Whose Rules Rule?: Grammar Controversies, Popular Culture and the Fear of English from Below

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Like a controversy should

In 1954, the host of CBS's *Morning Show* and broadcast-journalist icon, Walter Cronkite, refused to read the then new advertising jingle for Winston cigarettes. Given today's consensus on the negative effects of cigarette smoking, a present-day observer might assume that Cronkite's reluctance to endorse the product was connected to some prescient knowledge about the health hazards related to nicotine consumption. This, however, was not the basis for Cronkite's reaction; the actual reason is perhaps harder to grasp—Cronkite simply did not approve of the grammar in the slogan he was supposed to read, i.e. "*Winston tastes good <u>like</u> a cigarette should*". The prevailing traditionalist prescription at the time was that *like* should not be used as a conjunction—the correct conjunction, according to that view, should have been *as*.

The reactions of one, perhaps linguistically conservative journalist, do not necessarily confirm a usage as controversial, but the commotion involved more than Cronkite's refusal to read the jingle as written. According to Geoffrey Nunberg (2004: xiii) in his preface to *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-first Century*, when Merriam-Webster published its *Third New International Dictionary* (referred to henceforth as W3) in 1961, it included the use of *like* as a conjunction in a way which suspiciously echoed the Winston ad.[1] Many critics were

[1] Some sources, like the much maligned but generally informative *Wikipedia*, claim that the W3 actually cited the ad: "In the dictionary, the editors refused to condemn the use of 'like' as a conjunction, and cited 'Winston tastes good like a cigarette should' as an example of popular colloquial use" (see *Winston tastes good like a cigarette should* (2009). This, however, is not the case; the relevant part of the entry is as follows: "in accordance with the way in which: the way that <*the violin now sounds* like *an old masterpiece should*>" (see the entry for *like* in the W3, 1961). Whether or not the editors of the W3 cited the ad in the

incensed about this perceived lax attitude to language usage and "[t]he dictionary's derelictions were front-page news for months – The New York times condemned it as a **Bolshevik document** and the Chicago Daily News took it as the symptom of '**a general decay in values**'" (Nunberg 2004: xiii, my emphasis).[2]

Interestingly enough, the slightly flawed *Wikipedia* entry on this subject points out a useful connection between the ad and the concept of a "tipping point" as mentioned by Malcolm Gladwell in his 2002 book of the same name. According to Gladwell (2002: 25), the "ungrammatical and somehow provocative use of 'like' instead of 'as' created a minor sensation" when the ad was released and Gladwell goes even further to imply that the phrase itself may have helped to boost the sales of the cigarettes, eventually resulting in Winston's number one position on the market in 1971.

So, who really cares?

Other than operate as a humorous linguistic anecdote, many scholars may wonder if such an incident can offer any scholarly insights or tell us anything meaningful about English or language in general.

In this paper, I explore the idea that such controversies are relevant and important subjects of study. With a small selection of examples of Non-standard English in Popular Culture as a platform, I look at the "controversial" usage in question, discuss the pertinent linguistic issues and, when relevant, consider the reactions and uproar they have sometimes triggered. My aim is to show that underlying such controversies are broader cultural and social issues and in the process I sketch out some of the most central questions about the relationship between Popular Culture and language.

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ensuing public debate has not been confirmed, but the *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1989: 600-603) does explicitly mention the ad and provides an interesting article on the controversy over the use of conjunctive *like*.

[2] It should be noted that the condemnation of the W3 was not based solely on the use of *like* as a conjunction, the reviews mentioned above also disapproved of the inclusion of words like *ain't* and *irregardless* among other things (see Nunberg 2004: xiii).

This study is eclectic in its approach and theory, primarily using a straightforward modern descriptive framework to discuss questions of usage, but also employing different concepts and terminology from sociolinguistics, sociology and cultural studies, such as *symbolic capital*,[3] *critical literacy*,[4] *dominant ideology*[5] and *moral panic*[6] to interpret the background to the usage, the nature of the controversy and to situate these in behavior and attitudes.

Using Popular Culture as a resource to study English

For the vast majority of grammarians, it is relatively unfamiliar territory in academic research to examine and understand English through the lens of Popular Culture and, to my knowledge, very little work has been done within this specific methodology. Linguists who do use Popular Culture in their research often study English and Popular Culture in language learning situations (e.g. Priesler 1999a & b; Zuengler 2003, Marsh *et al* 2005; Marsh 2005, among others). Sometimes, Popular Culture may be discussed in sociolinguistic research as a way of understanding the language of various subcultural groups (often, but certainly not always, focused on AAVE and Hip-Hop) (c.f., for example, Alim 2006; Pennycook 2003; Priesler 1999a & b; Beers-Fägersten 2008, to mention only a few). In addition, many of these studies concentrate on the effect of Popular Culture on so-called "global" English (again, mainly focusing on Hip-Hop and Rap and its effect on the spread of English, see, for example, Pennycook 1994 & 2007).

