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ON PRESCRIPTIVE STATEMENTS

Is it wrong to tell someone else what to do or think? What if the person we are addressing likely disagrees with us, and we know it? Are we comfortable telling them what to do or think even though we know doing so will make them angry? Has it become socially unacceptable to directly state our opinion in social situations? Is there a safe way to express such an opinion?

These questions have, in my opinion, profound implications, particularly for people who live in a representative democracy. If the "man in the street" keeps his opinions to himself because it has become socially unacceptable to express them, he has, in a practical sense, lost his freedom of speech, the laws protecting such freedom notwithstanding.

There is no question that our linguistic choices directly determine how others react when we speak or write. We expect the correct linguistic choices, those that conform to the social morays of the society in which we live, to improve our chances for a successful and civil discourse.

It is my suggestion that our linguistic choices in the area of prescriptive statements[1], in particular the use of obligatory words and phrases, are now limited by our social consciousness in ways they were not in the past. Statements once acceptable in polite social settings now meet with general disapproval, which may or may not be expressed at the time the statement is made.

I further wish to suggest that these changes are insidious in effect, subtly influencing our speech, and establishing an unexpressed tabu against direct use of the prescriptive statement[2]. I believe they have their underpinnings in what the philosopher Mortimer Adler calls "the milder forms of skepticism"[3], the power of which has been released as the restraints against them provided by religious and societal mores have been eliminated. Adler says: "To refute the skeptical view, which makes all value judgements subjective and relative to individual desires, we must be able to show how prescriptive statements can be objectively true."[4] Without the availability of the prescriptive statement, Western rational thought rushes headlong toward two conclusions: the ends justify the means, and might makes right. As people become increasingly convinced[5] of the validity, or perhaps more accurately, the logical inevitability of these two conclusions, social discourse becomes increasingly polarized.

There are, of course, societies in which these conclusions, the ends justify the means and might makes right, are the only underpinnings of order, whether the governance of that society is based in secularism, as it is in Iraq or China, or in religion, as is the case in Iran or Saudi Arabia. The events on and after September 11, 2001 made it obvious that a faction of Islam is at war with the West, and as Bernard Lewis, professor emeritus of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University, has written in *National Review*, "Osama Bin Laden and his followers define the American enemy not as imperialists but as Crusaders (an earlier offender). They have no objection to imperial domination as such, provided that it is the true believers who rule the unbelievers, and not the reverse."[6] What Bin Laden wants is for the United States to remove itself from Saudi Arabia so that the current rulers, the Saud family, may be overthrown by force. There is, obviously, little chance that the grievances of Bin Laden's faction could be redressed through civil discourse. The dream of radical Islamists is a government by theocratic

dictatorship unencumbered by the "poison" of Western rationalist thought. How are we in the West to reach accommodation with these people?

The Economist, in the lead article of its March 23rd, 2002 issue, opines that the only hope is through the encouragement of the development of democracy in Islamic countries. In support of the idea, *The Economist* says that the difficulty of doing so notwithstanding, it may be the only possibility: "Those who consider Arab democracy a fantasy should ask how long the existing system can last. The Arabs have not rubbed along happily without democracy; they have rubbed along unhappily without it."[7]

What does all of this have to do with Prescriptive statements? Just this: Western society may not be able to point to democracy and the rule of law as a system that is superior to a theocracy precisely because it does not consider prescriptive statements to be within the realm of truth, and without the use of prescription, the West cannot make its argument. We in the West have been confused, something the Islamic militants are quick to point out, but we have somehow muddled our way through the past 50 years or so, in which time the problem has become more acute with the rapid recession of the status of religion in society. The use of might (force or the threat of force), rather than civil discourse, has been more and more the method of choice particularly since the end of the second World War, and this trend seems to be accelerating. In the United States the following examples come to mind: the shooting of students protesting the Vietnam war at Kent State University, the events surrounding the Democratic national convention in 1967, the increasing power of the Federal Supreme Court, especially when it functions as a social referee; the hasty Federal raid against the Branch Davidian compound at Waco, Texas; the terrorist bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; a Presidential election involving state and federal courts; bombings

and asassinations at abortion clinics, the impeachment of President Clinton, and the Elian Gonzales standoff. Everyone is sure the position they have espoused is correct, and equally sure that those who disagree cannot be persuaded of its truth: in the world of the skeptic, the prescriptive statement is just an opinion.

