




FAR FROM THE
MADDING
GERUND



and other dispatches from
LANGUAGE LOG



MARK LIBERMAN
GEOFFREY K. PULLUM

 WILLIAM, JAMES & Co.

Wilsonville, Oregon
www.wmjasco.com

Dedication

For Cindie and Barbara.

—*M.Y.L. & G.K.P.*

Publisher Jim Leisy (james_leisy@wmjasco.com)
Editor Tom Sumner
Production Assistants Kat Ricker
Brenda Jones

Publisher's note: In keeping with the style of *Language Log*, this book is typeset using the norms of British punctuation in that punctuation marks are placed outside of quotation marks when the meaning demands it.

Printed in the U.S.A.

Names of all products herein are used for identification purposes only and are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of their respective owners. William, James & Co. makes no claim of ownership or corporate association with the products or companies that own them.

© 2006 William, James & Co. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, or transcribed, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, telepathic, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed as follows:

Rights and Permissions
William, James & Co.
8536 SW St. Helens Drive, Suite D
Wilsonville, Oregon 97070

Page 175: "since feeling is first". Copyright 1926, 1954, © 1991 by The Trustees for the E.E. Cummings Trust. Copyright © 1985 by George James Firmage, from COMPLETE POEMS: 1904–1962 by E.E. Cummings, edited by George J. Firmage. Used by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Pages 209–210: "Uncle Robert's Peanut Vending Machines" by John Bensko, Copyright © Yale University Press. Used by permission.

Page 210: "The Moment of Memory", from FICTIONS FROM THE SELF by Michael Burkard. Copyright © 1988 by Michael Burkard. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lieberman, Mark.

Far from the madding gerund and other dispatches from language log / Mark Lieberman, Geoffrey K. Pullum.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-59028-055-5

1. Language and languages. I. Pullum, Geoffrey K. II. Title.

P107.L53 2006

400—dc22

2006008657

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Introduction: The origins of Language Log</i>	<i>xiii</i>

CHAPTER ONE

Random monkeys &
mendacious pontificating old windbags
[some (mostly false) claims about language]
page 1

<i>The disappearing modal: for those who'll believe anything</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>They are a prophet</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>The blowing of Strunk and White's rules off</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>The Chicago Manual of Style—and grammar</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>You say Nevada, I say Nevahda</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>"Too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence"</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Vintage Effle</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>A Churchill story up with which I will no longer put</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>A misattribution no longer to be put up with</i> [Guest post by Benjamin G. Zimmer]	<i>18</i>
<i>Churchill vs. editorial nonsense</i> [Guest post by Benjamin G. Zimmer]	<i>21</i>
<i>"All lockers must be emptied of its contents."</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>The coming death of whom: photo evidence</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Weblogs were invented by . . . Plato!</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Edward Sapir and the "formal completeness of language"</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>The pointless game of grammar Gotcha</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Cullen Murphy draws the line</i>	<i>33</i>

<i>Sidney Goldberg on NYT grammar: zero for three</i>	36
<i>Phrasal prepositions in a civil tone</i>	41
<i>Clear Thinking Campaign gives</i> <i>“fogged spectacles” award to John Lister</i>	46
<i>Irritating cliches? Get a life</i>	47
<i>Microsoft prescriptivism</i>	50
<i>Trademark grammar</i>	52
<i>A random monkey begins Julius Caesar</i>	57
<i>Monkeys saying things again—NOT</i>	60
<i>So now it’s dogs that understand language (sigh)</i>	63
<i>Stupid fake pet communication tricks</i>	64
<i>Fine writing at 40% adjective rate</i>	67
<i>Those who take the adjectives from the table</i>	67
<i>No word for “lazy hack parroting drivel”?</i>	70
<i>Words for life, the universe, and everything</i>	71
<i>A short sharp slap for Dennis Overbye</i>	72
<i>Reuters: early bilingualism causes autism</i>	74
<i>The rhetoric of cold reading</i>	77
<i>The self-styled grammarian: no respect</i>	79

CHAPTER TWO

The meaning of the lines

[precision in language]

page 81

<i>Ray Charles, America, and the subjunctive</i>	83
<i>Pickle jinx</i>	86
<i>High jinx</i>	87
<i>Why are negations so easy to fail to miss?</i>	89
<i>Can Derrida be “even wrong”?</i>	94
<i>Suspicion of charges</i>	97
<i>Reverse sarcasm?</i>	97
<i>A Veterans Day story</i>	99

