

## Pullum's Progress

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Several of you here today have been discussing, collaborating, arguing with Geoff Pullum since the 1970s and will be well aware of his career trajectory, and the unusual breadth of his contributions. But some of the young things present (I mean us under-70s) may only know the highlights; and, after all,

*Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot:  
But hee'll remember, with advantages  
What feats he did that day...* (Henry V, Act IV, Sc. 3)

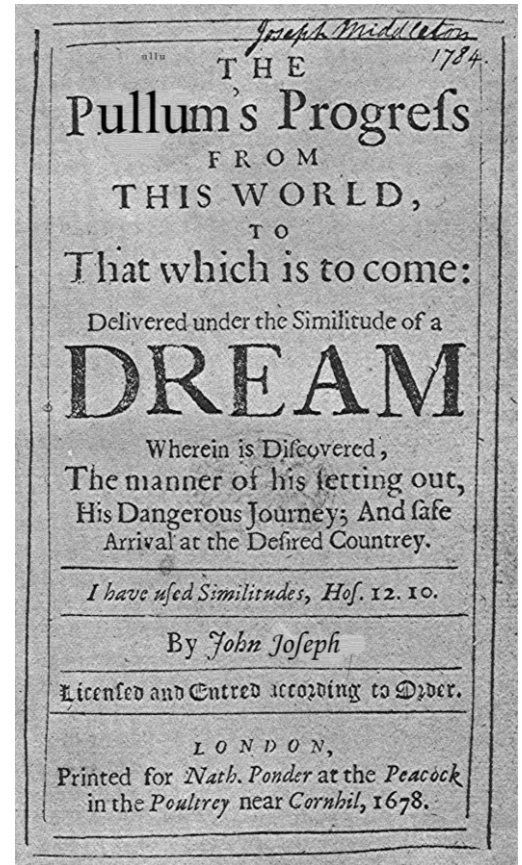
I shall be spurring remembrance, and maybe checking some advantages.

Geoff submitted his thesis to University College London in June 1976 for the PhD in General Linguistics. In the Acknowledgments he notes that he took his first linguistics course at York in 1968. He was 23, and had left his music career behind. He emphasises the importance to him of his year at Cambridge in 1973-4, capped by what he calls “the most rewarding eight weeks of my life at the Linguistic Institute in 1974, on the campus of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst”. He then began work on the thesis at UCL, producing its 429 pages in two years. (PhD candidates, take heed.)

In 1979 it was published by Garland in its series Outstanding Dissertations in Linguistics. This is the version most of us know, and its Preface, dated September 1, 1978, says that it has “essentially” the same form as the original. It then details the cuts made because “The speculative material in these sections did not contribute substantially to the content of the thesis”. Alarm bells: if the changes were insignificant, he wouldn't have mentioned them. The cuts do indeed show indications of progress over those two intervening years. The original says that “This thesis reports research conducted within the general framework of assumptions that characterizes transformational generative grammar” (Pullum 1976: 4). This is gone in 1979, where the new additions include this remark concerning Chomsky's “Conditions on Transformations” and subsequent related work:

My specific criticisms of Chomsky's recent assumptions constitute an exception to a general attempt throughout the thesis to maintain an agnostic position on many questions that surround issues I discuss. I avoid committing myself to particular background claims [...], for example, the generative semantics claim that initial phrase markers and semantic representations are identical for all sentences. (Pullum 1979a: 3)

We see here the just barely perceptible beginnings of a driving theme in Geoff's career, the attempt to



<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Brett Reynolds for organising the wonderful symposium to mark the retirement of one of the handful of people I have most admired in my life, and whose friendship I have had the extraordinary good fortune to enjoy. I am indebted to Randy Allen Harris and Caroline Heycock for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper, which were invaluable to me, a non-specialist in syntax, in understanding some of the less than obvious nuances of developments in syntactic theory which arise herein. Apologies to John Bunyan for appropriating the title and title page of his *Pilgrim's Progress*, with no disrespect intended – rather, the adapting of an inspired work to honour a beloved comrade.

hold Noam Chomsky accountable for sloppiness, over-generalisation, and apparent dishonesty. This though is still quite a mild distancing.<sup>2</sup> Remember that the 1979a Preface is dated 1 September 1978, so the paragraph just cited will have been written by that date. The next seven months would prove critical.