There is also a growing amount of research in so-called Multi-modality (see, for example, Kress 2009, for a textbook overview of the subject), which seeks to expand on traditional linguistic approaches to understanding language in a much broader sense and thus includes, for example, images, music, graphic design, etc, in its scope. In a fashion similar to Critical Discourse Analysis, multimodality seeks to reveal

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[3] À la Bourdieu 1984.

[4] As the term is used by people such as Norman Fairclough, 1995a & b and 2001, for example.

[5] Typically associated with Marxist theory, in particular Gramsci 1971.

[6] In the sense of Cohen 1972.

underlying ideologies and power relations which are woven into any given "text". Because of multimodality's wider sense of language, it naturally includes many examples of Popular Culture materials such as ads, websites, music videos, signs, etc.

Not many studies take the actual Popular Culture artifacts, i.e. lyrics, advertising jingles, movie/TV dialog, as the object of linguistic study themselves (a few exceptions include Trudgill 1983, Rey 2001, Trotta 2003 and Quaglio 2009 and Kreyer (forthcoming)). Therefore, before I deal with the specific topic of language usage controversies, it is relevant to first address the more general question about the usefulness of Popular Culture as a resource for the study of English grammar and language in general, i.e. why bother with the English encountered in Popular Culture when most respectable qualitative and quantities studies rely on methods such as introspection, corpora[7] and informant testing? What can the language found in Popular Culture contribute to the study of English?

First of all, Popular Culture is worth studying, not only because "it is there" in the proverbial Mount-Everest sense of the phrase, but because it is **everywhere**; most of us are exposed to it on a daily basis and we would need to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid it. It is a major vehicle for the introduction of new linguistic phenomena, which can quickly become part of the collective consciousness of speakers. By this, I do not mean to say it is necessarily assimilated and used, but rather that it enters our "awareness", not to mention dictionaries and usage books.[8]

Secondly, Popular Culture plays a major role in the way knowledge and values are constructed and mediated. Regardless of whether this reality is desirable, the plain fact is that many people, especially young

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[7] It is noteworthy in this context that several of the larger, more modern corpora include subgenres that could well be considered "Popular Culture", for example *The Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) is a 400 million word corpus that includes data from sources like popular magazines and movie scripts (see Davies 2008).

[8] Some recent lexico-grammatical theories (e.g. Hoey 2005) emphasize the fact that our knowledge of a word and its concomitant grammar are dependent on our experiences with it—thus oft-encountered non-standard usage in Popular Culture contexts can prime speakers for variations that they would not otherwise come across.

people, acquire a significant amount of knowledge about the world (and language) through Popular Culture (see, for example Zuengler 2003, or Baumgartner & Morris 2006, which examines the effect a TV comedy show like *The Daily Show* can have on the political opinions of young viewers). Thus, understanding Popular Culture can help us to understand current trends and opinions, not only about "real" world facts, but also about language, language use and the way in which linguistic representations of certain social groups in the popular media can affect the way we perceive those groups.

Thirdly, studying Popular Culture phenomena helps us to improve our general literacy and enhances our ability to understand texts on many levels and in many dimensions. In traditional academic contexts, literacy and critical literacy are typically taught through the canon. However important it may be to understand the concept of standard English and those texts which exemplify it, theories of language are nothing if they cannot be applied to the language that surrounds us in everyday, Popular Culture contexts. Put another way, the language found in revered and widely-read authors like Tennyson, Austen, Dickens, Joyce, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, etc., may tell us one story about English, whereas the language of Snoop Dogg, Tony Soprano, Homer Simpson, etc., may tell us another.

Fourthly, according to Priesler (1999a & b), in EFL countries (like Priesler's native Denmark), "passive" English language situations like watching TV, listening to music, using the internet, etc., are generally the most common form of contact with English. Much of the use of English in such countries is more related to the subcultural identity of the individual than the fact that it is a mandatory school subject or that English is presumed to have some intrinsic, superior value as a foreign language. In other words, the main driving force for using English in some EFL countries is that language's integral role as a lifestyle symbol and identity marker. In such cases, the English found in Popular Culture is important and note-worthy since it constitutes the source for imitation by language learners.

Finally, though Popular Culture may not typically be the main focus for linguistic study, examples from fiction and the mass media are not really all that unfamiliar in linguistic circles. Prominent scholars such as Stephen Pinker often reference Popular Culture for effect and many well-regarded, authoritative, grammarians such as Jespersen, Curme and

Poutsma often collected examples from the "popular" culture of the time, albeit edited, written language such as that found in print journalism and novels. As mentioned previously, the COCA corpus contains data from sources like magazines and movie scripts, but it is worth noting that even other "mainstream" corpora flirt with Popular Culture material. For example, the British National Corpus, the Cobuild Corpus, and even the more traditionally compiled Brown "family" of Corpora,[9] include data from popular periodicals and fictional texts from a wide variety of genres (Romance, Western, Science Fiction, among others).

