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THE VOCABULA REVIEW

News About Words and Writing from Vocabula Communications Company

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Vocabula Communications Company offers editing and writing services to business, industry, and government, as well as to publishers, packagers, and authors.

“A society is generally as lax as its language.”

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1. Ebook News and Views

Electronic Publishing: A Cultural Adventure

Electronic publishing empowers writers and readers in ways that no technology has ever done before. Whatever you write—fiction, poetry, news, how-to books, or business documents—exciting things are happening that will directly affect how you write and distribute your work. As readers, also, we are entering a new era of rapid cultural and social change resulting from this new technology.

Ebooks are not some high-tech fad that will come and go, or be limited only to a small niche market. The cultural adventure on which we are embarking has no limitations. Unlike the Renaissance some five centuries ago that followed the invention of the printing press with movable type, this “Renaissance 2” is a revolution in which almost everyone in the industrialized nations can participate—and which has particular potential to extended into the developing nations of Africa, Asia, South and Central America, and Eastern Europe. It can truly become another Age of Enlightenment.

Already a wide range of nonfiction and fictional works are being published without paper, totaling many thousands of titles available for downloading via the Internet, or distributed physically on floppy and CD-ROM disks.

Whatever you write, you can also publish for pennies through these new media. And almost whatever you read, you will

increasingly be able to obtain in a digital form.

The low cost and ease of entry into the new media ensure electronic publishing an important place in mainstream publishing. Electronic publishing has evolved further in a decade, in many respects, than conventional print publishing has developed over five centuries.

The electronic media seem likely to surpass conventional paper books in both range and volume within a few years. Already the days of conventional textbooks in schools and colleges are numbered. Millions of people already rely more on electronic news services than on printed newspapers—and an increasing number of online publishing services are operating profitably.

As Nathan Myhrvold, the head of advanced technology for Microsoft put it, “We still communicate mainly by smearing ink across dead trees.” Now the pace of the change from print to electronic communications is being accelerated because of the shortage and cost of the trees that must be killed, and the expense, slowness, and environmental impact inherent in the “ink-smearing” process.

Anyone concerned about the environment must welcome the trend toward electronic publishing. In addition to the enormous savings in cost and scarce resources, electronic media have other socially important attributes that make them impossible to ignore. These include making the written word readily accessible to millions of visually handicapped people who are denied the use of printed communications, but who can readily magnify the type of digitized texts, or change them to the spoken word.

Electronic publishing has a particular cultural and social importance because it gives added dimensions and power to the written word. The new media may prove to have the strengths that print publishing lacks in providing powerful leisure alternatives to television.

Words enter another dimension

Particularly intriguing are the ways in which the very physical structure of text might change. We have been dominated for centuries by the belief that words forming sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and publications exist only in the two dimensions to which print is limited.

When you use a highly technical reference book, for example, you might find it difficult, at least initially, to understand the relevance of its different sections and how they relate. You are limited to seeing the contents of the book in two dimensions, with only two pages of it open at any one time. When evaluating the usefulness of a book you plan to buy, you try to overcome these problems by flicking through the pages, essentially trying to get it to dynamically interact with you.

The better electronic reference books are inherently dynamic. They reach out to help you use them, with hypertext, bookmarking, and other practical methods available only in digital formats.

Ebooks may even enter a fascinating third dimension

At Xerox PARC (the Palo Alto Research Center in California), which has been the source of so much advanced information processing technology, researchers have been making text function efficiently in three dimensions, to give assemblies of words a physical depth. In the Xerox Information Theater project, you can browse through a text database on screen almost as a virtual reality experience. The words and phrases are not changed into graphics, but are set out in three-dimensional trees and other structures so that you can almost literally move into the text and explore it physically, just as scientists are using virtual reality to be able to move around inside models of molecular structures, notably the DNA helix, to understand them better.

Hypertext links take on a new substance and usefulness when this third dimension opens, becoming far more dynamic when they break away from the paper metaphors of one two-dimensional page leading sequentially to another. Developments in artificial intelligence, working with linked and embedded computer-created objects and other information-processing technology, will let you create and use words in ways that you cannot even conceive of now.

