

The Rules

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On the first day of seventh grade, I was sitting down among the faces of the future, waiting expectantly to meet yet another teacher who would have a hand in my intellectual molding, when I saw the sign that would set the tone for my academic career. It said, “Got is Gone.” The big red letters on the white tag board seemed almost as imposing as my teacher’s huge, domineering stature as he walked to the front of the classroom to introduce himself. Both the sign and the man had a certain boldness that demanded deference, prohibited skepticism. I did not have to wait long to learn that the sign meant we were not to use any variation of the word “got.” And if we were to use the forbidden word in our writing, our assignment would be penalized one letter grade—that’s how serious he was about it.

My teacher had brilliantly boiled down the art of writing to a single rule by which to gauge our progress. In fact, he often didn’t even have to read the assignment. He was a certified speed-reader who could scan an entire essay in seconds and, wielding his mighty pen, strike out every “got” he saw obstructing his path. And now, as I reflect back on my early education, most memories grow hazy, but I will always remember watching as he graded my semester project in one minute flat. I grew increasingly dismayed as he eradicated one, two, three variations of “got.” Just like that, I had gotten a “C.” And let me tell you, I’ll never use that word again.

This early display of grammatical tyranny was the first of many unyielding language rules to come that would reveal an excessively narrow view on the ills of

modern American writing. The academic elitism that promotes a constricted focus on nit-picky rules serves as blinders to the degeneration of articulate and expressive writing.

The ultimate goal of functional literacy, let alone literary art, falls by the wayside as the path is obstructed by grammatical dogma. What is the point of perfect structure if a phrase has no force? From my seventh grade take-off point, I was to encounter teachers who would drill into my head ranting oaths about countless grammatical laws, like “never ever, under any circumstances, will the passive voice be used,” and “You’ll forever abstain from using contractions in your writing.” And really, where would I be if it weren’t for this word orthodoxy keeping me in line? Surely, I would have been swept away by a swift river of grammatical travesties into a great pool of societal decadence from which this collapse of language spawns. I would have become just another base perpetrator of this “creeping casualness” that so many linguists, teachers, and moralistic grammar police are up in arms about (Eakin).

And what exactly are these conservatives up in arms about? Well, specifically, the “poor grammar, sloppy syntax, misused words, misspelled words, and other infelicities of style” that they see in their colleagues’, students’, and leaders’ writing (“Clues to Concise Writing”). It is they who write enraged letters to the editors for allowing grammatical lapses as if they were moral travesties. William Safire, a self-proclaimed enforcer of proper speech, is one of the squeakiest wheels out there, notorious for his indictments of America’s “sloppiness in speech,” whether it’s caused by “ignorance or apathy” (Safire). And one has to wonder how the moralistic tone entered the song of these “language snobs.” Linguist conservatives fear that the structures, much like grammar, that “provide our security are in danger of collapse” (Williams). Not only do they rail against the

language's misuse, but they lament the impending changes of it. They scoff at the annual alterations and additions to Webster's Standard Dictionary, such as "gift" and "impact" being amended to be verbs as well as their conventional definitions as nouns.

But the very notion of defending grammar is a little childish and willful. For example, one thousand years ago in Old English, "Happy New Millennium, Everybody" would have been "Bliss on bæm cumendum þusende îeara, Eallum!" (Kurland). No one looks at the status quo of grammar in respect to Old English and thinks, "We're such barbarians—what we've done to our forefathers' language is sacrilege!" People understand that languages, just like people and societies and thoughts, evolve. With a little perspective, it's difficult to imagine the English language had it remained static. It's futile to resist the changes in grammar that are being made today. So the current complaints about the degradation and evolution of the language are pretty myopic, really. Granted, grammatical slippages are jarring to a trained ear, and they can sometimes even be alarming, such as President Bush's comment on the educational testing system in which he says, "You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test."

However, one must question how dire poor grammar really is in the face of greater linguistic troubles. Perhaps there's a greater ill that's being overlooked by the likes of the grammar police, and that is a development of "vagueness and sheer incompetence" in the style of modern prose, as the art of style is viewed as superfluous (Orwell). Perhaps this crusade against grammar trespassers is pulling the wool over our eyes. A more pertinent issue, more significant than a misused "whom" here or an unnecessary preposition there, is how our language has become "ugly and inaccurate

because our thoughts are foolish” (Orwell). To this end, a more appropriate, and more alarming, quote from President Bush might be his statement in which he fervently asserted, “I know what I believe. I will continue to articulate what I believe and what I believe—I believe what I believe is right.” Articulate? I think not. Neither is it graceful nor moving, as was the style of political leaders past. Perhaps the English language is losing something more important than impeccable subject-verb conjugation.

