

English Grammar: Speaking in Modern Tongues

Maybe it's time for schools to go back to teaching Latin. I know some schools have never given it up, but the majority of them have, perhaps in the belief that teaching a dead language that was never spoken anyway and that officially fell out of favor in 476 AD (on a Tuesday) is pedantic folly. Teaching modern languages, on the other hand, is practical, the argument goes. I'm not against teaching modern languages; in fact, my B.A. is in French. However, what I suspect is that our students today speak their second, studied language more correctly than they speak English. Consider the following.

The other day several students were queued up outside my office signing in: There had been a bus problem of some sort. It was a Monday, so their conversations were mostly about the weekend. Gradually, my attention was drawn away from what I was doing to a student exchange. One girl was telling another (it could have been two boys) the woes of the weekend. She had had like this huge fight with her boyfriend, who like didn't get it, and she was like so bummed that like she told him that like if he didn't understand, that like he could forget it. The other girl took in every rich detail. All I could think of was George Bernard Shaw's admonishment to, be wary of language that doesn't conjure up images.

When I was a kid at school and said something like, me and Billy, Sister Mary Margaret – every Catholic school had one in those days – would rap my knuckles, hence my out-sized hands and my attention to the nominative. At home, either my parents or my educationally superior older brothers would correct me. Today, however, adults rarely correct young people's grammatical errors, perhaps because they don't recognize the errors. Turn on the evening news and any number of so-called educated folk, physicians, lawyers, Congressmen, Senators, judges, and the President, will tell you that once they refer back to their notes, they will report back to you. Do they not realize that the prefix re means back, and what they are saying – whether they mean to or not – is that they will turn back back to their notes and carry that information back back to you. Redundancy is so insidiously ingrained in our everyday communication that we have all but ratified it. Airlines all wish us well arriving at our final destination, scary and [sic] redundant. Promotions offer free gifts: have you ever paid for a gift? Recipes instruct cooks to mix the ingredients together or worse yet, mix the combined ingredients together. Coaches teach youngsters the basic fundamentals of their sport. Cryptographers labor to crack secret codes. Teachers frequently tell parents that their children aren't working to their full potential. And meteorologists (a word as misleading as meretricious) tell us how frigidly cold it can be in the state of Minnesota during the month of January. I suppose that if you lived in Pago Pago, you might not know that frigid was cold, that Minnesota was a state, that Jessie Ventura was ... no, I won't go there, or that January was a month, but the rest of us should. Despite our being the most educated society in the world, we seem to be tautologically challenged. Do you want to run that by me again?

The profusion of computers has also done serious damage to language. Yesterday, a faculty member wrote me a memo, informing me that he wanted to schedule an interface with me. I fired back that while I found his word choice was solecistic, at least the notion was scusi. Computer jargon has even changed the parts of speech of some words. Input before the PC

was a noun; now it is a verb as well, as is its opposite, output. Computers, however, can't be blamed for all parts-of-speech shifts: somewhere along the way, impact became a verb, as did critique and dialogue. The score was evened up somewhat, though, when quote became a noun

The malapropism that is fingernails on a blackboard for me is fun, as in, oh, how fun or that was so fun. I am not splitting syntactical hairs here or plumbing the grammatical depths of the arcane shall/will rule or even questioning the finesse of the subjunctive. In the two cases above, an adverb is modifying a noun, which is grammatically gauche by any standard. Whatever!

The purpose of this piece is not to advocate a return to teaching Latin, although the notion has merit. What I am advocating is using words according to their meanings. The evolutionary linguists will argue that language is living and therefore changing, and that I should lighten up. The doctrinaire will find any number of errors in what I have written, as I punctuate in an unorthodox manner, and I've been known to sometimes split an infinitive. The fixated will run to the OED and find that impact and dialogue are indeed listed as verbs, without understanding that the basis of the OED is Johnson's criterion of quotation (see ain't, page 50, The Compact Edition). Hmm, where does that citation put me? Notwithstanding, as Einstein said, we never speak clearer than we think.

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