

Are We Entering a Postgrammatical Age?

Moderator:

Cheryl Iverson
AMA Scientific Journals
Chicago, Illinois

Panelists:

Lorraine Loviglio
New England Journal of Medicine
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Concord, Massachusetts

Margaret Mahan
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Chicago, Illinois

Reporter:

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St Jude Children's Research Hospital
Memphis, Tennessee

Do grammar and usage matter any more? The overflow crowd at this session proved that members of CSE, at least, still care passionately about them. As hotel staff wheeled in stacks of extra chairs to accommodate the throng, moderator Cheryl Iverson, chair of the AMA Manual of Style Committee, introduced the topic question: Is the desire for rapid publication changing the perception that good grammar and correct usage are necessary?

Lorraine Loviglio, until recently writer of the *Science Editor* "Word Watcher" column, was first to address the question. She quickly set a humorous tone by announcing the panelists' original title for the session: "Lie or Lay? . . . Whatever". On a more serious note, Loviglio described

some current trends that are accelerating the erosion of language. Pressures created by instant electronic publication, a lack of interest in reading among the young, and the view that cultural standards are elitist are increasingly obscuring the distinctions that allow nuance and precision in language. "Pandering" descriptive dictionaries encourage the abandonment of standards by legitimizing incorrect usage. Several examples elicited choruses of groans from the audience. One dictionary listed the use of "it's" as a possessive pronoun and acknowledged "kudo" as a singular noun. "What's next?" Loviglio wondered. "Should one pathos now be called a patho?" Perhaps her most disturbing revelation was the advocacy by the National Council of Teachers of English of the use of "they" and "their" as singular pronouns.

Loviglio acknowledged that language must be and has always been dynamic and flexible. She did not object to change itself, but to the impoverishment of language through carelessness and complacent ignorance. She suggested that as science editors we should be among the last to set aside distinctions that preserve clarity, because clarity is often a life-and-death matter in scientific communication. She predicted that the language will continue to absorb change while we, "the nannies", continue to try to impose order on it.

Panelist Margaret Mahan, now revising the *Chicago Manual of Style*, spoke of the importance of time. It takes time, she said, to ensure that our language is correct—and we should take that time. She suggested

that placing too great a value on speed inevitably causes errors. As an example, she described finding "horrific" misuse in several language- and word-oriented Web sites. Mahan recommended that we distinguish between solecisms, or the small "nuisance" errors that do not compromise clarity, and errors that obscure the meaning of words. She reminded listeners that vigorous writing, as Strunk and White aver, "requires . . . that every word tell."

To Cheryl Iverson, it's all about passion. Those of us who are passionate about language know that by maintaining our language we maintain the vehicle that allows clear expression of individuality and of fact. Those who are passionate about profit may find the highest level of quality expendable, especially if it is not demanded in the marketplace. And those who are passionate about speed tend to eschew the rigidity of rules, focusing not on "how language has been", but on "how language will be". Despite its increasingly rapid evolution, however, language continues to have its basis in the past. Iverson predicted that the passion for language will remain strong enough to temper the pressures created by speed and greed with a counterpressure toward quality.

Audience participation in this session was enthusiastic. Although too numerous to recount in detail, questions and comments about usage included this one: If "actionable" is an acceptable adjective, what about the microwave container that warns "Caution: not ovenable"? 