Motivated Grammar

*Prescriptivism Must Die!*

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[The subjunctive might be dying, if you ignore where it’s going strong](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2013/04/03/the-subjunctive-might-be-dying-if-you-ignore-where-its-going-strong/)

April 3, 2013 in [common usage](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/common-usage/), [deterioration of English](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/deterioration-of-english/), [English](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/english/), [formality and tone](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/formality-and-tone/),[grammar](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/grammar/), [linguistics](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/linguistics/), [One Right Way](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/bad-arguments/one-right-way/), [Uncategorized](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/uncategorized/), [verbs](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/parts-of-speech/verbs/), [writing](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/writing/) | Tags: [if I was](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/if-i-was/), [if I were](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/if-i-were/), [subjunctive](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/subjunctive/) | [13 comments](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2013/04/03/the-subjunctive-might-be-dying-if-you-ignore-where-its-going-strong/#comments)

If you believe the grammar doomsayers, the English subjunctive is dying out. But if this is the end of the grammatical world, I feel fine — and I say that even though I often mark the subjunctive myself.

The most talked about use of the subjunctive is in counterfactuals:

(1) Even if I **were** available, I’d still skip his party.

For many people, marking the subjunctive here is not required; either they never mark it, using the past indicative form *was* instead, or they (like me) sometimes mark it with *were*, and sometimes leave it unmarked with *was*. For this latter group, the choice often depends on the formality of the setting. I’m calling this “not marking” the subjunctive, rather than “not using” it, because it seems less like people making a choice between two moods for the verb and more like a choice between two orthographic/phonemic forms for it.

It’s similar to the alternation for many people (incl. me) of marking or not marking *who(m)* in the accusative case, discussed by Arnold Zwicky [here](http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/004084.html) and[here](http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=16), and Stan Carey [here](http://stancarey.wordpress.com/2012/04/05/who-to-follow-is-grammatically-fine/). That said, I believe that (at least some) people who never use *were* in (1) do not have a grammatical rule saying that counterfactuals trigger the past subjunctive, and I’m not worried about that either.

![[Gee! I Wish I Were a Man!]]()

For being such a foolish war, World War I did generate some artistic propaganda.

This blitheness about the subjunctive does not go unmourned. I recently found myself being Twitter-followed by [someone](http://twitter.com/ifiwerejudgingu) whose account just corrects people who fail to use the subjunctive in sentences like (1).\* And Philip Corbett, associate managing editor for standards at the *New York Times*, annually rants about people failing to mark the subjunctive. Consider one of Corbett’s calls [to man the ramparts](http://afterdeadline.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/11/save-the-subjunctive-2/), which he begins by quoting, in its entirety, a 90-year-old letter complaining that the subjunctive must be saved from impending destruction.\*\* Corbett continues:

“[...] despite my repeated efforts to rally support for [the subjunctive] the crisis has only grown. For those few still unaware of the stakes, here is a reminder from The Times’s stylebook”

What are the stakes? What would we lose without the subjunctive? Corbett cites sentences such as these:

The mayor wishes the commissioner **were** retiring this year.
If the commissioner **were** rich, she could retire.
If the bill **were** going to pass, Secretary Kuzu would know by now.

If these were the stakes, I’d ditch the subjunctive. Corbett points out that in each of these we’re referring to a counterfactual condition, which should trigger the subjunctive. But note that using the indicative/unmarked *was*doesn’t make that any less clear. There is nothing to be gained from using the subjunctive in these cases but a sense of superiority and formality. (Not that I’m against either of those.)

But here’s the weird thing: all this defense of the subjunctive, all these worries — they’re all only about the past subjunctive. And the past subjunctive is weird, because it’s only marked on *be*, and it’s just a matter of using *were* for singular as well as plural. For everyone worrying that this is some crucial distinction, please note these sentences where it is insouciantly the same as teh indicative form:

(2a) The mayor wishes the commissioners **retired** last year.
(2b) If the commissioner **wanted** to, she could retire.
(2c) If the bill**s** **were** going to pass, Sec. Kuzu would know by now.

If anything, the loss of past subjunctive *were* strikes me as regularization of English, the loss of the last remaining vestige of what was once a regular and widespread marking system. Losing the past subjunctive makes English more sensible. I don’t see that as a bad thing.

