



Defending of Our Language Christian

BY Dennis Peterson

Listen to typical conversations among your students during lunch or between classes. Do they sound something like the following dialogue?

“So, how was your, like, conference with Mr. Saginaw?”

“It was like unreal, really. I go in, and he goes, ‘I’m concerned about your grades in history, Jessica.’ Like he thinks I don’t know they’re bad, y’know.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Then I go, ‘What’s wrong with my grades? I mean, like, I’m cool. I’m doin’ my best, y’know?’”

“Totally.”

“And then he acts surprised, and he goes, ‘Not really, Jessica. I don’t think you’re really doing your best. You don’t pay attention in class or turn in assignments on time.’”

“And I’m like, ‘Whatever. I feel like I’m doin’ my best. I’m cool with that.’”

“Totally awesome comeback, Jessica!”

“Yeah, I thought it was pretty cool, too. But Saginaw was totally uncool. And he goes, ‘If your grades don’t improve, I’m going to have to schedule a conference with your parents. You might not be eligible for extracurricular activities.’”

“Oh! That’s so unfair, y’know!”

“Like really! I mean, y’know?”

Sound familiar? Or perhaps you have read memos to parents from administrators or other teachers (never from *you*, of course!) that read something like the following example (Newman 1975):

The Supervisor of Reading . . . asks parents to provide readiness experiences for their preschool children by encouraging them to reaffirm their perceptions on a tactile level. Parents are to model behavior that characterizes their values.

And which typical parent is supposed to understand what that means?

The author was appalled recently while proctoring junior high achievement tests to find among the administration instructions to be read to the students instances of split infinitives, imprecise word choice, sentences ended with prepositions, and incorrect subject-verb constructions. These are the very types of problems we should be expecting our students to find and correct on such tests, not to find in the test’s instructions!

Other problems include confusing *that* and *which*, attributing degrees to uniqueness, using nonwords (e.g., by adding *-wise* to legitimate words, producing such monstrosities as *educationwise*, *compositionwise*, etc.), and using “I feel” when they should be stating what they *think* or *believe*.

the Integrity in the School

“DISEASED ENGLISH”

The Oxford Companion to the English Language refers to this problem as “diseased English” (McArthur, 1992). E. Newman (1974) warned, “Language is in decline. Not only has eloquence departed but simple, direct speech as well, though pomposity and banality have not.”

Evidence of the problem is apparent in practically every facet of society, especially in broadcasting, advertising, education, and politics. For example, NBC’s *Today Show* hostess Soledad O’Brien reported on air recently (March 30, 2003) that a Tennessee woman had “busted out of jail.” We might expect to hear such incorrect usage and poor word choice from an uneducated interviewee, but we expect better from a college-educated, experienced, professional communicator.

Newman (1988) once analyzed color commentary by veteran sports announcer John Madden and counted fifty-nine y’know’s and nineteen I tell ya’s or I tell ya one thing’s.

Political analysts have regularly referred to one group as the “Democratic Party” so long that even the Republicans have begun to believe that is the group’s name, whereas in reality it is the *Democrat* Party. Politics is also filled with euphemisms, jargon, nonwords, and bureaucratic “officialese.” The goal of some politicians seems to be either to confuse or to deceive or to mislead their constituents by the language they use. If they cannot convince by sound reason and clear logic, they will obfuscate and mystify—and get reelected!

Advertising further aggravates the problem by introducing clever misspellings or misused words for the sole purpose of making them different, thereby attracting attention and

making the advertised products or services memorable. Naïve and impressionable students grow up thinking that such spellings or usage are correct. For example, some readers might remember the student who, when asked in a spelling bee to spell *relief*, responded, “R-O-L-A-I-D-S.”

Political correctness (PC) is also forcing our society into extremes of incorrect usage and convoluted and distorted sentence constructions. Some examples seem relatively innocuous and utilitarian, such as the elimination of the use of *fireman*, which restricts that occupation to males, in favor of the broader, more inclusive *firefighter*. But other examples emphasize unnecessary pure PC at the expense of ease of understanding.

For example, in eliminating *all* use of a generic masculine pronoun, the policemen of PC force writers and speakers to develop monstrous, convoluted, and grammatically incorrect constructions such as the following: “If a *writer* [singular, nonspecified gender] wants [verb for use with a singular subject] to get published, *they* [incorrect plural pronoun] (or *he/she*) must . . .”

Perhaps the ultimate example of PC and its detrimental effect on the language came last year when organizations of minorities vocally and vociferously opposed one author’s use of the word *niggardly* in an article, implying that the word somehow was a racial slur when in reality it is a legitimate

word that has nothing whatsoever to do with race. (It actually means “grudgingly” or “stingily.”) What other words next will be expunged from our vocabulary because of the ignorance of a few misguided zealots?