Our American President’s use of dialect nicely highlights the contentiousness between linguistic conservatives and liberals. On the one hand, if our president, one of the most powerful and influential men in the world, can perform his job in the midst of grammatical carnage, then what’s the difference? In the grand scheme of things, his slip-ups are not so calamitous. And on the other hand, it is our president, one of the most powerful and influential men in the world, who is consistently breaching grammar laws. Should we as a society lighten up or buckle down? This is the question. And my own experience with teachers buckling down has helped me to come to my own answer.

My teachers’ narrow catering to prescriptive grammar hampered the possibility for creative advancement in my writing. In middle school, I abided by the grammar dogma religiously, for my teachers allowed no leeway. High school was not so terribly different; I still took my oaths and listened to various English teachers berate those grammatical urchins who were still writing sentence fragments and run-ons. But this was when we started analyzing rhetorical devices and syntax strategies in masterpieces of literature. We would write perfectly formed essays, with the thesis at the end of the first paragraph, appropriately placed topic sentences, and an all-inclusive conclusion at the end, even as we were writing about unconventional stylistic strategies that have been

lauded for centuries. Run-on sentences quickened the pace of one passage to convey a sense of urgency. There was improper capitalization in another to allow for greater flexibility in emphasis. Sentence fragments were a particularly potent way of accentuating a point. Switching tenses mid-piece was not careless writing, it was a deliberate and essential volta in the tone and meaning. So, we students wrote endless essays on these rhetorical devices, but I don't recall ever once being encouraged to write with the same finesse. We were trained to recognize the art that creative writing can generate, but our own expression was shackled by the commitment we had made to convention from our early education. As students, we have been taught in such a way that as we write, we have a constant dialogue of "should" and "shouldn't" that doesn't allow us liberty of expression. I think we've been buckled down too tightly.

So as the intellectual elite are now up in arms about the English language's "abuse and misuse in the news, media, and elsewhere" (Society for the Preservation of English), I find myself wondering what exactly they are aiming to salvage if we as a society are no longer capable of creating art through the language. There is a plethora of societal changes that are challenging the creative beauty of writing. We are an increasingly oral-based culture, for one. We get our news through the television and radio versus the newspaper. And when we do write, instead of letters, we communicate via e-mail, in which the writing is condensed as much as possible into clips like "ur," "g2g," "ttyl," and "brb." Letter writing is no longer an art, but a skill in concision. So we, as a society, are no longer reading or writing for news, entertainment, or education. Seems to me that grammar is the least of our worries as far as the fate of the English language is concerned. (Oh dear, thank God for Microsoft Word—had my previous sentence fragment not been

underlined with a squiggly green line, I know not what I'd have done. This corporation has dutifully taken upon itself the task of keeping billions of Word documents within the checks of pre-ordained grammar laws. But do you know what I'm even more thankful for about Microsoft Word? The *ignore* button.)

In fact, it is even arguable that as the language evolves, and as we deviate from the diction of "privileged classes from the past," we open up a greater freedom and potential for creative expression (Nunberg). So as our standards for grammar and definition evolve along with the times, what will this new voice sound like? Will it really be the voice of slovenliness and foolishness, or will it be the voice of inventiveness and expressiveness? Or perhaps it will merely temper the haughty, condescending tone of our intellectual elite, a point that leads nicely to the counterargument.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from the "language snobs" are the "language slob" (Williams). As the linguistic conservatives are trying desperately to prevent any kind of change in the language, these radicals believe that the "rules of language reflect the reality of human speech" and to attempt to control the language is to attempt to control the culture. Rather than make society follow the rails of a preserved language, they believe language should follow the flow of popular culture. Doing otherwise would be detrimental to creative expression. In fact, the present politics of academia have "been on the side of an open-ended diversity" in that grammar is now seen as a "plot to perpetuate the political dominance of white males." The teaching of grammar is suddenly politically incorrect as these radicals view it as preventing students from expressing themselves in their own "idioms and style and punctuation." Of course, strong individual voices would struggle to come out of a shaky verbal foundation in the first place, but

“expression without form” is hardly as dire a consequence as “form without...energy” (Williams). This is the real issue. The inconsequential changes which are disconcerting some to no end are just that—inconsequential.

“Word Orthodoxy” has no place in our current society (Adams). Such borders sever creative extremities and are not capable of containing something that is so intrinsically tied to our forever-evolving society. Of course proper grammar is an essential tool in the creation of artistic literature. However, this grammatical dogma is more of a limiting tool than a constructive one. If your inner-monologue is constantly reciting “I shall not...” and “never, ever...,” it’s awfully difficult to hear “what if...” or “maybe I could...” My seventh grade teacher would have found three travesties of grammatical justice in this paper. Rather narrow, isn’t it?

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