But, backing up a few years and following my trajectory: I took my first undergraduate linguistics courses at Michigan in 1975, and the syntax course was utterly dogmatic. Since I was doing Romance languages, I was particularly interested in Kayne (1975), but I thought it paradoxical that Chomskyans would sanction a generative grammar of a specific language whilst insisting that only universal grammar was a worthy object of scientific study. Someone tried to explain to me that Kayne's French syntax *is* universalist, in terms of components, phrase structure rules and the transformations available – Kayne (1975) wasn't inventing ad hoc transformations generative semantics style –<sup>3</sup> but something has to account for the syntactic differences, and the ordering of transformations is a means of doing that.

Across the Atlantic young Geoffrey was writing his thesis, and addressing a version of the paradox I perceived. He makes clear early on that

The true empirical issue in connection with rule ordering is the issue of whether orderings may be imposed on rules on a language-specific basis. In other words, can the grammars of two possible human languages differ with respect to the ordering imposed on identically formulated pairs of rules? This is a question which as far as I know Chomsky has never mentioned [...]. (Pullum 1976/79a: 13)

To clarify the terminology, Geoff introduces the term 'parochial ordering constraint' for an ordering constraint that is language-specific, and 'universal ordering constraint' "for a restriction on sequencing of rule applications that is not particular to any grammar but is part of the definition provided by linguistic theory of the notion 'possible grammar'" (ibid., p. 13). 'Parochial' was intended to replace Chomsky's (1965: 223n.) 'extrinsic order', and 'universal' to replace his 'intrinsic order'.<sup>4</sup> Pullum (1976/79a: 11-15) argues that the Chomskyan distinction is "incoherent".

Kayne's book supplies Pullum with eight examples of the ordering of transformations in French which, in Geoff's words, Kayne "cites as particularly relevant to the question" of "the standard view that transformations are linearly ordered" (ibid., p. 66). Geoff lists these as Cases A to H,<sup>5</sup> then sets aside C to F as involving rules which Kayne identifies as "cyclic" or "post-cyclic". He then goes through the four remaining cases, showing how each can be explained by "appeal to a global condition

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<sup>2</sup> As for the lack of distancing in 1976, Geoff noted during the discussion following my talk that the UCL department was still totally following the Chomskyan line in the period of his doctoral candidacy.

<sup>3</sup> Kayne (1975), the published version of his 1969 MIT PhD thesis, *The transformational cycle in French syntax*, supervised by John Robert Ross, was revised to align with Chomsky's 1973 "Conditions on Transformations".

<sup>4</sup> Polly Jacobsen has pointed out to me however that Chomsky's and Pullum's dichotomies are not obviously commensurate. Pullum (ibid., p. 14) adds that "I think it is only fair to Chomsky to point out that he has never to my knowledge explicitly claimed that language-particular 'extrinsic' (i.e. parochial) ordering statements will be needed in the description of languages, although his descriptive practice has assumed it and his theoretical discussions have heavily implied it".

<sup>5</sup> "Let me identify the eight cases Kayne lists as A to H in (35).

- (35) Case A: Clitic Placement precedes Wh Movement.
- Case B: Se Placement precedes Passive.
- Case C: NP-Extrapolation precedes Clitic Placement.
- Case D: Passive precedes Clitic Placement.
- Case E: Faire-Infinitive/Δ-Insertion precedes Leftward Tous Movement.
- Case F: Faire-Infinitive/Δ-Insertion precedes Clitic Placement.
- Case G: Clitic Placement precedes Modified Pronoun Deletion.
- Case H: Leftward Tous Movement precedes Modified Pronoun Deletion." (ibid.)

(and to direct reference to grammatical relations rather than constituent structure)” (ibid., p. 77). Again, the young things may need some glossing here: in the 1970s, ‘global condition’ was fightin’ words. Pullum concludes this section thus:

I conjecture, therefore, that cases B and H fall in with the other six cases from his [Kayne’s] book that I have discussed, lending no support at all to the claim that parochial ordering constraints are necessary or appropriate in syntactic descriptions [...]. To put it another way, I suggest that the denial of parochial ordering constraints and the adoption of certain principles of relational grammar are pointing in the same direction here, and that direction looks to me not like a dead end but like a promising new trail. (ibid., p. 80)

‘Relational grammar’ too was fightin’ words, by the way.