Further complicating and adding to the PC problem is the fact that today’s immigrants are not

following the example of the immigrants of earlier eras. Immigrants once entered America and immediately adopted and learned to use the language of their new homeland. Although they often continued to use their native tongues in their

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homes, they spoke English in public and insisted that their children become fluent in it because they recognized that the key to their success was their assimilation into the American society, and the first and most critical step toward that goal was to adopt the language.

Today's immigrants, however, tend to continue using solely their native tongue, refuse to learn English, and expect Americans to learn their language or make everything—from ballots and voting instructions to classroom curricula—multilingual. With so many minorities now in the nation, this attitude is leading to divisiveness and the Balkanization of the country rather than strengthening the nation through the unity that comes from having a single national language.

English instruction today often deemphasizes the traditional rules of grammar and usage. Some of those rules are openly ignored or denigrated, including the prohibitions against splitting infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions. Teachers of writing focus more on “creativity” than on rules of grammar, saying that emphasis on rules makes the language inflexible and stifles creativity. Yet, student writing skills continue to deteriorate—and students still do not know the rules of grammar.

Although William Strunk, coauthor with E. B. White of the classic writing guide *The Elements of Style*, “was quick to acknowledge the fallacy of inflexibility and the danger of doctrine,” he stated, “It is an old observation that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he [the writer] is certain of doing as well, he will probably do best to follow the rules” (White, 1959).

We have seen just a few examples of how our language has deteriorated not only among our youth but also within the ranks of professionals, most sadly among educators. At one extreme, we see a gross relaxation of specific terminology that results in the use of vague, meaningless, and needlessly repetitive terms. At the other extreme, we find meaningless jargon, the logic-defying inanities of PC, and “educationeze” that defies understanding by any parent—or maybe even the educators themselves.

CONSEQUENCES

So what is the big deal? you might be thinking. Why make such a fuss over a few picky issues of English grammar and semantics? Besides, no one follows the nit-picky rules of grammar and usage anymore. Let the language evolve!

The “big deal” is that we are not referring to the “evolution” of the language whereby new, useful, and meaningful words—words that reflect new technology, discoveries, or improvements—are added and archaic words slowly pass from usage. We are referring to linguistic decline that indicates and leads to more serious decline within society.

According to Atkinson (1999), “decay in the general use of language [is] the indisputable hallmark of a declining civilization.” Social and moral decline are linked to and accompany linguistic decline. Newman (1974) declares that “the state of the language is a commentary on the state of our society.” He continues, “Language . . . sets the tone of our society,” and “we would be better off if we spoke and wrote with exactness and grace, and if we preserved, rather than destroyed, the value of our language.” McCrum et al. (1986) reveal that “you cannot raise social standards without raising speech standards.”

Poor, lazy, sloppy writing reflects poor, lazy, sloppy thinking—and that is dangerous in any democratic society. Furthermore, a relaxed attitude toward the common language results in a relaxed attitude toward documents generally and the documents of our nation’s founding and the Word of God particularly. In fact, to say that the resulting deterioration of language threatens the very existence of our civilization is not an overstatement.

The problem is much like what a farmer faces when his fields begin to erode. Unless he does something quickly to

arrest and remedy the erosion, his fields will soon be destroyed, worthless and unproductive. Similarly, if we—those who are involved in any capacity with Christian education—do not arrest the deterioration of our language and do our part to correct it, the nation will suffer catastrophic consequences.


We only accelerate that erosion if we ourselves misuse the language or, offering the justification that we want to “relate” to our students, begin to use their fad words and phrases, make the same mistakes, or advise our students to “write the way you talk” when they do not use the language correctly in their speech, which tends to be even more relaxed than the written language. As was suggested at the beginning of this article, just listen to your students for a few minutes to hear how they talk. Examine closely what they are writing. Do we really want them to write as they talk?

CURATIVE MEASURES

Perhaps we cannot arrest the poor use of language by adult TV reporters, news analysts, politicians, or advertising copywriters, but we can influence our students’ use of the language. After all, they will be tomorrow’s reporters, analysts, politicians, educators, and writers. Newman (1975) declares, “If American English is to be saved, it will . . . have to be saved by individuals, or by small guerrilla groups that refuse to accept nonsense”

Following are some simple suggestions for how the classroom teacher can help preserve our great language.

1. Expose students to exemplary writers. Much of the learning of proper usage is the result of reading the works of writers who knew how to use the language well. White (1984) wrote that “only those who learn to read efficiently



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come to write efficiently. . . .” The typical American reads as little as he must, few people have the habit of reading to begin with, and much of what they do read is not exemplary. White declared, “When the *habit* [of reading and writing] goes, the *skill* goes” (emphasis added). Assign readings from authors whose works show that they knew how to use the language properly and effectively.

2. Expose incorrect usage in media, and explain what it should be. Many students do not know that they are using the language incorrectly; they are merely imitating the usage of TV personalities, sports figures, and their peers—all of whom may be wrong. Point out examples of incorrect usage whenever they occur, and then show the proper usage and explain why that is the right way.

