#languagechanges

I used to be that old curmudgeony teacher who would never let a student split an infinitive or end a sentence with a preposition ("Never a sentence end a preposition with"). I would get out the red pen whenever I encountered a sentence beginning with "And," "But," or "However." Then, when I was teaching community-college general education courses, after a dozen years of teaching at the university level followed by a decade of teaching at the high-school level, I read Steven Pinker's 2014 revolutionary *The Sense of Style*. Pinker's insight—that grammar is an evolving set of tacit standards agreed upon by the users of a language and not a set of prescriptive rules dictated by an authority—was a wake-up call for me. At the same time, on my long drive home from the River Valley Community College's Claremont, NH, campus, I began to listen to Martha Barnette's and Grant Barrett's wonderful *A Way with Words* podcast, which reinforced my growing awareness that as a teacher I had to loosen up and go with the flow of how the English language was changing.

And, I began to realize, that as an older man with an Ivy-League Ph.D. my heavy use of the red pen on the papers of my community-college students was reinforcing a social/ economic division between privileged and under-privileged educational classes. As a child of a university professor myself, I had easily transitioned from a good suburban high school to a top-notch liberal arts college and thence to graduate school. Many of my community-college students, on the other hand, had had to drop out of high school to earn some money in a low-paying job and were now valiantly trying to restart their education. And here I was as a Gatekeeper, saying that they couldn't enter my privileged, hyper-educated, world if they communicated in the natural language that their peers and community used.

This is not to say that there isn't value in helping students become familiar with what Pinker calls "Classic style"—that is, jargon-free writing that clearly communicates ideas to readers. But, as I was increasingly coming to realize, my role as a teacher should not be to focus on restrictive rules of grammatical and stylistic language usage. To truly help my students, I needed to encourage them to develop their critical thinking skills, no matter how they expressed their ideas. [That critical thinking is something woefully under-taught in our nation's public schools is indicated by the growing scourge of "alternate facts" and misinformation being spread on social media platforms.]

My transition from old fuddy-duddy grammarian to a looser type of teacher is documented by the few Twitter posts I have ever made in my life. I had joined Twitter in 2012 just to see what was this newfangled thing my students were talking about, but it wasn't

until September of 2014 that I made my first tweets, which I posted under the hashtag #languagechanges. My first tweet, on Sept. 16: "#languagechanges why do students use 'based off of' instead of 'based on'? A book based off of the table hits the floor." I followed this up with a Sept. 17 tweet: "#languagechanges Why do students write 'a philosopher named Aristotle . . .'? Do they think we can't figure out his name? A kind of tagging?" On Sept. 29, 2014, I followed this up with yet another tweet: "#languagechanges Word not to use: huge. Intensification is difficult; it takes gobs of imagination." From these snide posts, my next tweet, in July, 2015, noted that I was reading Pinker's *The Sense of Style,* which I said was "—a sobering lesson in how I've been a pedant in my teaching." On the same day I wrote my next, and last, tweet: "I give up and no longer mark 'The student picked up their books' as wrong." (My new-found tolerance of a plural adjectival pronoun referring to a singular noun was not only based on a Pinker-induced acceptance of change in the English language; I was at that time also teaching the wonderful sex-education curriculum *Our Whole Lives* to adolescents at my local Unitarian-Universalist church and had become sensitized to how the heteronormative "his or her" I used to write in red pen over students' inappropriate plural adjectival pronouns could be offensive to the LGBTQ community.)

But old habits die hard, and like many former teachers I always have my pedantic eye out for changes in language usage, especially when new, non-traditional, forms break those old prescriptive rules.   At the top of my list of the many changes in the English language that still get my pedantic grammarian goat are the atrocious neologisms that sportscasters come up with; it is beyond my comprehension, for instance, why play-by-play commentators of American football have chosen to use the noun "defense" as a verb, as in "that play was well defensed."

[That I am not alone in clinging to old-fashioned prescriptive rules of "standard English" can be seen on the many online groups that debate "right" and "wrong" language usage, such as the StackExchange's "English Language & Usage" discussion group, where one can find a page on the "based in" vs "based out of" controversy.]

Here is another example of a get-my-goat #languagechange:

In 2015, my wife and I had lunch with our son and his girlfriend in Boston, MA. During the course of that meal, I raised my concern that on radio and television news shows, when a host said "thank you" to a guest that they had just interviewed, the guest always responds with a "thank you" and never with the "you're welcome" I would have expected. My son and his partner both said that they almost never say "you're welcome" as that sounds

rude to them, as if one were pointing out that the other person was somehow now in your debt. (I wrote up this surprising change in language usage in a little article that was published in the Oct. 25, 2015 edition of the *Boston Globe Magazine*: https://murraymcclellan.com/youre-welcome/)

Another language change that has caught my attention (and, I have to admit, perturbs the old curmudgeon pedant who still lives within me):