Broadening out from his observations on Kayne, he makes his strong theoretical claim in answer to what he has identified as “The true empirical issue in connection with rule ordering”, “the issue of whether orderings may be imposed on rules on a language-specific basis” (ibid., p. 13). The answer is a firm “no” – with an equally firm insistence that the result is an “enormously strengthened theory”:

[...H]ardly a shred of evidence has been presented to justify the recourse to parochial ordering constraints that has constantly been had in standard transformational studies. An enormously strengthened theory is obtained if parochial ordering is completely forbidden, and in all the cases I have examined there is hardly any question but that this is fully compatible with what is currently known about the form optimal syntactic descriptions should take. (ibid., p. 100)

This is surely right in terms of a theory of universal grammar. Anything ‘parochial’ that is part of the theory itself is an Achilles’s heel. Geoff takes from Koutsoudas (1973) the “UDRA”, “the hypothesis of Universally Determined Rule Application: All restrictions on the application of rules are determined by universal principles” (Pullum 1976/79a: 18).

In the 1979a Introduction he laments that “I would very much have wished to have access to [Koutsoudas ed. 1976], but it was not available” (p. 2). Geoff’s review of that book appeared in March 1979, and from the first paragraph we no longer sense the struggle to “maintain an agnostic position” he wrote about in the summer of 1978, in the Introduction to the Garland edition of his thesis. It’s now openly Pullumical, and I trust no one any longer needs me to identify which of his words are doing the fightin’.

As is well known, the theory of transformational-generative grammar (TG) as exemplified in works like Chomsky (1965) suffers from a vitiating lack of explanatory force because it is so powerful. For any language anyone cares to specify or invent, no matter how intuitively crazy its properties, TG theory can, in principle, provide a grammar that generates it (Peters & Ritchie, 1973). Indeed, for any given language, there are many transformational grammars compatible with it. Hence the standard view that it is essential to find ways of restricting the class of grammars that TG makes available. One move that has this effect is to exclude all grammars that make use of language-specific constraints on the order of applicational precedence holding among grammatical rules. (Pullum 1979b: 179-180).

“As is well known” – hah! – and next, TG “suffers from a vitiating lack of explanatory force because it is so powerful”. Hang on: TG was built on the foundation of explanatory adequacy, rather than observational or descriptive adequacy, a/k/a butterfly collecting. Cook (1974) had made it clear how explanatory adequacy is bound up with universals in TG; ‘powerful’ had by now become a technical term for generativists, the opposite of ‘constrained’ in terms of whether the grammar generates or overgenerates possible strings. The review goes on to say that “I do not believe it has been fully recognized how extreme is the excess of power introduced into TG theory by the availability of parochial ordering constraints” (Pullum 1979b: 180).

Another word toward the start of the 1979b review is striking. “Crazy” isn’t to be found in Geoff’s thesis, except in the data sentence “It would be crazy for Maximilian to bathe in hot yoghurt” (Pullum 1976/79a: 47). Nor is this the rhetoric of his early articles. A book review however offers a less formal context, if the reviewer chooses to make it so and the editor allows it. We see developing a distinctive mode of Pullum’s style that he actually names in the title of his 1991 book *The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax and other irreverent essays*: Irreverent! That marks out a unique position for him, flowering first in his commentary pieces in *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, from which those irreverent essays came, then on *Language Log* and other blogs. His deadpan disembowelments in lively farcical style saved the sanity of many early-career linguists like me as we strove to survive the generativist Reign of Terror. That’s only a slight exaggeration; and it’s not entirely over, as Geoff documents in a recent paper on the reception of the work of Dan Everett, which I’ll address further on.

Regarding the style, there’s another fleeting glimpse of it in his early work. The last sentence of the 1976 doctoral thesis reads: “And now for something completely different” (1976: 414).<sup>6</sup> Lamentably, that sentence was dropped from 1979a, and only when I read the original recently did I realise that Geoff’s ‘irreverent’ style is very Monty Pythonesque – Cambridge Footlights humour as distinct from the schoolboy antics of the Generative Semanticists. I should perhaps change my Reign of Terror metaphor to The Spanish Inquisition, though actually in those days we were all expecting The Spanish Inquisition.

