Michael Hogue/Staff Artist

Linguist Bryan A. Garner (pictured below) is leading an effort to restore the home of English lexicographer Samuel Johnson. He's also an expert in the changing way language is used, particularly in popular and political speech.

'One language, many realities'

When words become politicized, we lose real meaning

By RUDOLPH BUSH

Were you bothered when President Joe Biden recently used the word "illegal" to describe a person accused of a heinous crime? Or were you aggravated when he walked back that description, saying he regretted it?

Did you gasp when former President Donald Trump used the word "bloodbath" in a speech about the violence that might happen to this country if he isn't reelected? Or did you pound the table because the press translated a shopworn metaphor as an actual threat?

Do you cringe when people announce their pronouns, or is that a welcome courtesy to you? Does the capitalization of the word Black, to indicate a person's race, set your teeth grinding or strike you as a small share of justice in an unjust world? What feelings do the letters L-a-t-i-n-x evoke in you? Is there an "invasion" on our southern border?

We are always hearing about what is at the center of our political struggles. But if one thing is really at the center, it's the way we use words. It's our shared language.

Most of us already know this, but as a newspaper editor in charge of opinions, I *really* know it. I'm constantly being reminded to be careful about how I say this or that. The intentions are usually good, but it can get aggravating. Those who know me understand that Careful is my middle name (he said, gently placing his reading glasses on the desk).

If there is some good news here, it's that struggling over language is nothing new. It has always been thus. I mean, it's always been that way. I mean, that's just the way it is.

As the great and gone-too-soon David Foster

See **BUSH** Page 4P

Staff Photo

Garner has spent a career trying to help us sort out how best to use language and how to understand its evolution. But work like his has fallen out of favor among many influential thinkers and across the education establishment in general. He's pictured next to a portrait of Samuel Johnson in Southern Methodist University's Fondren Library.

WHAT THEY SAID

"I sincerely **apologize to everyone** impacted in Saturday's accident." *— A statement and Instagram post by Kansas City Chiefs wide receiver Rashee Rice. The pro football player is presumed to be connected to a six-vehicle collision in Dallas on March 30. (Wednesday, The Dallas Morning News)*

"When a wonder of the world is this easy to get to, people are more likely to travel. And **Dallas is very easy to get to**." *— James Petrick, a professor at Texas A&M University, explaining how cities in the eclipse's path will experience a surge in visitors. (Tuesday, The Dallas Morning News)*

"So, do you believe that it's not political? **I mean ... it's an anti-war film.**" *— Actress Kirsten Dunst talking about her new film "Civil War." (Wednesday, Variety)*

"No Labels has always said we would only offer our ballot line to a ticket if we could identify candidates with a credible path to winning the White House. **No such candidates emerged,** so the responsible course of action is for us to stand down." *— Nancy Jacobson, No Labels' founder and CEO, announcing the group will not be fielding a third-party presidential candidate. (Thursday, The Wall Street Journal)*

Have questions or comments about Opinion? Please send letters via the online form at dallasnews.com/sendletters.

Bush

Continued from Page 1P

Wallace wrote in a famous 2001 review of Bryan A. Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, there is, or at least there was, a "seamy underbelly of U.S. lexicography" where the left and the right struggle over what language is and what it should be.

The difference between what Wallace wrote then and what we experience now is that he was describing an analog, academic struggle spelled out in competing dictionaries from dueling lexicographers. But if the argument over usage and meaning was once more or less bound up in the ivory tower, it's spilled out now.

There are those who perch above keyboards just waiting to pounce. People lose their jobs and reputations over these sorts of things. One internet mob howls at the off-note adjective that might be construed as offensive. Another hunts for the scent of the woke and caws over cancel culture.

It would be great to say this is just noise. It isn't. It has serious consequences. The presidents of Harvard and MIT found themselves out of jobs because they couldn't quite bring themselves to say that calling for genocide constitutes hate speech. A Georgetown University Law School administrator found himself on leave after a tweet describing what he expected would be the selection of a "lesser black woman" for the U.S. Supreme Court.

We could go on and on.

All of this leads to a sort of despair. It's easy to imagine a future of terrible, unremitting fighting over what we say, how we say it and how others take it. It's the possibility of constant anger at the meaning of anything and everything all of the time.

Staff Photo

SMU's Fondren Library is featuring "Taming the Tongue in the Heyday of English Grammar (1711-1851): From the Collection of Bryan A. Garner" through May 31. Garner has spent years not only studying the history of our language but also working to understand how it evolves, how we use it, how we have argued about it, and how those arguments have been resolved, writes Rudolph Bush, who spoke with Garner about politics and language.

