

THE GRUMPY GRAMMARIAN

Between you and I, irregardless of what you think, after exhausting myself writing the fulsome following column, its time for me to lay down.

(If this sentence doesn't bother you this column may not be for you. But more on that later.)

A friend of mine - (at least I thought he was) - told me this column should be called, not Frankly Speaking, but Crankily Speaking. I was surprised because I don't think of the column - or of myself - as being particularly cranky. Interesting. I hope. Amusing. Well, sometimes. But cranky? Not me.

But another friend gave me a book by the British writer Howard Jacobson called "Whatever It Is I Don't Like It." It's a collection of essays which really are cranky. And she signed it "From one curmudgeon to another." And an actress I know always greets me with "How's my favourite curmudgeon?" I routinely object. "I'm not a curmudgeon!" But maybe objecting only reinforces my curmudgeonliness.

According to online dictionaries, a curmudgeon is an "ill-tempered, cantankerous, usually old man".

Is that me?

Robbie Burns said:

"O wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us."

So is that how others see me? Ill-tempered, cantankerous, and old? Maybe I'll have to work on a couple of those. The third I can't do much about.

And sure, I grumble about slow traffic or waiting in line or being put on hold and having to listen to that awful piped in music - but does that make me a curmudgeon? Or just a member of the human race?

One thing I will admit to being curmudgeonly about is grammar and proper usage. English may not be as mellifluous as French or Italian, but employed properly it can be very precise, and even pleasing to the ear. It is the language of Shakespeare and Leonard Cohen after all, and I like to see it used correctly.

So, to return to the sentence I began with: --

Between you and I, irregardless of what you think, after exhausting myself writing the fulsome following column, its time for me to lay down.

You may not have noticed on a first quick read, but now that I've drawn attention to it, most of you will see that the sentence is actually a grammatical and usage train wreck, with as many as five mistakes. A corrected version would read:

Between you and me, regardless of what you think, after exhausting myself writing the thorough following column, it's time for me to lie down.

A couple of these corrections may be debatable. Hey! A grammar debate! What fun! Certainly "irregardless" is widely used but, in fact, it doesn't appear in the Oxford English Dictionary at all. As for "fulsome", most people take it to mean complete or thorough as in "He gave a fulsome account of the event." But in his Dictionary of Troublesome Words Bill Bryson says it's one of the most misused words in the English language. It actually means excessive to the point of insincerity, its synonyms including "oily", "smarmy" and "unctuous". So make sure not to greet your friends fulsomely.

(By the way, my grammar checker only flagged two of the five mistakes, so you can't always rely on it to smooth over your grammatical rough spots.)

The question is - does any of this matter? Riddled with mistakes though the above sentence may be, people will still get

the gist: i.e. *I wore myself out writing this column and need a rest.*

Is fussing over spelling and grammar and correct word usage just being snobbish, or pedantic, or, well, curmudgeonly? After all, if I write "Don't judge a book by it's cover" it's wrong, but there's no confusion. Everyone would know exactly what I mean. So where's the harm?

In other words - does grammar matter?

In my case I try to be a practitioner of good grammar and proper English usage. I think distinguishing between "infer" and "imply" isn't mere pedantry. It's a matter of accuracy. Of clarity. But I'm not a grammar Nazi - "No apostrophe for you!" - who delights in pointing out other people's errors. People in glass houses and all that. I admit to slipping up now and then, catching myself saying "Can I" when I really mean "May I".

And it's not easy to be a strict grammar purist. Even a dedicated grammar Nazi, phoning a family member, has probably started the conversation by saying "Hi. It's me." (I certainly have.) Strictly speaking, this is ungrammatical. But saying it correctly - "It is I." - sounds a little arch. You'd have to be the fussiest of fussbudgets to insist on "It is I." So how finicky should we be? I've read that Scott Fitzgerald was a terrible speller - but somehow *The Great Gatsby* is still a great book.

And you enlist in the grammar police at your peril. Personally, I'd rather keep my friends. As a curmudgeon they're hard to come by and there's no quicker way to lose them than by fussily correcting their grammar. (Well, singing the praises of Donald Trump might be quicker, I guess.)

And being a sensitive grammar stickler these days feels like a losing battle. In the age of emails and texts proper punctuation is already on life support. Can proper sentence

structure be far behind? While diehard grammarians poke their fingers in the language dike, denouncing mistakes left and right and crying "Sticklers unite!!", the world carries on blithely, obliviously. Ungrammatically.

