Five Myths about Grammar

In a delightful spin on the Sherlock Holmes-Dr. John Watson relationship, the 1988 comedy *Without a Clue*, directed by Thom Eberhardt, proposes that the real author—and detective hero-- of the Sherlock Holmes stories is Dr. Watson. In this version, Watson pseudonymously recounts actual cases that he himself has solved. The good doctor cannot use his real name on the stories, because the upper-crust medical profession of his day would disown someone who moonlights as a "sleazy" PI and then writes about it in pulp fiction. Wanting to keep his medical career separate from his detective and publishing work, he needs a cover. Watson therefore narrates his adventures in the voice of their hero, Sherlock Holmes. To give his readers a flesh-and-blood Holmes in support of the fictional persona, Watson hires an actor, Reginald Kincaid (played by Michael Caine) to pose as the author and hero-detective. But when Kincaid proves to be a buffoon, Watson tries to get rid of him. Alas for the "real Holmes," he has done too good a job of selling the false one to the public. No one will believe that Dr. Watson could possibly be the detective. At one point Watson proposes a clever stratagem for dealing with some suspected criminals; he is completely ignored, as if invisible. The bumbling Holmes repeats the same suggestion and is idolized for his genius. What the movie seems to be pointing out is that people see the reality they have been manipulated to see: an Emperor-with-no-clothes theme expressed in a somewhat similar way in the Peter Sellers film *Being There* (also well worth a viewing).

You may ask why we are discussing films when our purpose purports to deal with grammar. We're "educatedly guessing" that a good many of you may consider grammar dry and boring, anti-creative and superficial (it's the content that counts, right?)—and besides, grammar is too hard, in fact, *impossible* to learn…. So we encourage you instead of doing your grammar lesson, and before returning to this discussion, to watch *Without a Clue*. As a matter of fact, we suggest that you also watch *Gandhi*, director Richard Attenborough's 1992 film about the celebrated civil rights leader (starring Ben Kingsley, who happens to play Dr. John Watson in *Without a Clue*). Who needs grammar? Happy viewing.

* * * *

Well, here we are back at the grammar table. Let's confront the bogeyman. Before we ask what is it that makes grammar *impossible* to learn, however, let's observe something fundamental about the two films that you have recently watched, *Without a Clue* and *Gandhi*. Let's go even further and suggest that you brainstorm and outline a comparison-contrast essay looking closely at the characters of Dr. Watson in the comedy and Mahatma Gandhi in the epic. Consider their personalities and especially their goals—their functions in the films. Decide whether you believe the two characters are more fundamentally similar or dissimilar, and why.

For those who may have seen a core similarity between the two characters of Dr. Watson and Mahatma Gandhi, both played by Ben Kingsley (*Sir* Ben Kingsley, excuse us), you probably observed that they each perform the same basic *function*: they are each the protagonist of the film in which they appear. For all their differences of personality and perhaps depth of character, they are the central character, the "hero," the person through whose eyes we see the story. Maybe this means that whenever we see Ben Kingsley listed as the leading actor, he will be playing the part of protagonist. But wait a minute—Ben Kingsley plays the pickpocket gang leader Fagin in Roman Polanski's version of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Fagin victimizes orphans, forces a gang of street urchins to support him. Whether or not we call Fagin a villain, he is most certainly an antagonist, not the protagonist. Kingsley hopes one day to play a villain in a James Bond film, too, and he is going to appear as a villain in an episode of the British Thunderbird series.

Our point is that the same actor may fulfill opposite functions in two different film stories, and if you understand that, you now equally understand a central principle of sentences: the same word may play different roles in a sentence. Furthermore, two words may, like two actors, differ considerably from each other in tone and personality and yet play essentially the same leading role in two different sentences. To recognize that, all you need to do is ask not what *the word is*, but what is the word *playing*?

The student aced the exam.

The teacher praised the student.

