

**Q.** “On the radio this morning I heard Joyce Carol Oates, a prominent and best-selling novelist, say in an interview, “[One author] took the idea a step farther.” Her comment surprised me because I was taught to use *farther* only to describe distance in space or time and to use *further* to describe extent or addition. She was using both *step* and *farther* figuratively, so it seems she should have used *further*. Are *farther* and *further* now synonyms?”

**A.** My thanks to Minneapolis attorney V. John Ella for a straightforward question for which there is no straightforward answer. If you check the Internet you will find “authorities” on both sides of this question. Google™ comments, however, that the Associated Press and other standard-setters insist on *farther* for physical distance and *further* to express extent or degree. The AP then adds, “Some people get really testy about this.”

But that distinction is relatively recent, having taken hold only by the end of the 19th century. The older term is *further*. It came into Old English from Old High German as *ferre*, the comparative form of *fer*, with the meaning “farther.” The two adverbs merged during the Middle English period, probably because the comparative form of the two adverbs was spelled almost alike. So *farther* became a variant spelling for *further*, and Shakespeare and other notable writers freely interchanged the two adverbs until, in the 18th century, a group of language purists insisted on a difference in meaning.

These purists, led by Bishop Low, hoped to “perfect” the English language by eliminating what they believed to be the grievous errors of even the best writers of the time. Once they had rid English of its imperfections, the group expected to “fix” it—that is, to prevent it from changing through time. Their earnest efforts were futile, of course, but their prescriptive rules have had some stabilizing effect on English, keeping it from changing at every whim of the populace. At the same time as the prescriptivists were at work. George Campbell presented in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, a more reasonable standard of good usage: that which is “reputable, national, and present (current),” a definition still applicable today.

But the prescriptivist rule distinguishing *farther* from *further* that was promulgated in the 18th century and finally took firm hold at the end of the 19th century is still in force today. The 1996 edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, for example, reported that 72 percent of the elite Usage Panel preferred to use the adverb *farther* only for physical distance (“Go no farther than 50 miles ...”) and *further* only for extent (“We are further along than we had expected ...”), reserving *farther* to describe physical matters and reserving *further* for abstractions.

Towson University agrees with that view. On the Internet, Towson University helps interested persons learn the difference between the two adverbs by asking them to choose between *farther* or *further* in a list of 10 sentences. The participants can then compare their answers with the correct answers at the end.

George Campbell, the 18th-century philosopher quoted above, also maintained that language was purely “a species of fashion.” He was right about that too. Otherwise, how do you justify a rule that permits the statement, “That is far from the truth,” when the same rule forbids, “That is farther from the truth”? And if “We can push the limits farther” is correct, why is, “The patient will have farther tests” incorrect?

But despite the illogic of the rule, it is true that distinctions in meaning make language more clear and precise. Obliterating distinctions causes vagueness. We have lost the distinction between *healthy* and *healthful*, and clarity would be improved if *healthy* still described the state of one’s health and *healthful* described what improves health. The loss of distinction between the two verbs *bring* and *take* may not be crucial, but observing that difference clarifies your meaning.

Previously *unique* meant “one of a

kind.” Because *unique* has diminished in force and now means only “unusual,” a valuable distinction is lost. Another unfortunate loss is the distinction between the modifiers *disinterested* and *uninterested*. Not so long ago it was flattering to be called “a *disinterested* person.” One who was *disinterested* was unbiased and objective, though knowledgeable, and thus able to give an impartial opinion. Now, however, *uninterested* is seldom heard, and *disinterested* is frequently used to mean “not interested,” lessening its impact.

The verb *decimate* once meant “to kill every tenth person,” but it has been downgraded by having merged with *destroy*. The word *consensus* has been weakened by merging with *majority*. The Usage Panel of the *American Heritage Dictionary* nostalgically states that the phrase “consensus of opinion” used to be considered redundant because consensus once meant “complete agreement of opinion.” And *dilemma* was once a precise noun that meant “a predicament that required a person to choose between two exactly balanced alternatives, both often disastrous.” Now, a *dilemma* more often means only “a difficult choice.”

So it must be acknowledged that, when rules are ignored and prevailing usage alone decides what is correct, language is left uncontrolled and unguided, and important distinctions are lost. Lewis Carroll, who was both a linguist and a poet, said it well:

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be the master—that’s all.” **TFL**

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