The something completely different didn’t follow immediately from the 1976 thesis. As we’ve seen from his March 1979 review of Koutsoudas, Geoff was essentially progressing along the same track. But the very next month – to quote another Geoffrey –

*Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote,  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote  
...  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.*<sup>7</sup>

Our Geoffrey’s track changed dramatically when he read a paper by Gerald Gazdar, unpublished to this day, entitled “English as a context-free language” (Gazdar 1979). In his thesis, Geoff had dismissed the idea of a context-free transformational grammar, with a target who’s surprising in hindsight, Rodney Huddleston. Geoff writes that in his 1976 *An introduction to English transformational syntax*,

Huddleston proceeds to show how if the base is restricted to context-free phrase structure rules the restrictions that ordering of base rules would contribute have no place. [...] He then turns to transformations:

Let us now apply these notions to transformational rules. Here there is a strong case for including in the theory the extra power provided by extrinsic ordering.

It is my claim that there is no case at all for this increase in expressive power of the theory [...]. Huddleston has in fact provided no motivation whatever for his espousal of parochial ordering in syntax. (Pullum 1976/79: 55, 59)

What Gazdar was envisioning, however, was a context-free *non*-transformational grammar.

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<sup>6</sup> Every reader at the time would have recognised this as the signature transition utterance between sketches on the BBC comedy series *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*. Another of its running gags was to have some character tell another, “I wasn’t expecting The Spanish Inquisition”, whereupon Cardinal Ximénez, played by Michael Palin in full 16th-century regalia, would burst in, followed by Cardinals Biggles and Fang, and shout “*Nobody* expects The Spanish Inquisition!”

<sup>7</sup> From the beginning of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

Timing is everything. When in 1963 Gilbert Harman (1938-2021) published a very similar proposal in his “Generative grammars without transformation rules”, the world was in love with transformations and the magic they performed. Doing away with them felt madly retrogressive. Besides, who in those days could resist the clanging rhetoric of Noam Chomsky, who drummed out Harman’s proposal as “an extreme example” of “terminological equivocation”, “erroneously” raising an issue of “no conceivable importance” (1965: 210n.). By 1979, that rhetoric had grown somewhat wearisome, if not erroneous, to a generation of linguists who had grown up worrying and arguing about transformations. A plurality had come to feel that the arguments and worries were wasteful, so the thought of looking *beyond* transformations, to the vast multiplicity of issues in syntax, many of which had yet to be described, let alone explained, captured the imagination of a few of those linguists. One of them was named Geoffrey K. Pullum.

From this point forward, Geoff has charted his progress in a series of papers with sections of a historical-autobiographical nature. The preface to Gazdar & Pullum (1982) outlines the steps leading from Montague’s semantics to Gazdar (1979), and then to Gazdar (1981), which was the first publication on these lines in the journal literature. Gazdar & Pullum (1982: iii) say that the pre-1981 papers are “obsolete” and “should no longer be regarded as citable references”. They note that the term Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar “was adopted in the summer of 1980 during the Round Table Conference on Auxiliaries in Groningen, Holland”, where

Emmon Bach gave a paper [...] about what he was calling “generalized categorial grammar”. Bach’s adjective was promptly borrowed by Gazdar, Klein, Pullum and Sag, in order to forestall a growing tendency for people to employ the unpleasantly alliterative (and attributionally incorrect) name “Gazdar grammar” [...] (ibid.)

‘Generalized’ replaced the term ‘context-free’, with some conceptual and methodological shift: in GPSG syntactic categories have internal structure, in the way that phonemes are structured from distinctive features, and “a metagrammar [...] captures generalizations not expressed by the phrase structure rules themselves” (ibid., p. 1).

Gazdar, Klein, Pullum & Sag (1985: 6) take ‘generative grammar’ to include GPSG and a few other novel approaches, and Chomsky’s *Syntactic structures* (1957), but “little of the research done under the rubric of the ‘Government Binding’ framework, since there are few signs of any commitment to the explicit specification of grammars or theoretical principles in this genre of linguistics”. *Touché*.

