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# Strapline: The perpetuation of prescriptivism in popular culture

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The persistence of prescriptive rules in English today, or watching television as a linguist (and cringing at prescriptive rules)

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It is probably safe to say that whenever an expert encounters their field of expertise outside of science or academia, they shudder at misrepresentations, over-simplifications or flat out untruths. This sort of thing sometimes happens to me when I indulge in a bit of couch potato lounging and come across remarks about English or language in general on sitcoms. Thanks to Netflix, I can watch all the shows I missed when they first aired. I say this so that you, dear reader, will understand why my focus is on shows that aired several years ago and are now run as repeats or binge watched via streaming.

Many sitcoms use stereotypes as the basis for their characters and one common character type is that of the ‘nerd’. This character often lacks social skills and is overly pedantic. Some famous nerds include paleontologist ‘Ross Geller’ from *Friends*. Viewers will remember the reaction from the rest of the show’s characters whenever Ross talks about dinosaurs or other trivia including how salt water taffy is made (not with salt water); the odds of winning the lottery (not great); the capability of computers in the year 2030 (which might have seemed probable in 1999 when the scene aired [Season 5, Episode 7], but as we actually near 2030, seems ridiculous). There is also ‘Maurice Moss’ from the *IT Crowd* who is a stereotypical nerd, from his job as an IT technician who works in a basement to his wide-framed glasses, his short-sleeved plaid shirts worn with a tie, and the fact that he lives with his mother. Since 2007, we have had the theoretical physicist ‘Sheldon Cooper’ from *The Big Bang Theory*. Sheldon is known for his pedantry and recitation of factual information on areas not limited to his immediate area of expertise. As he himself once said: ‘I’m a

physicist. I have a working knowledge of the universe and everything it contains’ (Season 2, Episode 18). As a conversational opening he at one point offers ‘The capybara is the largest member of the rodent family’ (Season 4, Episode 7), and in another episode when a character offers another some more wine, Sheldon comments: ‘Here’s an interesting fact about alcohol: Man is not the only species that ferments fruit in order to become intoxicated. Can you guess what the other is? Hint: sometimes they pack the alcohol in their trunks’ (Season 4, Episode 24).

Each of these characters produce random factoids in the shows they appear in and sometimes these ‘facts’ have to do with language. For example, Ross corrects another character, Phoebe, when she ‘misuses’ ‘who’ in Season 4, Episode 8 of *Friends*:

Phoebe: Speaking of Christmas. Since Monica and I are starting a new business and have no money this year, we could do Secret Santa and each only buy one gift. And there’s the added mystery of who gets who.



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Ross: Who gets whom. [pause as he takes in the others' glares] I don't know why I do that.

In the *IT Crowd*, Moss corrects another character, Roy, for using a double negation, also thereby showing that he missed the reference to Pink Floyd's 'Another Brick in the Wall' in Season 1, Episode 4:

Roy: [singing to himself] We don't need no education.

Moss: Yes you do! You've just used the double negative!

In *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon comments on a number of linguistic constructions:

On the qualification of absolute state adjectives (Season 2, Episode 20):

Stuart: Ooh, Sheldon, I'm afraid you couldn't be more wrong.

Sheldon: More wrong? Wrong is an absolute state and not subject to gradation.

On the misuse of the subjunctive (Season 5, Episode 18):

Penny: Oh, Leonard, it's three o'clock in the morning. I don't care if Richard Feynman was a purple leprechaun who lived in my butt.

Sheldon: Penny meant if he were a purple leprechaun. Penny forgot to use the subjunctive.

On the use of *good* versus *well* (Season 6, Episode 14):

Kripke: Gave it to her good, huh?

Sheldon: No, I gave it to her well.

He also comments on sentence final prepositions (Season 1, Episode 12):

Leonard: [...] you speak English really well.

Dennis: So do you. Except for your tendency to end sentences with prepositions.

Leonard: What are you talking about?

Dennis: That.

Sheldon: He's not wrong.

And again (Season 3, Episode 22):

Raj: You're the guy we're trying to get away from.

Sheldon: Oh. Well, in that case, I don't need my jacket. And for the record, the correct syntax is I'm the guy from whom you're trying to get away.