The use of force, however subtle, has also been a feature of the formerly genteel world of academia in the second half of the twentieth century. Students and professors alike must now be very careful about their speech, both written and oral, if they expect to advance. In a search of the internet for appearances of various permutations of the term "politically correct," I came across many articles, most of them enraged, unenlightening polemics about the virtue or lack thereof of "political correctness."[8] One excellent article written by Alexander D. Gregor of the University of Manitoba stands out. Entitled "The Canadian University and Political Correctness: A Historical Perspective[9]," this article has much to say about the phenomenon as it manifests in the academic world of North America. While an analysis of Political Correctness is not within the scope of this essay, some of Mr. Gregor's statements are highly illustrative of the problems we will continue to face as a society because we believe prescription to be mere opinion. He writes that a "lack of mutual trust effectively meant the end of what the *uni*-versity was all about,"[10] and "A difference of opinion cannot be resolved if the tools of resolution themselves are dismissed as invalid."[11] He summarizes his assessment of the current condition of academia: "The North American university had inadvertently made itself into an academic Tower of Babel: not in terms of just specialized languages, which was a problem it had had for some time; but in terms of disagreement on basic intellectual process: on what was valid knowledge, and on what the routes were to valid knowledge. The university discovered that it no longer had the tools to handle the task of discussing its own nature and structure."[12] The university, the United States,

Gregor's Canada, and the whole of Western society has lost its way largely because we have lost our ability to prescribe.

I believe this phenomenon, the subtle elimination in the mind of the public of the validity of the prescriptive statement, though it has its origin in the philosophical thought of the seventeenth century and later, is currently driven by common everyday speech. This is not because people are thinking philosophically, but, rather, because they are not.

Mankind is not always predisposed to justice. People, on their own, do not always give justice careful consideration. If they did, there would be no need for a formalized system of justice. But justice *requires* prescription, and its reason must be accepted as more than opinion if it is to have force. Without the use of terms of obligation, the building blocks of prescriptive statements, it is impossible to formulate the rules of a just society, governed by reason rather than by force.

If all of this is true, one might well wonder how Western society has gotten along so well over the millennia prior to today. While some might argue that the bellicose history of Western man demonstrates that we have *not* gotten along so well, the fact remains that more people have more freedom and opportunity today than ever before in history, and this has been increasingly true since the Enlightenment. The gross injustices man has imposed upon his fellows in the past have not persisted, but have been, for the most part, corrected, sometimes at great cost. This is, perhaps, mankind’s greatest achievement.

Some may argue, correctly in my opinion, that the happy circumstances in which Western man today finds himself are a direct result of the philosophical and scientific thought first developed during the Enlightenment. But that thought was, and continued to be, tempered by the devotion of the majority of Western mankind to the prescriptions of religion. As I have

already noted, the influence of religion has gradually waned since the seventeenth century, and its influence has rapidly declined in the twentieth.

It has been religion, then, and not secular thought, that has been the source of the affirmation that the prescriptive statement belongs in the realm of truth, and not in that of mere opinion or taste. I suspect that the decline in the influence of religion in Western society has been accompanied by a parallel decline in the acceptance of the truth of the prescriptive statement. If this is true, and it is also true that an argument for justice cannot be made without the use of prescriptive statements, is it then true that we can no longer make a rational argument for the primacy of justice and its controlling function over freedom and equality? Are freedom and equality unlimited goods, of which it can always be said: more is better? The answer to that question cannot be "yes," for freedom and equality oppose each other. If the principle of justice does not have precedence over freedom and equality, they cannot coexist: one will prevail by force over the other.[13] If so, could the great gains in social justice we enjoy today be reversed in the name of freedom or equality? Could we find ourselves without a commonly accepted intellectual defense against those who would misuse the technological capabilities upon the doorstep of which mankind now stands? Will the future of Western man be determined in a confused use of might, rather than reasoned justice, to try to avoid that which we find repugnant, but against which we are unable to mount a logical argument?[14] Finally, is it possible to detect in the language we use the ongoing change which I believe is the result of an inability to provide proof that prescription belongs in the sphere of truth?

It is the intention of this paper to begin to examine this postulated change in the manner in which we express ourselves when we make obligatory or prescriptive statements, as reflected in both the words we choose, the meaning we assign to them, and the grammatical constructions

we employ when we form our speech. However any conclusion regarding such possible change, and even a statement positively affirming its existence, is far beyond the scope of this brief inquiry. I can only speculate, and offer examples of speech that I think might support my suspicion. This essay would be successful if the reader were to be convinced that further study of this matter might be fruitful.

I have chosen to examine the following words and phrases: *have to, must, ought (to), need (to),* and *should*. All of these have traditionally been considered to be obligatory, as demonstrated by attestation in the *Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition* with the exception of "need to" (in the sense I will illustrate), which I will try to demonstrate is a new, and developing, phenomenon. Furthermore, I contend that the *degree* to which these terms have become unacceptable is related to the grammatical person in which they are used. I will demonstrate the use of the indicative mood in statements which are imperative in nature. It is also possible that the *meaning* of these words has changed to accommodate social attitudes, and that there has been a shift from the active to the passive voice in attempted statements of prescription.

Some of these words have additional meanings that are not obligatory, and in looking at sources, I have tried to determine when this is the case and to eliminate those particular usage examples from consideration.

