Our changing language:

When does wrong become right?
My head literally exploded!

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends

Let’s start with a little straw poll on some current usages. We’re not going to debate them – we wouldn’t have a rest of the session if we did. I just want to get a sense of how people feel about these.
I’m going to do it irregardless.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
This is going to impact our sales.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
Your earring is very unique!

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
The squad was decimated—only 18 out of 100 were left.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
This curvy road is making me nauseous.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
Hopefully, the other team will lose.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
We will take off momentarily and will be in the air for five hours.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
The grand prize winner can use the money however they want.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
My sister was like, “I’m not touching that.”

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends

Does it matter whether it’s a direct quote, a paraphrase, or a thought?
We had a healthy meal of sushi.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
We await a return to normalcy.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
The officer was demoted.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends
She drove me there in her new car.

A. Acceptable
B. Unacceptable
C. It depends

(Car was at one time proscribed in at least some guides for automobile.) Are these examples beginning to look entirely unexceptionable? Guess what – every one of these usages has been condemned at some time in the last century. This reminds us of four important facts...
Language changes. We take part in that change. We can’t always predict or control how it will change. We are usually unaware of how it has changed in the past.

Language changes. All the time. If it doesn’t change it’s dead. It changes because its users are alive and are part of a living, changing social interaction. We’re among its users, and we’re among its more influential users, so we take part in that. But of course even if our votes count more than the average, they still may not win the election, so to speak. We can’t always predict what the world will do next (that’s for sure). And we also have an inaccurate view of what happened in the past. Generally we tend to think very little did. We think there’s a set of rules that have been around since time immemorial, and just about everything that deviates from those is a recent innovation. Going along with this idea of language as some ideal fixed thing is the etymological fallacy: if we discover a word used to mean something else, we decide that must be the true meaning. ...Of course, when I say “we,” I don’t mean people who know better. Like us here. 😊 Let’s look at a few more things that used to be dodgy innovations that are now generally unexceptional.
There will be more rain before the day is through.
There will be more rain before the day is done.
She won’t talk to me because she’s mad at me.

Mad for angry
The prisoner was executed.

“One executes orders, not persons.”
The repairman was electrocuted on the job.

A little bit later, after “execute” was accepted, and we had electric chairs, we got electrocution. Which for many then – and for some still now – only applies if the person was actually executed.
I can’t fault your reasoning.

Fault was formerly acceptable only as a noun.
We’re holding a meeting about this.

For a long time, many people held that “hold” could only be used to mean “grasp.” Clearly they had not grasped how English works.
He orated at length.

Orate: a barbarous backformation from oration.
Thirty people were present.

A century ago, many would insist that this should be “thirty persons.”
The suspect was planning to use a car to raid the warehouse.

According to a style guide from a century ago, “suspect” should be “suspicious person”; “plan” is not a verb, and neither is “raid”; and “car” is not properly applied to an automobile.
Would we even accept “The ship is building” now? Barely a century ago, that was the correct form and the progressive passive was dodgy.
Our examples of change so far have mostly involved words, because change at the word level is the easiest. It’s just like adding books to a shelf, or reshelving them. Changing the syntax is like altering the shelves themselves. Changes to sound are gradual and organic and mostly don’t affect us too much as editors, so I won’t really dwell on those, although actually sound is fascinating and really the most fluid and infinitely varied part of a language.
How change happens

The simple view:

- Change comes through invention, borrowing, reinterpretation, or gradual shift
- Starts with the younger generation (esp. females)
- Works its way up into acceptability as users get older and more people use it
- Starts slowly, accelerates, then levels off more gradually: an S-curve

But where does change come from? There’s a simple presentation of the process, and then there’s what really happens.
This view is a reasonably accurate general characterization of a syntactic change making its way into the usage of a single cohesive body of users.
When you factor in all the different kinds of changes and all the different levels and layers of the language, it’s a bit less simple.
Language isn’t a single simple system.

Different registers include:

- Business
- Magazine (different kinds)
- Newspaper
- Casual speech with friends, according to social group
- Academic
- Medical
- Twitter
- “Proper English” (that abstract mythical target)

We have different dialects and also different registers: varieties used for a specific context, with differences in expected vocabulary, syntax etc. It’s not just that a usage may come to be accepted for one register but not for another. It’s that some usages are only suitable for a specific register because they’re NOT suitable for others. Teen slang and medical jargon are good examples of this. We can think of some examples of each. [elicit?] Business jargon… newspaper-specific syntax or punctuation… slang words… academic and medical jargon… things you “know” are “correct” but just about never actually say… And change happens in different ways at different rates to different aspects of the language for different reasons. Let’s look at the “Why?”
A lot of change happens to make life easier. It reduces the effort in saying a word, reduces the number of words in a sentence. It cuts down the amount of complexity of a language system – this is particularly prone to happening when there are a lot of people speaking the language whose first language is something different. Or it fills a gap when we have a new thing that needs a name. Or it avoids social awkwardness. Or it adds clarity and reduces ambiguity. Sometimes making life easier means increasing effort in order to avoid confusion.
Why change happens:

2. To feel better.

- fun: wordplay, clever slang, cute turns of phrase
- art: metaphor
- culture: using new words for food etc.
- in-group identity: teen slang, technical jargon

