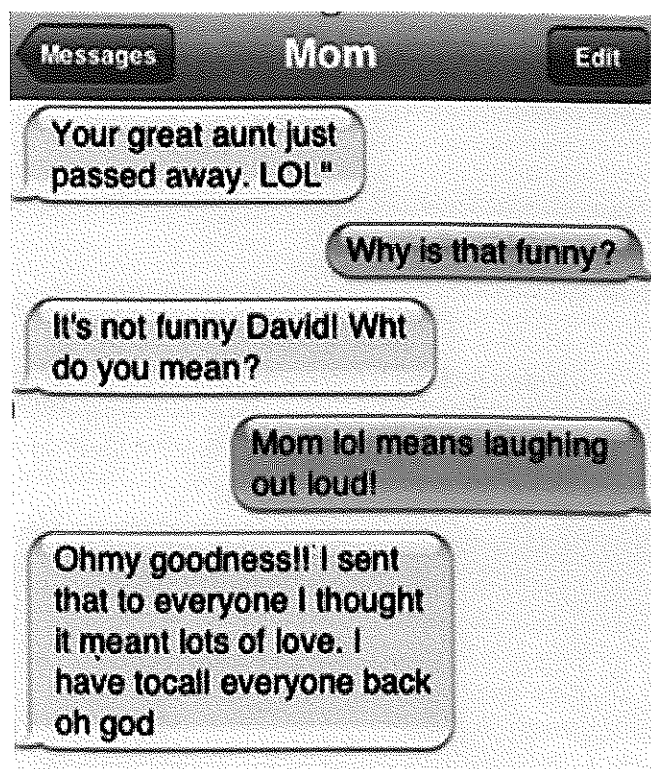


Like, get over it

Nicholas Alchin wonders if we are over-precious about punctuation and grumble too much about grammar

In 1680, the English King James told architect Christopher Wren that the newly-completed St Paul's Cathedral was 'awful, artificial and amusing'. In 1680 'awful' meant 'awe-inspiring'; 'artificial' meant 'artistically made' and 'amusing' meant 'amazing'.

The graphic below illustrates a very similar point – and I am sure many of us have had a similar experience, one way or another.



These flippant examples may seem a bit obscure – but a quick internet search for funny grammar images shows that the issue of correct or incorrect language raises strong emotions. And I was marking Theory of Knowledge essays from my grade 12 class last week, and wondering to what extent I should correct split infinitives, or allow sentences (like this one!) to start with a conjunction. More importantly, I was wondering if examiners would see through informal writing to the genuinely profound ideas in the essays – and so perhaps there is actually a more serious point here. Outside of a language acquisition course, there is nothing in most IB/IGCSE marking criteria about good grammar – and when we have so many students being examined in English as a second, third or fourth language, that's got to be right. On the other hand, accuracy in communication is important, and grammar facilitates that. As a child I was always taught

that 'breaking the laws of grammar' is a bad thing. So do these laws of grammar matter? I have come to think that the answer to this centres around what we think about the nature of laws, and I am reminded about how much we construct the world around us, rather than simply find it, already made. I think there's actually a moral point here too.



We sometimes tend to think that breaking the laws of grammar is a little like breaking the laws of a country; if you go through a red traffic light then whatever your intention, you have broken the law – fact. Mrs Eyegouger, my Primary School teacher, felt much the same about my errors with apostrophes. I have come to think differently, and that the laws of language are more akin to the laws of physics than the laws of the land. Suppose we found an object which hovered in mid-air, and did not fall when dropped; what would we do? We could declare the object illegal, lament and take appropriate punitive measures (Mrs Eyegouger) or we could revisit our understanding of the laws of physics. The latter seems more sensible. It's impossible for an object to break the laws of physics (apologies to the warlocks among you) because the laws explain how things behave. Similarly with language – the laws of grammar are descriptions of how things are, not how we would like them to be.

So my visceral disgust at double negatives may not be without logical reason, but the fact is that people do say 'I ain't done nothing wrong' and we all know what they mean, n'est-ce pas? Similarly, the word 'like' has recently evolved into an all-purpose linguistic Swiss-army knife, capable of remarkable flexibility. King James would have thought that was awful; to me, it's awesome – and we both know what we are talking about. Languages change, and there's nothing we can do to stop them. What's more, language drift is a

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one-way current (for more on that see Guy Detacher's The Unfolding of Language: An Evolutionary Tour of Mankind's Greatest Invention) or watch this short TED talk: www.ted.com/talks/erin_mckean_go_ahead_make_up_new_words.

As linguist Cukor-Avila said, "I tell my students, eventually all the people who hate this kind of thing are going to be dead, and the ones who use it are going to be in control". While that may not be the most uplifting sentiment, it is surely accurate.

Does that mean we don't bother correcting students' written work from infelicities? Of course not. Some styles are better suited to some occasions than others – and using "c u l8 r" in an English examination is a choice; probably not a very good one (see www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk). So we need to be aware of the various universes of discourse that are available to us.

I have come to see that rather than correcting students' work (which can be perilously close to telling them how to conform to arbitrary social mores – hardly the right message) I am seeking to sensitise them so they can make the right choice to convey their message to their audience. In most cases, that will look like traditional correcting, but I think there's a world of difference. Literally.

I remain your humble servant

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