In this essay, I will examine the Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States to look for any developments in public discourse, and airline boarding announcements as examples of a more personal nature.

AIRLINE ANNOUNCEMENTS

(NEED TO)

First I must beg forgiveness for stating the obvious, but the circumstances under which airline announcements are made should be kept in mind as the following analysis is read. While most people may consider flight attendants to be authoritative, and cooperate with the instructions given aboard an aircraft, this is not true of all passengers. The milieu is one of confinement on even the largest aircraft, and many passengers, especially since the events of September 11, 2001, consider the situation to be highly stressful. Adding to the general negative atmosphere is the fact that the public does not currently hold a high opinion of airline companies, and this may at times be reflected in their reaction to airline employees. I think if fair to assume that flight attendants are often apprehensive and eager to do what they can to avoid conflict with passengers. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect the language used by flight attendants, and particularly the language used in an instructional sense, to be diplomatic.

On March 25, 2001, I heard the following announcements while flying on an Southwest Airlines flight from Orange County, California to Oakland, California (my italics):

"Your carry on luggage *needs* to go…"

"You *need* to stow your carry – on…"

"We *need* you to read the safety card…"

"We *need* everyone in their seat…"

"We *need* you to pull into your row to make way…"

"…these items *need* to go under the seat in front of you…"

"…pagers *need* to be in the off position…"

"…we *need* you to stay in your seat until the seat belt sign has been turned off."

"At this time electronic equipment will *need* to be turned off and stowed…"

"All bags will *need* to be stowed for landing…", and two others:

"…items *can not* be turned on until…"

"…you *must* be 15 years of age or older…"

Having traveled extensively by air over the past twenty or so years, I have a general impression that similar language is used aboard most, if not all, of the flights on which I have been a passenger. This, however, is my first deliberate attempt to record it, and in any case, I feel one example is adequate to illustrate my contention here, which I shall now set forth.

The meaning and intention in this case is plain enough: the statements are meant to be imperative. Any doubt of this is dispelled if one considers the fact that there are implied consequences that would follow if one did not comply, as failure to do so would almost certainly result in one's being removed from the aircraft, if physically possible, and if one resisted that, a likely arrest by the jurisdictional law authority. However, with the exception of the last ("you must") phrase, all of these commands are *indicative*, not imperative. This use of the indicative when the imperative is intended is similar to what Suzette Haden-Elgin, in her book *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense*, means when she defines "presupposition," an offensive verbal tactic, as: "…something that a native speaker of a language knows is part of the meaning of a sequence of that language, even if it is not overtly present in the sequence."[15] Of presupposition, she says "[in using it]…it should almost never be necessary for you to make a*ny* open claim that could be objected to…"[16] Could it be that this structure is used to avoid any possible objection to the prescribed behavior?

Looking at the announcements again, we have:

It needs to go
You need to
We need you to
We need
We need you to
They need to go
They need to be
We need you to
It needs to be
They need to be
They can not
And then the uncharacteristically direct: you must.

If the intention is to issue commands, then why not use *have to* or *must*? Well, the word *must* was used in the last example, so the Flight Attendant making these announcements clearly knows how to use that word. But "you must be 15 years of age or older" implies a consequence only if the person in question is younger than 15 years: a child. Because the announcement is in regard to an exit row where the passenger seated in that row may be called upon to open a heavy exit door, the implication is that passengers under 15 years of age might not have the strength to open the door or the authoritative stature to guide other passengers through the exit in the event of an emergency. It is not, in my judgment, unreasonable to assume that a minor lacking these abilities would not be considered a threat, and therefore one might feel safe in using stronger language in this case. The question here is: did the flight attendant switch to a more direct imperative statement in light of the unthreatening nature of the passenger for whom the statement was intended? Note also, that the use of the phrase *can not* in reference to portable electronic devices is not only in the passive voice, it is also semantically incorrect. The electronic items in question are not incapable of being turned on or not functioning, as this phrase would normally be understood. The intention of this statement is, rather, that the use of these devices is forbidden. The correct phrase in this instance would be: *may not*. Is this a grammatical error or an intentional usage? An additional question is: would *must not* be considered a stronger or

weaker statement than *may not* in this instance? I will return to this point in the section of this paper in which I analyze presidential inaugural addresses.

Now, the word *need* can be used as a noun or a verb. In all of these examples, however, the usage is as a main verb. *The American Heritage Dictionary, fourth edition* defines this form of *need* as: "—*tr*. To have need of; require: *The family needs money*. See synonyms at **lack**. --*intr*. **1**. To be in need or want. **2**. To be necessary."[17]

Note that both a transitive and an intransitive form are cited. In the case of these announcements, only the phrases *you need to* and *we need you to* could be considered to be transitive (meaning 'to require'), and *The American Heritage Dictionary*, in a usage note, states: "…the verb *need* behaves…sometimes like a main verb (such as *want* or *try*). When used as a main verb, *need* agrees with its subject [and] takes *to* before the verb following it."[18] The phrase "We need you to…" seems to fulfill all the usage requirements (the word 'require' could be substituted for 'need'), but why use such an awkward construction when a much simpler, easier to pronounce alternative exists? It seems like a lot of trouble, but it *does* preserve the indicative mood of the phrase.