In the first sentence, the word "student" does the acting, so "student" is the subject of the action. In the second sentence, the word "teacher" does the acting, serves as subject, while the word "student" is acted upon. "Student" in the second example is the "object" of the action. This is where sentence analysis begins—in recognizing that you *can* see sentences. The first and possibly most harmful myth of all has been shattered—the false idea that grammar is *impossible*. That idea is as big a phoney as Reginald Kincaid (who is also a drunk, by the way). You, like the original Sherlock Holmes, in the words of Dr. Penner, a physician who has written about Holmes' physician's eye, may now observe "that which others do not know they can see" (*Acting on Words* para. 6, 129).

So the first myth about grammar is the false idea that it is impossible. What are some other myths about this misunderstood hero of communication? We will discuss a further three myths—numbers two, three, and four--and end by simply suggesting a fifth.

The second myth is that grammar is dry and boring. Grammar is simply the relationship of actors in a sentence to each other and the story they are telling. These actors (words and word elements) come from Latin, Greek, German, Danish, and French as well as other languages, each with colourful cultures and histories. English is a polyglot language (don't ask too many questions about what its great-grandparents got up to). Admittedly this makes it a little unpredictable, but hardly dry or boring. It has more words in its vocabulary than any other human language, each word denoting and connoting things of immense importance to the people who created them to serve in the business of living and stretching what it means to be human. Unless you are uninterested in life, this background should not be dry or boring.

The third myth is that grammar is superficial, and that those who become "hung up" on it (like martinet teachers) oppose creativity. Students sometimes object that lowering marks when the "content" is good is petty and punitive. But do these objections make sense when we think about them in light of what writing really is? If an apprenticing artist has the intention of painting a tree but lets his paintbrush wander all

over so that we have a hard time knowing if a tree is really the subject, do we say, well, the idea was good, so full marks for that? If a computer programmer mixes up the sequence of her code, so that the program will not function, do we say, that's okay, the content was good? Can we really separate what is said from *how* it is said? In fact, outstanding artists in all forms of expression are those who, in service of imagination, practise the precision and technical dexterity to make their works truly sing (on key, in harmony).

Before moving on to the fourth myth, it is important to acknowledge that many fine thinkers and writers *do* recognize that style and grammar constrain as well as assist us. Official rules *can* "hang us up." This is not because grammar is superficial, though, but because it is powerful, formative-- a potential limitation to free thought and expression. The "rebels"—or perhaps the better word is "revolutionaries"-- turn convention against itself to correct the problem. A classic example is G.I. Gurdjieff's satirical, iconoclastic teachings *Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson*. Originally written in Armenian and Russian, the text was translated by a team of language specialists closely guided by Gurdjieff, who himself could converse in numerous languages, including his own eccentric form of English:

> "You remember that when I explained to you how these favourites of yours define the 'flow-of-time' I said that when the organ Kundabuffer with all its properties was removed from their presence, and they began to have the same duration of existence as all normal three-brained beings arising everywhere in our Universe, that is, according to what is called the Foolasnitamnian principle, they also should then have existed without fail until their 'second-being-body-Kesdjan' had been completely coated in them and finally perfected by Reason up to the sacred 'Ishmesh.'"
>
> (Gurdjieff 27)

[MLA note: The quotation marks are present in this case, despite the in-set format, because those same quotation marks occur in the text—the speaker is being quoted by the author.]

Literary critics of 1950, when this work appeared, were generally appalled by its seemingly ornate, loquacious style and use of so many invented terms from other languages. Gurdjefff's oral use of English was even more alienating for many listeners, because its grammar was far less standard than that in the passage above, which mainly violates rules of orthodox vocabulary. In keeping with many esoteric spiritual and psychological traditions, however, Gurdjieff believed that the majority of us are simply "machines," creatures of habit, knee-jerk thinkers. Overcoming this lack of mindfulness, he believed, is no easy task. One of the goals of writing and art is to shock us out of our complacency, to make us, as Icelandic-Canadian poet Kristjana Gunnars would say, look at what we are seeing and listen to what we are hearing. An officially decreed "correct" style and "correct" grammar can lull us into smug snobbery. Rehabilitating the official literary English of his day into Beelzebub's English allowed Gurdjieff to challenge complacency not only in what he said but in how he said it. It allowed him to battle the ethno-centric limits at the heart of any grammar.

