

Each to Their Own Taste (Grrrr . . .)

If a time machine whisked us back to the era of Beowulf, we would have difficulty in understanding the people, and they would have a tougher time getting meaning out of what we say. The language—the English language, mind you—would be what both groups were speaking. But times change.

With that passage of time, words change, vocabularies change, meanings change. We no longer say “ye” or “thou”, but we do spout reams of “byte”, “ram”, “windshield wiper”, “zipper”, “static”, “boob tube”—all created in recent years. Because of the growth of civilization, our language had to expand and change. English undergoes changes because of newly created situations but also because of changes in use. Language must follow the advances of our society—or the way we use the language.

“Ain’t” is a great example. According to Fowler,¹ it originated in the middle 1700s and was common among English cockneys. Later it became strongly discredited and finally was totally frowned on. Today it is considered nonstandard, vernacular, and colloquial and is so listed in many dictionaries; still it gets used in the exceptional case. But most conversations and writings eschew it.

I thought a lot about this problem over the last few months as I heard and saw the repetition—in print and in sound—of what I think is the most frequent mistake in English grammar today: failure to have a personal pronoun agree with its antecedent noun in number (or gender).

The list of examples in the sidebar is purely illustrative—and collected in a matter of a couple of days without actually searching the subject. And they come not from uneducated or unsophisticated people. In fact, rarely a day passes that I do not hear on television or read in newspapers or magazines or see in my mail blatant examples of this error. It gets on my nerves.

There’s a special aspect for news media, reporters, and other writers. Part of my observation of print media tells me that most of these errors are found in quotations from some interviewed source and a great number occur in sports reporting. Journalistically, we were all taught that you must put into

quotation marks exactly word for word what was said, with no additions or deletions. If a reporter asks a question and the third baseman says (his actual words), “Our team don’t make no effort”, would a reporter use that exact quotation? Two actual newspaper quotes illustrate that the rule is being followed: (by a major league football player) “I think I’m definitely cuter than her” and (by an athlete’s father) “Me and [her] mom both had a chance. . . .”

I don’t question the wisdom of this common custom, and it seems to be followed almost universally. However, if an interviewee uses foul language, the writer often will eliminate it and suggest an acceptable substitute. For example, recently an art gallery director was quoted in a newspaper, “It’s a [freaking] container.” So the writer didn’t quote exactly but got the meaning across by bracketing a more suitable word in its place. And most people would understand what she actually said.

If bracketing is acceptable in these cases, why not the same approach when there is a grammatical error? “Our team [doesn’t] make [any] effort” explains it all, and the speaker is not embarrassed by seeing his grammatical error in print (if he recognizes it). However, it does underline the error for knowledgeable readers—and that can be embarrassing.

The *Associated Press Stylebook*² says, “Never alter quotations even to correct minor grammatical errors or word usage. Casual minor tongue slips may be removed by using ellipses but even that should be done with extreme caution.” That raises several questions: Is disagreement in number between noun and pronoun “minor”? Or is it a slip of the tongue? Who decides? When?

Alternatively, the writer could stay away from direct quotations and say, “Sam Collins said that his team doesn’t make any effort.” Problem solved, but the reporter has to be able to recognize that there is an error.

The more I think about these situations, the more I ask myself whether it is time for us to change what we consider acceptable. This is the question: If more and more people are using it, should we (or shouldn’t we) change the rules to keep up with the times—and the common usage? If many educated people—

ARNOLD MELNICK recently retired as executive vice chancellor and provost of the Health Professions Division of Nova Southeastern University. He is a columnist for the *Journal of the American Medical Writers Association* and enjoys further forays into his lifelong interest—writing and editing.

including writers, editors, advertising people, and politicians—are doing this daily, maybe it is time for a change. Has the time come for modification of the grammar rules—or acceptance by general consensus?

Here's the dilemma. If so many people use this "incorrect" construction, especially in speech but also frequently in writing, should we consider it no longer an error? Should we classify it as a colloquialism (which position "ain't" now occupies) that makes half the population shudder while the other half uses it regularly? What are we to do with essays in school (if they get reviewed for grammar)? What is to become of careful editing?

Several options are open to us:

- The easiest approach would be to do nothing and continue to burn up inside at each exposure. Hardly acceptable.
- Set up a Grammar Police to call this mistake to attention every time it is made, and try to enforce proper grammar. Also hardly acceptable.
- Have some "official" body notify every publication (newspaper and magazine), advertising agency, radio station, and TV outlet of the mistakes being made and the

proper form. Once more, this is hardly acceptable and probably impossible and impractical.

- Accept a modification of the rules.

So, we are between a rock and a hard place. We are damned if we do and damned if we don't. Are we ready for a change? Are we ready to concede?

Maybe the answer to this current "abuse" is for us purists (I am not a purist, merely obsessive-compulsive!) to do both: accept it (grudgingly) as a common but shoddy speech pattern in today's world and also look to writers to modify the statements they quote.

I do not know any exact answers to the problem, but this I do know: In either case, I am going to sit and burn—and burn—and burn!

References

1. Burchfield RW. *Fowler's modern English usage* (third edition). New York: Oxford University Press; 1996:p 37-8.
2. Goldstein N, ed. *Associated Press stylebook and briefing on media law*. 37th ed. New York: Associated Press; 2002: p 211.

"Each One Said It Their Way"

Headline in Bank of America ad in a travel magazine:
"This year, give everyone exactly what they want."

Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota, quoted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*:
"A patriot shows their patriotism through their actions."

From a TV public-service commercial:
"You're endangering your child's life if you put them in a car seat improperly."

By an MD, quoted in "Physicians Practice":
"To sit with someone for an hour and find out what they need and who they are is really why we went into medicine."

By a highly placed political consultant, quoted in the *Miami Herald*:

"When you're debating someone who's the sitting governor, they probably . . . have a lot more knowledge."

From a prominent law-school professor, quoted by a national wire service:
"Anyone who says this court is activist just does not know what they are talking about."

TV commercial for a major national food manufacturer:
"Everyone has their own particular taste."

Flyer from a nationally operating Internet bank:
". . . Bank pays you . . . for each new account holder that identifies you as the reason they opened their . . . account."

From the editorial page of the *Miami Herald*, under the byline of a prominent US senator:

". . . no senior will be required to participate unless they choose to do so. . . ."

Heading in large type, State Farm Insurance ad (in *AARP Modern Maturity*):
"It's the question no one wants to ask themselves."

TV commercial from one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world:
"Your child should continue to use their regular medication."

From an official CDC report on chronic fatigue syndrome:
"Although the patient may state they sleep better. . . ."