Online and CD-ROM text databases are already becoming so huge that established methods of using them are breaking down. We can go only so far in refining better and faster ways of searching for specific information. The next phase (which is already here) involves computers that help create relationships between you, your documents, and the information they contain, consequently making documents yield their information in ways specific to individual user/reader needs. Such computers learn quickly as you begin a search on what information you are really seeking. They interpret, rather than just slavishly follow, the keywords and other search parameters that you provide.

When you enter these large text resources, you might not even know what you really want among all the riches there. But the computer will note, as you grope around, what you accept and reject, alternately enlarging and then refining your searches, making suggestions, and steadily guiding you to the knowledge you seek.

Words must be published electronically to exploit these developments, which represent a quantum leap in the power of the written word to influence our cultural, as well as technological, evolution. Consequently, for those who love words, literature, and the wonders of the human mind, the prospect of electronic publishing replacing much of print publishing is not a doomsday scenario, but one offering marvelous new creative and cultural opportunities.

Crashing through linguistic barriers

Another of many culturally important developments made possible by electronic publishing is the way it is starting to demolish linguistic barriers. One of my books was published in Japan, Indonesia, and the Middle East in long, complicated, and ridiculously expensive processes because of the different languages involved. Now machine translation between natural languages by computer is becoming more sophisticated and functional by the day.

Not only can it save months of work and thousands of dollars, it creates publishing opportunities in other languages that never existed before. It is now easy and practical to publish directly from a modest desktop to the furthest corners of the global marketplace, striding over natural language barriers in the process.

All this does not mean the end of conventional books, those attractive, indeed sensuous, objects that impart knowledge and take us on the most exotic adventures. Books, wonderful books, will always be with us, but now they are joined by other exciting additions to the publishing spectrum.

Existing printed works, and a veritable avalanche of new titles, are now available in more flexible, economical, and practical forms. Usually they will be read on computer screens—particularly, the new generation of portable, pocketable information processors, the handheld personal digital assistants (PDAs) that are about to become almost as ubiquitous as pocket calculators, and as convenient for reading as a paperback.

The next stage—now starting to be commercialized—is the electronic ink technology in which text and pictures are printed on to paper or plastic sheets much like traditional printing. But the ink is very different. It has chemical and electronic properties that enable its microscopic elements to be activated by very low power electronic signals that change the words and pictures on that printed page.

Within a few years, electronic ink promises to give ebooks all the physical, tactile advantages of traditional printed books. In effect, you can own one book and display on its pages any ebook that you choose.

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- Versaware at <http://eBookCity.com/>

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- Wordarchive.com at <http://www.wordarchive.com/>

Wordarchive.com is a website based out of New Zealand. Launched in early November 1999, it offers an archiving service to writers for historical and contemporary work. Wordarchive.com attracts writers by offering them a percentage of the advertising revenue collected when the public views their material. With no financial outlay, authors benefit from the growing amount of centralized traffic created by wordarchive.com's resources while retaining complete control and copyright over their material. Work can be edited or deleted online, and authors can monitor the volume of traffic attracted to their works. The site is growing rapidly; as of December 20, wordarchive.com contained 732 articles from 203 authors. Future directions include marketing the resource to the general public, downloadable material in PDF and ebook formats, and syndication of content.

"Ebook News and Views" is designed to increase the awareness of ebooks and epublishing and to encourage a dialogue among responsible book people. What are your views of and experiences with ebooks and epublishing? Send us your thoughts, and we will do our best to include them in a later issue of "The Vocabula Review." And if you have a favorite ebook-related site, do let us know.

2. Looking at Language

Plain English

What is an article about plain English doing in "The Vocabula Review"? After all, many of you may subscribe because you love the section on "Scarcely Used Words." There isn't much scope for using words such as "amanuensis" and "atrabilious" in a plain English document. (These were just two of October's little gems.) Look at my e-mail signature too:

"Because clear documents make you clearly better to do business with." How can someone who so blatantly starts a sentence with a conjunction, and then ends it with a preposition, be allowed to contribute here?

We all use language differently depending on our audience and what we want to achieve. I think of plain English as being the appropriate language style for business communications. As a business writer, you are not usually writing to entertain, delight, horrify, or otherwise move your readers. Your key aims are probably to inform and to persuade, so it is vital that your readers understand your message the first time they read it. If not, they probably won't do you the favor of a second reading.

Why use plain English?

