Natural Grammar vs. Prescriptive Grammar in Technical Writing

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For centuries grammar has been an important focus in education systems across the world. This grammar, adopted form various languages over the years, governs the life of a technical writer. Grammar is essential to technical writing because, without it, writing would make little to no sense. Grammar functions as a unifying aspect for every language in the world. In this paper, I will discuss the function of grammar for the modern technical writer, as well as suggest changes that may be in order to make the current system of grammar use more applicable. Grammar is necessary for technical writing, but grammar can also cause problems for the reader if the type of grammar that is used is inappropriate for the context. I will be referring to prescriptive grammar in this paper. I am defining this type of grammar as grammar that is traditional and technical by nature. This kind of grammar is what is taught in school and has rules that are strictly adhered to. I will also be referring to natural grammar, which in this paper is considered the grammar that is learned and comprehended as an understanding of language develops from an early age. The grammar choices that technical writers make may confuse consumers. Technical writers need to pay attention to the wider audience and focus their grammar toward that audience and their level of education.

Natural versus Prescriptive Grammar

Grammar is necessary for technical writing. The question is, what type of grammar? Should technical writers focus on mastering certain grammar structures over others? More importantly, how much grammar should technical writers be employing? The answer may seem simple: use prescriptive grammar because that is what everyone understands. A problem can arise if the audience does not understand prescriptive grammar. According to Connatser, "Grammar is a system of syntactic, semantic, and phonological rules that govern the use of language"(264). When this wordy definition is broken down according to Connatser the

definition of grammar is sentence structure, the meaning of a word, and the distribution or pattern of speech in language. The literal definitions of syntactic, semantic, and phonological may seem a bit obscure, but grammar in fact governs sentence structure, grammar is also governed by the meaning of words, and is certainly a critical part of speech patterns within every language. Connatser's definition of grammar suggests that grammar is one of the most important aspects of writing. However, the range of comprehension among individuals is surprising. Teaching prescriptive grammar has been put on the back burner during the last several decades as a new school of thought emerged that focused on the inherent learning of grammar through proper writing technique. Because the teaching of grammar is being deemphasized, the expected knowledge of the average writer and consumer must be decreased as well. Chances are as you read the previous sentence the fact that it began with a subordinating conjunction, which is taboo in prescriptive grammar, did not affect the meaning of the sentence, nor did your brain become confused because of this use. However, this definition of grammar fails to include an explanation of the natural grammar that an individual procures throughout one's life as an instinctive way to exchange ideas. Natural grammar is the grammar that one develops as language skills mature. This form of grammar is governed by rhetorical comprehension, which is the understanding of style in writing. Natural grammar utilizes the innate way that the brain comprehends information and translates that information into a set of rules that most people can understand and agree with. These rules are not necessarily in a grammar textbook, though certainly prescriptive grammar is based on natural grammar, but without these rules communication would be nearly impossible. Perry completed a study on the relevance of various prescriptive grammar rules to writers. His findings included that less emphasis has been placed on avoiding split infinitives, as well as that using a pronoun should only occur after a

well-defined antecedent which is very important to technical writing, and that avoiding dangling modifiers is not as important as some other rules (45). I found these three examples of areas of potential changes to grammar utilization to be particularly interesting because these grammar rules are frequently stressed in the classroom. Also, frequently people who make their living writing do not feel that these rules carry as much weight as a grammar textbook would lead one to believe according to Perry's findings. Requiring that a writer not begin a sentence with a coordinating conjunction is another prescriptive rule that is not always necessary to follow in technical writing. Beginning a sentence with a coordinating conjunction can "serve effectively as a transitional expression that joins two sentences" (Connatser 271). Starting a sentence with a coordinating conjunction makes a natural transition that seems normal to the average person who follows natural grammar. The rules of prescriptive grammar are important; however, they should not dictate how technical writers choose to convey information to the audience because sometimes natural grammar helps the reader comprehend the material better than prescriptive grammar.