<i>“What are you, French?”</i>	102
<i>Defining marriage</i>	102
<i>A fine, or imprisonment . . . and both</i>	104
<i>Too complex to avoid judgment?</i>	107
<i>Divine ambiguity</i>	108
<i>Pete Rose and sorry statements of the third kind</i>	111
<i>Words and other lexical entries</i>	113
<i>Left turn only</i>	116
<i>Only lane bike: road surface psycholinguistics</i>	117
<i>Redeemable in cash</i>	118
<i>Sic sic sic</i>	119

CHAPTER THREE

Common and inevitable

[language in evolution]

page 121

<i>English in deep trouble?</i>	123
<i>It is up to us how fast it changes</i>	124
<i>The politics of pronunciation</i>	127
<i>The theology of phonology</i>	129
<i>Fossilized prejudices about however</i>	131
<i>Don't put up with usage abuse</i>	133
<i>Like is, like, not really like if you will</i>	136
<i>ADS word of the year is metrosexual</i>	138
<i>And the bead goes on</i>	140
<i>Once is cool, twice is queer</i>	144
<i>The water tower was higher than they</i>	147
<i>Such the surprise</i>	148
<i>Far from the madding gerund</i>	150
<i>Public Service Announcement:</i>	
<i>wedding vows are not wedding vowels</i>	153
<i>Linking which in Patrick O'Brian</i>	156

<i>Hic merus est Thyonianus</i>	158
<i>Quoi ce-qu'elle a parlé about?</i>	160

CHAPTER FOUR

Slips of the ear

[hearing, speaking, and spelling]

page 163

<i>Eggcorns: folk etymology, malapropism, mondegreen, ???</i>	165
<i>Get your boyfriend to move it: a speech perception story</i>	166
<i>An/Anne/Ian</i>	167
<i>Stress and death in Samarra</i>	168
<i>More on Samarra</i>	171
<i>Do you wish to use Hmoob?</i>	173
<i>Capitalization and Mr Cummings</i>	174

CHAPTER FIVE

Learn your grammar, Becky

[some disastrously unhelpful guidance on usage]

page 177

<i>Lie or lay? Some disastrously unhelpful guidance</i>	179
<i>Research has been made</i>	181
<i>Dangling etiquette</i>	184
<i>Phineas Gage gets an iron bar right through the PP</i>	185
<i>Without Washington's support . . . who??</i>	186
<i>Final periods and quotation marks: harder than you thought</i>	188
<i>Passive voice and bias in Reuter headlines</i> <i>about Israelis and Palestinians</i>	191

<i>Two out of three on passives</i>	195
<i>Terror: not even a noun (says Jon Stewart)</i>	197
<i>The SAT fails a grammar test</i>	199
<i>Collective nouns with singular verbs and plural pronouns</i>	205
<i>Menand's acumen deserts him</i>	212
<i>Italics and stuff</i>	214
<i>Content clauses are not necessarily complement clauses</i>	215
<i>Forensic syntax for spam detection</i>	217
<i>Inexpert and expert phishing spam</i>	219
<i>Learn your grammar, Becky</i>	223

CHAPTER SIX

Avoiding pseudo-text in cyberspace

[language goes to college]

page 227

<i>Corpus fetishism</i>	229
<i>Twenty thousand new words a year</i>	233
<i>Counting new words: is there a lexicography gap?</i>	235
<i>Word counts without lexical facts</i>	239
<i>Zettascale linguistics</i>	240
<i>Google psycholinguistics</i>	245
<i>Google-sampling: avoiding pseudo-text in cyberspace</i>	246
<i>Parsers that count</i>	251
<i>Ontologies and arguments</i>	253
<i>The plastic fetters of grammar</i>	257
<i>Mind-reading fatigue</i>	259
<i>Gall in the family</i>	261
<i>This is not Middle Earth</i>	263
<i>Colorless green probability estimates</i>	266
<i>How's your copperosity sagaciating?</i>	267
<i>Twang scholar on "the constraints of journalism"</i>	269
<i>and uh—then what?</i>	271

<i>“Everything is correct” versus “nothing is relevant”</i>	275
<i>Discourse: branch or tangle?</i>	279
<i>Discourse as turbulent flow</i>	282
<i>Trees spring eternal</i>	283
<i>Language relationships: families, grafts, prisons</i>	287
<i>Critic: writer::zoologist:elephant</i>	290