And anyway, the subjunctive probably isn’t going to disappear, not even the past subjunctive. The past subjunctive is, to my knowledge, necessarily marked in Subject-Auxiliary Inversion constructions:

(3) Were/\*Was I a betting man, I’d say the subjunctive survives.

A quick look at Google Books N-grams makes it look like *were* subjunctive marking has been [relatively constant](http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=If+I+was%2CIf+I+were&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=17&smoothing=3&share=) over the last 40 years in written American English, so maybe this is all just a tempest in a teacup.

Plus all of this worry about the subjunctive ignores that the present subjunctive is going strong.\*\*\* I’ve [written about](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/02/15/sometimes-the-subjunctive-matters-that-wont-stop-it-dying/) sentences where the present subjunctive changes the meaning (though I wrote with a dimmer view of the subjunctive’s long-term prospects), and Mike Pope supplied an excellent example:

(4a) I insist that he **be** there.
(4b) I insist that he **is** there.

In cases where marking the subjunctive is important, it’s sticking around. In cases where it isn’t important, and the subjunctive follows a strange paradigm, identical to the indicative for all but one verb, it may be disappearing. This is no crisis.

**Summary:** People who write “if I was” instead of “if I were” aren’t necessarily pallbearers of the English subjunctive. It may be regularization of the last remaining irregular part of the past subjunctive, with the present subjunctive remaining unscathed. And if the past subjunctive disappears, there will be, as far as I can tell, no loss to English. Go ahead and use it if you want (I often do), but to worry that other people aren’t is wrinkling your brow for nothing.

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\*: I do respect the tweeter’s restraint in seemingly only correcting people who’re already talking about grammar.

\*\*: That this destruction has been impending for 90 years has somehow not convinced the ranters that their panic may be misplaced. Also, Corbett keeps titling his posts “Subjunctivitis”, which I think sounds great, but not in the same way he probably does. *-itis* usually means an unwelcome inflammation of the root word, and I can’t help but see all this as an unhelpful inflammation of passions over the subjunctive.

\*\*\*: In fact, and I think this is pretty cool, (Master!) Jonathon Owen directed me to a classmate’s [corpus work](https://sites.google.com/site/amberelang495/prescriptive-rules-subjunctive) suggesting that for at least some verbs, marked subjunctive usage is *increasing*.

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[National Grammar Day 2013: Ten More Grammar Myths, Debunked](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2013/03/04/national-grammar-day-2013-ten-more-grammar-myths-debunked/)

March 4, 2013 in [deterioration of English](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/deterioration-of-english/), [English](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/english/), [grammar](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/grammar/), [ipsedixitism](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/ipsedixitism/), [language](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/language/),[links](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/links/), [prescription](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/prescription/), [Uncategorized](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/uncategorized/), [words](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/words/), [writing](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/writing/) | Tags: [arrant pedantry](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/arrant-pedantry/), [bradshaw of the future](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/bradshaw-of-the-future/), [dennis baron](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/dennis-baron/), [grammar myths](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/grammar-myths/), [kory stamper](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/kory-stamper/), [national grammar day](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/national-grammar-day/) | [34 comments](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2013/03/04/national-grammar-day-2013-ten-more-grammar-myths-debunked/#comments)

It’s National Grammar Day 2013, which has really snuck up on me. If you’ve been here in previous years, you know that I like to do three things on March 4th: have a rambling speculative discussion about the nature of grammar and/or linguistics, link to some people’s posts I’ve liked, and link to some of my posts. Unfortunately, I’ve been so busy with dissertation work lately that I’m a bit worn out on discussion and haven’t been adequately keeping up with everyone’s blogs. So I hope you’ll forgive my breach of etiquette in making this year’s NGD post all Motivated Grammar posts.

Well, not entirely. Everyone in our little community gets in on National Grammar Day, so let me mention a few good posts I’ve seen so far. [Kory Stamper](http://korystamper.wordpress.com/2013/03/01/a-plea-for-sanity-this-national-us-grammar-day/)discusses her mixed feelings on the day, as well as on correcting people’s language in general. [Dennis Baron](http://www.visualthesaurus.com/cm/wc/national-grammar-day-in-wartime/) looks at the abandoned, paranoid, wartime predecessor of NGD, “Better American Speech Week”. And from last year, but only better from the aging process, [Jonathon Owen](http://www.arrantpedantry.com/2012/03/04/rules-evidence-and-grammar/) and [goofy](http://bradshawofthefuture.blogspot.com/2012/03/national-grammar-day.html) had posts asking what counts as evidence for grammatical correctness or incorrectness, and why we’re so often content to repeat grammar myths.