Objective Style and Grammar

"Consider the situation, and you may be able to communicate effectively" (Buehler 459). The premise behind Buehler's idea is simple: do not merely follow grammar rules blindly, but instead focus on each individual situation and use the type of grammar that best fits the circumstances. For technical writers an objective style is generally chosen to convey clear, accurate messages that the majority of the population can understand. This rhetorical decision is based largely upon providing a minimum of distraction for the reader (Buehler 460). Many technical writers write based on an interesting code. "They're more concerned with the reader understanding than with technically correct copy (Perry 39). If the top priority of a technical

writer is the reader's comprehension of the material, as Perry suggests, then I propose a modification to the current system of grammatical expectations. In order to write effectively the technical writer must consider the audience to which the piece of writing is directed. All writers must consider their audience in order to be successful; however audience is particularly important for the technical writer. If the audience is well educated or schooled in grammar then a more prescriptive approach is in order. For this type of audience prescriptive grammar rules must be adhered to closely. Making the use of prescriptive grammar a requirement functions in two ways. The most important is that if too many errors occur the reader may transition from "reader to error detector" (Connaster 265). The danger of this shift lies in the counter productivity that will occur when the intended audience loses interest in the piece of writing in favor of spotting grammatical errors. Using natural grammar with those educated under the strict rules of prescriptive grammar can alter the rhetorical role of the reader and thus render the contents of the paper unimportant in the reader's eyes. The same problem can occur with those who are less educated in prescriptive grammar. If the author violates a rule of natural grammar to support the requirements of prescriptive grammar the reader may become an error detector for natural grammar instead of for prescriptive grammar. The challenge for the technical writer lies in deciding which type of grammar to utilize under which circumstances. I recommend that the technical writer apply natural grammar rules when writing for any audience that has statistically received less grammar instruction, or when writing fairly uncomplicated material. The audience that reads a set of instructions to build an entertainment center, for example, is more likely to adhere to the rules of natural grammar and gain a clearer understanding of the meaning behind the set of instructions if natural grammar is used. Since the most important goal for the technical writer is the comprehension of the reader, simple instructions, brochures, and advertising with

concise language and a focus on natural grammar is necessary for the intended audience. If the audience is particularly well educated, especially in grammar, or the material is a grant, software documentation, or other specialized information that requires an emphasis on perspective grammar to eliminate confusion, increase professionalism, and reduce the risk of the reader becoming an error checker then prescriptive grammar must be used.

The Four Elements of Technical Writing

In order to create clear rhetoric in a piece of technical writing, the author must consider four elements. The author must consider the "speaker or writer, the message to be communicated, the purpose of the message, and the person for whom the message is intended" (Buehler 459). Considering the speaker in a piece of technical writing is incredibly important to capture the audience's attention. The speaker must establish credibility right away and maintain that same level of credibility throughout the entirety of the document for the best outcome to occur. If, in a brochure for example, a dangling modifier is reworked into a prescriptively correct sentence the speaker may lose credibility because the verbiage becomes such that the reader doubts the knowledge and consistency of the author. Damage to credibility is best avoided and if grammar rules threaten credibility perhaps the rules of natural grammar should be adhered to in such an instance. In other settings, however, adhering to the rules of prescriptive grammar can increase one's credibility and including natural grammar in the piece can damage the credibility that using prescriptive grammar created for the audience. The message to be communicated directly dictates who the audience is, what they want to hear, and how they would like the information to be delivered. Focusing on the message is clearly important grammatically as well because if the author uses poor grammar, refuses to use commas, or makes other errors, the message can be misconstrued or ignored entirely because of these problems with mechanics.

The purpose of the message is quite similar to the message being communicated, but it focuses on why the reader would choose to read this particular piece of writing, and how best to facilitate the conveyance of the material. Now, the person for whom the message is intended is probably the most relevant consideration on this list for the technical writer. The focus of technical writing is to convey a message in a way that the people who are most interested or affected by the message being conveyed will understand it the best. As I have discussed earlier, one of the best ways to accomplish this is by discovering who the audience is that is reading the material in question, what their overall level of education is, and which type of grammar, rather natural or prescriptive, fits best that particular audience in this scenario. In these ways the four most important aspects of writing directly affect technical writing through the use of specific types of grammar.

