



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

February 10, 2016

On Language: In 1992, The Economist started a column on language, named in honor of Samuel Johnson, who created the great English dictionary of 1755. The column was discontinued, then revived as [a blog](#) in 2013. Last week, the blog was revived again as [a column](#). As The Economist notes, “A language column is expected to tackle questions of right and wrong. There are roughly two views of how to do this: one top-down, based on authority, prestige, writing and stability; one bottom-up, resting on how most people actually use the language, and open to change. The two schools of thought, known as ‘prescriptivism’ (which sets down how the language should be) and ‘descriptivism’ (which tells how it is), have often been at daggers drawn: English teachers and some usage-book writers on one side, and academic linguists, lexicographers and other usage-book writers on the other.” As English is not my first language, I have struggled with the prescriptivist position on [the Oxford comma](#), or with accepting the compliment from my son one day that my outfit was “dope”!

There is certainly support for either view, and I appreciate [Orwells’ critique](#) that language should not suffer of “staleness of imagery; or lack of precision.”

And lest we think that only English struggles with the tensions between form and change, we can take solace in our French friends, who not only have a ministry of culture that passes laws to regulate the frequency of French words in popular culture, and an academy that focuses on protecting and modernizing the French language. As stated very aptly in [this Euronews article](#): “Pourquoi faire simple quand on peut faire compliqué? (*Why make it simple when you can make it complicated?*)”. I was also surprised to [read](#) about a [paper](#) describing the lack of emotionally positive words in English. In Greek they have *volta* (leisurely strolling the streets), and in Arabic they have *Baraka* (gifts of spiritual energy). Is English really that devoid of positive descriptors? You can discuss it during your next *sobremesa* (Spanish for when the food has finished but the conversation is still flowing).

To probe further, here are some [interesting talks](#) on the power and changing nature of language.

The News from Santa Fe: Here is a recent update from our Office of Government & Community Relations: “The New Mexico House approved HB 2, the general appropriations act, on a 38 – 31 vote. Higher education takes a \$3.1 million hit in this budget, with UNM (main campus & HSC) bearing a third of that cut. After another very long debate, the House also approved HB 311 on a 46 - 23 vote. This bill primarily sweeps funds needed to balance the budget contained in HB 2. On Monday, February 8, Senate Rules confirmed UNM Regents Marron Lee and Ryan Berryman.” We are still waiting for Governor Martinez to name our seventh Regent, as well as a variety of outcomes of the legislative session regarding our other priorities.

Accreditation Update: Next Tuesday, the participants in our reaffirmation of accreditation process are meeting to share results from their initial review of the university, and to make plans for the next stage of the process: collecting evidence and writing the argument for accreditation. For more information about our accreditation, see [this short video](#) created by Associate Provost Greg Heileman, who is directing our reaffirmation of accreditation efforts.

Information Technology Update: As the next step in our review and evolution of information technology services across campus, UNM IT is drafting Service Level Agreements and IT Standards for campus review. This is a crucial step in our ability to move our efforts forward, by clearly articulating the service levels and expectations for centrally provided enterprise services and clearly defining the standards that need to be followed for distributed supplemental services. The first set of draft agreements has been posted to [discuss.unm.edu](#), and I encourage all interested parties to review and provide comments. For background information on this process and UNM’s efforts in this area, see the [Office of the President’s page](#).

Chaouki Abdallah

Provost & Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

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