say among officers of the British Regular Army. The utterance of these men is at once clear-cut and precise, yet free from affectation; at once downright and manly, yet in the highest degree refined and urbane. (Henry Wyld qtd. in Crowley 204)

The conclusion appears to be inescapable; we are in a double bind: On the one hand, it is impossible to apply the notion of 'correctness' to language form because there are no coherent grounds for doing so. Yet, on the other, it has proven quite hard to eliminate or replace.

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Additional Reasons for Confusion

Two issues need to be clarified in order to begin to come to an understanding of correctness in language, and not incidentally why it matters so much to basic writers and those who work with them. The first concerns what we mean by language, since the word can have two distinct senses in casual usage. For example, when we say 'Griselda knows several languages,' we are alluding to her possession of a set of productive and receptive capacities. Chomsky refers to language in this sense as "I-language" or internal language. On the other hand, when we talk about Griselda's having used 'offensive language,' we are referring to something quite different: actual text.[4] Chomsky referred to language in this sense as "E-language" or external language. It is probably helpful to see I-language as a form of mental software—composed of grammar and lexicon—that translates thought into communicable form. E-language, by contrast, consists of the documents that this software produces. The characteristics of the software certainly constrain the ultimate form of the document—Spanish software produces Spanish documents—but a lot more goes into the creation of the document than the software alone.

Now, when we look at an essay, we are clearly seeing E-language, and one way we might think of characterizing features of that essay as correct or incorrect is whether they match up with expected results of the I-language that created them. If the form under consideration is the result of some glitch in production—a slip of the pen—there is little doubt that the form is in some easily defensible way, incorrect. However, the term *incorrect* has traditionally not been limited to this sense, which is in fact more like how linguists use the term *ungrammatical*. The use of the notion of *correctness*, by contrast, is complicated by factors that relate to the second issue: language variation. People do not all have the same I-language in their heads, and, moreover, these different varieties are sometimes evaluated differently. For one thing, I-languages are not so much learned in the traditional sense as reinvented in stages by learners through a long developmental process (see Pinker). The intermediate stages of this mental software are not as stable nor as complete as the final one. This phenomenon is well known in second language acquisition, of course, where the transitional varieties are known as "interlanguages" (see Bartholmae for an extension of this notion to basic writing). Again, it would not be terribly problematic to find the output of these interlanguages lacking in some way because they are idiosyncratic, unstable, and differ in basic ways from the target language. For that reason, perhaps, the use of *correctness* is less problematic in L2 contexts than for native speakers. Still, these sorts of judgments are not limited to developmental forms. After all, a writing exam written in rigorously grammatical Black English Vernacular is likely to result in a placement in a basic writing section.

The problem is that the value judgments placed on samples of text then carry with them, intentionally or not, implicit evaluations of I-languages. These I-languages, in turn, are associated with the communities that use them, or are perceived of as using them (as for example, Black English Vernacular is associated with African Americans). In the United States, the issue is further complicated by the fact that the disrespected varieties suspiciously match up with disenfranchised groups. This last fact has, for obvious reasons, been of concern to investigators of the sociolinguistics of composition. For example, James Sledd, Dennis Baron, and Sharon Zuber and Ann Reed have all argued that the lack of acceptance accorded these varieties is essentially a method for keeping the groups who use them in a subordinated position. Although these critics do not come out and say as much—and might very well wish to reject this corollary—it is difficult to avoid the negative implications concerning the field of basic writing that arise from their arguments. For if what they say is true, it seems inescapable that teachers of basic writing are intimately involved in a repugnant social process to the extent that they enforce or perpetuate standard language norms and their system of support.

However, I believe that the conclusions of these researchers are based on a substantial oversimplification of the basic principles of the sociolinguistics of language variation. They are built upon the false premise that the concept *dialect* is more or less interchangeable with that of *language variety*. Since dialect is generally understood as pertaining to social groups, every group is seen as possessing its own. From there it is easy to conclude that a speaker of the disrespected variety is forced to make the effort to learn the variety of an oppressor every time they are required not to use their own vernacular. Thus, the adoption of non-vernacular varieties is equated with not only extra effort but with the betrayal of their own group. The reality, however, is considerably more complicated. Some sociolinguists have observed that variation by social group—dialect—is only one dimension of language variation (Hudson; Halliday & Hasan). The other dimension is variation by situation or text type—register variation. Dialect and register interact in complex ways, and in practice can be hard to tease apart completely, which is why the distinction is easy to miss. A dialect contains various registers because people use it for different purposes. Register, on the other hand, sometimes becomes more closely aligned with specific dialectal varieties, in part, because people from different groups can become associated with different uses of language. The end result is that an individual typically controls various varieties of their native language for uses with different people and different situations. In other words, they will have a panoply of often closely related software in their heads, for use in a number of situations and with different individuals.

