

PARADIGMS LOST

Reflections on Literacy and Its Decline

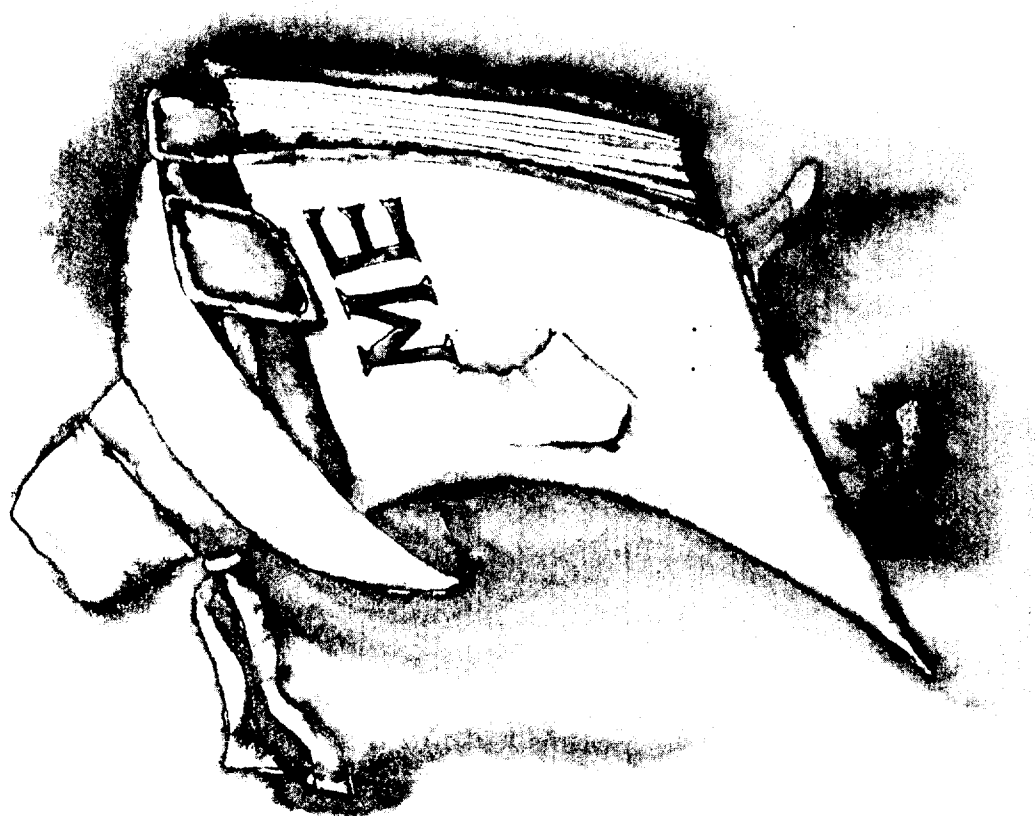
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AUTHORS WITHOUT FEAR OR SHAME

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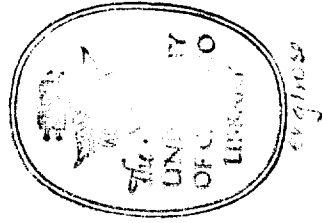
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To Alexandra
Before whom words fail me

It's Nice to Be Right

Grammar is a tricky, inconsistent thing. Being the backbone of speech and writing, it should, we think, be eminently logical, make perfect sense, like the human skeleton. But, of course, the skeleton is arbitrary, too. Why twelve pairs of ribs rather than eleven or thirteen? Why thirty-two teeth? It has something to do with evolution and functionalism—but only sometimes, not always. So there are aspects of grammar that make good, logical sense, and others that do not.

For example: it makes perfect sense that correct English should demand agreement; “no one,” “someone,” “everyone,” “anyone” should be followed by singular verbs because the “one” is a clear indication that English thinks of “everyone” and “everybody” as being a singular one or body—many people acting as one. Similarly, “no one” means “not any one,” and since the “one” is there (if only to be denied in actuality), it is nonsense to say “No one knew *their* American history” or “Everyone returned to *their* seats.” Observe that even the most cloddish speaker would unhesitatingly say “Everyone *was* happy” and would not dream of uttering “No one *were* there.”

Unfortunately, it takes only one or two intruding words for agreement—and logic—to vanish. Moreover, the nearness of a plural object (in my second example, “seats”) fools people into assuming that the pronoun in the possessive depends on this plural. But it depends on the subject, which is palpably singular, so that it clearly and democratically has to be one seat to one body or to one person.