Over the past few years, the word "existential" has undergone a dramatic linguistic transmogrification.   Back in the day, when I was in college and we were all reading Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "existential" always modified "crisis;" now, however, "existential" has almost exclusively come to modify "threat"—that is, as the equivalent of "life-or-death." As Dot Wordsworth has pointed out ("Existential threat: the birth of a cliché," *The Spectator*, Issue 24, 24 Jan., 2015): "The construction ["existential threat"] is strange because it means 'threat to existence', rather than 'threat that exists'. Think of parallels: *Islamist threat* does not mean 'threat to Islamists'. *Intentional threat* is not 'threat to intention'." In their article, Wordsworth provides an etymology of "existential," noting that "existential" as a philosophical term did not enter the English language until 1941 and that the verb "to exist" does not appear in English until Shakespeare's *King Lear*. (Note that I am using the plural adjectival pronoun to refer to Dot Wordsworth, the pseudonym used by *The Spectator*'s wonderful commentator on language and not the long-deceased sister of the English Romantic poet.)

And while, with my Pinker-inspired tolerance for language change, I am willing to accept the new equivalence of "existential" for "life-or-death," I am saddened to see that it is leading to the demise of that "existential dread" we undergraduates used to pretentiously indulge in as we lugubriously pondered the meaning of our privileged lives. Yes, climate change is an existential threat to the continuance of the human species, but can't we still agonize over the absurdity of trying to find the meaning of life in a universe that is manifestly indifferent to us?

Of course, the list of language changes that pique my pedantic petulance goes on and on. A few years ago, while I was still teaching, I noticed that my students were tending to use "that" instead of the relative pronoun "who," as in ". . . the student that picked up their books." This language shift, it seemed to me, was in keeping with the depersonalization of our modern *zeitgeist*. In a 4 November, 2006, posting, "Who Versus That," on her *Quick and Dirty Tricks* website, the "Grammar Girl" Mignon Fogarty noted that, while there are

respected writers as early as Chaucer who use "that" in referring to people, she prefers the rule of using "who" in relative clauses that refer to people:

> So, it's more of a gray area than some people think, and if you have strong feelings about it, you could make an argument for using *that* when you're talking about people. But my guess is that most people who use *who* and *that* interchangeably do it because they don't know the difference. I don't consider myself a grammar snob-–this is "quick and dirty" grammar, after all-–but in this case, I have to take the side of the people who prefer the strict rule.To me, using *that* when you are talking about a person makes them seem less than human. I always think of my friend who would only refer to his new stepmother as *the woman that married my father*. He was clearly trying to indicate his animosity and you wouldn't want to do that accidentally.

(Note that Forgarty puts only one space after the periods at the end of her sentences. While I have no particular beef with this new trend in orthography, for old fogies like me with failing eyesight, not having two spaces after a full stop makes the text harder to read. I hope that this one-space-after-a-period trend is not the start of a reversion to earlier forms of orthography such as in Archaic Greek inscriptions, where not only were there no indications of where sentences ended but there were also no spaces between words, creating texts that only a trained epigrapher can decipher.)

(I might parenthetically add that I am not so much of an old fogey that I still denote the titles of books and other major works by underlining them—an archaism that goes back to when underlines in manuscripts were a sign for typesetters to switch to an italic font. With our word-processing programs it is, after all, just as easy to hit command +i as it is to type command +u. I am distressed, however, by the recent trend of putting quotation marks around *all* titles, be they the titles of major works or short articles. It irks me no end to see no differentiation between a short note that an author might have whipped off in a day and a book that an author worked on for years.)

My current #languagechanges pet peeve involves the use of "less" and "fewer." In spite of my new-found appreciation for the evolution of the English language, I still cringe when I hear phrases like "there are less students in the room." There is a *Wikipedia* entry, "Fewer versus less," that decries strict prescriptive grammarians like me who want to insist that the comparative "fewer" be employed when modifying countable nouns. I guess that I am still not quite there!

And don't get me started on acronyms used in social media! I remember, back in the day when we used to write real letters to our friends and family, I would often sign off with an "lol"—an acronym we all understood at the time to mean "lots of love." I was thus quite

confused when I first encountered a "laughing-out-loud" lol acronym on Facebook; fortunately, I had students who could explain this new lol, as well as its off-color cousin lmao, to me. The other day, I got an email from my younger brother (yes, there are *still* old farts like me who use email!) that contained an "np" acronym that it only took me a minute or two to figure out was a shortened form of "no problem." I have come up with a new acronym, "Idgas" ("I don't give a sh-t") that I haven't yet had the courage to use on a public platform!

Endnote: As I have retired and moved out of the US, I am no longer faced with piles of student papers laced with problematic grammar, and I generally hear less spoken English than I used to. And, given the poor level of my Spanish, I am increasingly tolerant of the broken English that shopkeepers kindly trot out when trying to communicate with me. And as the astute reader of this essay will have realized, looking at those split infinitives and sentences that begin with "And" or "But" and that end with prepositions, I have even begun to internalize the language changes that used to bug me so much.

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