On linguistic controversies, Popular Culture and English from below

Unusual usages, neologisms and catchphrases from Popular Culture have a certain power that is difficult to ignore; they seem to carry more weight since they are not simply evidence of any one particular speaker's usage, but rather appear to derive from a higher authority in much the same way that the written word is often said to be perceived as more powerful than the spoken. Reactions are therefore stronger and controversies take on a different proportion since we are "forced" to read/listen to (and perhaps accept) a usage to a degree that would be much less dramatic if it were the product of only a single user, from a specific and identifiable "other" dialect or understood in some narrow or negligible linguistic context.

A linguistic controversy in Popular Culture may highlight an important stage in the development of a grammatical construction. Changes in grammar, unlike changes in vocabulary, are slow, long-term processes and many of the usages discussed in this paper were not "invented" for a specific purpose in Popular Culture, but rather they have been in existence previously and then exploited in Popular Culture media for various reasons. It is tempting to speculate that their appearance on the Popular Culture scene could well provide a kind of "tipping point" (to borrow Gladwell's terminology mentioned above) in the development and usage of the relevant construction, i.e. they may be legitimized and

[9] The Brown Family of Corpora includes the Brown and LOB corpora (consisting of American and British texts from 1961), and the so-called FROWN and FLOB corpora (which mirror the composition of Brown and LOB corpora with texts from 1991).

mimicked after the Popular Culture publicity, which in turn brings exposure to more speakers who may then pick up on the usage in a type of mutual feedback loop between local and global forces (see Trotta 1998: 104).

Linguistically controversial examples in Popular Culture can serve as a platform to investigate broader cultural and social issues such as how grammaticality is established and who has authority over what shall be deemed correct, acceptable linguistic behavior and what shall not. In this context, they highlight the emotional attachment speakers can sometimes have to certain grammatical "rules" and their insistence on maintaining them in the face of logic, reason and usage. There is a certain symbolic capital (cf. Bourdieu 1984 & 1991) in mastering the grammar of English, and knowing the rules allows us to pass judgments on those who seemingly do not. Because of this, these examples can help us to understand the anxieties many speakers have about certain usages, their concerns about embarrassing verbal *faux pas* and their desire to understand the shibboleths that separate "us" and "them".

In this context, the parallels between non-standard (NSE) vs. standard English (SE) and Popular vs. "Elite" Culture are striking:

- Standard English (SE) and the canon of "high" culture come from "above", Non-standard English (NSE) and "popular" culture come from "below".
- Knowledge of the conventions of SE, just like familiarity with artifacts of high culture, conveys symbolic capital.
- NSE & popular culture can trigger a reaction of moral panic (cf. Cohen 1972), i.e. they are often perceived as threatening to society. For some they signal a decline in morality, values and taste.[10]
- SE is codified in reference works; high culture is codified in anthologies, histories, university literature lists, etc.
- The logic for the "higher" value of SE and high culture is often circular and self-perpetuating fear

[10] See, for example, Battistella 2005: 41-66 for a detailed discussion of how the relationship between concerns for the health of the English language and the fear of moral and social decay have been woven into early prescriptivists' approaches to grammar.

Considering the points above, an examination of grammar controversies in context allows us to reflect on the usage and the user with a mind to what is at stake socially and ideologically.

To boldly go where every grammarian has gone before, again

Many a grammar discussion has begun using Captain Kirk's infamously bold split infinitive:

> Space... the Final Frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, **to boldly go** where no man has gone before. (Prologue voiceover, *Star Trek* (Original Series), 1966-1969, my emphasis.)

This construction has been considered by so many linguists that even a shortlist of the most widely-read and respected ones would still be fairly long (see for example Ohlander 1999, for a comprehensive discussion of the construction and the controversy). Though discussions often begin with the fact that many people still react negatively to split infinitives like the one above, the question often leads to an investigation of the so-called rule itself, i.e. how ungrammatical or stylistically ungraceful is the split infinitive actually, and on what is the prohibition against it based? The consensus on the issue is quite clear; the split infinitive in English is not, nor has it ever been ungrammatical. Even the earliest discussions by the foremost authorities (e.g. Hall 1882; Onions 1904; Jespersen 1905 & 1956; Fowler 1908 & 1926; Curme 1927 and Partridge 1965) concur on the issue and, though they may not find the construction optimally elegant, they find no grammatically- or historically-motivated reason to avoid "splitting" an infinitive:

> The 'split' infinitive has taken such hold upon the consciences of journalists that, instead of warning the novice against splitting his infinitives, we must warn him against the curious superstition that the splitting or not splitting makes the difference between a good and a bad writer. (Fowler 1908)