There are now some impressive case studies showing the impact that plain English can make on a business's communications and its bottom line. For example, when British Telecom (BT) produced a clearer phone bill in plain English, it received around 25 percent fewer complaints and queries each quarter. Customers also paid their bills more promptly, improving cash flow and reducing the cost of collecting overdue bills. Before the change, BT had been receiving around one million complaints a year about its bills. (Source: "Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please," Joseph Kimble, "The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing," vol. 6, 1996-1997.)

Do you think of yourself as a business writer? Perhaps not if you are a civil servant or a college professor. My view is this: if you write at work, you're a business writer, and you need to be sure that you're getting your message across.

Is it easy to write in plain English?

Is it easy to drive a car? Not when you're first learning how to do it. But in time it becomes easy—almost automatic. It's like that with writing in plain English. Here are some suggestions:

- Always plan. Decide on your purpose and the information you want to get across. Put it in a logical order that will make sense to your reader.
- Try to put yourself in your readers' shoes. What is their likely reading ability, vocabulary, or level of education?
- Use everyday words wherever possible, and explain any technical terms you use. Yes, I know there is a feature on "Elegant English vs. Everyday English" in "The Vocabula Review." However, there's nothing elegant about calling an elevator a "vertical people transporter." (Who lies down in an elevator anyway?)
- Use short sentences. Try to have no more than two or three ideas in most of your sentences, and aim for an average sentence length of fifteen to twenty words.
- Use "you" and "we" instead of "the applicant," "the borrower," "the bank," "the company," and so on.
- Use active verbs rather than passive verbs. In other words, write "We will pay this into your account when we get your letter telling us . . ." rather than "Payment will be made when your letter is received . . ."
- Use plenty of signposts to help your readers find what they are looking for. These include contents lists, headings and subheadings, and lists of key features (like this one).
- When you've finished writing, read it out loud. Better still, get someone else to read it out loud. Listen for words that your helper hesitates or stumbles over. These are likely to be uncommon or unfamiliar words that your helper isn't used to saying or hearing. Use everyday, familiar words instead.
- If you can, test the document on a sample of typical readers. If you skip this stage, you may be responsible for putting into print a sentence like the (obviously untested) one that follows from a UK mutual society's mortgage brochure: "You'll also need a separate life assurance policy for if you were to die during the mortgage term—something we'll be pleased to arrange for you." Any takers?

Finally, what about starting sentences with conjunctions and ending them with prepositions? Many writers have been taught that this is "bad grammar." In fact, these are style issues, not grammar ones. Today, it is acceptable style to start a sentence with a preposition or to end one with a conjunction. However, I wouldn't recommend that you overdid it. Your readers might feel strongly about the issue and think you were a sloppy writer. Whatever our reasons for writing, that's the last thing we want.

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"Because clear documents make you clearly better to do business with"

Dave Fox runs the Word Centre (<http://www.wordcentre.co.uk>), based in the UK. He spends his time helping organizations to use plain English, and thus improve their customer relations and profitability.

The Wrong-Headedness of Linguistic Self-Righteousness

Introduction

I recently received an email invitation to subscribe to “The Vocabula Review.” Before deciding, I browsed the archives on the web to get a flavor of the newsletter. Much of what I found was the by now rather old (read cliched) lamentations on the declining state of English.

For decades and even centuries, these arguments have been thrown in vain in the way of relentless language change. Prescriptive grammar is as presumptuous, as naive, as futile as prescriptive meteorology. Language and the process of language change are natural phenomena. They go on, indifferent to all our wishes and musings about what should and should not be.

Language is an amazingly complex thing because it is for the most part the very embodiment of how the human mind works. I believe that what defines humans is their ability to manipulate thoughts, meanings, the boundaries of reference, of things concrete and abstract. Language is the tool. When a concept does not serve a need, the boundaries of the “semantic space” it envelopes can be made fuzzy to add nuance, metaphor, poetic ambiguity, or just a new point of view to the concept; they can be moved to have the concept include more or less space. This is what gives language its power, what gives humans the ability to create.

Language is not set in stone. Every utterance of every word is a metaphorical use, not exactly like any use ever made of it before. That is why it is also the very nature of language to change. It is, as are traditions, dress, shared history, collective memory, and much more, part of Culture. I use the word here with a capital C (a usage picked up from Alton Becker, Professor Emeritus of the University of Michigan, and from Kenneth Pike’s view that language is part of this larger context) to refer to the entirety of what makes up a group’s identity, customs, knowledge, etc. Language is inextricably joined with Culture, a chicken-and-egg relationship. Culture is not static. We do not dress as we did 100 years ago, or even 20 years ago. We do not have the same customs or values as we did 100 or 500 years ago. We do not speak or write as we did. Nor should we be expected to.