Below you’ll find this year’s collection of debunked myths. As usual, the statements below are the reality, not the myth, and you can click through for the original post and the rest of the story.

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[***The reason is because* and *the reason is that* are both acceptable.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/06/28/the-reason-is-because/) *The reason is because* is a standard English phrase, one coming from the pen of good writers (Bacon, Frost, Wodehouse) for 400 years. There’s nothing ungrammatical about it, and its supposedly condemnable redundancy is at worst mild.

[**Gender-neutral language isn’t new.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/05/30/gender-neutral-isnt-new/) Some people get up in arms about gender-neutral language (e.g., *firefighter* for *fireman*), claiming that everyone was fine with gendered language up until the touchy-feely ’60s or ’70s. But that’s not the case, and this post discusses gender-neutral language well before our time, over 200 years ago.

[***Off of* is perhaps informal, but not wrong.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/07/31/on-off-of/) There is nothing linguistically or grammatically incorrect about *off of*. It’s nonstandard in some dialects and informal in most, so you should probably avoid it if you’re concerned about your writing seeming formal. But when formality isn’t a concern, use it as you see fit.

[***Can I do something?* oughtn’t to be an objectionable question.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/12/05/can-i-may-i-the-historical-perspective/) Permission-seeking *can* has been in use for over a century (including by Lord Tennyson), and common use for half a century. It is time for us all to accept it.

[***Since* for *because* is fine.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/05/03/using-since/) In fact, almost no usage guides complain about this, though it’s a persistent myth among self-appointed language guardians. A surprising number of style guides (such as that of the APA) are against it, but historically and contemporaneously, English has been and remains fine with it.

[**Formal language isn’t the ideal; informal language isn’t defective.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/06/21/formal-language-isnt-the-ideal/) Informal language has its own set of rules, separate from formal language. It’s the “normal” form of the language, the one we’re all familiar with and use most. At different times, formal or informal language is more appropriate, so we shouldn’t think of formal language as the best form.

[**Someone can know more *than me*.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/06/13/than-i-and-than-me/) *Than* is fine as a conjunction or a preposition, which means that *than me/him/her/us* is acceptable, as it has been for hundreds of years. The belief it isn’t is just the result of trying to import Latin rules to a distinctly non-Latinate language.

[**Comma splices aren’t inherently wrong.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/07/23/comma-splices-historical-and-informal-not-wrong/) Comma splices, where two (usually short) sentences are joined by nothing more than a comma, became less prominent as English’s punctuation rules codified. But historically speaking, they’ve been fine, and to the present day they’re most accurately viewed as informal, but hardly incorrect. That said, one has to be careful with them so that they don’t just sound like run-ons.

[**It doesn’t make sense to say that a standard usage is erroneous.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/06/07/if-everyone-says-it-it-cant-be-wrong/) There are rules in language, but if the language itself breaks them, then it’s a shortcoming of the rule, not of the language.

[***Disinterested* and *uninterested* are separating, not blurring.**](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/03/21/am-i-disinterested-or-uninterested-in-this-debate/) Though many people believe that these two words ought to mean different things, they haven’t historically. In fact, the overlap in meaning between the two isn’t indicative of a distinction being lost, but rather a distinction appearing.

*Psst. Hey, down here. You want more debunked myths? We’ve got four more years of ‘em for ya. Check out*[*2012*](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2012/03/04/national-grammar-day-2012-ten-more-grammar-myths-debunked/)*,*[*2011*](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2011/03/04/national-grammar-day-2011-ten-more-grammar-myths-debunked/)*,*[*2010*](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2010/03/04/national-grammar-day-2010-ten-more-common-grammar-myths-debunked/)*, and*[*2009*](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2009/03/04/national-grammar-day-2009-ten-common-grammar-myths-debunked/)*. 40 more myths for your pleasure. Check out singular “they”, “anyway(s)”, “hopefully”, and more.*

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January 18, 2013 in [et cetera](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/et-cetera/), [fortnight before](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/fortnight-before/), [links](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/links/), [news](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/et-cetera/news/), [Uncategorized](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/uncategorized/) | [2 comments](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2013/01/18/the-fortnight-before-011813/#comments)

I’ve been meaning to set up some sort of occasional round-up of interesting pieces on the rest of the Internet, and with the new year, there’s no better time to start.  I’ll be posting these (hopefully consistently) every other Friday, starting today. This edition is going to go a bit outside the past 14 days; I hope this doesn’t sour you to it.