I shall not pursue the subsequent developments of Geoff’s work in grammatical theory, which have been quite well covered by other papers on our programme today; except for one, which I can’t resist, his 1983 “How many possible human languages are there?” – obviously a direct challenge to the foundational Chomskyan position that there are only a finite number. Pullum looks at this “finiteness thesis”, as he calls it, through the lens of various versions of generative theory, and concludes that it is baseless. The back story to this is recounted in Pullum (forthcoming), where he recalls a lecture he gave at UCL in 1976:

In a lecture on constituent-order typology I presented arguments [...] that there was no convincing evidence for any language in the world having an object-initial basic constituent order (OVS or OSV). The only surface orders for the major constituents of the clause permitted by universal grammar seemed to be SOV as in Hindi, SVO as in English, VSO as in Irish, and VOS as in Malagasy.

In the back row of the lecture hall a man raised his hand, “and said that he had been working on a language that he believed strongly preferred OVS as the order in transitive clauses” (ibid.). This was Desmond Derbyshire (1924-2007), an SIL missionary whose UCL PhD thesis Geoff had been assigned to supervise. Derbyshire had no university degree, but did have 20 years’ experience working

on a Cariban language of northern Amazonia, Hixkaryana. He persuaded his initially dubious, much younger supervisor that the basic word order of the language is indeed strict OVS.

Derbyshire's grammar of Hixkaryana earned him his PhD and was published in 1977, in a revised version, as the first volume in the *Lingua Descriptive Series* founded by Bernard Comrie and Norval Smith. In order to facilitate comparative study by linguists of the languages covered in the series, Comrie and Smith devised the *Lingua Descriptive Series Questionnaire*, which specified topics to be covered in each book and how they should be ordered. When in 1984 Derbyshire and Pullum undertook to compile the four-volume *Handbook of Amazonian languages* (1986-98), they adopted the *Lingua Questionnaire*, and they recruited the young SIL missionary Daniel Everett to write the description of Pirahã. In his forthcoming paper Geoff expresses regret for having made Everett follow the *Lingua Questionnaire*, as it appears to have led to his informants producing certain utterances that aren't really Pirahã, perhaps in a desire, experienced by many anthropologists, to please the kind foreigner who was so intently interested in them. Years later those inimical to Everett, because of his powerful evidence that Pirahã lacks recursion, the last bit still standing of Chomsky's *Universal Grammar*, would point precisely to these bits of Everett's data in order to discredit him.

Geoff doesn't disguise his contempt for the anti-intellectual nature of the attacks on Everett. Throughout the *œuvre pullumienne* is found a methodological rigour so deeply engrained that no one whose writing he critiques can get away with sneaky little shortcuts, let alone out-and-out dishonesty. That's not to say that Geoff's approach lacks argumentative strategy and tactical nous. Far from it. In the published doctoral thesis, for instance, he says:

I feel that where it is possible, claims about rule interaction (or other issues in linguistics) should be substantiated or refuted on ground chosen by the opponents of the view being argued for. For example, in the case of the treatment of modals and other "auxiliary" verbs as ordinary main verbs in initial structures, it is clearly the generative semantics defenders who will be most ready to accept the claim; for that reason, Deirdre Wilson and I attempted in our paper [Pullum & Wilson 1977] to show that the claim could be convincingly argued for in terms of autonomous syntax assumptions – that is, on the ground chosen by those who had generally rejected or ignored the main verb analysis.

That is strategy, deployed in the interest of honest debate, and not aimed at guaranteeing a win.

You may be wondering whether Geoff ever patched things up with Rodney Huddleston, who as it happens did his PhD here in our Edinburgh applied linguistics programme, under M. A. K. Halliday (1925-2018). In 1998 Geoff and Arnold Zwicky contributed a paper to Huddleston's *Festschrift*, and then in 2002 appeared the Huddleston & Pullum *Cambridge grammar of the English language*. I wonder whether in 2123 people looking back at the whole period of linguistics from the mid-20th century on won't point to this as one of its most significant achievements, alongside the *Handbook of Amazonian languages*. Both can be seen as bound up with Pullum's progress from the doctoral student arguing against any parochial ordering of rules to the proponent of flat-structured GPSG and its progeny. All this was buttressed by ground-breaking work in computational linguistics and the philosophy of language, much of it written in collaboration with the greatly missed Barbara Scholz (1947-2011).