*The Big Bang Theory* (hereafter *TBBT*) is a popular television series centered around hard science academics including several physicists, an engineer, a microbiologist and a neurobiologist. Sheldon has a particular disdain for the humanities, once stating 'The social sciences are largely hokum' (Season 2, Episode 13); during a conversation with his girlfriend, Amy Farrah Fowler, she uses this knowledge to persuade him to go to a fundraising event he is reluctant to attend:

Amy: And consider this, without you to make the case for the physics department, the task will fall to people like Leonard and Rajesh.

Sheldon: Are you trying to scare me? 'Cause you're succeeding.

Amy: Well, then prepare to be terrified. If your friends are unconvincing, this year's donations might go to, say, the geology department.

Sheldon: Oh, dear, not, not the dirt people!

Amy: Or worse, it could go to the liberal arts.

Sheldon: No!

Amy: Millions of dollars being showered on poets, literary theorists and students of gender studies.

Sheldon: Oh, the humanities! (Season 4, Episode 15)

As an academic, I enjoy watching *TBBT*, especially the early seasons, which sometimes comment on academic life, such as the research funding conversation quoted above. However, as a linguist, I shudder at the comments presented as facts about linguistics or English language usage in the show. The show prides itself in its scientific accuracy, employing a fact-checker, Professor David Salzberg of UCLA, to ensure that the mathematics and related material are correctly presented. In interviews with the cast and crew, it has been noted that the script writers sometimes put 'science to come' in brackets for Professor Salzberg to elaborate on (Season 2, *Physicist to the Stars*). Professor Salzberg also has a blog in which he explains the science behind some of the episodes and he sometimes comments on errors or incomplete truths ([thebigblogtheory.wordpress.com](http://thebigblogtheory.wordpress.com)). For these reasons, and others which I will mention later, I think the writers believe that the lines that they write for Sheldon about language are factually true and no do need to be looked up by fact checkers. In fact, *Grammar Girl* cites the final preposition rule as one of the top-ten grammar myths, in

the number one spot; split infinitives is number two and the good/well distinction is number three (Fogarty, 2011).

For each of his comments, Sheldon adheres to prescriptive rules for English (as his fellow nerds, Ross and Moss, also do), disregarding views held by most linguists. Prescriptivists are those traditional grammar mavens who talk about the 'correct' use of English. In this paper, I shall use the term 'traditional grammar' to refer to the type of prescriptive grammar children are often taught at school. As Hudson (2004: 106) noted in his paper on English grammar teaching in the UK, 'traditional grammar (in this sense) is traditional because schools simply transmit it from generation to generation with very little debate or understanding, and because it has no roots in modern linguistics or indeed in the pre-modern linguistics of previous centuries'. Traditional grammar mavens would say, for example, that it is incorrect to split an infinitive and to use double negation (which according to them leads to a positive statement using the analogy of double negatives in mathematics). Descriptive linguists, however, objectively explain the language phenomena that speakers produce. For example, speakers of English frequently split infinitives without causing confusion, as in 'to boldly go' from the opening credits of *Star Trek*, and double negate without intending a positive, as in 'I can't get no satisfaction' in the eponymous Rolling Stones song.

One well-known prescriptive rule is that it is incorrect to end a sentence with a preposition. There are several potential sources for the rule. One possible source is the interpretation of the word 'preposition' as being composed of 'pre', meaning 'before', and 'position', meaning 'place' and that such words should be placed before their complement (Oxford Dictionaries Blog, 2011). Another suggested source for the preposition 'rule' is John Dryden who in a 1672 text criticized a text written by Ben Jonson in 1611, writing 'The Preposition [sic] in the end of the sentence; a common fault with him [Jonson], and which I have but lately observ'd [sic] in my own writings' (cited in Burchfield, 1996). This preference for non-final prepositions was perpetuated in Lindley Murray's (1795) incredibly popular book, *English Grammar*, which ran to over 65 editions and was widely used in British and American schools (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 1996).

Through *TBBT* this rule, along with others, continues to be perpetuated in popular culture today. Though of course, the show and other forms of popular culture are not alone in its perpetuation.