But all may not be lost. There are still people out there who care about the difference between "disinterested" and "uninterested", between "flout" and "flaunt", who are prepared to man the barricades - or at least write to the Globe and Mail - to defend the importance of grammar and proper usage.

In a recent piece in the Globe titled "Why I've Stopped Correcting My Kids' Grammar" the author calls grammatical rules mere "window dressing", equating them to fiddly and antiquated Emily Post type rules of etiquette such as always spooning soup away from yourself. She says when her teenage boys say "me and Ethan are friends" or "should of" instead of "should have" she doesn't want to break the flow of child-parent communication by correcting them.

Well, she was absolutely lambasted in the comments section. Readers accused her of being nothing less than a bad parent. They said that language skills are an important part of the capital that parents pass along to their children, that potential employers will judge her sons by how they speak and write, that she was compromising their futures by refusing to teach them proper grammar. And on and on.

So maybe there's a silent - or not so silent - army of grammar sticklers who haven't given up the fight. (Or wait, shouldn't that be "which hasn't" - a singular verb to agree with the singular subject "army"? It sounds a bit awkward that way, but if God had wanted grammar to be easy he wouldn't have invented the pesky dangling participle.)

You may remember the book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* which, quite unexpectedly, became an international bestseller a few

years ago. And it wasn't even about grammar or word usage but about *punctuation*, surely the driest and least interesting rest stop on the language highway.

But who am I to disparage punctuation? In extreme cases it can completely change the meaning of a sentence, as in:

"A woman, without her man, is nothing."

As opposed to: "A woman: without her, man is nothing."

Cute. But examples like this are exceptions. More often than not punctuation lapses are minor misdemeanours rather than capital offenses. And really, couldn't we all get along just fine never using a semicolon again? And do the intricacies of apostrophes really get the blood flowing?

Well, evidently they do for the good folks at the Apostrophe Protection Society; yes it's an actual organization based, not surprisingly, in England. (Hey, I used a semicolon!) Their mission is to spot signs which say things like "No Dog's Allowed" and write fastidious letters to the offenders demanding corrections, but to me this verges on a Monty Python routine. I can picture John Cleese as the Apostrophe Nazi, berating a hapless greengrocer who has advertised "New Potatoe's".

Centuries ago, Dr. Johnson said you shouldn't try to "embalm" language. It should be allowed to evolve. And most reasonable, literate people wouldn't argue with that. After all, the English of Chaucer is almost unrecognizable today. But, without being tedious sticklers or grammar Nazis, don't we have to draw the line somewhere? If I say "Nice to meet youse," or "I like this here house," the meaning is perfectly clear, but it sounds like chalk screeching on a blackboard. It's just wrong, grammatically and, well, aesthetically. It's hard to see how it represents an evolutionary step forward.

And if that makes me a snob, or a curmudgeon, so be it. Do we really want a language where anything goes, where people can

just say whatever they like, grammar-wise? Evolution is all very well, but can lead to purple loosestrife, choking out everything around it. Just because a plant - or a word - is seen everywhere doesn't mean it's good.

Of course, I'm only talking about English - (the one language I can speak - my failing). It's a notoriously random and difficult language, with rules riddled with exceptions, and exceptions to the exceptions, often with no discernible logic. Why in heaven's name, is the plural of mouse mice, and the plural of sheep, well, sheep? And let's not get started on children and oxen.

The quirky difficulty of English is encapsulated in the following riddle: - How do you spell fish? Answer: GHOTI. That is - GH as in LAUGH, O as in WOMEN, and TI as in MOTION. Aaah - FISH! English is a wonderful language, but it's a wonder anyone ever learns to speak or write it flawlessly, unless they start in the cradle.

But does insisting on proper grammar make using English harder? Or easier? Playwright David Mamet - a curmudgeon himself - says writing is a craft, like building a table. If you don't use your tools properly and make one leg too short your table will rattle. Similarly, in writing, correct words and grammar and punctuation are your tools to build a solid structure. So, if someone accuses me of being a grumpy grammar curmudgeon I say - "Au contraire. I'm just a humble wordsmith who doesn't want my sentences to rattle."

And if you happened to spot a grammatical no-no somewhere in this essay - which wouldn't surprise me - don't feel obliged to tell me. It will just make me even more curmudgeonly.

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