Another example of someone who did this, another language iconoclast, was British artist-poet William Blake (1757-1825). In the prelude to his monumental illustrated psychodrama "Jerusalem," he declared that "Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race!" His poetry and prose were seldom fettered by conventions of grammar and punctuation.

I call them by their English names: English the rough basement.

Los built the stubborn structure of the language, acting against

Albions melancholy, who must else have been a Dumb despair.

("Jerusalem" 2, 58-60)

What have I said? What have I done? O all-powerful Human Words!

("Jerusalem" 1, 41-42)

Blake recognizes, even celebrates, the “rough” character of English. Yet he also allows that it is the “basement,” the underlying base and unconscious provider of our culture. Human words are “all-powerful.” He knew that every syllable and squiggle he burnt into copper plates and then printed onto illuminated pages would affect his reader. On one hand, the self-taught artist-poet was proud not to follow conventional guidelines: "Thank God I never was sent to school/ To be flogd into following the style of a Fool" (qtd in Ackroyd 23). On the other hand, he knew full well that word order and punctuation communicate meaning. He took pains to use a language and style that were consistent if original—ones that could be learned by readers willing to take equal pains.

Another writer who defied many of the language conventions of his time was James Joyce (1882-1941). His prose works *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* became renowned for their learned, playful use of language. In the spirit of Blake, Joyce once said that it had taken him seven years to write *Finnegan’s Wake*, and he expected readers to be willing to spend seven years trying to decipher it. Again, we need to realize that while some writers break the rules on one hand, they set up other new, necessary rules on the other. They allow for the act of communication to prevail; they simply assign it new codes in an effort to refresh awareness, as a thunderstorm refreshes the air.

A related situation occurs when writers play with grammar to welcome ambiguity for reasons beyond those of a typical business communication (which seeks to eliminate ambiguity). No less an authority than H.W. Fowler observes in various parts of his famous *Modern English Usage* that achieved writers such as Shakespeare and Dickens can be found to break grammar rules or to use words in unofficial ways. Often they do so to multiply meanings or access desired sounds. Furthermore, rules that used to be considered absolute are now recognized by the *Oxford English Dictionary* to be relative. Infinitives may be split. It seems likely that in another decade or so the rule against using “their” as the possessive pronoun for the gender indefinite singular may be more relaxed than it already is (*Oxford* and some American grammars recognize that this rule against “their” may be on the way out). English is an ideal medium for such efforts of renewal, since it is clearly an ever-changing language, no matter how hard certain control-oriented types may wish to deny that fact. Certain grammar-checks “correct” *who* to *that* when the

referent is human, so students think that who is wrong—and from the species-centric point of view, perhaps it is. From another viewpoint, greater refinement and discrimination may be thought to confer superior opportunities for both clarity and nuance.

All of this is a way of leading to two well-known bits of wisdom: 1. rules are made to be broken, but 2. it is best not to break rules until you can understand and apply them. If you resent standard usage rules, remember Rudolf Steiner's admonition: "To know the serpent, get inside its skin."

If you don't get inside the serpent's skin, what happens? We might illustrate this by inviting you to consider, for now, just two of the 15 Common Errors presented in *Acting on Words* pages 550-564: CE 4 and CE 5 (553-54). You can do exercises in recognizing and solving them by going to our text enrichment site. Discuss these two "problems" with your classmates and instructor. What lies at their base is the simple problem of confusion. If your instructor writes "CE 4" (pronoun-antecedent problem) or "CE 5" (dangling modifier) beside your text, then you likely have a fundamental problem to solve: *You* may know exactly what you mean, but you have not said it in a way that allows your reader to know exactly what you mean.

The simplest of all little marks on the page—the humble comma— illustrates that no mark of guidance is insignificant: a comma more or less can play havoc if meaning is not considered. The following example should prove this point. On August 7, 2006, in an article entitled "Comma Quirk Irks Rogers," Grant Robertson reported in the *Globe and Mail* what could be "the most costly piece of punctuation in Canada." Rogers Communications had signed an agreement with Valiant Inc. allowing Rogers to attach cable lines across utility poles in the Maritimes for an annual fee of $9.60 per pole. A sentence in the contract reads as follows:

> The agreement shall continue in force for a period of five years from the date it is made, and thereafter for successive five-year terms, unless and until terminated by one-year prior notice in writing by either party.