The application of *correctness* to the formal characteristics of one variety is still, no doubt, problematic. To say that the various features of, say, casual Suburban Los Angeles English are correct while those of, say Black English Vernacular, are wrong is both unjustifiable and a sign of more or less covert prejudice. The same can be said of similar arguments exalting a register such as standard written English. Judgments such as these are damaging because they put a person's capacity to produce language into question. Perhaps because our ability to produce language is so closely tied up with our humanity, the results of the linguistic insecurity these beliefs can produce can be devastating to a person's self esteem. What is wrong, however, is the picture of a nation composed of different identifiable ethnic or cultural groups all with their own varieties, which they would speak and write all the time if only left in peace to do so. As teachers and examiners required to make appraisals of language in the form of grades and comments, we are faced with an enormously complicated sociolinguistic situation. Oversimplifications based on ideological principles are not terribly helpful.

The Hidden Truth of Language Myths

However problematic it may be to describe some forms of language as correct and others as incorrect, the application of these notions is the predominant mode of metalinguistic discourse and has been arguably for ever. The earliest linguistic analyses we have, the work of ancient Indian grammarians such as Panini (5th century BCE), are attempts to do just that (Smith). Far less sophisticated efforts to prescribe the correct forms of language continue today in the newspaper columns by language 'mavens' such as Safire and Kirkpatrick and in classrooms. Whether modern or ancient, more or less knowledgeable about language, prescribers face similar problems; they must provide reasons why certain forms are to be preferred. Because, as we have seen, there are no a priori reasons to do so—there are indeed excellent reasons to not do so—they have had to manufacture the criteria for deciding correctness themselves.

This process of manufacturing is called prescriptive grammar, and it consists largely of two alternative strategies:[5] In the first, the patterns of one extant variety are established as 'more correct' than those of others, perhaps because 'better' people employ them. For example, the patterns of the English spoken in the triangle between London, Cambridge, and Oxford became the model for all written English during the Early Modern English period.[6] Currently the spoken patterns used by the mostly suburban middle classes are commonly thought to be more correct than those used by poor rural or urban classes in America. Linguists such as Jones, Wyld, and Fries proposed making

usage the only criterion for establishing correctness, but it has not traditionally been so. Prescriptive grammarians have also often used the second method which is to establish specific rules belonging to no variety, and then castigate speakers of whatever origin for not following them. Sundry high-minded, but linguistically incoherent justifications are given in support of the rules proposed. This strategy is the source of the typical prescriptive bugaboos, a few of which are collected in following list, along with the apparent basis for their invention:

The mandate that pronouns are supposed to agree in number with antecedents	based on the overgeneralization of language patterns.
The use of irregular plurals (and singulars) for borrowings, such as "criteria," "corpora," and "graffito"	based on the morphological patterns of the language of origin[7]
The prohibition of split infinitives	based on Latin grammar
The dictum that double negatives equal an affirmative	based on the application of notions of logic to grammar.
The notion that "between" is only valid for two objects	based on the reconstruction of etymology, "tween," in this case, being related to two.
The idea that whom should be used in verbal objects	based on resistance to linguistic change

What is important to keep in mind is that in every case, the rules are without basis, and the rationales given in their support are red herrings. There is *never* any rational justification for either, and as Crowley argued, they are usually stand-ins for other social issues. The dictums make so little sense, the arguments put forward in support are so spectacularly wrong-headed, and the supporters so blindly zealous in their belief, that linguists, as serious investigators of language, tend to be driven nearly to apoplexy by them. Pinker sums up many linguists' attitudes in the following two quotes:

> Most of the prescriptive rules of the language mavens make no sense on any level. They are bits of folklore that originated for screwball reasons several hundred years ago and have

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perpetuated themselves ever since. For as long as they have existed, speakers have flouted them, spawning identical plaints about the imminent decline of the language century after century. . . (373)

One can choose to obsess over prescriptive rules, but they have no more to do with human language than the criteria for judging cats at a cat show have to do with mammalian biology (372)

What linguists such as Pinker may not realize, however, is that criticisms based on its irrationality have only limited potential in undermining prescriptive grammar because prescription is not a science but a myth. As long as prescriptive approaches to language reflect a certain social need, they will be preserved as is any myth. The point of prescriptive grammar is that it is a way of rationalizing and responding to the meaning inherent in language variation, meaning which is not readily apparent but is nonetheless there. Like other myths, prescription is a way of making sense of what we have not been able to put our fingers on clearly.