Anyone who has gone to school, primary, secondary and beyond, has likely been schooled in traditional grammar which emphasizes prescriptive rules and the concepts of 'correct' English usage (Umbach, 1999). Umbach (1999: 9) noted 'When I started teaching linguistics to future teachers, I would get resistance to the idea of descriptivism on the grounds that prescriptive traditional grammar was what they would be expected to teach, and so I should teach it to them'. The idea that this is what linguists do, i.e., preserve correct grammar, was also expressed in Weird Al Yankovich's (2014) song *Word Crimes*: 'You should hire / Some cunning linguist / To help you distinguish / What is proper English / Everybody wise up!' Umbach also notes that most language textbooks assume that readers are already familiar with the rules of traditional grammar (see also Battistella, 1999, who notes the lack of success that linguists have had in ridding the classroom of prescriptivism). This familiarity with traditional grammar is key in the humor that is produced in scripted sitcoms. The jokes only work when we remember those cultural references: the average Joe or Jane will have forgotten the rules, but the nerd will remember.

Prescriptive rules often fail when applied (Battistella, 1999; Hudson, 2004). Even John Dryden noticed that he used sentence final prepositions on occasion. After noting that Sheldon is the sort of prescriptivist who minds sentence final prepositions, I decided to explore how consequential he is in following this rule, knowing that the rule is artificial and therefore unlikely to be strictly adhered to. (The final preposition here is incidental, but dear reader, I invite you to try to 'fix' it. For added fun, fix the other sentence final prepositions earlier in this paper, if you can find them.) I had the hypothesis that if preposition stranding is objectionable, then Sheldon, of all characters, should not produce such structures, though other characters might. It is of course noted that *TBBT* is a scripted show, but its writers, products of the education system, likely believe that they are stating 'facts' and they should be aware of staying in character and using 'proper' English as the voice of the character Sheldon.

I analyzed the script from the episode in which the topic first comes up: Season 1, Episode 12. Turns and words counts per character in the episode were counted and phrase/sentence final prepositions were identified for each character. For the purposes of this analysis, I differentiated between phrasal verb particles and prepositions, which look identical but have different semantic

functions. For example in (1a) *up* is a final preposition but in (2a) *up* is a particle in a phrasal verb.

- (1a) That's the hill Jack ran *up*.
- (2a) That's the car Jack picked *up*.

In (1a) the preposition describes the direction of the movement and in (2a) it is part of a verb phrase meaning 'collect' with no meaning of direction or location. In (1a) the sentence could be re-phrased as (1b) to avoid preposition stranding using what linguists call pied-piping:

- (1b) That's the hill *up* which Jack ran.

However, pied-piping cannot be used for phrasal verbs as in (2b):

- (2b) \* That's the car *up* which Jack picked.

Thus the preposition rule applies only to final prepositions and not verb particles in the final position. Table 1 shows the total turn and word counts per character and the total number of final prepositions.

Leonard, who was criticized for the practice, uses preposition stranding twice in (3) and (10), all other instances are examples of phrasal verb particles.

- (3) What are you talking *about*?
- (4) Come *on*, Sheldon, we've hardly shown him anything.
- (5) Come *on*, Dennis, I'll show you the rec center, they've got nautilus equipment.
- (6) Come *on*, Dennis, I'll show you the radiation lab.
- (7) Well, what are you going to do, Sheldon, give *up*?
- (8) It would blow *up*.
- (9) Hang *on*, are we talking about murdering Dennis Kim? I'm not saying *no*.
- (10) Okay, that was uncalled *for*.

Sheldon also uses sentence final prepositions in (11), (12), (13) and (14) in addition to one phrasal verb particle in (15).

- (11) Get him *out*.
- (12) Get him *out*, Leonard.
- (13) But, since the arrival of Dennis Kim has rendered my research pointless, I just have to find something else to focus *on*.
- (14) No, no, please, come *in*. Yeah, I think you'll appreciate this, very exciting.
- (15) Youngest till the cyborgs rise *up*!

Sheldon and Leonard, who speak most, end sentences with prepositions and it is unclear how this could be avoided in each case. For example, to rephrase (3) and (10), repeated below, using pied piping as in (3a) would likely be too formal for casual speech or in the case of (10a) and (10b) incomprehensible:

- (3) What are you talking about?
- (3a) About what are you talking?
- (10) Okay, that was uncalled for.
- (10a) Okay, for that it was uncalled.
- (10b) Okay, for that it was not called.

The line (10) could also be rephrased by moving the negation from the verb to the agent: 'Nobody called for that'.