We’ll borrow words to make ourselves feel smarter or more cultured. We’ll invent slang or jargon to reinforce in-group membership.
Some change also happens because people want to exert power over others. And some change happens just because people want their world to be tidy, tidy, tidy. These two impulses often work in concert. It covers a range from “you kids get off my lawn” to “the world should run my way” to “I don’t like your kind.” Class-based judgements are pervasive: words, phrasings, or pronunciations are deprecated because of association with lower-status groups – even if they’re the product of the same processes used by the standard dialect, just applied more consistently. People in marketing like to introduce words and usages that will have a positive effect on how people think of their products. And then there are all those people who would tidy up our language and declare this or that usage wrong.
There are 3 reasons people change language. But there’s a fourth reason language changes.
Oh, did you think it was just those ignorant people who say “ax” for “ask”? Well, long before that, our ignorant forebears turned “acs” into “ask.”
The most insidious kind of change:
Change that pretends to be preserving the language against change.

The grand prescriptivist “rules” are all changes introduced in the last three centuries.

Those proscriptions on split infinitives, conjunctions at the starts of sentences and prepositions at the end, and their ilk, were all imposed on English by those who – under the inspiration of their idea of a proper language influenced by Latin – felt that it was unduly messy. Every time someone “breaks” one of these rules, they’re actually going against the change; every time someone goes with one of these rules, they’re carrying on the change.
The people who introduce the change may not be the people who are the vectors for it.

Prescriptivist grammars make students the carriers.

Marketing invents and consumers carry. (Popular entertainment too.)

Where the change comes from is also going to affect where it’s acceptable and what tone it has.
Not all change sticks.

• Zowie! That's not jake, is it?
• It's an abhomination.
• Should all Nouns be capitalized?
• There are established rules for punctuation;— why do they change? You can see it when you read old books (historical researchers have also been mifled ;) and yet we do not retain the forms.
• neut, v., 'act aggressively as a newcomer' (1995)
• plutoed, adj., 'demoted or devalued' (2006)
How do you decide what to go with?
1. What is the change? Really?
2. Where did it come from? When?
3. Where is it used? By whom?
4. Who is your text for?
5. What are the gains and losses?

Use “very unique” as example. Also split infinitives.
1. What is the change? Really?

2. Where did it come from? When?
   - Good historical info can be had from m-w.com and dictionary.com (and even more from the online OED if you have access)
   - Usage manuals are good
   - Google ngrams can give you good historical info
   - Also look at sites such as Language Log
   - If it’s from marketing, do you want to become someone’s marketer?
1. What is the change? Really?

2. Where did it come from? When?

- Google ngrams show us that very unique, more unique, and most unique have all been in use since at least the 1820s, with most unique being most common, and have a peak around 1915. They showed up in various periodicals for educated audiences.

- In Old English, infinitives were one word; the to version comes from a special purposive form; even today many infinitives appear without to; the “rule” against “splitting” was invented in the 1800s.
3. Where is it used? By whom?

- Corpora such as COCA can give good information on collocations
- Google ngrams can let you see what texts were using them when
- Look at similar texts to the one you’re working on (of course that can be a tall order)

A word is known by the company it keeps.
3. Where is it used? By whom?

- Both of our test cases are quite widely used
- Very *unique* etc. appear to be found more in popular literature and business docs. Top Google hits are usage manuals. But it also shows up in such places as stats and history textbooks
- Avoidance of “split infinitives” is a negative, not a positive, so it’s harder to find – hard to go through large corpora for ugly constructions that could be avoided by “splitting.” But we can see the many places it has *not* prevailed, and we can look at a given text for relative number of instances of “splits”
4. Who is your text for?

- This is where register really comes in! Also age, sex, etc.
- How will they receive and react to the usage?

Old actuaries never die...
4. Who is your text for?

- For instances such as very unique and especially “split infinitives,” you’re really estimating the LCI of your expected audience (LCI = linguistic crustiness index)
- Targeting specific registers, especially with innovative usages, is particular germane to advertising (slang usages and nonstandard phrasing; also in-group usages) and to in-group technical documents

Old actuaries never die...
5. What are the gains and losses?

- If it adds expressive power, it’s worth keeping
- If you welcome a change as a part of a lively informal idiom and would regret its loss as a marker of informality, you should certainly resist using it in formal texts – that would limit its expressive power
- If it mainly serves to limit what you can do with the language, it’s like dumping detergent into a stream to “clean it up”

Let’s talk about the gains and losses for “very unique” and avoiding split infinitives. No added slide. For unique, compare connotations of “unusual” and similar and the tone of “unique” – also how many things are truly utterly unique (in one view, few; in another, all)
New and future trends

- Greater flexibility in crossing word class boundaries; more play with subcategorization and argument structure. Starts with deliberate play, but seeps through. Find your playful. So creation! Very change. Wow. Because fun!
- This will work hand in hand with contact influence from second-language speakers.
- Singular they will prevail. Expect a clarifying they-all or theys in parallel with you-all and youse.
- Danglers (at least some kinds) may come to be accepted as sentence adverbials.
- Whither capitalization?