In your opinion, according to strict and literal interpretation of standard punctuation, is this statement saying that the contract can be terminated only *after* its first five-year term (provided the one-year prior notice is given), or is it saying that the agreement can be terminated at any time, even within the *first* five-year term (provided the one-year notice is given)?

As it turned out, if the contract signers with Rogers had referred to the pertinent parts of *Acting on Words*, they could have avoided an estimated additional cost of $1 million. Aliant gave notice to terminate the contract and demanded a new more costly one, well within the first five years. According to Aliant, the second comma in the sentence (before the word "unless") means that the contract can be terminated at any time, by one-year notification. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), as reported by Robertson, agreed with Aliant. CRTC said that "[b]ased on the rules of punctuation, the comma in question allows for the termination of the contract at any time, without cause, upon one-year's written notice." As you might expect, Rogers was outraged. The company said the same thing that we have heard from many students responding to cautions to be clear. The company insisted that what it had meant to agree to was obvious, that it would not have put itself at risk by signing such a short-term contract. But what the company intended and what it said in writing were two different things. CRTC did correctly interpret the guidelines for punctuating restrictive and non-restrictive elements. Whether a subordinate clause is taken to be restrictive or not, as this case makes clear, can have a major impact on what the sentence says. Legal contracts in this society almost always rely on what has been written. If one party is afterwards allowed to say, "But that's not what I really meant to say," then all contracts could be altered to suit any number of new wishes: the words would, in effect, lose meaning. Rogers might in fact have paid upwards to $2.13 million had not the CRTC, like a sympathetic teacher, let them off with a partial warning.

Commenting on this case in a subsequent *Globe and Mail* article on August 16, 2007, Beppi Crosaiol reported that law instructors across the country would be giving their students "sober warnings about the importance of grammar" (A-7). Peter Ruby, a litigator at LLP, who also teaches telecommunications and Internet law at the University

of Toronto, told the *Globe* that the CRTC ruling merely follows the lead of Canadian courts, to take legal wordings at literal face value, unless doing so results in utterly absurd conclusions. Ruby referred to another multimillion-dollar dispute over punctuation (in that case over a semicolon). Another litigator, Timothy Pinos, told the *Globe* that although he had sided with Rogers—because why would an initial five-year term have been established if it could be ended at any time—the CRTC ruling underscored a general decline in understanding of punctuation, also demonstrated by the remarkable sales among business people of Lynn Truss's grammar guide *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*. Said Pinos: "I think this reinforces the lessons that everyone is taught at some point in their [sic] [1]legal career. Write as clearly and simply as possible" (A-7). Here we find an opportune occasion to remind you that the common errors portion of *Acting on Words* connects directly with its opening discussion of written communication versus oral forms. The CRTC specifically favoured written submissions over oral presentations. Not simply law students but all students should review the advice in Chapter 1: to keep in mind the special challenges of writing—to keep in mind that writing must convey in words alone, without feedback or paralanguage, meanings that are otherwise conveyed with the help of supplementary media. We routinely *underestimate* the requirements of clear writing. Indifference to punctuation and grammar, as the Rogers case makes clear, virtually guarantees that our written communications will be or might be misunderstood, sometimes with dire results. In other words, the myth that grammar is superficial could hardly be more incorrect.