Sheldon's line in (13) could be re-phrased using pied-piping to create '[...] I just have to find something else on which to focus' which possibly would sound artificial in conversational speech for most people, but fits Sheldon's pedantic character. The other prepositions 'get him out' in (11) and (12) and 'come in' in (14) are more difficult to 'correct'. Pied-piping would be difficult, but 'of this room' and 'this room' could be added in each case to

**Table 1: Number of turns, words and final prepositions per character in Season 1, Episode 12**

Character	Turns	Words	Final Prepositions
Sheldon	66	986	4
Leonard	56	604	2
Howard	39	512	0
Gablehauser	21	333	2
Raj	23	270	1
Penny	8	95	0
Dennis	18	197	0
Goldfarb	2	5	0

prevent the preposition from being phrase/sentence final. In sum, the analysis of the script has shown that final prepositions are not uncommon, even for the character who explicitly stated that their use is incorrect.

Formal research has explored how English speakers view preposition stranding and pied-piping in grammaticality judgment tasks. Such a study was conducted by Radford, Felser and Boxell (2012) who explored grammaticality judgments of a British university's staff and students for a number of constructions:

Preposition copying (... a world in which people live in...)

Preposition pied-piping (... a world in which people live...)

Preposition stranding (... a world which people live in...)

Preposition pruning (... a world  $\emptyset$  which people live  $\emptyset$ ...)

Radford et al. refer to copying and pruning as 'putatively ungrammatical' meaning that to double mark the preposition and to delete it altogether would appear to break the rules of grammar, whereas pied-piping and stranding functioned as 'grammatical' control conditions in that the preposition is marked only once. In the grammaticality rating task, all conditions were rated at least as 6 or above on a 10-point scale (corresponding to grammatical) by the participants. The 'putatively ungrammatical condition', preposition copying, received the highest ratings (8.4), but pruning the lowest (6.1).

Because in the grammaticality judgment task people may over-think their answers, perhaps reflecting on what they were taught in school with respect to final prepositions, Radford et al. repeated the experiment using a timed yes/no grammaticality decision task to test instinctual reactions to such sentences. In the timed experiment, they found that participants responded to copying, pied-piping and stranding equally quickly as grammatical. In the timed task, stranding was considered just as acceptable as copying and pied-piping, with pruning rated significantly lower than all other conditions. Radford et al. argued that '[t]he surprisingly high acceptance rate of [...] copying, pied-piping, and stranding in Experiment 2 [the timed experiment] calls into question the validity of any prescriptive rules against preposition copying or stranding' (p. 422). In other words, if preposition stranding (or copying for that matter) were strictly ungrammatical, as prescriptivists

argue, this should be reflected in the results of both experiments. Yet in the timed task, in which participants gave their instinctual reactions, neither stranding or copying was regarded as incorrect.

The current study investigated a prescriptivist's, embodied by the scripted character Sheldon Cooper, adherence to the prescriptive rule in English against sentence final preposition stranding. Not only did Sheldon use such constructions himself, other research shows that people do not generally find sentence final prepositions objectionable, especially if they are making a speeded judgment, which reflects what happens in real-time spoken language. For a television series that prides itself on its scientific accuracy, *TBBT* and Sheldon Cooper (and his fact-checkers and writers) may do well to show more respect to the humanities and help fight the persistence of prescriptive rules in popular culture. I therefore offer a re-write of the original dialogue in Season 1, Episode 12, a sort of Dialogue 2.0 if you will:

Leonard: [...] you speak English really well.

Dennis: So do you. Except for your tendency to end sentences with prepositions.

Leonard: What are you talking about?

Dennis: That.

Sheldon: He's not wrong, you do; however that rule is prescriptive and modern linguists do not take it seriously and people have no trouble processing sentence final prepositions. In fact many people who champion the rule regularly break it themselves. Sorry Dennis, but a broader knowledge of the humanities will prevent you from saying something silly.

To finish on a more serious note, prescriptivism in our schools and popular culture is problematic. Battistella (1999: 16) argued that

[...] traditional grammar is also to a great extent a surrogate for traditional values and morality. In its most unsophisticated versions, it assumes that simple definitions and rules handed down from earlier generations [...] have some inherent cultural priority and that those who do not follow the rules of correct usage have failed to learn English due to classlessness, stupidity, laziness, or obstinence.

That is clearly undesirable. Instead, we should espouse descriptive linguistics which describes how speech communities use languages and

dialects without value judgements. Here's to a more inclusive embrace of language usage not only in schools, but even popular culture.

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