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**A couple links with commentary:**

\* Jonathon Owen’s [post on **relative pronouns**](http://www.arrantpedantry.com/2012/12/24/relative-pronoun-redux/) and the silly proscriptions they engender is really darn good, and having been posted on Christmas Eve, it would have made a great present, if only I’d seen it then.  This part I’m quoting isn’t even my favorite part, that’s how good it is:

If you think the system doesn’t make sense, the solution isn’t to try to hammer it into something that does make sense; the solution is to figure out what kind of sense it makes.

\* This isn’t exactly language-related, but here’s [a post from Christopher Simmons](http://www.aiga.org/the-uc-logo-controversy/) on the **University of California’s scrapped new logo & brand identity**. The core point of the article is the debate about to what extent knowledge of the underlying purpose or process is necessary in order to fairly critique the outcome. In the case of the logo, was it fair to hate it without knowing exactly how it was used, how the designers presented it, and what the University asked the designers for?

I see a parallel here with language; we often wonder when it’s fair to critique someone’s usage, and to what extent one must know their background or dialect. I disagree with many of Simmons’s points; logo design is more about the impression it makes than the intent behind it, so it seems to me that a reaction like “I don’t like it” must be taken into account — just as I must occasionally swallow my pride and write “needs to be done” instead of “needs done” in formal writing, even though I can fully justify the usage. But I like his thoughts on valid and invalid, helpful and unhelpful, and justified and unjustified complaints. (Full disclosure: I thought that the new logo & identity were a poor choice, especially compared to the semi-traditional identity that they were intended to replace.)

\* Also a bit afield from the usual here, but [John McIntyre wrote yesterday](http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/language-blog/bal-were-supposed-to-be-skeptical-20130117%2C0%2C6087915.story) that (journalistic) **editors are supposed to provide skepticism** at least as much as they provide story improvements. I was a little embarrassed, having finished the piece, that I’d never thought of such seemingly obvious points — the true sign of a good and well-needed discussion. We too readily bemoan the loss of editing in contemporary publishing when we see errors that don’t matter (like a headline I’ve seen for three straight days on a website, confusing “effect” for “affect”), but we miss out on the really crucial losses — the fact-checking and oversight of the information we receive.

**A couple without:**

\* Johnson (Lane Greene) on [singular *they*](http://www.economist.com/blogs/johnson/2013/01/grammar) (and a follow-up on singular/plural[*you*](http://www.economist.com/blogs/johnson/2013/01/pronouns).

\* Geoff Nunberg on [*big data* misinterpreted](http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=4396) as a plural.

\* Be a [online DARE beta tester](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/features/dare/digital)! (via [Mr. Verb](http://mr-verb.blogspot.com/2013/01/dare-goes-digital.html))

\* [Ben Zimmer recounts](http://www.visualthesaurus.com/cm/wordroutes/tag-youre-it-hashtag-wins-as-2012-word-of-the-year/) the ADS word-of-the-year voting.

**A picture to close it out:**



The view as I (and my allergies) escaped the two dogs & three cats at my grandmother’s Christmas gathering.

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[Of course you don’t see patterns in what you don’t understand](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/of-course-you-dont-see-patterns-in-what-you-dont-understand/)

January 7, 2013 in [bad arguments](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/bad-arguments/), [common usage](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/common-usage/), [deterioration of English](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/deterioration-of-english/), [educated](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/educated/),[English](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/english/), [grammar](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/grammar/), [holier-than-thou](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/holier-than-thou/), [philosophy](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/philosophy/), [Uncategorized](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/uncategorized/), [writing](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/category/writing/) | Tags: [gizmodo](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/gizmodo/),[hashtags](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/hashtags/), [twitter](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/tag/twitter/) | [12 comments](http://motivatedgrammar.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/of-course-you-dont-see-patterns-in-what-you-dont-understand/#comments)

I’ve been looking through some unfinished drafts of posts from last year, trying to toss some of them together into something meaningful, and I found one that was talking about the stupid Gizmodo “Hashtags are ruining English”[piece](http://gizmodo.com/5869538/how-the-hashtag-is-ruining-the-english-language) from last January. (Given *hashtag*‘s selection as ADS Word of the Year, I think that claim has been safely rebutted.) Apparently, in a fit of light madness, I read through the piece’s comments. I didn’t find any of them particularly noteworthy, save one. A commenter named Ephemeral wrote:

