

An Essay on Linguistics in Editing

By Gabriel Rodriguez

My name is Gabriel Rodriguez. I'm twenty-nine years old, and I finished grad school five years ago. I am an author, a freshly minted editor, and, by certification, a scientist and linguist. I've recently begun working in editing—academic copyediting, specifically—and after I joined the EFA and reached out to Sheryl Holmberg at the Freelancer, she asked me if I'd be interested in writing an article about how my experience as a linguist informs my work as an editor. Very deeply.

What Is a Linguist?

To understand modern linguistics, you have to know one thing: we have a shibboleth. There's a dizzying variety of disciplines and sub-disciplines that fall under its banner, but every single linguist I've ever met shares jaded amusement at the fact that telling someone you're a linguist invariably results in one of two responses, often both:

"How many languages do you speak?"

"I'm going to have to watch my grammar around you."

The first is dreaded because the answer is slightly embarrassing: "one" more often than you'd expect, and rarely more than two or three, at least among Americans. The reason for this is simple—many linguists work exclusively on English, or their own native language, and you don't actually need to know a language to study its grammatical structure, although heavily specializing in a language does often require fluency.

The second is slightly more complicated. I would guess that most editors have at least heard of the prescriptivism/descriptivism debate, which I think is mostly associated with debates over lexicography and pedagogy outside of linguistics. If you haven't, long story short, prescriptivism is the belief that those who study language should also *prescribe* how it is used, by articulating rules and policing the boundaries of acceptable usage.

Descriptivism is the belief that those who study language should *describe* how it is used and avoid interfering with the speakers they're observing.

There are much finer distinctions to be drawn, but the point is that linguists tend to very strongly believe that prescriptivism is appropriate only in certain contexts, while

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a scientific approach to language overwhelmingly requires descriptivism. This is partially because from around 1600–1950 linguists played a key role in the development of the belief that upper-class Europeans and Americans were the genetic heirs to the greatest language in history, Latin. Lower-class speakers of European languages were essentially mental children, and all other languages ranged from archaic (Chinese) to less than human (Indigenous, African). It is also a reflection of what centuries of observation of human language has taught us: barring occasional mistakes in speech, it does not appear to be possible for a native speaker of any language or dialect to produce spoken instances of that language that are not regulated by internally consistent and extremely complex rules.

It tends to be difficult to convince people of this without just giving them an education in linguistics, but believe me when I tell you that the central insight of the past seventy-plus years of linguistics is the realization that there is a shocking level of order and consistency to human speech. Those rules may not align with the variety of the language which is considered refined, polite, or "correct" by the broader society, but they are rules, and hence can only be considered "incorrect" in relation to other sets of rules.

Most modern societies define that correctness by its subscription to a particular, arbitrarily selected language variety, often because of its association with powerful classes of people. (While people have always been persecuted for their language, linguistic correctness as we now know it arose in conjunction with the nation-state from around the 17th–19th centuries.) We call this the "standard language" or "prestige dialect," and the belief that it is superior to other varieties is called "standard language ideology."

From the perspective of linguists, a standard language is beneficial insofar as it facilitates communication. However, standard language ideology has been used to justify oppression, racism, and genocide, often with linguists' aid and complicity. Because of our familiarity with this history, and the atrocious harm our profession has done, modern linguists tend on principle to be opposed to correcting people's grammar.

Editing Versus Linguistics

So, as a linguist, "correcting" someone else's language is anathema to me, unless they're a non-native speaker and have asked me to do so—my job is to record words as data and form my interpretations from there. However, I'm also an author. In addition to academic work, I've published a few opinion pieces in a political magazine, and I've been writing

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Linguistics in Editing

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fiction since I learned how to read. Editing language on literary-aesthetic grounds is a different, albeit not unrelated question. Linguists on the whole are also not unreasonable about this. We know that mastery of the standard language variety is desirable to many people, at the very least for its social utility, and that writing is a different modality from speech and is subject to errors and inconsistencies that would not occur in one's spoken language. I've read plenty of academic works that I wish had had an editor, and I've edited many of my own works, helped others edit theirs, and seen the incredible improvements good editing can bring to a piece of writing. There is nothing inherently objectionable to me about helping someone sort out their thoughts on the page.