> 'To' is no more an essential part of an infinitive than the definite article is an essential part of a nominative, and no one would think of calling 'the good man' a 'split nominative'. (Jespersen 1956: 144)

> …if it [the split infinitive] is the clearest and most natural construction, use it boldly. The angels are on our side. (Partridge 1965: 304)

In many reference books and popular texts, the prescriptive (or correctionist[11]) rule banning the split infinitive is usually bunched together with a number of other linguistic *faux pas* like ending a sentence with a preposition (*the rule which I am referring to*) or double negations (e.g. *you ain't seen nothing yet*). All these proscriptions are usually attributed to the first English grammars, written in the eighteenth century, and presumably modelled after Latin. The Bishop (and Oxford Professor) Robert Lowth in particular is mentioned quite often in this context, though there is actually no basis to blame him for the split-infinitive quandary since he never even mentions it in his influential *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* from 1762.[12]

So, clearly, the uproar is NOT, nor has ever been based in linguistic fact, it deals with the perceived shibboleths of good or "educated" writing. It is a seemingly monolithic prescription that merely states a rule without justifying it. It is not warranted based on the internal logic of English, nor has it any historical support, but this rule seems rather to derive from the predilections of a few early experts (starting perhaps with Alford 1866) who simply disliked the construction. What is remarkable about the rule is the frustrating circularity which perpetuates it; educated writers have avoided using it for fear that splitting an infinitive could make them seem unaware of the rule, thus reinforcing the idea that unsplit infinitives are the standard in educated writing.

Through the years, logic and common sense seem to have prevailed in the debate on split-infinitives and most usage books no longer advise

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[11] I use the term "correctionist" in the same sense as Batistella 2005, i.e. the "correctionist" view deems certain uses of non-standard English as incorrect and thus these forms need to be corrected to proper English. For all intents and purposes, it is synonymous with the term "prescriptivist" in this paper.

[12] Interestingly enough, the assertion that the rule against splitting an infinitive derives from a misguided comparison with Latin is also questionable—the earliest proscriptions do not actually argue the case based on Latin. According to Richard Bailey, the belief that Latin has inspired this "rule" is "part of the folklore of linguistics" (Bailey 2006).

against it (if it is discussed at all, it is typically deemed "awkward" rather than ungrammatical). The issue, however, was revived recently when another type of split verb construction (or, more specifically, an oddly placed adverbial) seemed to cause a linguistic stumble during the oath of office ceremony for President Barak Obama in the winter of 2009 (see also "Inauguration of Barak Obama" 2009).

The internet blogger and podcaster, Mignon Fogharty (a.k.a. *Grammar Girl*) took up the construction shortly after Obama's inauguration and Steven Pinker's commentary on the subject in the *New York Times* (Pinker 2009). Her blog covers the issues briefly and clearly does not condemn the split infinitive but rather she appears to embrace it. Some of the comments from her readers, however, still show an irrational skepticism toward the construction. Consider the comments from a visitor to the *Grammar Girl* site known as "John from Lorain", the relevant part of whose post begins with a comment on a previous post by "Andrea from Raleigh":

> Andrea from Raleigh writes: "Split infinitives ... have existed in the English language since at least the fourteenth century, and never has there been a rule against them." Andrea's own words contradict her. It should have been obvious to her that, if (as she claimed) there was a starting point for this barbarism, people had followed the rule against it up to that point! Now it is OUR turn to follow it. Grammar rules, including the two being discussed here, make for clearer communication and more pleasant reading. Andrea also wrote: "The superstition first began in the mid-nineteenth century ...". This is a sheer fiction, designed to twist readers' minds through the use of a false, but powerful, slur ("superstition"). The selective advocacy of barbarisms at this site (both by GG and other visitors) is symptomatic of the general slovenliness in the world today. There is a 20th/21st-Century laziness and lack of self-discipline that the greatest writers of prior centuries would have condemned. Let us learn from them not to be so sloppy and careless of our readers. Thank you. (Fogarty 2009)

These comments are admittedly extreme and perhaps not representative of the general discussion on the topic, but I have selected it to show that even the relatively harmless and fairly uncontroversial split infinitive can trigger emotions that readily draw on the deep-seated attitude that straying from the prescripted norms is a sign of decay. Consider now the following passage from Battistella (2005: 47) which gives some background to the so-called correctionist approach to grammar:

> Lowth's grammar was imitated and adapted in school grammars by Lindley Murray and others, and Murray's grammar, in turn, became widely used in America. […] Murray's approach also combined elements of the correctionist teaching method with aspects of moral education, helping to establish a tradition of promoting virtue, patriotism, and religion through grammar study. Following Murray, such American grammarians as Goold Brown and Samuel Kirkham set the pattern and tone of education with mass-produced grammars that also adopted a correctionist stance and treated the grammatical prescriptions of Lowth and others as already a matter of established tradition.