In the case of the *you need to* announcements, it is not the intention of the announcement to point out or acknowledge a *need* possessed by the passenger, as in "you need to stow your carry – on," nor does the word "require" substitute for "need" because "you require to" is not grammatical.

All the other "need to" statements, that is those referring to inanimate objects, use the verb in an intransitive sense, but do not refer to a lack of something as in "the cart needs a new wheel." Instead they refer to the condition or state of the object in which it has been placed by the passenger. Furthermore, the announcement is not really about the object, but expresses a

requirement that the passenger who possesses the object take an action involving it: the requirement being expressed, and therefore the statement itself, is directed at the passenger, not the object, even though the statement is so constructed as to appear to be a statement about the object. This is a declarative statement using an intransitive verb to instruct the subject (the passenger) to take an action upon an object, which is precisely what a transitive verb does in an imperative statement. Does this represent a new usage?

A Southwest Airlines *Flight Attendant Manual*, published in October 2000, does not recommend the use of the phrase *need to*.[19] One flight attendant, an employee of Southwest Airlines, told me that the language actually written in the Flight Attendant's manual is suggested, not required, and that the flight attendant may use any appropriate language, provided it was in keeping with company standards and goals. In fact, the *Manual* is full of words of obligation: "items must be stowed", "phones must be turned off", and "your seat belt should be worn", and imperative statements[20], among them: "Please make sure", "please discontinue use", and "Please keep your seatbelt fastened"[21]. So it appears that the Flight Attendant has deliberately deviated from the language recommended by the airline, substituting the language quoted for the recommended language.

The Oxford English Dictionary shows only one example in which the use of the phrase *need to* could be interpreted as imperative in intent , this under the second sense of the verb, 8th definition, "To be under a necessity or obligation *to* do something"[22], and only one example given under this definition has the sense under discussion here, this from one R.I. Wilberforce, in his *Rutilius & Lucius* (1842): "They need to be taught…how vain are those objects."[23] This is probably not being used in the same sense as the airline announcements because the statement is one of opinion and is not imperative in nature. It is, however,

prescriptive in that the sense seems to be similar to that of other terms of obligation (*should, ought to*). All other attestations in the *OED* either have the meaning “to lack”, or are obsolete. In any case the use of "need to" when the speaker intends to be prescriptive has now become more common than the use of all other terms of obligation. I think this is easily illustrated by asking the reader to think of a situation in which the following sentences might be used and to pick the form most likely to occur and to be most easily accepted:

John has to shut up.
John ought to shut up.
John must shut up.
John should shut up.
John needs to shut up.

The effect seems stronger as the message becomes more personal:

You have to clean up your act.
You ought to clean up your act.
You must clean up your act.
You should clean up your act.
You need to clean up your act.

In 1979, Fowler and Kress wrote:

> Declaratives and imperatives express the relation between speaker and addressee in differing ways: the speech roles assigned in one case are 'giver of information' and 'recipient of information' ; in the other 'commander' and 'commanded'. It is clear than the two forms are appropriate for two quite distinct kinds of power-relation: the imperative for one involving a considerable power differential, one where control may be exercised through the direct assertion of the roles of commander-commanded. The declarative, on the other hand, seemingly makes no specific claims about power-relations; the giving of information seems a neutral act.[24]

This would seem to support my conclusion about the flight attendant's use of the word *must*. However, Fowler and Kress go on to discuss the use of the declarative statement to express a command:

> The 'command' in declaratives is not carried through a speech-role directly, but modally, through the use of the modal verb *must*. In the imperative, the source of the command is quite plain: *I*, the speaker/

> writer, command *you*, the addressee; but in the declarative with the modal 'must', the source of the authority is vague: it might be the speaker, equally it might not.[25]

So *need to* may be considered a modal, though as of the third volume of the OED's *Additions Series* to the 2nd edition of the dictionary, this usage has not been recorded. In addition to having become a modal, the declarative is being used here by a person who is clearly in an authoritative position, that is a position in which use of the imperative would certainly be acceptable. Therefore I think it reasonable to suggest that this usage is a new one.