CHAPTER SEVEN

The fractal deconstruction of Yankeehood

[vocabulary lessons]

page 293

<i>It’s Yankees all the way down</i>	295
<i>Were the French the Yankees of Medieval Europe?</i>	298
<i>Sasha Aikhenvald on Inuit snow words: a clarification</i>	301
<i>Mad cow words</i>	303
<i>Same-sex Mrs. Santa: “the semantics are confusing”</i>	306
<i>The kaleidoscope of power</i>	309

CHAPTER EIGHT

The sixteen first rules of fiction

[and other writing tips]

page 311

<i>Avoiding rape and adverbs</i>	313
<i>Alistair and the adjective</i>	314
<i>The awful German New Yorker Language?</i>	315
<i>Those who are not authorized are not authorized</i>	317
<i>The sixteen first rules of fiction</i>	319

<i>Jail copy editors for the right reasons</i>	320
<i>Omit stupid grammar teaching</i>	321
<i>More timewasting garbage, another copy-editing moron</i>	323
<i>Was it Frazier or the copy editor?</i>	327
<i>Grammar and essay grading</i>	329
<i>Cell phone poems</i>	330
<i>The Dan Brown code</i>	332
<i>Dan Brown still moving very briskly about</i>	335
<i>Oxen, sharks, and insects: we need pictures</i>	338
<i>Renowned author Dan Brown staggered</i> <i>through his formulaic opening sentence</i>	340
<i>Thank God for film: Dan Brown without the writing</i>	342
<i>Index</i>	344

Preface

This book is about language, the subject to which both of us have, with great relish, devoted our academic lives. But it doesn't represent the serious work that we do within our respective departments. That work is what we do for a day job. This book is in a much lighter vein. We wrote it during evenings and weekends and odd moments between classes or while waiting for planes.

It concentrates primarily on topics having to do with grammar and correctness in Standard English—how people use the language, evidence that a lot of usage criticism is flat wrong, speculations on why incorrectly framed or completely mythical rules have such a vice-like grip on the minds of educated Americans, and so on. So there is a great deal in this book that we think should be taken seriously by people in positions of power over the prose of others (editors, teachers, and so on). However, the range of topics is pretty broad, and there is a great deal of outright fun. Here and there, we venture to predict you will actually giggle.

We may well have said things that will get up many editors' and teachers' noses: irreverence does put some people's backs up. But we were powerless to resist: writing irreverently was more enjoyable than being sober and measured and cautious. We could have censored and reframed and toned down and cut, and that would have ruined it all. So we didn't. You see our material here in just about the identical form in which it appeared before its first audience: the readers of *Language Log* (<http://www.languagelog.com>). Frequent emails from those readers said it was great fun to read. It was certainly fun to write.

Other topics besides English usage are included, especially if they are such as might provoke a good laugh or draw out a surprising and interesting fact. Some of the topics we've pursued have led to new areas of investigation and new technical terminology being coined.

Eggcorn is one term that was coined very early on in *Language Log's* history. It denotes a peculiar kind of entrenched error where people

have assumed from the sound of a word or phrase that it has a certain origin and spelled it as if that were correct. Like imagining that the people who use the word *acorn* for the egg-like little things we call acorns are saying “eggcorns” (that, of course, was the first eggcorn that came to our attention, and it gave its name to the whole species of such errors, and suggested the acorn you will notice on the cover, plus the “artist’s interpretation” of an eggcorn, used for page decoration throughout the interior).

Snowclone is another term that originated on *Language Log*. A “snowclone” is a kind of phrasal cliché, with some assembly required, that journalists adapt for use and re-use over and over again (a famous and particularly moth-eaten one is based on referring to the Eskimos as having *X* many words for snow; hence the name). You’ll find occasional references to eggcorns and snowclones in this book, though we don’t concentrate on those topics.

There is a little politics here and there, we confess; so many of the most salient utterances in public life come from the fine ladies and gentlemen that we elect to office to represent or govern us. When we notice striking things about what politicians say, we often run to the computer and write something about it for *Language Log*. There isn’t much of a bias: we happen to inhabit neither the Trotskyite end of the spectrum nor the Mussolinian one.

And in fact we have been rather disappointed with the tendency of humorists in the media to highlight and exaggerate the misspeakings of one man, our 43rd President. Flubbing and drying and mangling and other linguistic catastrophes befall everyone, not just George W. There are as many Democratic as Republican politicians whose utterances sometimes raise a linguist’s eyebrow. And Mark actually has a challenge out to Jacob Weisberg, who publishes collections of “Bushisms”: a free dinner at the restaurant of Weisberg’s choice if he will allow his conversation at it to be taped and transcribed and studied later for howlers that can be published as Weisbergisms. Weisberg has so far not dared to accept. (Cluck-cluck! Chicken!)