SNOOT heaven

Somewhere in the midst of spinning out this terrible vision in my head, I got a surprise invitation.

A mutual friend told me that I should meet Bryan Garner, that he lives here in Dallas, and that the two of us have a lot of shared interests. It took me a minute to place the name. But then it came back to me — the Wallace essay reviewing Garner's dictionary.

During my years teaching journalism, I used that essay to explain to students the importance of being precise with language but not inflexible. It was also just a brilliant read from a genius of what Wallace would call SWE: Standard Written English.

There are, as Wallace explained, language SNOOTs, that is, those who are particular about words. "There are a lot of epithets for people like this — Grammar Nazis, Usage Nerds, Syntax Snobs, the Language Police."

To those of us who care about this sort of thing (and there are a lot more than you might think), Garner is the King SNOOT, the authority on usage.

Don't take it from me. Oxford calls the fifth edition of *Garner's Modern English Usage* "The Authority on Grammar, Usage, and Style." But what you really need to know about Garner … oh, let me just let David Foster Wallace explain Bryan A. Garner.

"This is an interesting guy. He's both a lawyer and a lexicographer (which seems a bit like being both a narcotics dealer and a DEA agent). His 1987 *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage* is already a minor classic; now, instead of practicing law anymore, he goes around conducting writing seminars for J.D.s and doing prose-consulting for various judicial bodies. Garner's also the founder of something called the H.W. Fowler Society, a worldwide group of usage-Trekkies who like to send one another linguistic boners clipped from different periodicals. You get the idea. This Garner is one serious and very hard-core SNOOT."

When I first met Garner last year, it was in his home or, more precisely, in the fantastic library of his home, which is the place where SNOOTs go to heaven. It's a beautiful room, what you might see when you imagine the library of an old manor, all dark wood and shelf after shelf of leather-bound books, thick volumes perfectly aligned and not a paperback in sight.

I sat down in an upholstered chair with a portrait of Dr. Samuel Johnson's swollen face staring at me over my shoulder.

Garner didn't know it but I came to him in a funk about language.

Through our mutual friend, Garner was probably under the misimpression that I was there to talk to him about an amazing project he has going on in London: the preservation of the home of the Ur-SNOOT of the English language, the greatest of the dictionary greats, the famously biographed and aforementioned Samuel Johnson.

Garner's mission to preserve Johnson's home and to expand it into a learning center to advance both the preservation and appreciation of the English language is a worthy endeavor that deserves more comprehensive coverage than it's getting here.

(For those unaware, Johnson is often mistaken as the author of the first English dictionary. He is not. He is, however, the most accomplished writer in the English language to ever undertake a dictionary. What's more, his dictionary did the great service of actually connecting the words he was defining with examples of how they were used in the culture, from Shakespeare to Milton and beyond. He was also funny, which helps a lot in lexicography.)

Preserving Johnson's home comes with a hefty price of some $8 million to $12 million. Garner, who chairs the American Friends of Dr. Johnson's House, is hoping that readers of columns like this might see the project as one worthy of support.

I hope they do, and if you are so inclined to offer a sum of money to support this mission and thereby advance the preservation of the history of the English language, you are the sort of person Bryan Garner is looking for.

Slogan or argument?

I was in Garner's library for another reason. It's possible I came under false pretenses. I wanted to speak to him about politics and language, the sort of conversation that to him must be akin to the dentist at a dinner party enduring questions about someone's toothache.

I pressed on nevertheless. If anyone could answer these questions, I thought, Garner is him. Garner is he. It's Garner.

> Take the example of someone who goes on a talk show and is asked the question "What is a woman?" The point of the question isn't to arrive at an agreed-upon conclusion about the definition of a woman. It's to categorize the person answering the question.

Garner has spent years not only studying the history of our language but also working to understand how it evolves, how we use it, how we have argued about it, and how those arguments have been resolved.

This includes everything from how the grammatically unacceptable becomes normal usage (still groaning over "irregardless"?) to how language is used as a kind of political or cultural signaling. (Did you know, for example, that it was a woman, the grammarian Ann Fisher, who, circa 1750, determined that the masculine pronoun includes the feminine? Oh, the tangled webs we weave.)

Now, take the example of someone who goes on a talk show and is asked the question "What is a woman?"

The point of the question isn't to arrive at an agreed-upon conclusion about the definition of a woman. It's to categorize the person answering the question.