Note how J from L's comments above seem to be informed by the same "correctionist" attitudes that informed Murray, Lowth, Brown and Kirkham. If we understand that non-standard forms involve such culturally and morally charged issues for some speakers, it is easier to understand how the potentially influential power of non-standard language in Popular Culture can be perceived as decadent, threatening and harmful for society in general.

The funnest controversy ever

A grammar controversy that stirred up much fuss in 2008 is the use of the word (or, for some speakers, non-word) *funnest* in Apple's iPod advertisements from that year. The ad appeared in several versions featuring different images, all of which headed by the line: *Apple, the* **funnest** *iPod ever*.

The journey of *fun* from a noun to an adjective is a fairly recent phenomenon, and when it arrived in the territory of adjectives, it had some emotional baggage right from the start. Ben Zimmer, lexicographer and executive producer of the visual thesaurus (see "VisualThesaurus" n.d.), provides some historical background to the debate in his weblog from Oct 3, 2008:

> Why are reactions so strong against *funner* and *funnest*? Plain old *fun* has always gotten something of a bad rap: back in 1755, Samuel Johnson called it "a low cant word," meaning that it was jargon from the underworld. Over the centuries, the reputation of fun has been rehabilitated, but only as a noun. Many usage guides still state bluntly that fun is a noun and not an adjective. But it's a plain fact that fun has increasingly been treated as an adjective by modern English speakers, even among those who object to adding the comparative and superlative suffixes. (Zimmer 2008)

If we accept the fact that *fun* can be used as an adjective in present-day English, then it follows logically that it should, at least in theory, be possible to apply the same principles to it as one applies to other adjectives. Put briefly and ignoring the spelling details that can influence the choice of comparative and superlative constructions, typical adjectives follow the pattern below (see Quirk et al 1985: 461-62; Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1122-1170 for a comprehensive discussion):

Table 1: Comparative and Superlative forms of Typical Adjectives

	'Rule'	**Comparative & Superlatives**
One syllable: e.g. *large, strong, cold*	Add *-er*/*-est*	*larger/largest, stronger/strongest, colder/coldest*
Two syllables, e.g. *angry, narrow, stupid*	Forms vary based on spelling and/or rhythmic concerns	*angrier/angriest/* or *more/most angry narrower/narrowest* or *more/most narrow stupider/stupidest* or *more/most stupid*
Three syllables (+) e.g. *generous, important, intelligent*	Use *more/ most*	*more/most generous, more/most important, more/most intelligent*

As can be seen from the Table 1, two syllable adjectives are special since there are different (and usually predictable) factors affecting the choice of comparative forms. It should be noted too that some monosyllabic adjectives can even take the *more*/*most* forms (such as the word *grim* in *[…]the situation for the Somali government, which was fragile at best, is looking even* ***more grim***) given the right context. Otherwise the pattern is fairly straightforward for monosyllabic, gradable adjectives.[13]

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[13] There a few notable exceptions to the one syllable rule with adjectives like *real*, *right*, or *wrong* which have a lot in common with ungradable adjectives like *absolute*, *closed*, *dead*, etc., in that they seem to have a limited range of scale. One can say, for example "*more right than wrong*" (or vice versa), but one could hardly say "*the most right/wrong solution*". Comparisons of the type "more X than X" are possible even with the most stubbornly non-gradable adjectives, *cf* "*more silk than polyester*". Regardless of the special rules that

Consider below some of the reactions to the word forms *funner* and *funnest* garnered on different internet language forums:

> Sorry, Ben, I refuse to allow advertising to dictate the evolution of the language. Should we also accept "like" as in "Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should?" Bad manners may become the norm, but they will always evidence rudeness and ignorance. The same can be said for grammar. Patrick B. (Marquette, MI)
>
> (Zimmer 2008)

> Funnest is not a word. Neither is funner. It's 'more fun' and 'most fun.' Some words do not take the -er or -est endings. Another one is 'important.' You wouldn't say "She is importanter than him." You just have to remember when to use each one. There's not always a works-every-time, black and white rule for grammar. In fact there usually isn't! (Fogarty 2008)

These views, in particular the first, exemplify once again the belief that a language innovation from Popular Culture is inherently bad or wrong, *funner* and *funnest* cannot be considered words because advertisers have "invented" them (which, as we shall see below, is not true). Note also the reference to the Winston ad campaign, which further highlights how stubbornly entrenched the idea is that commercial/popular forces are responsible for corrupting the language. The second comment, moreover, shows how a misunderstanding of how the inflectional system works can lead to claims that are illogical and grammatically unsupported. The obvious reason that the adjective *important* does not take the *–er/est* inflections is because it is a three-syllable word; *fun* is a one syllable word and therefore using *more* and *most* to modify it would make it an exception to an otherwise uniform system.