For that reason, I was cautiously intrigued when a few people I knew suggested I try my hand at editing. I thought editing professionally sounded enjoyable, but I was afraid that I would be asked, or even required, to enforce arbitrary rules that I saw as unnecessary, groundless, or even harmful—that I'd be conscripting myself into a war on the side of Standard Language Ideology.

What Is an Editor?

That's why I was pleasantly surprised when I first spoke with a manuscript editor at an academic press who had graduated from the same Master's program at the same university I had. She told me that it was their policy to do their utmost to protect the voice of the original author, that the

rules they worked with were reasonable and flexible, and that she felt that was the prevailing ethos in academic editing. She referred me to a member of the EFA, who said much the same things and suggested I join the organization and take a few classes or webinars.

I chose to jump into copyediting, as the middle level of editing and arguably the broadest. I don't know enough or have enough experience to interrogate what editors on the whole believe, but what I saw in those classes and the readings we did was a systemic commitment to minimalist intervention and an attitude of informed flexibility towards the rules. And I was delighted to see that those rules are understood not as ineffable but as the conscious and necessarily arbitrary editorial decisions of the curators of style guides and house styles. The Chicago Manual of Style itself, which I had always regarded with dread, actually says that its modern additions incorporate the insights of linguistics (and I can attest that it does). The first rule of editing, I was told, is to *do no harm*—to worsen a manuscript with unnecessary modifications.

Copyediting, as I came to understand it, is not about "fixing" other people's language through adherence to an unreconstructed ruleset—it's essentially about achieving compliance with a style guide. Those style guides can be rebuilt, modified, and supplemented through the tool of the style sheet. While of course many editorial

judgments are a question of aesthetic subjectivity, it is on the whole much more scientific than I expected.

By that I mean each decision is supposed to have a lucid and well-defined chain of reasoning behind it that operates as part of an internally consistent system. That reasoning should then be made legible to your audience, which for an editor is the author and anyone else they're accountable to for their decisions. I consider myself more of a fiction author at heart than a scientific one, but those principles are what I would consider the core of scientific writing, and it's an environment I find very agreeable.

My Experience

Of course, these are all the words of an extremely inexperienced (professional) editor. I have a few projects penciled in now, and I've worked as a fact-checker for about a year, but I haven't yet actually gone through the process of editing a text from beginning to end for someone who is paying me to do it. I haven't yet faced the frustration of a wall of *stets*, and I've gotten to pick and choose how I apply CMoS without the ironclad rules of a publisher's style guide. How things go from here is unwritten, but I would like to think that my background will help me approach editing by better understanding what rules are, and what it means to correct someone else's language.

I have my own aesthetic preferences, and I know that when I'm faced with particular problems in a manuscript I'm

going to want to rip into it with a buzzsaw. But I understand what I'm doing as the application of my particular preferences, which were chosen in response to a particular context and bearing in mind a particular audience. However strongly I may prefer the serial comma, it isn't a question of right and wrong, because I don't believe in wrong language. I believe in language created by particular principles in a particular context to communicate with a particular group of people. Those principles can be important—indispensable, even—but it isn't what language *is*, because language is so much more than that, so much more than what we can even grasp.

I hope this will help me to do less harm.

*Gabriel Rodriguez
gabrielrrodriguez.com*

Additional Resources

What is Linguistics (LSA): from the Linguistics Society of America (LSA), the main professional association for linguistics in the US.

What is Linguistics (UCLA): a good place to start. UCLA has a great linguistics program.

All Things Linguistic Link Roundup: a huge list of free resources on linguistics from around the web.

