

# These 'rules' are already broken

**Geoff Pullum**

a review of *Strictly English: The Correct Way to Write ... and Why It Matters*, by Simon Heffer (Random House, 322pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781847946300, published 16 September 2010)

Simon Heffer enjoys writing in the manner he imagines was current around 1900. Heaven forbid that I should deny a man his private pleasures. But setting out a cavalcade of rules that standard English does not comply with and never did, and representing them as instruction in how to write today, is dishonest. Some linguistic masochists may delight in letting Heffer bully them into compliance with his whims and peeves; but I see this obtusely atavistic book as a perversion of grammatical education.

Part One, "The Rules", trots out familiar 18th-century naive grammar of a stripe that was discredited decades ago (a noun "is the name of something", an adjective "is a word that describes a noun"...). Part Two, "Bad English", lambasts words, phrases, and writers Heffer dislikes. Part Three, "Good English", lauds his heroes.

It is the staggeringly erroneous claims of Part Two that shock me most. They are based on long-standing ignorance: the works in his brief bibliography are almost all from before he earned his 1979 B.A. On average they date from more than 65 years ago. He seems uninformed by any modern work on English grammar.

"No educated American would blink", he believes (p.73), at *if I be wrong* (for *if I am wrong*). No American from before about 1900, maybe.

*Volcanologists warn that an eruption is imminent* is ungrammatical, he warns firmly (p.xxix). So is *If he kissed me I would scream* (p.66), and *It's only me* (p.62), and *I walked into a lamp-post* (p.119).

He holds (p.71) that the modal verb *can* has only the physical ability meaning (so if anyone capable of motion asks "Can I kiss you?" the correct answer must be "Yes"). He thinks *not John* is a negated noun (p.56).

These aren't minor, forgivable slips; they are outrageous, whales-are-fish howlers.

Unfortunately, we would be wasting our time discussing them with him; he speaks ex cathedra. "As a professional writer, I happen to believe that the 'evidence' of how I see English written by others, including some other professional writers, is not something by which I wish to be influenced", he says (p.xviii). As he said in the *Daily Telegraph* (20 August), "English grammar shouldn't be a matter for debate."

No point, then, in observing that *they* with singular antecedent, which he calls “abominable” (p.xiii), is found (“We can only know an actual person by observing their behaviour...”) in the writings of George Orwell, who Heffer calls “the finest writer of English prose” (p.275). The rational conclusion from the usage of such a fine writer would be that *they* allows indefinite singular antecedents in standard English. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Byron, Austen, and dozens of other great writers confirm this. But evidence is not something by which Heffer wishes to be influenced.

There will be no debating his stubborn insistence that *none* is strictly singular (p.47). That implies the ungrammaticality of *None of us are perfect* --- a line uttered by Canon Chasuble in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Heffer must class Wilde as ignorant of English or assume he deliberately represented Dr Chasuble thus. Neither is plausible. But this is merely evidence, so Heffer would ignore it.

“*Lest* never takes a subjunctive auxiliary such as *should*, *would* or *might*”, says Heffer (p.75) in a truly daring excursion into fantasy (just Google “lest it should” and see what you think).

Heffer is blind to textual evidence even when he himself exhibits it. His long and ill-explained section on *that* and *which* (pp.110-115) insists that *which* is forbidden in restrictive relative clauses. (This classifies President Franklin Roosevelt as a grammatical nincompoop: remember “a date which will live in infamy”.) But he overlooks his third colophon quotation (p.vii), Samuel Johnson defining grammar as “the art which teaches the relations of words to each other”.

Franklin Roosevelt and Samuel Johnson knew the rules of standard English perfectly well. Fowler (Heffer’s chief scholarly influence) knew them too, and accepts that *which* commonly introduces restrictive relatives in good literature. Fowler wanted to start a movement to change this (he was a radical!) --- and Heffer is falsely claiming that the reform succeeded (it did not).

Descriptive linguists are often charged with being “liberal” on grammar, as if their goal was lax enforcement or abandonment, while pedants glory in the role of conservative defenders of educational values. But there is nothing conservative about bone-headed ignorance. Linguists love rules; but they care enough to believe there is a fact of the matter about whether a given set of rules is correct.

Peddling fictive rules is not a defence of writing standards; it is an intellectual abdication. Heffer should be ashamed of himself, and Random House should be ashamed of this book.

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