Though I would love to lay out all the arguments I have been collecting over the years against blind prescriptivism and the bases for them, I have only a fraction of the time and space needed to even touch on them. This is probably just as well because, just as most of the pinings and whinings of prescriptivists have been repeated many times, so too have the arguments against them. It is unfortunate that they do not get as much airtime as the more compelling sky-is-falling scenarios. And so, I hereby throw my own feeble rantings in the way of relentless prescriptivism. Do please note the references at the end of this article to works by some who are far more articulate than I could be.

Though this little treatise is not likely to convince anyone of these opinions, I do hope to demonstrate the following. Since language necessarily changes over time, as does much of human behavior, thereby creating differences across social and physical distance, it is not only futile and foolhardy to be prescriptive in grammar, it also reveals a lack of understanding of the nature of language. Though convention has its place, the notion of prescriptive grammar beyond mere convention is wrong-headed.

The self-appointed linguistic police

Through the years we have been subjected to the seemingly enlightened views of people like William Safire, Edwin Newman, John Simon, even Kingsley Amis. I use the term “seemingly” quite deliberately. They go on and on about the deterioration of English. They tell everyone how to speak and write, what is acceptable and what is not. Long before I began studying language, I wondered about these people’s credentials and was appalled by the audacity of what amounted to telling people that the culture they belong to is somehow wrong. There are many more who play the role of Chicken Little. Bookshelves are crowded with the lamentations of those I call the self-appointed linguistic police (SALP). That these people are articulate in English should in no way be taken to mean they have credentials to speak about correctness. I say this for two reasons.

First, when reading the scoldings of those mentioned above, one finds no evidence, despite their talent for writing, that they have ever studied linguistics, that is, the scientific study of language, and so one must wonder about their authority to discuss certain aspects of language structure, history, and use.

Second, and more to the point, I will venture dangerously close to the position that no one has credentials to speak about “correctness” in grammar because there is no such thing as “incorrect” when it comes to the speech of a native speaker of a particular language or dialect. If any notion of correctness exists, it can only ever be a description of what is and never a prescription of what someone, especially someone from outside the language or dialect in question, wishes would be.

The origins and persistence of linguistic self-righteousness

I would suggest that the reader visit the following URL:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98mar/halpern/nunberg.htm>. There will be found an article written for the “Atlantic Monthly” by Geoffrey Nunberg (whose commentaries about language can be heard occasionally on NPR). He is far more learned and articulate than I am on this subject. But for a very few particulars, I agree with his interpretation of the “cold war” between traditional, prescriptive grammarians and linguists. Among other topics, Mr. Nunberg touches upon the history that led to the present situation. My own over-simplified summarization of that history follows.

During the 19th century, a kind of linguistic inferiority complex developed that led to traditional grammarians over-emphasizing the influence of Latin on English. Ridiculous rules that have nothing to do with how English is or ever was have been handed down for so long in and out of classrooms that people have come to think they actually have justification. These rules include such inanities

as avoiding so-called prepositions at the ends of sentences, avoiding so-called split infinitives, using the possessive 's only for living things, "It's me" is wrong and "It is I" is correct. They do not have any historical linguistic justification. I could allow myself quite a rant on these and other examples, but I will spare the gentle reader and suggest finding an infinitely kinder discussion of some of them in the pages of Patricia T. O'Conner's "Woe Is I."

These rules refuse to die because widespread ignorance of the real nature of language prevents even otherwise well-educated people from overcoming their blind adherence to a so-called tradition of what is considered "proper" (never mind that the rules were concocted rather than having any historical basis). Then, of course, there are always new SALPs appearing on the scene from time to time, adding to these rules: "and" and "but" should never begin a sentence, "hopefully" cannot be a sentence-level adverb, and so on.

Linguistic ignorance

I use the term "linguistic ignorance" to refer not to ignorance of some idea of "correct" grammar but rather to a lack of understanding of the nature of human language and how it really behaves.