We owe thanks to many of our fellow *Language Log* contributors for their help and support, and in particular we are grateful to Ben Zimmer, who wrote two wonderful posts on Winston Churchill and prepositions that were so tightly connected to posts of ours that we didn’t

want to leave them out. Ben kindly allowed us to include them here. But otherwise the posts we have included bear only our names, so we are the only ones to blame for any errors committed or offense given—Mark if the signature at the end says “myl” and Geoff if it says “gkp”.

The others who have helped us or provided things for us to write about—too many to name—include anonymous bloggers from strangely named blogs such as *Languagehat* and *Tenser, said the Tensor*, numerous journalists and columnists and writers whose work product we have examined, and various allegedly talking animals (Kanzi the bonobo, Koko the gorilla, N’kisi the parrot, Rico the dog), plus correspondents like John Cowan, Chris Culy, Gerald Gazdar, Lane Greene, Stephen Jones, Marilyn Martin, Marc van Oostendorp, Fernando Pereira, Paul Postal, Jesse Sheidlower, Barbara Scholz, Chris Waigl, Glen Whitman, and . . . Oh, heck, we told you there were too many to name.

In addition, for their hard work in putting this book together, editing it, and getting it out, we thank Brenda Jones, Jim Leisy, Kat Ricker, and Tom Sumner at William, James & Co. The idea for the book was originally Tom’s. If you like it, be grateful to him. We are.

As you read this book, you may (we hope) find yourself thinking, “I never knew that!”, or “I always thought that was bad grammar!”, or “Was that really the origin?”, or “Did they really write that?”; and while these thoughts are occurring to you, it may be that you will come to see the English language somewhat differently on some points. You will have fun, but your opinions about language will shift. You might even begin to think you’d like to know a bit more about linguistics than you know right now. We’d be glad, because that is our real mission. Linguistics has always been a source of fascination and pleasure for us. We’d like to share.

—Mark Liberman
Geoff Pullum
March 2006

Introduction

The origins of Language Log

The idea for *Language Log* was simple enough: to start a little on-line magazine written entirely by professional linguists, who would work for free, in time snatched away from their busy teaching and writing lives. It would be a magazine devoted entirely to linguistic topics like syntax and phonetics but aimed entirely at a general non-linguist readership. Now, how sensible does that sound?

Well, roughly as sensible as starting a little on-line magazine written entirely by periodontists, who would work for free, in time snatched away from their busy professional lives treating gum disease. A magazine devoted entirely to periodontological topics like root planing and bacterial plaque but aimed entirely at a general non-dentist readership.

Were we absolutely nuts?

We, of course, would not have been the ones to ask.

“Oh, no!” we would probably have said, oblivious to the slightly loony light in our eyes. “Oh, no, we are not insane! It is our conjecture that there exists an unsuspected reservoir of public interest in such topics as syntactic rules and phonetic transcription and morphological structure!”

Yeah, right. And engineers are suddenly going to reveal a previously latent curiosity about whether *among* and *amongst* have different distributions, and economic development specialists in Michigan will discover a previously suppressed fascination with dangling participles . . . Porcine aeronautics.

No venture capitalist would have reached for the checkbook. We would have sounded several bricks short of a full intellectual load, if not straightforwardly batshit crazy. The idea teetered between the hilarious and the deranged. Leaning, if anything, a little toward the bonkers.

But of course, you do not need a venture capitalist to set up a little magazine any more. Personal publishing software is almost free, and a web address costs just a few dollars a year. Anyone can play.

And now, only a couple of years later, when we check our access logs (which we do, like anxious new parents constantly peeping into the crib, unable to believe there is a live baby in there), we find that thousands and thousands and thousands of people are pointing their browsers at <http://www.languagelog.com>, and reading *Language Log* every day. By the time this book was finished, *Language Log* had passed the two million visitor mark.

Somewhere out there, it seems, there are bankers and physicians and engineers and managers and programmers and librarians and writers and lawyers and graduate students and undergraduates and even kids in high school who wait for us (and the other Language Loggers) to post our thoughts on things that occur to us about language: technical points in linguistics, topical issues about language in the news, strange mistakes concerning language made in the media, misguided notions held by copy editors, false allegations about disfluency of political figures, frivolous bits of linguistic whimsy, or other things of varied sorts. And they read every word we write.