However, myths develop not for all areas of human life that are difficult to understand, but only for those that are significant in our lives, and language variation gives information of tremendous functional import. Dialect does not vary passively by social group as some sort of inherent characteristic; it is part of the communicative load of any message. It tells us information about the speaker's identity. As the following Biblical excerpt suggests, mythological treatments of this issue are nothing new:

> **JUDGES 12:4** Then Jephthah gathered together all the men of Gilead, and fought with Ephraim: and the men of Gilead smote Ephraim, because they said, Ye Gileadites are fugitives of Ephraim among the Ephraimites, and among the Manassites.
> **12:5** And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay;
> **12:6** Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.

The story in Judges expresses an understanding of the existence and dangers of the information derived from dialect variation as well as the inability of individuals to control it. The myths of prescription serve, in a more sophisticated way, as mechanisms for dealing with

the linguistic insecurity that arises out of this bind. They codify a series of usages which are then considered correct and incorrect and so provide grounds for arbitrating acceptability. The need for such arbitration explains the paradox of why the acceptance of 'authority in language,' as Milroy and Milroy put it, is still so unquestioned in societies whose dominant ideology is steeped in the notion of individual freedom. People feel safe in employing a particular word or grammatical structure if it is recommended by some authority: a handbook, teacher, or maven. Similarly, they feel justified in coming to negative conclusions about others if they can label their speech or writing as incorrect with reference to the criteria put forward by an authority, however spurious the criteria or unqualified the authority. Prescription provides mythological grounds for assertions of correctness in the absence of any more solid ones.

Just as dialectal variation provides important insights into correctness, so does register variation. Register variation has not been as closely examined as dialectal variation, but for teachers of writing it is arguably more important because register gives information relating to text-type. Specifically, formal differences between registers indicate the genre to which that text belongs. We know when we are reading an academic text, listening to a formal conversation, reading a friendly or business letter, in large part through a series of formal features that we do not normally think of as meaningful. It is not just that certain features are appropriate, then, in some abstract and arbitrary way for certain genres of discourse because 'that's the way it is.' It is that these features supply us with the information we need to categorize one text in relation to others; they supply a form of intertextual meaning. Note, however, that intertextual relations are not just indicated by grammatical features; they can be expressed by any type of similarity or difference, including rhyme schemes, meter, number of feet per line in poetry, and similar phrasing and shared vocabulary in prose. For example, the alliteration, semantics, and formal character of the title of this article were intended as a reference to Shaughnessy's earlier work. The similarity indicates that I would like this work to be seen as a continuation in the line of thought about basic writing which Shaughnessy inaugurated. By my very title, I remind potential readers of that precedent and ask them to keep it in mind if they choose to read this article. More generally, my choice of words, spelling, and grammar are intended to place my text into the web of texts that make up the academic genre. My use of singular they and split infinitives, on the other hand, distance my piece from the more conservative lines of that tradition. This role of form may not usually be consciously noticed, but it is of the utmost importance to writers and readers; for, of such stylistic matter are constellations of texts formed in the universe of discourse.

This perspective leads to a coherent understanding of the notions of error and correctness in language, in particular why they matter. To sum up, the reference is not to *language as a system* (I-language) but to *a specific text* (E-language) — particularly to the relation between that text and others and to the social identity of the person who produces the text. The problem with applying *correctness* to language is caused by the attempt to refer to form alone, and form is beyond evaluation. Moreover, it is ethically and scientifically wrong to place value judgments on an individual's fully developed ability to produce language. To do this is to devalue that person's humanity and to judge the entire community which shares those abilities.

Looking at the meaning which the form expresses, however, solves both problems because meanings can be judged — barring the objections of certain relativistic philosophers and literary critics — as correct or incorrect. In this sense, correctness in language, may validly refer to the assessment of felicity of the information provided in a text about its genre and its writer's or speaker's social identity. Specifically, correct use of form is one that tells readers or listeners the information the writer or speaker wishes to convey regarding social and intertextual relations. Error, on the other hand, sends the wrong message, in terms of genre and identity about the text and its author. This definition is not precisely how correctness has been used traditionally in reference to language, nor does it precisely match either of the definitions given in the *American Heritage*. Correctness is based upon accuracy; it is an assertion that the information given by the formal features of the text truthfully portrays the identity of the author and the genre of the text.