There is one more point I would like to make about the statements made by the flight attendant, and that is in regard to the use of the passive mood as in "Your seatbelt needs to be fastened." This usage not only makes the source of the authority seem vague (the flight attendant isn't telling the passengers what to do, but is merely delivering a message from the Federal Aviation Administration), but it has the added advantage of verbally focusing attention on the item that must be manipulated in order to comply with the command. Once again, Fowler and Kress write:

> One major explanation for the frequency of the passive in English is its function in making items focal: 'He wanted fifteen', 'fifteen were wanted'.[26]

By mentioning the item in question early in the sentence, focus on the item on the part of the passengers listening to the announcement is strengthened, but it also somewhat obviates the need for statement of the command (in however subtle a fashion). Having analyzed an example of this usage in speech, I shall now move on to an examination of written language with the same ideas in mind.

PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURAL ADDRESSES

While I have been aware of the use of “need to” in statements of prescription for some time, I have not, prior to writing this essay, recorded the examples. I remembered, however, that I have

heard it many times aboard aircraft, and was, fortunately, able to find examples on the only flight upon which I was a passenger in the time during which I was writing this essay. I wondered, however, about usage in more formalized settings, for example in print. It then occurred to me that if I am correct in my explanation for the"need to" phenomenon, the same process might be occurring in the usage involving other terms of obligation. It was suggested by my brother, a linguist, etymologist, and editor that I might look at the Inaugural Addresses of Presidents of the United States.[27]

I read all of them, looking first for words used in prescriptive statements, and then checking each example so that I might eliminate those used in a non-obligatory sense. Having done this, I counted the use of all these terms in each Inaugural Address, and then counted each term alone. I then further counted usage by grammatical person. I charted and graphed the counted examples, looking for correlation.

Referring to the graph in the Appendix titled **All Terms** (p. 27), the most striking feature is the heavy, yet erratic usage of obligatory terms between the years 1897 and 1929, with the years 1905 and 1913 showing only 3 examples each, and 1917, none. One might expect to find that the Presidents who most influenced their times would use the greatest number of these terms, but this is not the case. The biggest users are McKinley, Taft (the all time champion), Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. George Washington used 2 in his first address and none in the second. Thomas Jefferson used only 7 in two addresses. Abraham Lincoln used 9 in 1861, a time of great national stress, but none in 1865, with the nation embroiled in civil war. Theodore Roosevelt, certainly a strongly opinionated president, uses only 3. Woodrow Wilson uses 3 in his first address, and none in his second. Franklin Roosevelt uses terms of obligation only 13 times in four addresses, an average of 3.25 each. John Kennedy used none. In the years between

1937 (Roosevelt) and 1981 (Reagan), usage was uniformly low, picking up again in Reagan's second address (1985) and William Clinton's first address in 1993. George W. Bush used only the word "must," and that only 4 times in 2001. I draw no conclusions from this data, however when the words are plotted separately, some striking trends are revealed.

Looking at the **Ought** (see graph p. 28), Taft (7) and Cooledge (8) are the heavy users, with James Buchanan the next biggest user with 5. No other president uses *ought* more than twice, and the word is not used at all after Herbert Hoover uses it once in 1929. This may indicate that this word, which was once used somewhat regularly, has either become unacceptable to the public, or possibly has lost its force due to the relegation of terms of obligation to the spheres of opinion or taste rather than the sphere of truth. My feeling is that the former is the case, but I have no evidence to support this claim.

Now **ought** can be used in several senses, but the sense with which we are concerned here is branch III in the *Oxford English Dictionary* "As auxiliary of predication."[28] The definition under sense 5 is: "The general verb to express duty obligation of any kind; strictly used of moral obligation, but also with various weakened shades of meaning, expressing what is befitting, proper, correct, advisable, or naturally expected."[29] This sounds to me as though *ought* can be used in a strong or weak sense, but in Washington's first inaugural address he says of himself: "…one who… ought to be peculiarly conscious of his own deficiencies…", and this does not strike me as a particularly weak phrase. James Monroe, in his first inaugural address, says: "…we ought not to depend in the degree we have done on supplies from other countries.", and in his second: "…if the policy is sound it ought to be supported.", which seems robust enough. James Buchanan said: "We ought to cherish a sacred regard for the independence of all nations…". All of these are prescriptive, but are not demanding a call to

action, this function having been relegated to the more vigorous *should*, which, though it does not disappear after 1929, is only used 4 times after Herbert Hoover used it 13 times in his address that year.

The word **should** (see graph p. 29), which is really the past tense of shall, as it is used in statements of obligation, is sense 18.a. in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: " In statements of duty, obligation, or propriety (originally, as applicable to hypothetical conditions not regarded as real). Also, in statements of expectation, likelihood, prediction, etc."[30] There is also a definition note following the definition, which defines the sense of the word as it is used with prescriptive intent: "This conditional form of expression was from an early period substituted for the unconditional *shall* in sense 2, and in mod. Eng. The pres. Tense in this use is obs., and *should* = ought to."[31] Well, almost but not quite. As I previously stated, in my opinion the word *should* is stronger than ought in that it calls for action on the part of the addressee, where *ought*, at least in the sense it is used in inaugural addresses generally refers to a desired condition, rather than to an action. (Oddly, I personally have a sense of *ought* that it may be considered more aggressive or authoritative when used in he 2nd person to express criticism. There are, however, no examples of ought being used in the 2nd person in the inaugural addresses.)

