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Laurence Lerner
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CHAPTER ONE

# Trendy or Diehard?

Hopefully, you are going to buy this book. Assuming, that is, you haven't already bought it.

So there we are, in the very first sentence of a book about English usage, committing an error. For I have plenty of friends – and so perhaps do you – who would not hesitate to complain that this use of *hopefully* is wrong. If you say *Hopefully, he'll arrive in time to catch the train*, or *Hopefully, it won't rain tomorrow*, dozens of people will hasten to tell you, helpfully or regretfully (or triumphantly), that you're wrong. You can catch a train eagerly, or reluctantly, or hopefully, they'll say, and that means you're full of hope. But, they will point out, you didn't mean that the person catching the train is hopeful, you meant that we are; and they will explain that in this case you ought to say *We hope he'll arrive in time*. And then they might add something rueful or indignant about declining standards, and shake their heads at what the world is coming to.

Are our helpful (or rueful or triumphant) friends right? Not altogether. Placed at the beginning of the sentence like that, *hopefully* doesn't mean that he'll arrive full of hope. It doesn't apply to the person arriving, it applies to the whole sentence. It is perfectly normal usage in English for an adverb to modify a whole sentence. We say *Frankly, you ought not to do that*, or *Unfortunately, the rules do not allow that option*, or *Interestingly, three different candidates made the same mistake*. We do not mean that you ought not to do it frankly (but may do it in secret); nor do we mean that the rules are unfortunate or that the candidates were interesting. We mean, rather, that the whole remark is being uttered frankly, that the fact conveyed by the whole statement is unfortunate, that the whole statement is interesting.



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Your friends may not be convinced. They may have strong feelings about what they see as the misuse of *hopefully*. The reason their feelings are so strong is that the example is, for them, part of a larger tendency: the tendency of the language to get more and more sloppy, of young people to speak more and more carelessly – all of this is part of the way the world is going to the dogs. Well, the world is (of course) always going to the dogs, just as the world is always improving: some things get worse, others get better. Our children probably know less history than our parents did, but have better computer skills. Our great-grandparents had a much richer vocabulary for agricultural processes or theological niceties than we have, but a much poorer vocabulary for social movements or science. The argument between the believers in progress and the believers in decline will never be settled, because both are right, but in different areas. A little book on English usage can hardly tackle the huge question of progress or decline in our civilisation, but there are some things we can point out.

One is that changes in the meanings of words (something, as we shall see, which is going on all the time) can very easily be taken as evidence that thought, or civilisation, as a whole is declining. Take, for instance, the word *refute*. This means 'disprove': *I refuted his argument* means 'I succeeded in showing it was wrong.' But, as is often pointed out, the word is now frequently used with the meaning 'reject'. *I refute what he is saying*, says the indignant politician, oblivious of the fact that it is for others to judge whether his objections succeed in refuting it or not; what he means is 'I deny, or reject, what he is saying.' If we look up the word in *Chambers Dictionary* we find 'to disprove, loosely to deny', a neat illustration of the dual function of dictionaries: to tell us what is correct, and to tell us what the usage is. Chambers clearly feels we ought to know that alongside the established meaning, 'disprove', there is a looser usage which has grown up. What no one can say is whether this looser usage will become so widespread that future dictionaries will define *refute* as 'to disprove; to deny'. It may happen, or the loose meaning may die out. More interestingly still, if we look up *refute* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which tells us about the history of the word, we find that the earliest meaning given (but qualified as 'obsolete' and 'rare') is to 'refuse or reject' – not quite the modern loose meaning but very similar.



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All this is a common enough state of affairs: a new meaning grows up, first as a loose usage, and then (possibly, we cannot predict) may become accepted. And while it is happening, there will be indignant protests. *That shows*, the protesters will say, *how standards of thought are declining: the young* (or *our politicians*, or *the media*) *can't even distinguish between denying something and actually refuting it*. Is that true? If we ask our refuting politician, or a young person, or a journalist, about the difference between denying and disproving an argument, they will have no difficulty in explaining it. They all have the word *disprove* in their vocabulary, and in contexts where this meaning is crucial, such as science, we are in any case likely to use a slightly more technical term. Scientific hypotheses can be refuted, but they are more likely to be *disproved* or *invalidated* – even, if things are left still uncertain, *disconfirmed*. Change in usage does not necessarily mean decline in thinking.

Occasionally, however, it does: as we see from the case of *disinterested*. Since the seventeenth century, this has meant 'impartial, unprejudiced, because not governed by one's own self-interest'. It derives, not from the meaning of *interesting* as opposed to *dull* or *boring*, but from the meaning of *interest* as in *He has an interest in the business* – that is, he has money invested in it, or *He is an interested party in this inquiry* – that is, he stands to gain (often financially) from the outcome. We expect judges to pass disinterested judgements, because we expect them to be honest and to declare themselves ineligible if they have an interest (in the material sense) in the outcome. Recently, however, *disinterested* has more and more come to be used with the same meaning as *uninterested*. This is now so widespread, especially in the spoken language, that it may inevitably come to be the normal meaning – though if you use the word correctly, if you say *I'm quite disinterested, I don't stand to gain anything by the outcome*, you will still be understood. (Meanings that are dying out often remain alive for a while in passive use, so there is no difficulty in using the word correctly oneself.) The case here is not quite the same as with *refute*, since there really is no other word with the exact shade of meaning as *disinterested*: it occupies a space that joins together the idea of being impartial (referring to your state of mind) with that of having nothing to gain (referring to your material circumstances). That is why it is a good idea to go on using it correctly.



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It has a valuable meaning, which it would be a pity to lose, and the more we can lengthen its life the richer the language will be – though my prediction is that we shall lose it in the end.

I quoted *Chambers Dictionary* on *refute*, and now have to add that I used the 1983 edition; when we turn to the latest (2003) edition, we find that the qualification 'loosely' has been dropped, and the word is defined simply as 'to disprove, to deny'. On *disinterested*, the meaning 'uninterested' was already included in 1983, with the comment 'revived from obsolescence' – an accurate summary, showing us that the meaning was once current, then almost died out, and is now once more acceptable (though the 'correct' meaning is given first and made more prominent). This tells us two things. First, that dictionaries cannot pretend that the language is standing still: they recognise and record the reality of change, on which Chapter 3 will have much to say. And second, on both these words Chambers gives some support to the trendies against the diehards.

Back for a moment to the helpful friends who are so anxious to correct you. What corrections are they most likely to make? I can predict with some confidence that *hopefully* will be one of their favourite examples. Objecting to this use of *hopefully* is very fashionable, and fashion rules, not only in determining what mistakes people make, but also in determining what usages are denounced as mistakes by the diehards. To show this we need only move back a few generations. For many years, the standard work on common mistakes in usage was H. W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, first published in 1926. You will not find in it any mention of *hopefully*, and all it has to say about *refute* concerns the pronunciation of *refutable* and whether there is such a word as *refutal*. But you will find all sorts of other fascinating issues discussed: whether to say *analyst* or *analyser* (Fowler claims the latter is correct); *pacifist* or *pacificist* (he reluctantly concedes that the former, though 'barbarous', has taken too strong a hold to be dislodged); *accompanist* or *accompanyist* (he prefers the latter); and whether to say *basic principle* (he regards *basic* as an unnecessary upstart, driving out 'fundamental, with its 500-year tradition'). So next time you are inclined to say that as a pacifist your basic principle is non-violence, whatever the analysts of strategy may claim, you can reflect that conservatives today may object only to the sentiments, but conservatives in 1926 would have objected equally to the usage. Hopefully, they'd let you get away with it today.



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