The average person knows what the basic units of chemistry are, the basic laws of physics, what a molecule is, what gravity does, that lights work because of electricity, that living things are composed of cells that interact. But the average person does not know the units of language and their relationships; that language is made of phonemes, morphemes, phrases, clauses; or about how these interact. Most people do not know that the processes of language are physical, physiological, psychological, emotional, social; nor do they know that nearly all words and most concepts in any particular language (including their own, the language that is the tool for nearly all of their thoughts and ideas) are arbitrary. The meanings of words, their connotations, their usage, the concept of tenses, cases, genders, etc., whether their language even has them, particular variations in pronunciation that distinguish phonemes and all the differences among regional and class dialects are never static and are in their very essence arbitrary.

These aspects of language are defined and redefined continually by a strange and ever-changing mix of the non-arbitrariness of some properties of the natural world (for example, the physiology of human mouths and the physics of air flow) and the historical, evolved, and highly arbitrary trappings of Culture. For example, what concepts a group of people finds important to represent in dress, in behavior, in music, in architecture, and linguistically in syntax, grammatical forms, creation and maintenance of individual words are all transient and arbitrary. Until each person realizes that his or her own world view is as constrained by language as it is freed by it, and that every native speaker of every language is in the same boat (or, better put, that each is in a similar but different boat), people will forever be misunderstanding each other at the most basic level, and in a sense never quite understanding themselves. More to the point here, if people understood the arbitrariness of their own preferences, they would feel less compelled to "correct" others.

I would love to discuss more fully the different kinds of arbitrariness in language and how they play a role in language change since this is a major point. However, space and time dictate that we move on.

What is language?

Note: In this section, the use of the words "choose" and "decide" are figurative. Also, the use of the word "language" also implies that the same characteristics hold true for a "dialect," the language of a subculture or even an "idiolect," the language of an individual.

When I first began learning about languages and linguistics, I believed the following. All humans live in the same world. Reality, after all, is reality. In a person's mind is a "semantic space," with a very large but likely limited number of dimensions. Each dimension's axis is a spectrum, a continuum of meaning, of representation of some part of reality. Different languages choose which dimensions are important enough to bring explicitly to the surface of language. Now, I have come to believe that though some dimensions are shared by some languages and dialects, there are very few that can be considered universal. As a group, as a Culture, we may very well choose to divide those dimensions differently as, for example, different languages have different words and concepts to divide the spectrum of colors. Let's look at one example of how even the manifestation of a possible universal can be Culture specific.

All languages seem to have a continuum that goes from object reference on one end (noun), through description of objects (adjective), to description of events (verb). Let's call it the NtoV continuum. In most western languages, this is divided into three parts: nouns, adjectives, and verbs. In Chinese, we could say that the continuum is divided in two: nouns and verbs (some verbs may have to be translated into English with "be" plus an adjective, but that in no way implies that there is an underlying three-way division in some universal NtoV continuum. It only implies that English is not the same as Chinese. In Japanese, NtoV is divided into four. There are nouns, noun-like adjectives, verb-like adjectives, and verbs. I will not go into detail here, but anyone who has studied Japanese knows that the verb-like adjectives have only some of the forms of verbs (for example, tense and negative but not formal and informal). The noun-like adjectives require the copula, do not have any of the verbal forms, and when standing alone behave just as nouns do.

Then, and possibly more interestingly, some dimensions, I am more or less convinced, different languages or Cultures do not share at all. Chinese does not have tense in verbs, number in nouns, etc. English lacks in its verbs the depth of the Japanese verbal system

in the realm of formality, the grammatical manifestations of “in-group vs. out-group,” but the reverse is true in the realm of complex time-tense relationships.

The semantic space we each carry around has been defined by our language and our experience. None of this is to say that some thoughts are not expressible in one language or another. Language is, that is to say, all languages are, wondrously fuzzy. We can push the boundaries of our semantic space anytime we need to. That is what good writing, poetry, and even creativity are all about. I would go so far as to say that that is what human intelligence is all about. As stated earlier, in a sense, all language use is metaphorical and poetic. Because each language, dialect, and individual has a distinct way of thinking, a distinct way of pushing boundaries, a distinct sense of metaphor, and because these are constantly in a state of change, it is necessarily, essentially, and ultimately impossible to prescribe language usage. Again, it is as absurd as prescriptive meteorology.