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Mary Knight

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I'm on the board of the San Diego Chapter of Culinary Historians. Each month we feature informative talks about food history from experts across the US. I recently was honored to speak about the history of Sicilian food from 800 BC to the present.

What are your social media links?

[Maryknight.net](https://maryknight.net)

[LinkedIn](#)

Sarah Banks is the owner of Spring Tide. Her website is <https://springtideeditandwrite.com/>

MAL Letter

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And while we think this new series is totally awesome and one of the best things the EFA has ever done (OK, that's hyperbole!), if it totally flops, next year's MALs can STET the change and create something different to engage EFA members.

Here's to talking,

Dayna M. Reidenouer,
EFA Board of Governors
Member at Large

Linguistics Resources

[Crash Course Linguistics \(YouTube\)](#): playlist of videos explaining the basics. ...continued

[Lingthusiasm \(podcast\)](#): pop science linguistics podcast from Gretchen McCulloch.

[LingComm Resources List](#): list of resources for linguists doing public outreach. Professional linguists are the intended users of this list, but it actually gives you a decent idea of what's out there.

Beginner's Guide to ChatGPT

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Researching and Fact-Checking: Now that ChatGPT can access the live web, it can quickly gather and summarize information for you and cite its sources so you can double-check. Rather than reading through multiple articles to hunt down and verify info, send the query to ChatGPT. It will collect the resources you need.

Making Custom Word Macros: ChatGPT can build macros for Microsoft Word that you can use with every project or specific, single-use macros that will save you time with one project.

Invest in the Paid Version

The editors who dismiss ChatGPT's capabilities often have not experimented with the paid version. The free

version can give you only a fraction of a glimpse into what the paid version can do. It's like comparing a rowboat with a rocket ship.

The paid version offers quicker response times, vastly improved output, increased accuracy, and priority access to new features. ChatGPT can save you days of work every month and is worth the monthly \$20 subscription. You can register for a paid plan here: openai.com

You Still Have to Do Your Job

AI is not a replacement for human editors. Editors bring a depth of understanding, emotional intelligence, and cultural awareness that AI cannot replicate. It can conduct basic editing with accuracy and offer helpful content-editing suggestions,

but it can't fully grasp the nuance or make the context-specific judgment calls that professional editors can. And, just like human editors, it sometimes makes mistakes.

Using these skills will allow ChatGPT to augment your capabilities. This will free up time so you can focus on the parts of editing that require your unique human skills. Remember, ChatGPT is a powerful tool, but the true artistry of editing still lies in the hands of skilled editorial professionals, *human* ones.

Erin Servais helps editors upskill through using Artificial Intelligence. She teaches the ChatGPT for Editors course and blogs about AI editing tips at AIforEditors.com.

Crystal Adaway

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What sparks your creativity?

Pretty much anything! I love clever wordplay, being out in nature, listening to different kinds of music, reading or watching a compelling story, catching a whiff of something exotic or delicious. My daughters are brilliant and absolutely hilarious, so being around them is always great for creative sparks.

What is your favorite kind of work?

I have two favorites that tap into different parts of my brain, and I love them equally. As an editor, my favorite kind of work is developmental editing—fiction, non-fiction, memoirs, and plays. I find it exciting and fulfilling to dig deep with a writer to help them figure out the best way to tell their story structurally, logically, creatively, and memorably. As a graphic designer, logos

are my favorite projects. When the typography, images, and colors all work together to put the client in their most impactful, enduring light...*chef's kiss*.

Share something fun or interesting that's happened recently, either personally or professionally.

I know you said either, but it's tough to choose! Personally, I recently had a developmental reading of my new full-length dramatic play, *To Be Still*. I'll be working on revisions in the coming months, and [Pipeline Playwrights](#) will be producing it in the fall of 2024. In the professional arena, I'm most excited about working with [Teachers Unify to End Gun Violence](#). I designed the suite of new logos for this powerfully important and growing grassroots organization and its affiliates.