

Breaking Down Grammatical Snobbery: What Comedian Stephen Fry Can Teach Us about Language Flexibility in Genres

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In this article, Autumn Jackson looks at a blog post by comedian Stephen Fry in order to gain insight into the matter of grammatical prescription or “snobbery.” Through Fry’s and her own examples, she explains some language rules and how those rules are not merely one fixed set of laws. She looks at the concept of genre to understand how and when certain language rules might apply.

Stephen Fry, the British actor, might be vaguely familiar to many American audiences as the voice of the Cheshire cat from Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* or as the guy who used to do a comedy show with Hugh Laurie (from Fox’s *House M.D.*). You’re probably not familiar with their comedy series, *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*, unless you’ve had a lot of access to BBC reruns from the late 80s and early 90s. To get a sense of what they covered, think of something along the lines of *Saturday Night Live* crossed with *Monty Python*—a minimally-cast series of sarcastic sketches which often relied on word play and puns, British dry humor inspired by everything from London street jabber to presumptuous literary history.¹ Fry knows a thing or two about the power of words: he’s performed in and written plays, he’s got a degree in literature from Cambridge, and he’s an outspoken social activist.² So it should come as no surprise that he likes to talk about language, language rules, and how they can flex to make language fun.

Fry had an obsession with all of English’s possibilities even back in his days on *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*. In the show’s first season, Fry’s in-sketch character compares words and language to piano keys and music.³



Figure 1: A Bit of Fry & Laurie

He remarks that a piano has “*only* 88” keys, and yet, he says, “hundreds of new melodies” can be composed from those keys. His manner of delivery is over-the-top, exaggerated, and repetitive, but through the laughter, the metaphor rings true. Language is a creative entity; new sentences can always be arranged or uttered. We’re all capable of taking something that’s already been said and saying it again in a wonderfully new way, a way that makes it sound more important or more delightful or more horrifying than ever before. “And yet,” Fry accuses in this sketch, “we all of us spend all our days saying to each other the same things, time after weary time.” I see that happening, in part,

because of concern with correctness and appropriateness, but like Fry, I believe there must be some balance between being “correct” and toying with words.

I’d like to look at language here, as both the music and the keys, and discuss the usefulness of rules—because, as I realized when I bought a keyboard five years ago but didn’t invest in piano lessons, you can’t just hit random keys and expect to make beautiful music. There are genres in which traditional grammar “rules” (e.g. *by whom* instead of *by who*) are better to use (first in my mind, for example, is a literary analysis), and there are genres which have different or more flexible sets of guidelines (such as text messages, notes to friends, or emails to Grandma—if your Grandma’s as hip with the internet as mine is). Different rules work in different contexts.



Figure 2: Fry’s “Don’t Mind Your Language...” Blog Post

Prescriptivism and language rules

Fry’s fascination with language is *not* a grammatically-perfect obsession; he recognizes that the traditional grammar rules don’t always hold. There’s a post on his blog from November 4, 2008, titled “Don’t Mind Your Language...” in which he stands up against people who insist on grammatical “snobbery.”⁴

He’s especially annoyed by those who are concerned with correcting common nuances of language, word orders or spellings or apostrophe placements that are considered incorrect according to snobbery but are used by many people on a regular basis. Those who’d interrupt a sentence to fix a word are his “snobs.” Think of the command, “Never end a sentence with a preposition!” Really, no tragedy has ever come of a dangling preposition. More importantly, a sentence like “that’s something to stand up for” is understandable in almost all contexts; that *for* shouldn’t have to be moved to the middle of the sentence, says Fry, only to appease the snobs.

There’s a more precise term than snob that fits here—prescriptivists. Linguistic prescription, or prescriptivism, attempts to establish and maintain a single “correct” version of a language.⁵ Anyone who considers another’s language deficient just because of something like a dangling preposition is a prescriptivist. Fry concedes that even prescriptivists have the right to their own opinions, but insists that following every single obscure or arbitrary prescriptive rule won’t make for *better* language.

So when should we follow rules about dangling prepositions and “real good” grammar? Consider an example I saw on Youtube recently about grammar correction by Weird Al Yankovic, a man who made his career by changing songs such as “My Sharona” into things like “My Bologna”—not exactly the first person you’d think of when talking about uptightness and grammatical prescriptivism.⁶ In this clip, he “fixes” a supermarket sign to say *15 items or fewer* in place of *15 items or less*.

Whether or not you know the grammatical difference between *less* and *fewer*, you’ve probably utilized the *15 items or less* line in a grocery store when you had between 1 and 15 items (unless you’re one of those who tries to sneak 17 things through). It’s unlikely anyone has ever been lost in that supermarket because *less* refers to mass nouns—that is, uncountable things like “water” or “flour”—rather than things you can actually count like “cookies” or “items.” So, if the difference between *less* and *fewer* is of little importance in the

I do not agree with prescriptive grammars at all! Not at all! But I’ll confess here: I *really* can’t stand seeing signs or posters imploring me to “Have a real good time!” No, *thanks*, I always think, *I prefer to have a really good time*. But this is something I’m working on, trying occasionally to have a real good time.



