1 Synopsis

Prescriptivism in the Democratic Spirit  Wallace addresses the debate between descriptive and prescriptive linguistics both from the standpoint of lexicography (dictionary making) and general linguistics (grammar writing). His emphasis is overwhelmingly on lexicography — at times it seems as though he thinks of it as the only kind of descriptive linguistics (e.g., p. 45, column 2). The article uses Bryan A. Gardner’s A Dictionary of Modern American Usage (ADMAU) as its centerpiece. It is partly a review of ADMAU. However, in the main, ADMAU is used to offer a kind of ideal prescriptivist stance: Gardner’s book is presented as one in the Democratic Spirit (DS), i.e., it provides a set of conventions upon which reasonable, experienced writers can probably agree (p. 41–43, p. 58). According to Wallace, ADMAU works hard to convince its readers that they too should subscribe to its pronouncements (p. 58).

Into the classrooms of higher education  Wallace acknowledges that Standard Written English (SWE) is not the only dialect of English. Variants of Standard Black English (SBE) are his primary example of another dialect (p. 54). (He also discusses Rural Midwestern, p. 50–51.) He seeks to impress upon his students, in a blunt, open manner, that SWE has prestige but SBE does not. SWE is the language that they must use if they want their ideas to be taken seriously. The approach has mixed results, perhaps in large part because of Wallace’s demeanor (p. 53–55, p. 56–57). His basic claim seems sound and good.

On speech codes and the like (p. 54–55)  Wallace also addresses Politically Correct English (PCE). He rejects PCE as a cheap attempt to avoid addressing serious issues (p. 55), one that probably does a disservice to the very people and issues it seeks to empower (p. 55).

On when to use different registers and dialects  The discussion and supporting examples are particularly effective (p. 52).

A critical view of Wallace’s anti-descriptivist arguments  Wallace is quick to reject much of descriptive linguistics. I am skeptical of his arguments and would enjoy being able to ask him, for example, whether he would want future cultures studying our own to understand that speakers sometimes use fortuitous to mean lucky and say could care less to convey could not care less. Suppose we deny them this understanding. Then they will misinterpret what we are all about. Suppose we provide them the opportunity. To do that, we need dictionaries that explain this kind of thing — dictionaries like Webster’s Third, which comes in for heavy criticism from Wallace.

2 The content of Wallace’s article

2.1 A new take on prescriptivism

(1) “Issues of tradition vs. egalitarianism in U.S. English are at root political issues and can be effectively addressed only in what this article hereby terms a “Democratic Spirit.” A Democratic Spirit is one that combines rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus sedulous respect for the convictions of others. As any American knows, this is a very difficult spirit to cultivate and maintain, particularly when it comes to issues you feel strongly about.”

2.2 On the way English is taught

(2) “Most traditional teachers of English grammar have, of course, been dogmatic snooTs, and like most dogmatists they have been incredibly stupid about the rhetoric they used and the Audience they were addressing. […] an average U.S. student is going to go to the trouble of mastering the difficult conventions of SWE only if he sees SWE’s relevant Group or Discourse Community as one he’d like to be a part of. And in the absence of any sort of argument for why the correct-SWE Group is good or desirable (an argument that, recall, the traditional teacher hasn’t given, because he’s such a dogmatic snoot he sees no need to), the student is going to be reduced to evaluating the desirability of the SWE Group based on the one obvious member of the Group he has encountered, namely the snooty teacher himself.” (p. 53)

2.3 What your language says about you

(3) “When I say or write something, there are actually a whole lot of different things that I am communicating. The propositional content (the actual information I am trying to convey) is only one part of it. Another part is stuff about me, the communicator. Everyone knows this. It’s a function of the fact that there are uncountably many well-formed ways to say the same basic thing […]” (p. 50)

(4) “People really do “judge” one another according to their use of language.” (p. 50)

(5) “I submit that the dialect you use depends mostly on what sort of Group your listener is part of and whether you wish to present yourself as a fellow member of that Group.” (p. 52)

(6) “the obscurity and pretension of Academic English can be attributed in part to a disruption in the delicate balance between language as a vector of meaning and language as a vector of the writer’s own résumé. In other words, it is when a scholar’s vanity/insecurity leads him to write primarily to communicate and reinforce his own status as an Intellectual that his English is deformed by pleonasm and pretentious diction […]” (p. 56)
2.4 Varieties of English, natural and engineered

(7) “Although it is the major and arguably most important one, SWE is only one dialect.” (p. 52)

(8) “When I’m talking to R.M.’s [Rural Midwesterners], I usually use, for example, the construction “Where’s it at?” instead of “Where is it?” [...] I, snoot or no, believe that this and other R.M.isms are in certain ways superior to their Standard equivalents.” (p. 51–52)

(9) [Wallace is speaking to a hypothetical speaker of SBE.] “they were grading you down for mistakes in a foreign language you didn’t even know was a foreign language.” (p. 54)

(10) “I refer here to Politically Correct English (PCE), under whose conventions failing students become “high potential” students and poor people “economically disadvantaged” [...] Although it’s common to make jokes about PCE [...] be advised that its various pre- and pro-scriptions are taken very seriously indeed by colleges and corporations and government agencies, whose own institutional dialects now evolve under the beady scrutiny of a whole new kind of Language Police.” (p. 54)

(11) “This is PCE’s central fallacy — that a society’s mode of expression is productive of its attitudes rather than a product of those attitudes — and of course it’s nothing but the obverse of the politically conservative snoot’s delusion that social change can be retarded by restricting change in standard usage.” (p. 55)

(12) “I’m afraid I regard Academic English not as a dialectal variation but as a grotesque debasement of SWE, and loathe it even more than the stilted incoherence of Presidential English [...]” (p. 56)

2.5 Arguments for learning SWE

(13) [Wallace is speaking to a hypothetical speaker of SBE.] “SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is How It Is. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can decide it’s racist and unjust and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I’ll tell you something: if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you’re going to have to communicate them in SWE [...]” (p. 54)

(14) “Garner frames his prescriptions in rhetorical terms, e.g.: “To the writer or speaker for whom credibility is important, it’s a good idea to avoid distracting any readers or listeners.”” (p. 58)