There is of course much more, so very much more. I'll limit myself to one last, recent step in Pullum's progress for which he credits me with playing a role. You're probably aware that Geoff's greatest public fame, aside from the Ram Jam Band, lies with his skewering of prescriptive grammarians, in particular because the rules which they prescribe are aimed at utterances which many if not most native speakers produce naturally, but which for one reason or another a grammarian deems incorrect. This goes back to some of Geoff's earliest publications, notably his 1974 article "Lowth's grammar: a re-evaluation". Bishop Robert Lowth FRS (1710-1787) is famous for having codified the rule against ending a sentence with a preposition, and remarking that this "is an Idiom

that our language is strongly inclined to” (Lowth 1764 [1762]: 138). I wrote my own PhD thesis on language standardisation, looking at its development over modern times across the Romance languages and beyond, and how ‘prescriptivism’ functions in terms of social power, in both negative and positive ways (Joseph 1987). I happened to start it just when what’s known as the Black English Trial got under way in Ann Arbor, and I witnessed how the linguistic discrimination case launched by the parents of African-American children against the school board was won based very much on the testimony of William Labov, who persuaded the court that Black English or AAVE – there’s currently no term for it that doesn’t cause offence in some quarters – that it’s genuinely a language in its own right, and not English spoken badly. Labov did this by demonstrating its regular structure and, crucially, by showing that there are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of speaking Black English (see Labov 1982). Prescriptivism makes it a real language, in the eyes of the law.

In Joseph (2020) I argued against statements in Pullum (2004) to the effect that the ‘constitutive’ rules which syntacticians discover are different in kind from the ‘regulative’ rules that prescriptivists deal in. I tried to show that the distinction isn’t black and white, in particular that constitutive rules do in fact have a regulative side. And that regulative rules, prescriptive rules, even as codified in Geoff’s *bête noire*, Strunk & White’s *The elements of style*, have aided countless numbers of people to raise themselves up in the socioeconomic hierarchy, people who like me didn’t grow up in a family that spoke Standard English. Some of you may recall my presenting the paper here at Edinburgh, with Geoff chairing, and shall we say, not obviously accepting my argument. But in the recent *Routledge handbook of linguistic prescriptivism* you’ll find the opening chapter by Geoffrey K. Pullum entitled “Why grammars have to be normative – and prescriptivists have to be scientific”. In it we read:

Factual hallucination, elitist contempt, and reformist dreams are not necessary concomitants of works with a prescriptive motivation. And once we put all three of those aside, it becomes clear that prescriptive works can be very useful to anyone who produces writing that is intended for others to read. (Pullum 2023: 10)

He recognises that most of those opening to his chapter in the expectation of ritual vivisection of prescriptivists will be taken aback:

At this point readers acquainted with some of my earlier work might begin to wonder whether this is really me, or some other Geoff Pullum. Do my supportive remarks about prescriptivists and my apparently relativist recognition of different cultures signal a retrenchment? For am I not the same Geoff Pullum who summarized the contribution of that much-loved booklet *The Elements of Style* as ‘50 years of stupid grammar advice’ (Pullum 2009)? Did I not once suggest that usage manual consumers seemed to be masochists (Pullum 2017)? I am indeed that same Pullum. And no, I have not changed my mind.

However –

the tendency of modern linguists to decry the efforts of prescriptivist writers sight unseen has created a putative rivalry that serves no good purpose. It encourages the counterposed stereotypes under which usage advice writers are depicted as blinkered fools or malign elitists [...], while linguists are caricatured as anything-goes liberals who believe there are no grammatical restraints at all [...]. The community of scholars studying English grammar is not well served by being divided into two hostile factions constantly caricaturing and insulting each other. (ibid., p. 12)

Ah, once more hath he arrived at the Desired Country of John Bunyan’s pilgrim. I confess I was confused by a footnote to this chapter which refers to the UDHR – *What?!*, I wondered: has Geoff reverted to worrying about Koutsoudas’s Universally Determined Rule Application? No, that’s

UDRA. This was a comment about the normative nature of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Phew. Rest assured: Pullum's progress is never retrograde. Long may it continue. *And now for something completely different.*

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