The first use of *should* is by Thomas Jefferson in his first address, and it is in the 2nd person plural in a sense that sounds almost like one I have heard in gangster movies and also in speech sometimes heard in New York City: "…it is proper you should understand what I deem the essential principles of our government…". In this example *should* is used almost as a substitute for *would*, but there is a hint of obligatory intent. He uses the word again in his second address, and this time the usage more strongly bears out my point: "No inference is here intended, that the laws…should not be enforced." The prescriptive intent and the call to action is

clear. In speaking of the government's obligation to Native Americans in his second inaugural address, James Monroe says: "We should become their real benefactors", a sentiment that likely was not shared by all citizens in 1821, and therefore, a call to action in a highly prescriptive manner even if it does precede the imperialistic: "Their sovereignty over vast territories should cease." In his address of 1829, Andrew Jackson said: "…the military should be held subordinate to the civil power." Here *ought* might have served as well. William Henry Harrison used *should* this way: "…it was not intended to make him [the president] the source of legislation, and…he should never be looked to for schemes of finance." Abraham Lincoln asked: "And should anyone in any case be content that his oath shall go unkept on a merely unsubstantial controversy as to how it shall be kept?". Herbert Hoover, in his address of 1929, says: "Our people have determined that we should make no political engagements such as membership in the League of Nations…", and, as stated earlier, use of *should* is rare after this time.

Now, we turn to **must** (see graph p. 30). This word first appears in Martin Van Buren's address of 1837, and is regularly used thereafter. It is the obligatory term of choice after 1929, and in fact, after that date we have only 3 uses of "should", 2 used of "has to", 1use of "need to be", 4 uses of "have to", and 2 uses of "need" in addition to "must". This means that "must" has been chosen 86% of the time in inaugural addresses since 1929, and even this percentage is somewhat misleading because, with the exception of two strong "shoulds" on the part of Ronald Reagan in 1981, the other 10 examples are prescriptive in the weakest sense, as in Richard Nixon's "What has to be done, has to be done by government" in his address of 1969. One might, therefore, rightly wonder if the word "must" has become the most acceptable word of obligation, perhaps the only acceptable word of obligation at the beginning of the 21st century.

The *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* points out that *must* can be used only in the present tense, and that "*have to* has an added advantage in that it can be conjugated in past and future tenses".[32] Why, then, would the less versatile *must* be preferred?

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, in sense 3.a. of the verb *must* says: "Equivalent to the older MOTE *v*. 2, expressing necessity: Am (is, are) obliged or required to; have (has) to; it is necessary that (I, you, he, she, it, etc.) should", and what follows is of interest: "In the second person, *must* now chiefly expresses a command or an insistent request or counsel; in the third person it tends to be restricted to the expression of a necessity which is either imposed by the will of the speaker, or relative to some specified end, or enunciated as a general proposition."[33]

Must is used in the second person only twice in all of the Inaugural Addresses. The first time, by Franklin Pierce in 1853, it expresses a cry for help: "You have summoned me in my weakness; you must sustain me by your strength." In 1965, however, Lyndon Johnson uses it in a call to conscience: "But you must look within your own hearts…" My feeling is that, when it is used in the 1st person plural (we), *must* is generally considered as expressing a general proposition rather than a command or strong exhortation. I cannot think of an example in recent presidential addresses where the word has been forcefully stressed so as to be clearly imperative in intent.

My Person Tally for *must* shows it is used in the third person 52% of the time, and in the 1st person plural 44%. Of the examples in the 3rd person, however, the impersonal *it must* is used 70% of the time, and the vague *they must*, 30%. Likewise, my Percentages By Person Tally shows that the use of *must* in the 1st person plural (we) is substantially higher than that of the other terms. The *OED* is silent on the use of *must* in the 1st plural. Is this a stronger or weaker use of *must*? An answer to this question is crucial, since *must* is the term of choice in the 20th

century, and may indicate a level of acceptability of the prescriptive statement: higher if *we must* is considered to be strongly obligatory, lower if the opposite were true.