The fourth myth about grammar- previously anticipated by our discussion of those revolutionaries who knowingly defy conventional "Fetters"-- is that there are only *two* kinds of grammar: wrong (the kind *you* use) and right (the kind the teacher or the

[1] The term "sic" in square editor's brackets indicates that the editor wishes to signal some sort of error in the original that has been left intact. Editors thereby reassure readers that they have copied accurately precisely what was written or said. Do you see the "error"? It is the use of the possessive pronoun form "their" to agree with a gender indefinite singular pronoun (everyone). This is discussed under CE 4, along with the problem of confusion caused when a pronoun lacks a clear antecedent or referent. Here we find a litigator talking about the need for correct grammar yet ignoring the traditional agreement rule forbidding "their" in agreement with "everyone," or "she" or "he." If a lawyer speaking to the *Globe and Mail* on the matter of grammar does not follow this traditional rule, can we disagree with the *Oxford Dictionary* that the rule appears to be under challenge? English is an ever-changing language. This adds to the fun of making writerly decisions based on purpose and audience awareness. Many English teachers and editors still insist that you not use "their" as Pinos has done in this quotation.

grammar book wants you to use). That idea, while understandable, is ridiculous if we remember the fact that every writing occasion, based on audience and purpose, differs and demands therefore a unique tone and style suited to the need. Bob Dylan's 2004 autobiography *Chronicles Volume I* carries on the voice of his songs, presumably a cross between his own informal voice and the folksy mythical (using the word "myth" here in a positive sense) voices of the many American troubadours he admires, starting with Woody Guthrie. This voice—something of a persona—commits the so-called 15 common errors on almost every page. It is rife with slang and knowing use of colloquial cliché. But the voice is consistent, highly artistic and effective. The "errors" in standard grammar and punctuation serve the writer's intended purpose and audience. They are not the sorts of errors that cause the reader to lose a precise understanding of what is being communicated. You may say that if that is so, and considering that *Chronicles* likely rakes in more money in a month than *Acting on Words* – even foisted on victim classes—could do in a four-year cycle—why worry about grammar? Again, keep in mind that *Chronicles* and other solid informal writing of its kind do not *lack* grammar. They follow their own *own* grammar consistently. This sort of writing adapts to a purpose different from that of standard scholarly analysis and persuasion, different from academic writing. The 15 common errors presented in *Acting on Words* simply advise you of standard usage expectations that apply in scholarly publishing. Learn these standards for academic and similar purposes, break them for other purposes.

If you speak English as a foreign language, or if you feel as if you do (which most of us would admit, if we were honest), then you can turn that sense of powerlessness into a power. In evolving your own voice as a writer (at least, as a creative writer), you can institute *your* English, drawing upon the words you know, as you know them, yet doing so, of course, with awareness of your reader. If your writing is a personal essay, memoir, short story, poem, or creative non-fiction piece, choosing *not* to follow standard usage in some ways may be a decided benefit to the work as a whole. Originality is in too short supply, partly because we have been buffaloed by rules and rule-ridden atmospheres into believing it best to hold silent. Grammar *isn't* a matter of right and wrong. It *is* a matter of mindfulness, of *thinking* and making decisions. A core of thinking is recognizing how deeply we and our readers are influenced by the so-called grammar level of sentences,

whether we admit it or not. In your personal, creative work, explore deviations, innovations. In your submissions to a scholarly press, remember the standard rules for grammar and punctuation. This prepares us for the fifth myth.

Ultimately a careful use of grammar and punctuation to suit your declared purpose is an act of respect. It is an act of respect for your reader, your purpose, your craft, and therefore yourself as well as others. It attests to awareness of community and the importance of community, to the need for precision, accuracy, and subtlety in the discussions that concern community. We strongly encourage you to read the persuasive speech "Language Arts or Language Departs?" by Monica Dickens (Text Enrichment Site, Chapter 16). It provides further context and examples to help explain the ideas we have presented in this essay. It would be most understandable if you do harbour some or even all of the myths about grammar that we have just discussed. Our society cannot be said to be doing its utmost to enlighten its citizens about language. Is that perhaps because someone somewhere realizes—however unconsciously—that those who know language intimately are more liable than many others to see and question "convenient untruths" and to begin to utter "inconvenient truths"? George Orwell, for one, would reply, "Yes." (See his essay "Politics and the English Language," *Acting on Words* 471-481). Recognizing subjects and verbs may seem to have nothing to do with freedom, democracy, and respect for community. That assumption, we suggest, is the fifth myth about grammar. Perhaps you can decide whether it is less or more significant than the first one.

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