Figure 3: Weird Al Yankovic’s Grammar Lesson on 15 Items or Less

Or could Weird Al be parodying prescriptivists? That would fit his whole career, wouldn't it?

context of the supermarket, why complain about it or go in like Weird Al and “correct” it?

Fry rants that “there is no doubt what ‘Five items or less’ means, just as only a dolt can’t tell from the context and from the age and education of the speaker, whether ‘disinterested’ is used in the ‘proper’ sense of non-partisan, or in the ‘improper’ sense of uninterested.” In the same way, you can gather from his explanation the two different meanings of *disinterested*, and even if you’re not familiar with the word, you can probably see that *dolt* means something like *blockhead* or *numskull*.⁷

Genre: the grammar rules get shifty

The concept of genre can help us understand why these rules are more important in some contexts than others. There are situations in which one way of speaking or writing works better than another; there’s still that difference between the literary analysis paper, where I’d remark “fewer references to the author’s splendid wife would improve the poem,” and my email to Grandma, where I’d try to convince her that “less socks for Christmas” would be a good thing this year. The differences aren’t only between the printed-paper-for-class and computer screen; when writing an email to my boss, I use a different tone, a different style, and different vocabulary than when I write an email to a friend. And, of course, exactly what I have to say to each of them affects all of the aspects of the message. In short, I use different forms of language depending on the text’s genre.

Because I like talking about language almost as much as Fry does, let’s look at another example—*who* and *whom*—and place them in different genres to see what happens.

It’s normal that *whom* is simply left out of language in favor of its shorter relative *who*: “Who do I love?” “Who are you talking to?” In fact, according to the prescriptive approach to grammar, *whom* is correct in both of those questions according to the prescriptive approach, but in non-prescriptive contexts (like many genres of writing and speech), it’s fading out of English, or at least becoming the unusual form. The prescriptive grammatical reality is that *who* is a subject and *whom* is an object: “The man who calls daily is standing outside your door!” vs. “Whom does he want to see?” (Here’s a trick, if you’re in a prescriptive pinch and need to actually use these according to tradition: for a fast check to see if *whom* is really what you want to use, just try inserting *him* or *her* into your statement—“he wants to see *her*.” He/she is the subject; him/her is the object.)

But let me repeat myself. Let me scream it: that difference between *who* and *whom* is part of a PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR. It’s formal—snobby,

by Fry’s word—and you just *might* have to use it in some cases but won’t in others. Unless your audience is concerned with that difference, *who* can fit both roles; in fact, it might even work better, depending on the genre. *Whom* might sound appropriate in a researched essay on presidential appointments for a history class: “The man whom Lincoln chose to stand beside him...” but might not work the same way in demanding to your friends: “I want to know on whom you pulled the prank.” That’s a fine sentence, to be sure, but “I want to know who you pulled the prank on” conveys the same meaning—and will keep your friends from laughing at you (unless I’m one of your friends, in which case I’d turn the discussion toward the fascinating use of prescriptive grammars in casual genres, and you’d never find out who the victim of the prank was).

Notice all those *mights* in my examples. There’s no definite *this word will work* here. I could use either *who* or *whom* among my friends in conversation, and because they know me and my love of grammar, both would be okay and conversation would flow on. But in the middle of a family dinner, I wouldn’t use the word *whom* because I know it would hinder the meaning of the sentence; my family’d respond with raised eyebrows, groans, and sighs of “why, Autumn, *why?*” and probably throw a glob of mashed potatoes at me.

Fry doesn’t use the word “genre” in his blog post, but he certainly recognizes its significance:

You slip into a suit for an interview and you dress your language up too. You can wear what you like linguistically or sartorially when you’re at home or with friends, but most people accept the need to smarten up under some circumstances—it’s only considerate. But that is an issue of fitness, of suitability, it has nothing to do with correctness. There is no right language or wrong language any more than are right or wrong clothes. Context, convention and circumstance are all. (Fry, “Don’t Mind Your Language”)

So, although Fry doesn’t want us to talk about *correct* or *incorrect* language, we can talk about language that fits a context or genre. Just as you probably wouldn’t want to show up for an interview for an office job in pajamas, you probably won’t use the abbreviation *u* in place of *you* when writing an email to a professor, not to mention a scholarship application. I wouldn’t do it in my email to Grandma, because she’s not savvy with that lingo, but my brothers use it all the time in emails and texts to me. The higher the stakes of writing, the more “dressed up” we tend to make it. High stakes writing refers to the formal and heavily graded or weighted writing we do (think: college application essay, or final exam essay worth 20% of a class grade), and there’s a tendency to “dress up” such writing with the traditional prescriptive grammar rules.⁸

Conventions and grammar rules: reading the context and making music

The conventions that Fry mentions—the particular setting, situation, audience, and purpose of a text—vary per genre. A prescriptive grammar cannot fit into every type of writing, as we’ve seen, but we can look at the conventions of certain genres to see what type of grammar would fit best: the conversation at my family’s dinner table and a note I scribble to my mom and stick on the fridge do not have any conventions which demand the use of *whom*. Conventions tell us what is acceptable or normal in different genres.