“The point is that texting and hashtags are at the root of the increasing illiteracy. Why worry about what an adjective is? If it doesn’t fit in my 140 character limit, it could be an adverb, for all I care. And, if it can’t be reduced to a less-than-five-character ‘word’ with letters and digits, then I am not interested anyway. [...] #ltr8″

The rant doesn’t really make any sense (character limits are making kids confuse adverbs and adjectives?), but the point is clear: Ephemeral is mad because kids today just use whatever the hell they feel like to express themselves.

To drive home the point, Ephemeral adds a hashtag to the end of the comment: **#ltr8**. That’s one of those “less-than-five-character ‘words’”, you’ll note. Except that no one uses this tag. ([Literally no one](https://www.google.com/search?q=ltr8&aq=f&oq=ltr8&sugexp=chrome,mod=0&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#hl=en&sclient=psy-ab&q=%23ltr8&oq=%23ltr8&gs_l=serp.3..0i7i10i30j0i10i30l2j0i7i30.6849.6849.0.7188.1.1.0.0.0.0.89.89.1.1.0.les%3B..0.0...1c.1.CcRxvokG6Yk&pbx=1&fp=1&bpcl=37643589&biw=1366&bih=617&bav=on.2,or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf.&cad=b).) I can only guess that the intended hashtag was a leet-speak version of *later*, which would be *#l8r*.*#ltr8* would be, I don’t know, “later-ate”?

If it were the case that one could say *later* by typing in *ltr8* and pronouncing it “later”, then maybe that would be indicative of increasing illiteracy (or mild dyslexia). But this isn’t the case, as the Google results show, and what little sense there was in Ephemeral’s point falls apart. It’s not because Ephemeral’s making an error while complaining about an error, which wouldn’t negate a valid argument. It’s because Ephemeral is declaring something simplistic despite not being able to understand it.

This is rampant in armchair linguistic analysis, and really irritating. Non-standard dialects are the prime example of this; if you ask people unfamiliar with it to speak African-American Vernacular English (i.e., ugh, “Ebonics”), all they’re going to do is stop conjugating verbs in the present tense. “I be real happy,” they might say. No wonder these same people would view it as a deficient form of English; according to their knowledge of it, it’s just Standard American English with a few rules taken out.

But the truth is that there are [extensive differences](http://public.wsu.edu/~gordonl/S2003/326/SAE_AAVE.htm) between AAVE and SAE, including an ability in AAVE to distinguish between past tenses that SAE doesn’t morphologically distinguish. In terms of speaking about the past, it would have to be SAE that’s the deficient dialect. But because the people griping about AAVE haven’t tried to learn it, they don’t see any additional structure, and assume it must be deficient.

So too with textspeak. If you don’t understand the patterns, and you really think that *#ltr8* is something that people would say to each other despite its flouting of reason, then of course you’ll see think it deficient. In your mind, anyone can say anything in textspeak, even if it’s nonsense. Since there are apparently no rules whatsoever in textspeak, it’s no surprise if you perceive it as a bogeyman out to destroy your rule-based language. But if you find out that *#ltr8* isn’t acceptable in texts, maybe you start to realize that textspeak has rules, albeit different (and less strictly enforced) ones from formal English.

What I think I’m getting at here is that before you say “X is decreasing literacy”, make sure that you are sufficently literate in X to know what you’re talking about.

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ABOUT ME

I'm [Gabe Doyle](http://ling.ucsd.edu/~gdoyle), a graduate student/doctoral candidate in Linguistics at UC San Diego. I have a Bachelor's in math from Princeton and a Master's in linguistics from UCSD.

In my research, I try to figure out how people choose among the various ways they can express a given thought in words. My dissertation models how children learn to use multiple cues to segment words from child-directed speech.

ABOUT THE BLOG

A lot of people make claims about what "good English" is. Much of what they say is flim-flam, and this blog aims to set the record straight. Its goal is to explain the motivations behind the real grammar of English and to debunk ill-founded claims about what is grammatical and what isn't. Somehow, this was enough to garner a favorable mention in the [*Wall Street Journal*](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121278020204352653.html).



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