3. Reward proper usage, and have students correct improper usage. Mark and return to the students papers that fail to follow the rules of our language and have them correct the mistakes rather than merely giving up and “going with the flow” of deteriorating language because it seems like a hopeless case. Correction must begin somewhere; make that place your classroom. Emphasize what *ought* to be (prescriptive) rather than merely allowing what *is* (descriptive). Point out what is, but always contrast that with what should be. Show how correct usage is more effective than incorrect usage in accomplishing the goal of communication. Emphasize to your students the fact that “no craftsman can be competent who does not respect his tools” (White, 1984), and language is every person’s most important tool.

4. Insist upon following Fowler’s principles. According to the foremost authorities on the proper use of English, Fowler and Fowler (1993), prefer the familiar word over the unfamiliar word, the concrete over the abstract, a single word over a multiple-word phrase, and the short word over the long word. The goal of any writer, they wrote, should be “to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous, and lucid.”

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5. Have students write some things without the aid of a computer. Michael Heim (1990) wrote, “Using computers for writing, we experience language as electronic data, and the machines reinforce information over significance.” Don’t prohibit computer use, of course, but limit it. For example,

have the students write short assignments in longhand. Have them write first drafts of longer papers by hand before doing a final version on the computer.

6. Emphasize creativity within the confines of the rules of proper usage. Rules are not meant to stifle creativity; they provide boundaries within which creativity can best be expressed.

Strict adherence to rules of grammar no more restrict creativity in writing than the Ten Commandments restrict the exercise of Christian liberty in Christ. Laissez faire perhaps is a good economic principle, but it is the death of language.

7. Insist upon following Orwell’s advice. Orwell (1946) insisted, “A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will [best] express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more concisely? Have I said any-

thing that is avoidably ugly?” Orwell detested “dying metaphors,” “verbal false limbs,” passive voice, “pretentious diction,” and “meaningless words.” So should we.

8. Emphasize correct usage across the curriculum, not just in English class. Critic Mencken (1946) declared, “In the American colleges and high-schools there is no faculty so weak as the English faculty. It is the common catch-all for aspirants to the birch who are too lazy or too feeble in intelligence to acquire any sort of exact knowledge, and the professional incompetence of its typical ornament is matched only by his hollow cocksureness.” Mencken’s denunciation is overstated, but typically English majors take primarily literature courses and few grammar courses; therefore, they often do not themselves receive instruction in proper language usage. Many people in that major who are able to “test out” of the few grammar courses that are required often would benefit from taking them. Prove Mencken wrong—at least in your school—by insisting on proper use

of the language in not only the English classes but also every other class in the school. Teach good language usage across the curriculum and at all grade levels.

9. Set the proper example by using the language correctly yourself, especially if you teach English. Nothing teaches more effectively than a good example, so be one. The first step is to assess your own intolerance with improper usage. Does it bother you? It should! Safire (1980) believes that frustration with the improper use of language “comes from a search for standards and values. We resent fogginess; we resist manipulation by spokesmen who use loaded words and catch phrases . . . and we are reaching for a firm foothold in fundamentals.” If you want students to follow that high standard, then set an even higher standard for yourself all the time, but especially when you are around students. When you speak and write, be aware of your role as an exemplar in how you express yourself.



Part of our moral obligation as both Americans and Christian educators is to be “salt and light.” One way of fulfilling that role is to work to preserve the integrity of our God-given language.

10. Dare to continue the fight at all costs—alone if necessary. Do not assume that if you launch a crusade for better English everyone on the faculty or in the student body will suddenly rally to your support. To the contrary, as Atkinson (1999) warns, “. . . in a declining community any citizen who retains respect for the truth must become alienated from the majority of his fellow citizens because they hate the truth.” If you fight language decay, you will be unpopular, at least for a while. Insisting on proper language use is not popular, it is not easy, and it tends to alienate people. It takes hard work. People resist change. But if you persevere, your students will learn to use the language properly. And proper use of the language—correct grammar; precise, broad, and rich vocabulary; and proper enunciation and pronunciation—is the mark of a well-educated person.

OUR OBLIGATION

Part of our moral obligation as both Americans and Christian educators is to be “salt and light.” One way of fulfilling that role is to work to preserve the integrity of our God-given language. As John Simon noted, “There is . . . a morality of language: an obligation to preserve and nurture its niceties, the fine distinctions, that have been handed down to us” (Ricks and Michaels, 1990).

Perhaps Friedrich von Schlegel summarized our task best. Consider well his words and then begin doing your part:

The case of the national language is at all times a sacred trust and a most important privilege of the higher orders of society. Every man of education should make it the object of his unceasing concern to preserve his language pure and entire, to speak it, so far as is in his power, in all its beauty and perfection (Mencken, 1989). ■

Dennis L. Peterson is a free-lance editor-writer with numerous published credits. He was a senior technical editor with Lockheed Martin Energy Systems, Inc. and taught English in Christian schools for 11 years. This article was copyrighted (c) 2003, Dennis L. Peterson. First North American rights.



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