Language learning and language change

The language and Culture individuals learn is what is around them. They are learned simultaneously. Much of language change is like Culture change. Interestingly, people who prescribe language use sound a lot like those who are prescriptive in their attitude toward Culture change. Those who complain about the way people dress or the music they listen to, because it isn't what used to be, sound a lot like those who complain about a new word or a new usage of an old word.

The whining is a mix of nostalgia (strangely, often for something that never even existed), self-righteousness (“there is a right way and it is mine”) and, as I have mentioned, ignorance of the reality of the laws governing and of the myriad variables involved in language change.

Why do there exist different Cultures and languages? Because they evolved, not unlike animals, over eons in differing degrees of isolation from each other. Isolation, which can be due to geographic, economic, racial, or generational separation, leads to separate evolutionary tracks.

The kinds of change are many. Here I will mention only a few examples, with little explanation. There can be differences in phonology (the difference in the aspiration of voiceless stops between South African English and most other dialects), vocabulary (“bag” or “sack”; “lift” or “elevator”), syntax (American English: “I have a headache”; Indian English: “I am having a headache”), and so on. Changes occur over time even to one dialect: changes in the transitivity of a verb, changes in the part of speech of a word, etc.

It is as silly to complain about differences in language from dialect to dialect as it is to complain that snakes have no legs; one is comparing two separate evolutionary tracks. In the case of differences arising over time within one dialect, we should remember that each of our opinions is based on a mere snapshot of the world. A lifetime is not long enough to determine which language trends will endure. We must view language, Culture, and dare I say, human progress, as a geologist views a landscape; that is, with an appreciation of the present and of how it fits into a much longer time scale. We may like to think that Mt. Everest is rock solid, but it is changing height and location as we speak.

Standards, conventions, and linguistic bigotry

Am I a linguistic anarchist? Do I feel that anything, absolutely anything, goes? Yes and no. I believe that language, like all other aspects of Culture, is not something that can be steered or stopped. The behavior of different groups will evolve in different ways because that is what humans do. It is the nature of the beast. However, I do understand that there also exists the necessity to get things done.

Communication between groups is necessary. That is why we have conventions. A convention concerning basic rules of language use is handy so that when I write, making allowances, I can expect others, making allowances, to understand. I see this convention as a lingua franca, nothing more. We should encourage those who are not comfortable using this convention to become so. But we should not discourage those who are fortunate enough to have other languages and dialects from keeping them as they also accept the convention. We should not tell them their grammar is “wrong.” Speaking several languages allows one to communicate with more people in the world. We should envy those who are multi-dialectical as much as we do those who are multi-lingual.

The problem with talking about a convention as a description of some ideal is that people forget that it is merely a convention. That one group of people agrees to drive on the right or the left of the road is arbitrary. There is nothing inherently better about one way or another.

Summary

I hope someday to have enough time to collect my unkempt thoughts into a form that might help undo the damage I believe linguistic luddites have done. The book I envision would “tell it like it is,” as does “American Tongue and Cheek” by Jim Quinn, a book that should be read by every English speaker who feels even a smidgen of linguistic smugness. It would have all the linguistic knowledge of Steven Pinker’s “The Language Instinct.” It would also contain examples from many dialects, from many languages, examples of phonological, syntactic, and semantic variation. It would be a book that overwhelms the reader with the immensity of the manifestation of variation in language, much as peering up at a clear night sky makes one feel small and yet somehow privileged

to be a part of something so large.

In conclusion, I would like to urge everyone interested in language and especially those who feel compelled to promote some ideal of usage to remember that with regard to language use, it can only be convention. The nature of language prevents it from ever being more than that.

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Grumbling About Grammar

Although few people can complain of another’s grammatical mistakes with impunity, that is, without revealing their own, I am hopeful that “Grumbling About Grammar” will encourage us all to pay more heed to how the language is used—by ourselves as well as by others—while bettering our ability to speak and write it. The grammatical errors that I have assembled here come from publications like “The New York Times,” “Wired,” “Business Week,” “Los Angeles Times,” “Time,” “TV Guide,” and “Martha Stewart Living.” Others come from TV newscasters, politicians, and businesspeople. These are the people we so often read and listen to— whether or not we care to. Woefully, it is not Edith Wharton or Henry James from whom we learn to speak and write the language; rather, it is these sometime purveyors of confused, misused, and abused language.