Grammar Girl ends her internet column with the following words "I predict the 'funnest iPod ever' campaign will increase the general use of 'funnest' and could even push it into the informal usage category. Now that's power" (Fogarty 2008).

Using the 400+ million word Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008), I searched for occurrences of *funner* and *funnest* to see if it is possible to say anything about the forms and their usage

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apply to ungradable adjectives, *fun* must certainly be considered to be gradable and therefore compliant with the normal rules of comparative forms.

based on empirical, verifiable evidence. The bar chart below shows that the words *funner/funnest* were already in existence in the early 1990s:

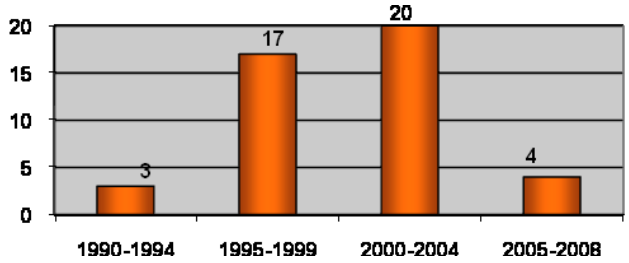

Figure 1: Occurrences of *funner* and *funnest* in the COCA corpus

Though the occurrences are too low for the above illustration to be statistically significant, we can derive at least one clear conclusion: the usage was clearly not invented by Steve Jobs or iPod's advertisers since *funnest* first occurs in the corpus in 1991 (*We shop around more and know more about the prices before buying. It used to be buying clothes was one of the* ***funnest*** *things in the world now it's more a necessity*. Ellen Neuborn 1991, *USA Today*) and it is reasonable to believe that there are examples which should pre-date even that one. Additionally, despite the fact that there are not all that many examples in COCA, Figure 1 also demonstrates that the occurrences of *funner* and *funnest* dropped in the corpus right around the time of the iPod ad; i.e. its usage appears to have been on the decline by the time of the ad campaign in question. It is too early to tell if the iPod ads will have an effect on speakers and thus boost the use of these comparative forms; only when the corpus statistics are available for the period of 2009 and after will we know for sure if *Grammar Girl*'s prediction is correct.

Maybe it's just funner to be provocative?

As was the case with the Winston cigarette jingle above, the provocative use of language can cause a commotion (intentional or otherwise) which in turn can create greater exposure for a product. For that reason, it seems reasonable to assume that admen may be tempted to break the rules of English simply for an attention-grabbing effect. Returning now

for a moment to the use of *like* as a conjunction in the example of the controversial Winston ad which introduced this study, we can once again see that the admen did not create the "aberrant" usage. *The Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* provides a useful sketch of the history of conjunctive *like*, citing examples from as early as the fourteenth century, but also states that it did not become particularly common until the nineteenth century (see the dictionary entry for *like* in *The Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, 1989). Since Winston did not introduce the construction, the question then is, could the Winston ad have affected usage positively? Consider now Figure 2 below which is based on searches from the "extended" Brown Family of Corpora[14]:

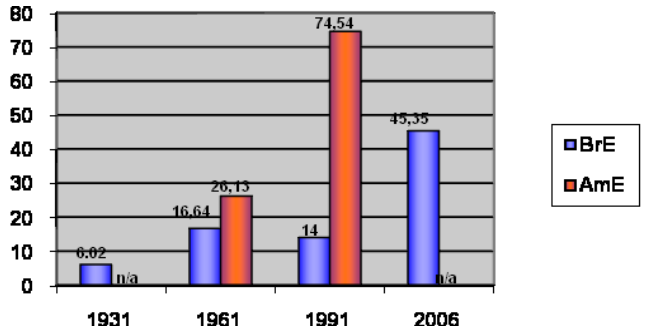

Figure 2: The use of *like* as a conjunction over time (BrE & AmE treated separately)

The numbers in Figure 2 are to be understood as normalized frequencies per million words of text, i.e. in 1931 conjunctive *like* occurred 6.02 times per one million words of text in the BLOB corpus (here this represents a mere 7 occurrences). There is no American equivalent to the BLOB corpus yet, so no comparison is possible for texts from 1931. However, in 1961, there is a clear trend; American English appears to favor the construction more than British (30 hits in Brown vs. only 19 in LOB) and that trend continues in the 1991 subcorpora, with the difference that the usage increased in Frown (86 hits) but more or less

[14] The specific corpora used here were the Brown, LOB, Frown, FLOB, the pre-LOB (or BLOB) and the BE2006 corpora.

remained stable in FLOB (only 16 hits). This increase in conjunctive *like* in the American corpora on its own cannot conclusively prove that the Winston ad had any effect, but it is consistent with the idea that the ad could have been a factor in the increased use of conjunctive *like* in AmE. Another interesting speculation is that the increased use of this construction in BrE in the 2006 subcorpus could be due to the influence of AmE on BrE. Though there is no corresponding 2006 American subcorpus in the Brown family, a quick comparison with the COCA corpus shows that in the period 2004-2008, conjunctive *like* has a normalized frequency of 106.1 per million words, in other words the increase in use has presumably continued (roughly a 41% increase), but it is not as drastic in the material as it is between 1961 and 1991 (a 188% increase).