The Meaning of Basic Writing

In this way, we can begin to understand the source of the expectations that so afflict basic writers. Errors tell us something we do not want to hear about people and texts; they force us to examine the text, the person who created it or both, rather than simply apprehending the communication that the person meant the text to impart. Correct language is felt to be transparent because it matches expectations; an error, on the other hand, is distracting because it challenges them. Note, however, one more point that affects basic writers: Societies use expectations of regularities in behavior, including language, to facilitate interactions. When these expectations become important they can also come to be enforced with moral pressure, and as such are norms (Bartsch). As Renate Bartsch argues, norms define a culture, and so they are highly valued by that culture. Flouting is taken as a threat to that culture, and violations are used to read people out, so to speak, of that culture. Basic writers' errors are understood by the academic community, by the larger society, and by many basic writers themselves as

a message of alienation from academic culture: thus that familiar refrain, 'I can't believe the person who wrote this is in college!' Basic writers' sometimes wild guessing at the nature and the forms of academic discourse is a reflection of students' cultural and the intellectual distance from the world of academe. At the same time, the guesses indicate the efforts they are making to move toward that world. Whether or not they vocalize the issue, or whatever the ambivalence they may have in this regard, for nontraditional students, coming to university implies a decision to make a cultural transformation. However, repeated failures on exams indicate to some students that they are not getting closer, producing the frustration, the magical thinking, and the sometimes desperate responses they have to their errors—the manifestation of their distance. If basic writers appear to be obsessed with getting the grammar right, it is in many ways a reasonable response; they are trying to send the message that they belong to the academic world they have come to join. They are desperately trying to say they are college students.

Basic writers and administrators are thus right in their belief that errors matter more than some teachers of writing have been prepared to admit—though in both cases their response to that understanding may be inappropriate to say the least. Basic writers' errors matter more than children's developmental errors or foreign-language errors to the extent they manifest the difference between being able to produce academic discourse or not being able to. The less the texts produced by writers look like previous texts in a genre, the less their texts are included in that genre. Since being able to produce recognizable academic texts is necessary for membership in the academic community, students' errors together with other stylistic infelicities mark the distinction between being accepted as members and being excluded from that community. Although in one way, the difference between proficient undergraduates and basic writers might be seen as a continuum in the relative number of errors, the notion of a cline is in some essential ways misleading. The question is crucially acceptance or rejection whether it is indicated by proficiency tests, grades in courses, portfolios, or any other means. The passing grade serves as the admissions committee.

The gatekeeping role of error and other stylistic demands is what makes basic writing a legitimate discipline, different from other forms of writing instruction. Error is a product of our expectations, but it is not entirely a vacuous one, nor is it simply based on prejudice. The message of exclusion that error carries with it is the issue basic writers and those who work with them confront. The issue is serious, particularly in a world where a college education may the only reasonable method for escape from the underclass for many. It will not go away, however, by attempts to abolish the category of basic writer by, say,

doing away with remedial programs in colleges and mainstreaming the students. The category remains because the words and forms used by basic writers will continue to tell the story of their alienation from academic discourse and academic life, and so frequently from their own dreams. In many cases this alienation, as Courtney Cazden points out, goes back to early grades. It is formed, often enough, from a clash between teachers' and students' cultures and literacy practices. The task of bridging that cultural and textual gap falls to teachers of basic writing, a task that we all know goes far beyond correcting, beyond teaching rhetorical principles. A basic writing class is, at its best, a form of acculturation into novel forms of literacy; even more than having as its object changing grammar and improving style and organization, it is focused on acquiring a new way of meaning.

Notes

[1] On this particular issue of usage, see Newman (1992, 1993) for a rationale for my usage.

[2] Of course any ungrammatical form will be understood as an error, but error is a catch-all category that is used for many linguistic and quasi-linguistic phenomena, including ungrammatical sequences, infractions of some pragmatic rules, violations of arcane prescriptions, interlanguage features, misspellings, and idiosyncratic uses of punctuation. This is no less the case despite attempts within the field of composition and ESL to oppose *error* to *mistake* by using *error* for what might be called motivated deviations from normative forms and *mistake* to apply to unsystematic slips (see, for example, Bartholomae, 1980).

[3] This interpretation of the definition should be understood lexicographically not philosophically; it is meant only to describe how the word is used in everyday life, and I make no claims about the nature or truth and reality. As, the editors of *JBW* pointed out in their response to a draft of this article, discussions of truth and language are inherently problematic, which in fact should be amply clear from this article.

[4] I use *text* following Halliday and Hasan (1985/1989) as referring to spoken as well as written language.

[5] I will disregard here the issue of ideologically based prescriptions, such as, those dealing with sexist language, and language deemed offensive to ethnic and other social groups. This is clearly a prescriptive movement, but its criteria are much different from those of the tradition.

[6] Although both literary English and spoken West Midlands dialects have evolved in their own ways since then.

[7] This criterion has now given rise to a curious phenomenon regarding sex reference. While on one hand, English has steadily elimi-

nated nouns that only refer to one sex, such as *hostess, poetess, Jewess,* and now even *waitress,* the idea of maintaining morphological integrity has brought in *Latina* to refer to a woman of Latin origin, preserving the gender of the Spanish word.

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