

Me and My Column

When a scientist considers all the high-tech mental machinery needed to arrange words into ordinary sentences, prescriptive rules are, at best, inconsequential little decorations.

— Steven Pinker

Gather 'round, children

It began a few days back when Mrs. Hawk showed me a 3-in × 4-in wallet card that a teacher friend had given her. “Me and My Car Are Doing Something Good for the Planet”, it said. “Sarah (made-up name) said I should ask you to take a look at this. She says it takes more time to correct her second-graders over this than anything else.”

You haven't been in the editing business very long if you don't recognize “take a look at this” as code for “I'm in over my head and I need an editor to back me up.”

So I took a look at it. The card was from a for-profit company—I'll call it GreenWheels—headquartered here in the San Francisco Bay area. The GreenWheels premise is that you can buy a “pass” that guarantees to counteract your automobile's annual CO₂ emissions. It does that when you submit data on the car you drive and its annual mileage and send the company some money.

For example, the GreenWheels online calculator told me that \$29.95 exactly offsets the 5,908 lb of CO₂ emitted yearly by my driving 8,000 miles in our 1959 Edsel at an average 49.04 mph. Offsets? Yes, by allowing GreenWheels to fund clean energy sources, such as wind farms and methane-capture facilities. Edsel? No, I made that up. How much of that \$29.95 is profit? Good question. Are there other offset products? Yes: \$39.95 (“Efficient”); \$49.95 (“Standard”); and \$79.95 (“Brantomobile”). Brantomobile? No, I made that up too—“Utility/Performance”, actually.

Sarah sent a complaint to GreenWheels saying that she liked their idea but could not bring herself to give the “me and my car” wallet cards out to her friends. She sent me her message and GW's response:

We agree with you that “Me and my car” is not proper formal English.

However, we do think that the phrase has come through common usage to be an acceptable spoken colloquialism, which is the spirit in which it is used in our marketing communications.

We are not alone in this view. Steven Pinker, the renowned linguist and author of the bestselling book *The Language Instinct*, lays out the case far more skillfully than we ever could [in “Grammar Puss: the fallacies of the language mavens”]:http://camba.ucsd.edu/~bakovic/ll/grammar_puss.html.

You may not agree with Pinker, but hopefully you'll realize that we're not tossing our words around lightly.

Golly, what happened next, Uncle Hawk?

I did what any editor with any sense does with a hot potato like this—I decided to mash it up and spread it around to dispel the heat. I consulted a number of other editors and said “Take a look at this”. I included the text of Sarah's letter and the answer from GreenWheels.

The editors' responses ranged from fulminating condemnation to resigned acceptance. Some excerpts (edited and abridged):

- I really wouldn't debate this with the company. It's “marketing speak”; it's not good grammar, but it has its purpose . . . which is to draw attention to itself; I wonder if they also used crayon-drawn letters in the campaign?
- It is true that English usage changes over time, but—the desires of relativists aside—what is correct at any given moment can generally be defined with clarity. They're all wet.
- The key to goodly song lyrics and movie titles is to not be grammatical.
- I can't believe they're using “The Simpsons” to justify incorrect use of English.

- Their teacher needs to lighten up and deal with the world she/he lives in. As for GreenWheels, what's not to like? I think we all need to have a little understanding.
- I would urge this teacher to stop buying products from GreenWheels.
- I recognize the teacher's predicament, but kids are flexible. And since they will come across "me and my . . ." sooner or later (whether we like it or not), let's just explain it to them now rather than avoid it.
- We still speak good English even though we heard "Winston Tastes Good Like a Cigarette Should", and "Me and My Car" won't corrupt us either. There are more people interested in a relationship with a car than in the precision of language.
- The anti-intellectuals ye have always with ye.
- This presents an excellent opportunity for the teacher to discuss with her class the rights and wrongs of grammar, and even to extend that into a lesson in understanding the goals of marketers.
- My husband and I . . . consistently think less (and buy less) from companies and organizations that mangle language in the name of marketing strategy.
- I have the feeling that so much stress is put on [mastering the subjective] "he and I" . . . that students decide that this construction must always be correct, even in the objective case, and they carry this decision with them throughout adulthood.

An editor to whom I showed the "me and my car" wallet card changed his opinion from "It's juvenile, but tolerable" (based on my earlier oral description) to a flat "It's a mistake" after he saw it. "Besides," he added, "it's illogical; the picture shows

two people, and the slogan says 'me and my car'."

Does that mean the good grammarians won, Uncle Hawk?

What do you mean by *good*? It's true that many language issues fall on one side or the other of a divide—almost everyone can agree that they're right or wrong. Others are always feeling their way along a tight-rope of taste, style, gracefulness, context, and preference, tipping first to one side, then to the other, and the far wall that secures the anchor point of that high wire always seems to be receding.

Pinker describes himself as a theoretical psycholinguist. No matter how illustrious he might be, is Pinker necessarily the best authority—or at least, should GreenWheels rely on him as its *sole* authority—to cite for a slogan that it happily concedes is "not proper formal English"? In *The Language Instinct* (1994) and *Words and Rules* (1999), Pinker states that prescriptivists still reflexively correct split infinitives and sentences that terminate with prepositions, practices that Henry Fowler characterized as "superstitions" and "fetishes" 80 years ago in *Modern English Usage* (1926). Does this suggest that Pinker might be a bit out of touch with current editing practice? I note also that the subtitle of *Words and Rules* is *The Ingredients of Language*. I would point out to the professor that sliced apples, flour, water, milk, butter, cinnamon, and sugar do not a pie make.

Pinker talks a good fight. While defending descriptivism, he chooses strongly prescriptivist usage in his books. Although he professes grammatical atheism—or at least agnosticism—his writing is right out of the Books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Chicago. I suspect that this is partly because he is, after all, mortal like the rest of us and subject to the same demands that his publisher imposes on him when consigning print to paper. The theoretician describes, but the publisher prescribes, and even the Pope has a confessor.

Time for grace after the meal, children

Pinker professes to admire Joseph M Williams's classic *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. What was that last word? GreenWheels has cut the legs out from under the "me and my car" question by reducing it to one of descriptivism versus prescriptivism. Some editorial questions cannot be decided by an appeal to one or the other. This is one. I gave a nod to "taste, style, gracefulness, context, and preference" in a paragraph above. In its search for language to spur the blue-jeans crowd to do something about a growing problem, GreenWheels has decided that it would rather sound ungraceful than uncool because sounding uncool won't feed the kitty. Well, Sinatra never wore blue jeans, no one ever found him uncool, and he made a decent living. Some people might find black too somber, but wearing

black is never wrong. "My car and I" as the subject of a sentence is never wrong, but as GreenWheels found from a lot of people who wrote to complain, "me and my car" as the subject of a *printed sentence* (note emphasis) is still very much regarded as such, regardless of how often you might hear it colloquially. People might not judge GreenWheels and its eco-friendly products by its language as much as they might question the maturity and erudition—quite possibly the breeding—of its management. Because GreenWheels is a for-profit venture, probably none of that is helpful to its bottom line.

Chuckle of the Month

"It was incorrectly reported last Friday that today is T-Shirt Appreciation Day. In fact, it is actually Teacher Appreciation Day" (Richard Lederer's *Anguished English* calendar for 2 October 2006).

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