*****The Grumbling About Grammar Award (GAGA) of the Month*****

Our girls are not part of this presidential process, and I’m not going to

let them get “drug” in.—U.S. presidential candidate George W. Bush

Even if I were an ardent Republican, I doubt whether I would vote for a

man who uses “drug” instead of “dragged.”—RHF

-
1. affect. Misused for effect. * However, producing truth has the opposite “affect.” USE “effect.” [Nationally syndicated columnist]

The word “affect” is much less often used as a noun than it is as a verb.

All the same, it is often misused for, or perhaps misspelled, “effect.” The noun “affect” means a feeling or emotion; the noun “effect” means a result or outcome.

2. an. Misused for a. * After “an historic” day of grand jury testimony, Clinton called on the country—and independent counsel

Kenneth W. Starr -- to move on from the embarrassing episode. USE “a historic.” [”Los Angeles Times”] * Millions of Americans today witnessed “an historic” albeit unseemly moment in our nation’s history. USE “a historic.” [Television newscaster.] * He chose “an historic” moment to strike, and he changed a bit of history. USE “a historic.” [”Brill’s Content”]

The correct form is “a historic,” not “an historic.” Similarly, “a hallucination” and “a hotel” are correct, and “an hallucination” and “an hotel” are not. Conversely, “a heirloom” (like “a herb,” “a heir,” and “a heiress”) is incorrect. Since the “h” of “heirloom” is not pronounced, we say “an heirloom.” “A” is used before a consonant sound; “an” before a vowel sound. It’s true that the correct wording was once “an historic,” but not since we have been pronouncing the “h” in this word and others.

3. equally as. Solecistic for equally or as. * A banana and whole-wheat bagel would be cheaper and “equally as” nutritious. USE “equally” or “as.” [”Cooking Light”]

As you can clearly see in this example, “equally as” is a redundancy.

4. flaunt. Misused for flout. * Leave it up to the Rocky Mountain volleyball team to “flaunt” convention. USE “flout.” [”Denver Rocky Mountain News”]

To “flaunt” is to show off or exhibit; to “flout” is to ignore or disobey.

5. fulsome. Misused for insincere (or similar words). * As White House aides expressed their glee when Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr resigned last month, one top official broke ranks, offering Starr “fulsome” praise. USE “gushing.” [”Newsweek”] * At no point in his broadcasts did Jones disclose that there was a financial consideration underpinning his “fulsome” editorial support. USE “enthusiastic.” [”The Sydney Morning Herald”]

“Fulsome” means insincere, offensive, or odious, not, as is meant here, abundant, effusive, or enthusiastic.

6. goes. Misused for states (or similar words). * If you share this truth, and he “goes,” “Cool, thank you,” or “Let me think about that,” you may have some grounds for growth. USE “says.” [”Essence”]

I suppose we have all heard, and even become inured to, adolescents who use “goes” instead of “says,” and I further suppose most of us have heard adults who do as much, but to see it in print is altogether a sad surprise.

7. less. Misused for fewer. * In a survey of 132 jumpers, “less” than half had complaints—all minor. USE “fewer.” [”Health”]

The distinction between “fewer” and “less” (like that between “number” and “amount”) centers on what can be counted and what cannot. “Fewer” we use for numbers; “less” we use for quantities.

8. reoccur. Misused for recur. * Reading your Aug. 27 front-page article, “Tending to teens’ need to sleep,” irritated a “reoccurring” wound. USE “recurring.” [Schoolteacher’s letter to the editor in “The Boston Globe”]

This is not an excusable spelling mistake but an inexcusable grammatical one. From presidential candidates to schoolteachers, ineptitude looms large.

And then there are those who use “reoccurrence” instead of “recurrence”: * Basically, what this study is doing is looking at state-of-the-art treatments for depression and looking at how well they work in the short term, but also how well they prevent “reoccurrence.”—USE “recurrence.” [University of Washington project coordinator] * Gross margins for the three months ended October 31, 1999 increased to 35% from (5%) in the prior year, primarily due to the “non-reoccurrence” of inventory related charges that resulted in the negative margin for the second quarter of last year.—USE “non-recurrence.” [”Business Wire”]

Of course, neither “reoccur” nor “reoccurrence” exists in any English-language lexicon.

9. who. Misused for whom. * You all know exactly “who” I am talking about
· which is odd considering that we don’t have princes. USE “whom.”