Based on the answer, Garner explained, "A lot of people will simply then decide you're a bigot or, no, you're on my side and you're a good person. And they don't really want to hear anything more than that. It's a kind of sloganeering displacing thought. And either you agree with my slogan or you don't agree with my slogan, and I'm going to judge you based on the answer you give."

This is an important idea. When I sit with politicians (I do this a lot and not always joyfully), I ask them about complex issues. I usually already know their positions. What I'm really listening for is whether they address the question with any depth of understanding about the complexity of the matter, or whether they just repeat prepared slogans using different words. It's interesting to count how many rely on slogans rather than actual thoughts.

This is an easy game anyone can play. Just go to the website of any politician you like (or one you don't). Click on the tab labeled something like "issues." Are the answers provided long and complex with the necessary nuance? They almost certainly are not. Are they a sentence or two of "truths"? You have a sloganeer on your hands.

Slogans are not arguments. Slogans are not appeals to reason. They are appeals to emotion. They are playing you.

"For our own sanity, all of us have to try to be aware of what is happening when we're listening to talk or analysis of any kind. We have to be aware of our own biases and the tendency we all have toward confirmation bias," Garner said.

Arguments are a good thing. I don't mean shouting. I mean reasoning through ideas, listening to others' best points and being willing to modify one's own argument or one's own point of view. To do that, you've got to be willing to hear things you disagree with.

"That's the only way you can understand how arguments work, how arguments are made," Garner said.

"If you're just preaching to the choir, you're not really persuading anybody."

Is English decaying?

We live in a perfect era for sloganeers. Social media wrecks our attention for complexity and nuance. And algorithms direct us back, again and again, to our own biases. The language is rough and simple. The ideas are small.

Words themselves are marshaled into the struggle. Illegal alien or undocumented person? We get your drift. The words aren't about conveying meaning, they are about signaling a political bent.

"Is the English language decaying? Was it once in a pristine state? Has it been sliding ever since?" Garner asks us in the preface to *Garner's Modern English Usage*.

The answer, he decides, is no. "Our best journalists and authors are as talented as any who have ever worked in the language."

Well, maybe. But even if that's true, fewer and fewer people seem to be exposed to the best sort of writing. It's more commonly true that they consume the worst.

Garner knows this: "There are also bad, obscuring forces at work. One language, many realities," he wrote.

Garner has spent a career trying to help us sort out how best to use language and how to understand its evolution. But work like his comes with its own political weight. Usage books have fallen out of favor among many influential thinkers and across the education establishment in general.

Grammar, logic and rhetoric, the holy trivium, were once the foundation of an educated person's scholastic life. Now, the idea of studying the basic grammar of standard written English is either ignored or treated with suspicion and contempt.

There are powerful forces that view any kind of guideposts (or dare I say it — rules) about language as the political imposition of the empowered class.

The problem with that, as the ancient Greeks understood, is that when grammar, the first leg of the trivium's stool, is pulled away, logic and rhetoric teeter.

Destabilizing the politics of words is a great way to replace thinking with sloganeering. People who are caught up in the language wars usually aren't trying to give offense. They are those who reached for the wrong word here or there (see the scandal over the Georgetown Law professor) or who, for fear of treading on thin ice, were too legalistic or nuanced about something that should have been obvious (see Harvard and MIT). Or they are clueless about something in the culture that has shifted and they were left behind.

We are all left saying, "Be careful."

On Gough Square

Most of us don't think much about dictionaries anymore. If we need to look up a word, we Google it. Even the way we use language is quietly defined by technology. Google Docs or Microsoft Word interrupt our writing with little pieces of advice, much of it good, some of it dubious.

But even as programs have taken more control over how we write and what words we use, our social sense of language has become more fragmented. Shared meaning is eroding. We are losing pieces of our ability to communicate with one another, to understand one another.

A dictionary is more than a book of definitions. It is a statement of hope about the possibility of shared meaning.

The more I thought about these things, the more I came around on Garner's project. Maybe we need a symbol of shared meaning.

In a little brick house on Gough Square, in the center of London, Samuel Johnson compiled the words of the English language and tried to define them in ways that would endure.

Words, Johnson wrote, "are but the signs of ideas."

"I wish, however, that the instrument might be less apt to decay, and that the signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote."

Words, these days, are a battlefield. Too afraid or too incompetent to genuinely discuss the ideas we differ about, we would rather fight over the symbols of those ideas.

As we lose a shared language, we lose something of consequence. We lose something of ourselves.

Rudolph Bush is the editorial page editor of The Dallas Morning News.