Are classic authors more better as a model?

In much of the lay discussion on language (as well as among some of the so-called experts), there is a sense of moral panic concerning the decay of the language encountered in Popular Culture. As was noted earlier in the discussion of the Winston ad, *The Chicago Daily News* decried the use of *like* as a conjunction and took the acceptance of this usage as "a general decay in values in society". It is also obvious from blog excerpts above that, among some, there is a sense that controversial usage, though it may be well-documented and historically defensible, are still somehow looked upon with dismay as signs of ignorance, laziness and moral complacency (for detailed treatments of this subject, see Aitchison 1991 and Battistella 2005).

For the purpose of illustrating how this opinion still exists and how it can sometimes be voiced today, I have selected the text below, taken from the *Daily Mail* columnist Peter Hitchens's weblog from November 29, 2006:

> I really do grow weary of the people who say 'language will always change, there's nothing you can do about it'. It's simply not true, and this is a wretched excuse for moral and practical laziness. People speak and write of their own free will. If they think a word or an expression is ugly, or vague, or ambiguous, they can decline to use it.

Hitchens then continues by appealing to an appreciation of the "classic" authors of the English canon:

> […] I'm certain that Shakespeare, by clothing certain thoughts in majestic language, enriched the way that all Englishmen speak, for as long as his work was taught and appreciated.
>
> I'm equally certain that the shrinking knowledge of Shakespeare, Dickens, Tennyson. [sic] Keats and the other great poets has impoverished our language and made it thinner and less honest.

In the next few lines, he goes on to comment, in both good and bad terms, on American English, which he follows with a plea for people to read Orwell's famous essay *Politics and the English Language* (Orwell 1946).[15] He then concludes his blog with the paragraph below:

> They [changes for the worse] destroy subtlety, narrow meanings and gradually reduce a musical and intricate tongue to a series of utilitarian grunts, splutters and yells. It's our duty, to those who come after us, to resist this, not complacently to insist that it is inevitable. The beauty and subtlety of language are both measures of a civilisation. If we willingly let them disappear, then we should not be surprised at the new dark age [sic] that follows.

Again, echoes from eighteenth century correctionists like Sheridan, Lowth and Murray are evident in the ideas that language change is a result of "moral and practical laziness" and that "a new Dark Age" awaits us if we are not careful.

In the light of the "moral panic" of the kind expressed above, and his appeal for us to read his selection of canonized writers, it is relevant to look at the acclaimed authors mentioned, those who are explicitly said to enrich English and those whose works one should study in a way to improve one's language. Though it would be illuminating to illustrate usages from many different authors, for a more concise examination, I consider only Shakespeare (all the examples below were taken from Alden 1925 and it should be mentioned that his collection of examples is far more extensive than the one presented here):

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[15] See Pullum (2008) for an interesting critique on Orwell's essay.

Shakespeare often substituted one word class with another, altering the grammar of the verb idiosyncratically:

-- In the dark **backward** and abysm of time. *Temp*., I, ii, 50
-- That may repeat and **history** his loss. *2 H 4*, IV, i, 203
-- This day shall **gentle** his condition. *H 5*, IV, iii, 63
-- **Grace** me no grace, nor **uncle** me no uncle. *R 2*, II, iii, 87
-- My death's sad tale may yet **undeaf** his ear. *R 2*, II, i, 16

Pronouns in Shakespeare's writing often have the "wrong" form, subject forms are repeatedly used instead of the object forms:

-- And **he** (= *him*) my husband best of all affects. *M.W.W.*, IV, iv, 87
-- Yes, you may have seen Cassio and **she** together. *Oth.*, IV, ii, 3
-- Making night hideous, and **we** fools of nature/So horridly to shake our disposition. *Haml.*, I, iv, 54
-- Pray you, **who** does the wolf love? *Cor.*, II, i, 8

Subject verb agreement is sometimes incorrect or awkward:

-- These high wild hills and rough uneven ways/**Draws** out our miles, and makes them wearisome. *R 2*, II, iii, 4-5
-- Their encounters… **hath** been royally attorneyed. *W.T.*, I, i, 28
-- Three parts of him **Is** ours already . *J.C.*, I, iii, 154-55

Relative pronouns in subject positions are often omitted, a usage which is generally condemned as substandard in present-day English:

-- I have a **brother is** condemn'd to die. *M. for M.*, II, ii, 34
-- Besides, our nearness to the King in love
Is near the hate of **those love** not the King. *R 2*, II, ii, 129

Double-negatives and multiple comparatives, which are also stigmatized in PdE, are not unusual in Shakespeare:

-- I **cannot** go **no** further. *A.Y.L*, II, iv
-- And that **no** woman has, nor **never none**,
Shall mistress be of it, save I alone. *T.N*., III, I
-- And his **more braver** daughter could control thee. *Temp.*, I, ii, 439
-- With the **most boldest** and best hearts of Rome. *J.C.*, II, i, 121

By using the above examples, I emphatically do not mean to criticize Shakespeare's writing or characterize it as inferior, sloppy or error-ridden. I list the examples above to show: 1) that even though Shakespeare is sometimes referred to as a model to aspire to, the language in his works often exhibits exactly those features that the traditionalists and correctionists dislike and 2) that studying Shakespeare exposes the reader to many of the same deviant constructions that one would encounter in Popular Culture, yet there is no fear that exposure to Shakespeare's writing will taint the reader or cause him/her to use constructions which violate present-day prescriptions. A noteworthy parallelism in this context is that the nature of Shakespeare's dialogs makes them require a feeling of a credible, natural conversation (cf. Battistella 2005: 34), just as much of the language of Popular Culture also requires.

I can only conclude here that it is the symbolic capital which is tied to Shakespeare and the other authors of the canon[16] that allows this contradiction to make sense; if Shakespeare's usage shifts and grammar idiosyncrasies can be taught/understood in context without corrupting the reader, it should be possible to do so with the language of Popular Culture. In this way, the language of Popular Culture can be used as a tool to engage the reader in a dialog about what is correct, grammatical, elegant, etc., and what are the pressures and background issues that can help explain questionable uses, put them in perspective and allow the reader to make an informed decision on the matter.

Factors which confound the issue

As a way of moving toward the conclusion of the essay, I now summarize some of the relevant factors which contribute to and exacerbate controversies over language use.

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[16] *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage,* under headings such as "double negative", "double comparative", "like", "split infinitive", "ain't", etc, give illustrative examples of many famous authors and orators such as Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Jane Austen, Winston Churchill, etc., who violate prescriptive norms.

Many reference works (Trudgill 1999; Bex & Watts 1999; Crowley 2003 and Crystal 2006, to name just a few) which take up the issue of so-called "Standard English" note that, unlike many other languages, there is no central authority or governing academy for the English Language. Because there is no established, recognized agency on matters of usage, some people, especially those inclined to traditional prescription, tend to take specific reference works and well-regarded authors as authoritative. The problem with this, of course, is which reference works and which authors should be seen as the "correct" ones? It is apparent from many discussions cited in this study as well as in common usage reference works that older and/or more well established constructions are considered to be the gold standard for usage issues. Even when this approach is applied with care it is problematic since traditions are often inconsistent, ambiguous or at odds with each other.

Other people, relativists in particular, tend to argue "whatever is is right" and thus correctness for them is defined by usage. This attitude, if it is applied indiscriminately, has many disadvantages as well, since most usage, standard or otherwise, is situated in real life situations which must be understood in context.

As many of the above mentioned controversies show, it can be difficult to reconcile the traditional and relativist standpoints for a more subtle, balanced and commonsense approach. Sometimes judgments are flawed due to general misunderstandings about how grammar works (as was demonstrated in the case of *funner/funnest*), or vexed because of the belief that a specific construction has been introduced for commercial reasons and should therefore be treated with suspicion.

Conclusion

In this brief examination of controversial English grammar in Popular Culture, I have shown that Popular Culture can be an important resource in studying English. At the same time as it reflects usage, it can also inform us on cultural and social issues that not only lie behind usage, but also help us to understand the ideological standpoints from which usage is disputed.

I have also made a case that controversial usages may have an effect on real life linguistic behavior and at the very least they can signal a change in progress. In the examples I discussed, these changes were not

completely new, but the Popular Culture usage may have accelerated more widespread use.

Finally I have illustrated that there is underlying "fear" of the language of Popular Culture simply because it is Popular Culture; it is commonly viewed as a reflection of bad character and poor education and as such it does not typically possess (and cannot typically transfer onto a speaker) the symbolic and cultural capital connected with the dominant ideology.[17] This may be based on a belief that such usages are only associated with short-lived trends, commercial interests or poorly educated and incompetent speakers. This view is harmful in that it inhibits a better understanding of the language that surrounds us on an everyday basis and how it affects us; it rejects and trivializes its usefulness in understanding historical developments, stylistic variation, multicultural diversity, and linguistic identity, among other things.

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[17] This is not to say that it does NOT reinforce the dominant ideology, which is a fascinating topic of study, but an altogether different issue then the relevant one here.

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