[”Mademoiselle”]

If “I am talking about she” is egregiously bad English, so, of course, is “You know exactly who I am talking about.”

10. who. Misused for that or which. * The fund will be administered by individuals and organizations “who” are not connected to Siemens. USE “that.” [“Jewish Telegraphic Agency”] * She became an activist after a 1986 conference revealed the perilous future of the animals, “who” are hunted (for food and as pets) and are ill-treated in medical research. USE “which.” [“TV Guide”] * But spokesman Bob Carolla acknowledges that the group receives substantial funding from drug firms, “who” provide most if not all of the anti-discrimination campaign’s \$4 million annual budget. USE “which.” [“Mother Jones”]

In standard, nonsolecistic English, “who” is used to refer to people, “that” to both people and things, and “which” to things alone. Further, “which” is the preferred word to begin nonrestrictive (or nondefining) clauses (those that use a comma before “which,” as in the last two examples), and “that” to begin restrictive (or defining) ones.

Elegant English vs. Everyday English

We all know far too well how to speak and write everyday English, but few of us know how to speak and write elegant English—English that is expressed with music as well as meaning, style as well as substance. Consider these examples of the difference between everyday English and elegant English. Which do you prefer?

1. Everyday English: The society of friends or other groups is one thing
 · and we often enjoy ourselves in them—but government is quite another; it’s a negative thing that at very turn seems to hold us back.

Elegant English: Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices. [Thomas Paine, “Common Sense”]

2. Everyday English: She was her own person; she wouldn’t allow demanding publishers or her friends’ acclaim push her into anything she didn’t want or think was honest.

Elegant English: She would not have been rushed by the importunity of publishers or the flattery of friends into slovenliness or insincerity. [Virginia Woolf, “Jane Austen”]

3. Everyday English: Try to live in the here-and-now; there’s little point to worrying about what the future might bring.

Elegant English: Our grand business undoubtedly is, not to “see” what lies dimly at a distance, but to “do” what lies clearly at hand. [Thomas Carlyle, “Signs of the Times”]

4. Everyday English: Believe me, he felt twice as bad as I did, and it showed.

Elegant English: The misery painted in the woman’s visage was not half so strongly expressed as the agony in his. [Oliver Goldsmith, “The Man in Black”]

5. Everyday English: It is common knowledge among the business community that recognition is more important to employees than how much money they make.

Elegant English: That thirst, if the last infirmity of noble minds, is also the first infirmity of weak ones; and, on the whole, the strongest impulsive influence on average humanity: the greatest efforts of the race have always been traceable to the love of praise, as its greatest catastrophes to the love of pleasure. [John Ruskin, “Sesame and Lilies”]

Scarcely Used Words

How many of these words do you know? Do you use any of them in your speech or writing?

1. babylonian (bab-ah-LO-nee-an) adj. 1. pertaining to Babylon or Babylonia. 2. excessively luxurious, pleasure seeking,

unrestrained, or wicked.

2. concupiscence (kon-KYOO-pah-sens) n. strong desire or appetite, especially sexual desire; lust.
3. laodicean (lay-od-ah-SEE-an) adj. 1. pertaining to Laodicea. 2. indifferent or lukewarm about religion or any subject.
4. quinquagenarian (kwin-kwuh-juh-NAR-ee-uhn) n. a person in his or her fifties.
5. yclept (i-KLEPT) v. called, named, known as [past participle of “clepe”].

“Looking at Language” is a monthly feature of “The Vocabula Review.” If you would like to submit a short article about some area of the English language—perhaps you’d like to rail about how shoddily it is so often used, or speak to the usefulness of slang and colloquialisms—we would be happy to consider it for publication. We are also interested in publishing new poetry—so long as it is no longer than fifty lines and observes some of the strictures of scansion and musicality.

3. Letters to the Editor

Your special characters (quotation marks, apostrophes, etc.) are coming through as odd symbols like Ö umlaut and u circumflex—on both my home and office computer—one with Novel GroupWise, one with Outlook 2000. Too bad—hope you can fix it—I love what you are doing!

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Yes, I now understand that I used smart quotes when I ought to have used straight ones. I apologize. I trust that the December issue of “The Vocabula Review” will be more readable. You can view an uncluttered copy of “The Vocabula Review” at the list archive: <http://vocabula.listbot.com/>

-- RHF

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