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## Teaching Imperatives: Both Moral and Superfluous

Mathijs Arens

In the few minutes before the start of my class, I hear my English second language students complain (not for the first time) about the “homeless” who reside outside of our school in Hollywood. I listen to them as they casually discuss how there are “too many homeless,” and different encounters they have experienced with “a homeless” or “this one homeless,” and I hear them ask “why are there so many homeless.” Throughout this conversation, I choose to remain quiet until one student asks me for the plural form of the word *homeless*. Thankful for the opportunity to share, I then explain that there is not a plural to this word since *homeless* is not a noun but an adjective. I describe that the singular term for an unhoused individual is *homeless person* while the plural is *homeless people*. I then attempt to convey to my students - many of whom may not have had much experience with homelessness - my belief that such people are worth more than a lack of housing which is why the distinction between “\*a homeless” and “a homeless *person*” is important.

I often reflect upon this moment as I consider other matters which may present themselves in the classroom. The question I face is what teaching decisions I make in regard to my own personal values, both those related to serious issues and those connected to less important matters. This is juxtaposed to the fact that not every English speaker may share my opinions. The aforementioned distinction regarding homelessness is of great importance to me, though I am aware that both native and non-native English speakers use the word *homeless* as a noun. In consideration of this point, I have come to the conclusion that all teachers must make certain decisions regarding the values which will inform their teaching. Here are a few which I have considered in my own instruction:

I have said this many times in my life since first becoming a self-proclaimed biology-nerd: gorillas are not monkeys. I have frequently heard all members of the great ape family referred to as monkeys, but this is a scientific inaccuracy as monkeys represent an entirely different branch of primate evolution than apes such as gorillas, chimps, gibbons, and orangutans. Despite my aversion to hearing apes lumped into this inaccurate category, some would argue that this is a matter for biologists and not an issue which English language teachers should confront. From a certain point of view, I must concede this point. Many native English-speakers would use the term *monkey* to describe any member of the primate family, meaning it would not necessarily be incorrect for English-learners to make use of this colloquial (albeit inaccurate) label. Having that said, my value of both correct definitions and scientific knowledge prompt me to integrate proper scientific terminology into the English second language

classroom. While I would correct a student who referred to a gorilla as a monkey, I would hope to clarify that though the student did not necessarily choose the wrong word, there is indeed a biological difference between these creatures.

If this point on proper taxonomy seems to be a superfluous one, then perhaps a different example may be more relevant to the reader. Consider how a teacher may respond to a student who refers to Pluto as a planet. The teacher may be tempted to correct the student, or else acknowledge that Pluto used to be a planet. Some teachers, however, may feel the need to confirm to their students their belief that Pluto is, in fact, a planet; this is likely what was taught to them as a child. Regardless of whether or not the teacher labels Pluto as a planet, this decision will be informed by the teacher's personal value system. If the teacher values the analysis made by scientists, the teacher will likely inform the student that while they are thinking of something close to the definition of a planet Pluto does not technically fall into this category. Otherwise, the teacher may decide to ignore what has become common scientific knowledge. Both cases show the teacher making a value-based decision in regard to semantics.

My last example of the presence of personal values in teaching comes from a common pronunciation headache for bakers and dessert-savants. There exists a minimal pair in the form of two desserts with similar sounding names which are often confused by those who are unaware or uninterested in the differences in pronunciation: macaroons and macarons. Macaroons (/mækə'ru:nz/) are often thick doughy pastries made with coconut while macarons (/mækə'rɒ:nz/ as I would pronounce it in my accent) are meringue-based desserts which are often colorful and sandwiched together surrounding a cream or jelly. At both the taste and the touch, these two desserts are quite different. However, the similarity in spelling and pronunciation cause them to often be confused or - as is more common - believed to have the same name (macarons are often referred to as macaroons, though the reverse is not as common); some have even taken to calling macarons "French macaroons". For individuals who care about the distinction between these two desserts, acquaintances of these individuals may find themselves lectured to or corrected should they mispronounce one of these names. A teacher who is aware of this phonetic difference, should they encounter the opportunity in the classroom, will again need to make a decision on what they will teach their students. A teacher may find it easiest to declare that while the French pronounce macaron as /makakɔ̃/ many Americans pronounce the word as /mækə'ru:n/. The question may arise, however, as to which pronunciation is correct. It is here that the teacher's own judgment on the word will be impressed upon students, either a value of popular pronunciation or of proper baking pronunciation.

Just as macarons are a product of French baking, language does not exist separate from culture. In an increasingly globalized society with multiple World Englishes, English foreign and second language teachers will be confronted by grey areas between what is *correct* English and what is *common* English (if such ideas even exist). In humility, teachers may desire to clarify that their teaching is strictly their own personal opinion, though such a statement may undermine other aspects of their teaching. However, when a teacher feels an imperative (either moral or

superfluous) to educate their students “properly”, teachers will make a choice based upon their own ideology; one which reflects their personal experience and world view.

**Mathijs Arens** is an independent English Second Language teacher from California. Having received his education from UC Berkeley and Cal State LA, Mathijs specializes in the intersectionality of performance art and language instruction.