Procedural Discourse

Procedural discourse is another important part of technical writing. Procedural discourse focuses on "written and spoken discourse that guides people in performing a task" such as user guides, repair manuals, online help systems and sets of instructions (Farkus 42). The system for providing the information that the reader wants to know to the reader is similar in procedural discourse as it is in other forms of technical writing. The author must first adapt the material to best fit the user's background and form the information to the circumstances under which it will be most often used (Farkus 43). The author must then use an appropriate style, vocabulary, and level of detail that fits both the user and the intentioned function of the written material that is being read by the user. The most difficult portion of writing for procedural discourse lies in deciding how best to present the various, and sometimes tedious, steps and states of the information to each particular audience. An example of this would be in an instruction booklet.

If the instructions say: Take Part B in the above and in the space below insert into Space D-12. Even with the help of visual aids, this sentence is ambiguous largely because there are too many words and a confusing preposition. If the instructions read: Take Part B from the above space and insert it into Space D-12. This sentence makes more sense, even without context, and will help the consumer complete the task at hand with less frustration and potentially with less risk of injury or damage to the object being assembled. The grammar and word choice utilized in these particular instances has great rhetorical effect on the outcome of the usability of the above named discourse. For procedural discourse the "less is best" motto of technical writing is especially effective. Using brief steps, simple, easy to follow formatting, a title, a consistent design, and a distinct "decision-action" sequence help create a highly functional set of procedures (Farkus 45). According to Farkus, a particularly important attribute to include is an action statement that is built around an imperative verb (45). This helps to create a simple, stream-lined approach to the execution of the steps. If statements are added that include too much description, these statements will most likely confuse the user and affect the overall effectiveness of the procedures. Another way to continue the concise style that procedural discourse calls for is to use gerunds rather than noun phrases. Noun phrases offer very little information, whereas "gerunds convey a sense of process and work well over a broad range of designs" (Farkus 46). Despite the fact that natural versus prescriptive grammar is not nearly as important in procedural discourse as it is in other areas of technical communication, grammar still plays an important role in conveying information and giving the reader an accurate sense of the information and how the information affects the project at hand.

Problems with Prescriptive Grammar

One major problem with prescriptive grammar versus natural grammar is that prescriptive grammar has been collected from several different languages throughout the centuries. The issue behind this lies in the fact that these languages, particularly the foundational Latin and Greek, have different subject verb agreements than English does (Connatser 268). These languages are built on different premises, with different sentence structures, and different case-number markers. When English speakers try to use words from other languages that are still in their original form tense changes occur and frequently cause unnecessary confusion. The form of the word that one would assume is the grammatically correct one is actually frequently natural grammar rather than prescriptive grammar because of the difference in origin of the word. Some examples of this problem can be found in Connatser's *Reconsidering Some Prescriptive Rules of Grammar and Composition* where Connatser gives some examples of words that are frequently misused. These include the word data, media, and alumnus (and its other conjugations) (Connatser 269). This problem is a frequent concern for technical editors who must differentiate between the necessity for grammatical correctness and the preferred usage of the word in context by the population. Deciding that the importance of grammatical correctness transcends the importance of preferred usage often occurs, however based on my findings about natural versus prescriptive grammar perhaps this will change in the very near future.

Overall, the importance of grammar in technical writing varies. In certain instances prescriptive grammar is necessary to engage the audience and prevent error detection. Natural grammar, on the other hand, provides several positive options for technical writing. These include ease of understanding and accessibility for a wider population. Rhetoric in technical

writing is also important as it clearly identifies whom the piece is intended for, who the speaker is, and clarifies the purpose of the piece of writing. Procedural discourse is another important part of technical writing and focuses on consistency, conciseness, and clarity. These attributes are particularly important for ease of use by the reader. Without reader comprehension technical writing is useless, which makes this category particularly important. The origins of a word also affect the grammatical function of that word and it is frequently opposite of the expected usage of the word because of its origin in another language. While this may be confusing, language plays a vital role in grammar and the true meaning of words can greatly affect the meaning of a sentence and how grammar rules function for that particular word. This difference causes a large amount of confusion and thus is a constant struggle for both technical writers and technical editors. In these ways I have illustrated the importance of modifying the set of grammar that technical writers are expected to use to include paying particular attention to the audience for whom the piece is intended. The use of natural or prescriptive grammar is largely dictated by the audience and should be chosen according to the audience's level of education, level of grammatical knowledge, and amount knowledge required to accomplish the task at hand.

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