In seventh grade, I was taught not to write *you* when I wanted to create an example: “You can ride the best wooden roller coaster at Michigan’s Adventure Amusement Park,” but to replace it with that ugly nonpersonal pronoun *one*: “One can ride the best wooden roller coaster...” *One* is third-person, I was taught, which is more appropriate for formal writing. I was told: No more papers dominated by *you* misconstructions; the mysterious *one* is neutral. I wasn’t told it’s prescriptive and that’s why it’s reserved for formal genres.

I used *one* in seventh grade and for many years after, but I never got over the clunkiness of it and do all I can *not* to use it now. Perhaps if I were used to different genres of writing—say, in the field of Information Technology—it’d sound like a good fit. But I do not and am not writing in that field. Wouldn’t you have been annoyed with me if I’d spent this whole paper saying “one must look at the conventions” instead of addressing you as *you*, especially as I know that you are a you? Would *one* fit the genre conventions of this journal?

The conventions are important and identifying them will help you to get the language right in a certain genre, but I think Fry would want me to remind you of language’s flexibility: that there *is* wiggle room even inside the conventions! Like the rules, they’re not stiff, not forever fixed in position. If they were, we’d really all be saying “the same things, time after weary time.” You may be writing in a genre but what you’re writing doesn’t have to be *generic* (meant here in the recently-made North American sense of “typical; dull, unoriginal, nondescript”⁹). Some genres call for strict, prescriptive-like language, and others want looser, more shaken-up language; some audiences will react better to straight-laced constructions, and others will smile grandly at unwoven wordings. But, even when you’ve got to work under constraints, the sheer expanse of the English language means that in any given situation you’ve got more than one way to say something.

Remember the piano keys? Following the conventions of a genre or a writing assignment doesn’t mean there’s no flexibility in *how something is said*. And just because prescriptive rules exist doesn’t mean we have to follow them blindly. We need to balance the rules with our own styles and see how those

styles fit into the conventions. The idea of the piano keys is that: if you're comfortable playing the tune of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" (the only one I can passably plunk out) as it's usually taught, that's probably sufficient. But sometimes the conventions (or the venue at which you're playing this imaginary piano) allow you to do something a little bit different with it, and the results can be very successful—Stevie Ray Vaughan's blues version of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" is testament.¹⁰ Ultimately, how you use the rules of language depends on the *situation*, the genre, the purpose of the text, the audience, and so on—but it also depends on *you*.

Fry demands that, above all else, you *enjoy* language, that you take pleasure in knowing that rules are flexible and you can bend them for fun. He says:

Words are your birthright. Unlike music, painting, dance and raffia work, you don't have to be taught any part of language or buy any equipment to use it, all the power of it was in you from the moment the head of daddy's little wiggler fused with the wall of mummy's little bubble. So if you've got it, use it (Fry, "Don't Mind Your Language").

Consider the change in impact if he'd written, "all the power of language was in you from the moment you were conceived." The point is the same—but it's not quite as expressive as his wording. He's said it in a way that's funny (he can't escape being the comedian) and a bit risqué. Not only are his images powerful and entertaining, but the words have a *spark* to them; they're surprising and various and when we read them, instead of a few plunked-out notes in sequence, there's a new and captivating melody.

Now the question is: how can you make language work for you?

Endnotes

1. More information about "A Bit of Fry & Laurie" can be found at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/abitooffryandlaurie>.
2. Much of the information about his life comes from Fry's website <http://www.stephenfry.com/>. His blog can also be found through that website.
3. You can watch the clip ("Stephen Fry & Hugh Laurie: The Subject of Language") at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHQ2756cyD8>. A transcript can be found at: http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/A_Bit_Of_Fry_And_Laurie#Episode_3.
4. The post can be found here: <http://www.stephenfry.com/2008/11/04/dont-mind-your-language%E2%80%A6/>.

5. Linguist David Crystal has a lot to say on this subject, and my definition is influenced by him. Plenty of articles about English, its usage and change, are available for free at his website: http://www.davidcrystal.com/David_Crystal/articles.htm.

6. This video, titled “Weird Al Yankovic - grammar lesson,” can be seen at: http://www.youtube.com/user/alyankovic?blend=3&ob=5#p/f/5/RGWiTvYZR_w.

7. I can’t take credit for thinking up the synonym “numskull.” These two words are in the definition of “dolt” given by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED).

8. More information on “high stakes” and “low stakes” writing: Elbow, P. (1997). “High stakes and low stakes in assigning and responding to writing” In Sorcinelli, M. D., and Elbow, P. (Eds.) *Writing to learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing across the Discipline*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 69. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

9. Again from the OED.

10. Listen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aP2RzLNlbw>.



Autumn Jackson is obsessed with the English language, whether she's teaching it, writing in it, playing with it, or interrogating it. She's working on a Master's degree in that very subject, in fact, and after finishing that degree plans to continue spreading critical visions of language around the world.