We know they do, because when we post something with even the slightest mistake in it (although we are immune to error, we do post deliberate errors to check on the acuity of our readership, you understand), we often find that the first emails pointing out the errors arrive within three minutes or so. People are logging in and checking the site so frequently that it seems at our end that they must be hovering over their browsers, reloading *Language Log* just to see if anything new has been posted so they can send us email about it.

Do they send us email!

That sentence is not actually a question. It has interrogative syntactic form but exclamatory semantic force. But if you want to read it as a question, then the answer is yes, they send us email. Enthusiastic congratulations, helpful corrections, sour disagreements, stern objections, well-informed grouching, clever counterexamples, warm praise, new observations, related ideas, pedantic remarks . . . we sure do get mail.

That all means extra work reading it and answering it, of course. Why do extra work? For that matter, why do we do all the work of writing *Language Log* in the first place? It's not just the two of us: about a dozen people sometimes contribute, from the once-or-twice-a-year contributors to once-or-twice-a-week people, and they all have

professional positions of some kind as linguists. They have actual work to do in day jobs that involve teaching linguistics or doing research or translation or technical work that involves language. All of us have work we have to do for the people who pay us actual money. So why do we do extra work for no pay writing *Language Log*?

When mountaineers are asked why anyone would try to climb Mount Everest when there is no pay for it and the attempt is quite likely to kill them, they generally like to say they wanted to climb it *because it is there*. We did not have that excuse: *Language Log* was *not* there in summer 2003. It was just a gleam in Mark's eye (he was the one who first had the idea). So that would not be an answer. One answer we could give to why we started *Language Log* up and why we continue writing for it would be that it is useful to have a place where preliminary thoughts of a not-too-serious nature can be laid out and viewed by a few thousand close friends. We hardly know what we think until we have written it down and placed it where anyone in the world with a browser can see it. We teach ourselves new stuff this way.

But the most serious answer is that we do care about the discipline of linguistics, which has given us such enormous intellectual satisfaction over the years, and we believe other people would love it too, only the number of people studying it in schools and colleges and universities is not even half what it ought to be. As a rough rule of thumb, we believe that, at least on average, enrollments in linguistics courses should match the number of people getting undergraduate degrees one for one. (Not that everyone should be forced by edict to take a linguistics course, you understand, but that there should be enough places in linguistics courses that it would average out to be the same as having room for every undergraduate to take one.)

The main reason people are not studying linguistics, we suspect, is that they've simply never heard of it. *Language Log* is trying to change that.

But having mentioned the noble goal of contributing to the linguistics profession that we cherish, we should also mention that, as we said in the preface, it is a blast writing for *Language Log*. Infinitely more fun than writing for harsher taskmasters. Refereed journal articles often take 15 months to get refereed and revised and resubmitted and reviewed and copy-edited and typeset and proofread and printed and

bound and distributed to people who can pay the huge prices that many professional journals charge or who have access through university libraries. The first responses in print might take another 15 months or more. Full and widespread appreciation of the contribution of an article might take 15 years.

On *Language Log*, you can see your stuff published where everyone in the world can see it for free just 15 seconds after you write it, and you often have some feedback in 15 minutes. That's an improvement of four or five orders of magnitude. It's scholarship on methamphetamines. Publication for speed freaks.

And for control freaks too: another wonderful thing is that you choose the text and the layout and no editor intervenes between your ruminative laptop tapings and your instant appearance in the blogosphere. If you want a bit in red boldface, you just put it in red boldface.

Of course, the lack of controls would certainly permit the spewing of unlimited quantities of unreadable garbage into cyberspace. But we harbored certain quality-related ambitions for *Language Log*, and those rein us in a bit. We wanted *Language Log* to be more than an electronic toilet wall to write graffiti on. We wanted it to have the feel of a small high-quality Internet magazine—not quite *Slate* or *Salon*, perhaps (we have no advertising and no web designers and we are light on graphics), but considerably more like them than a random personal blog (like Zipper Harris's blog in the *Doonesbury* strip, with entries like: "Krispy Kreme has introduced its new donut of the month; IMHO it's a winner").

We try to make *Language Log* look like a quality magazine about language by combining two features: (1) it is written almost exclusively by people who have degrees in linguistics or very closely related subjects, and who are very well informed about how language works; and (2) it is topical and lively and fun to read.

Very little is being published in major media outlets that meet criterion (1), we feel; and nothing at all that also meets criterion (2). Is it even possible? When we started *Language Log*, we didn't know. We thought it might be interesting to find out. In this book you will find some evidence about the way things went.