McKinley, in 1901 says: "we must not be disheartened…" and "with our near neighbors we must remain close friends…", hardly the sort of statement to raise someone's hackles. Taft, in 1909, is a bit more prescriptive in regard to the construction of a modern navy: "It must be built and in existence when the emergency arises which calls for its use and operation." Well, one would suppose so. In the next few addresses, *must* is used only in vague generalities. In fact it is not until Herbert Hoover's address of 1929 where, in speaking of producers of commodities, he says: "because we substantially confer a monopoly by limiting competition, we must regulate their services and rates.", that we see a real prescription. Franklin Roosevelt uses few prescriptive terms over 4 addresses. In his first, he strongly prescribes: "We must act and act quickly.", "…there must be a strict supervision of all banking and credits…", "…there must be an end to speculation…", but he uses *must* in generalities in his next three addresses, and the next few presidents follow suit. Richard Nixon, in his second address calls for the "New Federalism": "Government must learn to take less from people…", a statement that was ahead of its time, and probably too general to upset many people. Jimmy Carter sounds Biblical with his "the powerful must not persecute the weak…", and less so with "we must simply do our best." Ronald Reagan is more forceful in 1985: "We must simplify our tax system…", and in proposing a balanced budget: "It must be done…" George Bush, William Clinton, and George W. Bush use *must* to tell us to keep thinking the good thoughts, but prescribe nothing stronger.

Considering the almost exclusive and fairly common use of *must* in the second half of

the 20th Century, and the fact that there are precious few strongly prescriptive uses of the word, it might even be said that rallying public support, at least through the vehicle of inaugural addresses, with the possible exception of Reagan, has fallen out of favor.

There are some significant points a reading of the inaugural addresses brings forth that the data does not. John Kennedy uses no words of obligation in his highly prescriptive and beautifully written inaugural address. Instead, he relies on the performative phrases "we pledge" and "we dare not" to deliver his message, which gives the impression that he is addressing a very unified nation with a common purpose, this after winning the office of President in one of the narrowest elections in history.

Ronald Reagan boldly used the word "should", by the time of his address in 1981 clearly out of favor, in two lines, which though they are not highly prescriptive, are eerily reminiscent of John Kennedy: "Our forbearance should never be misunderstood. Our reluctance for conflict should not be misjudged as a failure of will." William Clinton came close to the speech used aboard an aircraft when he declared: "We need a new government', and "We need a new sense of responsibility for a new century."

I did not graph the grammatical person used in conjunction with each word of obligation in presidential inaugural addresses, but I have included a tally sheet for each term and a combined tally for all terms in the Appendix. In the 353 examples of words of obligation I counted in the addresses, 284, or 80% are preceded by the pronoun "it" or "we". "They" was the third most used pronoun with 58, or 16% of the total. Comparing the total after 1929 with the grand total, a shift toward "we" is detectable, with "we" being used 35% of the time in all addresses, and increasing to 56% of the time in addresses given since 1929.

In an article in *Scientific American* Steve Minsky, in his column *Anti Gravity*,

reports that Dr. Keith Greiner "found that 'since James Garfield's [Presidential Inaugural] address in 1881, the percentage of words describing the inclusive 'we' relationship has grown dramatically…inclusive words account for about 2 percent of most speeches before Garfield but rise thereafter to an average of approximately 6 percent and hit a high of 10 percent for Ronald Reagan a century later."[34]

Conclusion

The data would seem to support my initial premise: prescriptive statements have been increasingly unacceptable since the seventeenth century, and this trend rapidly accelerated in the 20th century, therefore I believe more extensive diachronic study of the use of terms of obligation may be fruitful.

Endnotes

[1] I will use the terms “prescriptive statement” and “descriptive statement” throughout the essay. I use these terms as defined by Mortimer J. Adler in his essay *The Truth and the Good – Is and Ought*, which I found at: http://www.radicalacademy.com/adlertruthgood.htm. Adler writes: “A prescriptive statement or judgment is one that asserts what ought or ought not to be done. A statement about what ought or ought not to be desired imposes a prescription that may or may not be obeyed. In contradistinction, a descriptive statement or judgment is one that asserts the way things are, not how they ought to be. A statement about what is desired by a given individual simply describes his condition as a matter of fact.”

[1] In their book *Language and Control*, Roger Fowler and Gunther Kress write "Sociolinguists generally treat linguistic variation as an 'index' of social structure," they go on to say "The forms of language in use are a part of as well as a *consequence of*, social process." In similar fashion it is my contention that the linguistic items under study here are both reflective of and causative of the hypothesized linguistic change.

[3] Adler, Mortimer J. *Six Great Ideas*. New York: Macmillan, 1981: p. 65.

[4] Ibid: p. 71.

[5] In his book, *The Great Ideas*: A Lexicon of Western Thought. New York. Macmillan,1992, p. ix, Mortimer Adler writes "A cultural delusion is widespread in the twentieth century. The extraordinary progress in science and technology that we have achieved in this century has deluded many of our contemporaries into thinking that similar progress obtains in other fields of mental activity. They unquestioningly think that the twentieth century is superior to its predecessors in all the efforts of the human mind." In using the words "increasingly convinced," I do not intend to suggest a consciousness of the conviction in the mind of the person holding the conviction. It is my observation that quite the opposite is the case. This unconscious conviction seems to me to be equally, or even more firmly held in the minds of professional academicians, politicians, social activists, and members of the media as it is in the mind of the common man.

[6] Lewis, Bernard. "Did You Say 'American Imperialism'?". *National Review* [December 17, 2001]: p. 26.

[7] *The Economist* [March 23-29, 2002]: p. 12.

[8] Volume 3 of the *Oxford English Dictionary Additions Series*, Oxford, 1997, offers additions to the words "political," "politically," and "politically incorrect." It is very difficult to pinpoint the origin of the generalized phrase "politically correct" not only because the sense has changed over time, but because it changes drastically depending on the point of view of the person using it. The phrase has been in use for many years, but it is probably safe to say that it picked up its emotional charge sometime around 1970. While the varied social phenomenon associated with the phrase certainly result in a generalized prescriptive attitude on the part of those associated with it (regardless of their position, pro or con), the phrase is not prescriptive in and of itself due to its lack of specificity.

[9] http://www.arobase.to/v2_n1/gregor.html

[10] Ibid: p.3

[11] Ibid: p.7

[12] Ibid: p.7

[13] For a cogent discussion of the relationship between justice, freedom (liberty), and equality, see Mortimer Adler's very accessible book *Six Great Ideas*. For a discussion of the philosophical mistakes leading to the current condition of Western thought, and specifically its inability to access the truth of prescriptive statements see Adler's equally accessible *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*. Both are listed in the bibliography which follows.

[14] In an interview with Bill Moyers in the book *A World of Ideas*. New York: Doubleday, 1999, p. 55, Noam Chomsky says "The marginalization of the population and its separation from institutions could potentially lead to a mass base for a fascist movement. We've been extremely lucky in the United States that we've never had a charismatic leader who was capable of organizing people around power and its use." Ironically, Chomsky's political thought seems to be organized around the populist views of Howard Zinn and Murray Levin rather than his own work in Linguistics. The world has, of course, produced such leaders in the twentieth century but the United States has until recently been for the most part, more strongly religious than other Western nations. Many people believe Franklin Roosevelt possessed the requisite charisma referred to by Chomsky, and perhaps suffered from megalomania, but he was ill and had a war to attend to. Chomsky does believe that there are "sophisticated

mechanisms" that prevent people from "making use of those freedoms" (p. 41), but he seems to be focused on the political rather than the philosophical.
In the same volume, Tom Wolfe says "This is the old "cabal" theory – that somewhere there's a room with a baize-covered desk where a bunch of capitalists are sitting around, pulling strings. These rooms don't exist! I mean, I hate to tell Mr. Chomsky this." (p. 65) This is not an accurate assessment of what Chomsky espouses, but on p. 62 Wolfe says "In 1835, de Toqueville said that people in the United States could afford the extraordinary political and personal freedom that they had only because they were so intensely religious." The loss of religious conviction is, of course, the thing that has made the problem I discuss in this essay so acute.

[15] Haden Elgin, Suzette. *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense*. Prentice-Hall, 1980, p. 15.

[16] Ibid: p. 116

[17] Pickett, Joseph P., Executive Editor. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, fourth edition.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000: p. 1175.

[18] Ibid: p. 1175.

[19] Southwest Airlines. *Flight Attendant Manual*. Your Flight Beginning to End. Revision 59 – October 20, 2000: Section 12 – p.1.

[20] One might argue that the use of the word *please* transforms a command into a request. However, in this case, the intention of the speaker is definitely not to simply suggest or request an action on the part of the listener. Compliance with the speaker's wishes is not optional.

[21] Ibid: Section 12 – p.1.

[22] Simpson, J.A. and Weiner, E.S.C. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *Second Edition.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. Volume X, p. 289.

[23] Ibid: p. 289.

[24] Fowler, R.G. and Kress, G.R. *Language and Control*. London, 1979. p.28.

[25] Ibid., p.28.

[26] Ibid., p.50.

[27] My source for the texts of the inaugural addresses is: *The Avalon Project at the Yale Law School. The Avalon Project: The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents*. Located at: http:www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/presiden/inaug/inaug.htm. As the addresses are generally short, are identified in the text, and are all available from this source, I shall dispense with endnoting quotations from them.

[28] Simpson, J.A. and Weiner, E.S.C. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *Second Edition.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. Volume X, p. 991.

[29] Ibid: p. 991.

[30] Simpson, J.A. and Weiner, E.S.C. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *Second Edition.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. Volume XV, p. 154.

[31] Ibid: p.154.

[32] Morris, William and Morris, Mary. *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985. P. 404.

[33] Simpson, J.A. and Weiner, E.S.C. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *Second Edition.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. Volume X, p. 138.

[34] Mirsky, Steve. "Sound Proof". *Scientific American* (March 2001): p.92.

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