There are, then, many instances where grammar is manifestly logical and where application of simple logic could spare us a good many errors. Take the absurd “overly,” which has gained widespread acceptance in this country, though it is still sensibly frowned on in England. Consider that “over” is an adverb (among its several uses) and so too would be “overly,” which does nothing more than add an extra syllable to turn something into what it has been all along. Why, then, say “overly complicated,” “overly qualified,” or “overly fond,” et cetera, when “overcomplicated,” “overqualified,” “overfond,” and so on are shorter, neater, more

euphonious? The argument that we need "overly" for the negative statement "not overly" is otiose; we have "overmuch," "excessively," "very," and several others to choose from. So let the *-ly* serve where it logically belongs: in converting an adjective into an adverb, as in, say, "keenly," "sensibly," and the like. The gratuitous *-ly* is on the march, however: already we have the redundancy "firstly," the abomination "thusly," and soon, for all I know, we may get "soonly."

Thus, concision, which is a form of common sense, is another logical guiding principle. But, unfortunately, grammar is as often arbitrary as it is logical. There is, for instance, no logical reason that I can detect for "She is as beautiful as you" becoming, in a negative construction, "She is not so beautiful as you." Nevertheless, Eric Partridge, in *Usage and Abuse* (citing *Webster's*—the second edition, doubtless, not the third), records that "[not] so . . . as" is "preferred by many writers and authorities." In that very useful book *Modern American Usage*, which Wilson Follett regretfully did not live to finish, we read that in America (as opposed to England) even "workaday writers" and casual speakers will say: "This summer is not so hot as last" rather than "not as . . . as." A conversation with Jacques Barzun makes me suspect this entry to be one of his addenda to Follett's book as published; and it is one of the rare instances where I disagree with him: I see and hear "not as . . . as" all around me. Still, *Modern American Usage* makes a good stab at explaining this curiosity: "Perhaps as . . . as suggests equality so strongly that a denial of it must be signaled by *not so*."

This would be a case of emphasis for the sake of clarity, which, along with logic and concision, must guide our use of language. But when language can be correctly inconsistent, it surely is not logical. Yet English, which clearly prefers "You are better than I" to "than me," also possesses the idiom "than whom no one is wiser." This reflects the inconsistency from which our present language arose: a bit of discrepancy in a surviving locution that points back to the initial chaos. The solution seems to be to respect the idiom as it has reached us, but in all other constructions to stick with "than" plus the nominative.

Besides logic, concision, and clarity, there is also the matter of authority. I wrote in one of these columns that you do not begin a sentence with "too" in the sense of "also," as in "Too, he was very old by then." Instead, you should write "By then, too, he was very

old" or "Also, he was very old by then." Many readers wrote in asking on what authority I asserted this. Partly, of course, it is a matter of clarity, so that the "too" not be confused even for a second with "to" or with "two," either of which is apt to appear at the beginning of a sentence. But there is also the fact that good writers of the English language have not used the initial "too." This is the argument from authority, and with this kind of argument we must be extremely careful.

The two most common failures here are, one, adducing a good writer from the distant past, such as Shakespeare, who wrote before the language had become sufficiently codified; and, two, assuming that because the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites a couple of famous writers who committed a certain grammatical faux pas, the error has become legitimized. This brings me to the matter of dictionaries: quite a few readers have asked me to recommend a dictionary that speaks with full authority about what is right or wrong.

Alas, even the best dictionaries tend to abrogate that authority. In the biography of James Murray, the man behind the *Oxford English Dictionary*, K. M. Elisabeth Murray writes, "The one thing of which he was certain was that it was not the function of the Dictionary to establish a standard of 'right' or 'wrong,'" and she quotes her famous grandfather: "We do not all think alike, walk alike, dress alike, write alike, or dine alike: why should not we use our liberty in speech also, so long as the purpose of speech, to be intelligible, and its grace are not interfered with?"

This is, to me, a very disappointing position from a great dictionary maker, and it is most fortunate that his practice (and that of his collaborators) was better than his preaching. We get a rather confused statement that, on the one hand, promises considerable, if not total, freedom and, on the other, demands intelligibility and grace.

These are fine words, but what do they mean? At what point does intelligibility cease, and for whom? Some people can decipher the thickest foreign accents and the grossest mispronunciations; others cannot. On whose level of comprehension do we draw the line between intelligibility and gibberish? And what about the time factor? Is having to stop for several seconds while one unscrambles a meaning a legitimate or an illegitimate loss of time?

Yet if "intelligibility" is a somewhat elusive criterion, "grace" is as slippery as an Oriental-rug dealer. Graceful to whom, by what standards, and to what end? Is it more graceful to tell something horrible with appropriate horror or to tone it down for polite company? With grace we enter into the domain of taste, and taste is beyond the legislation of any dictionary. Here, clearly, we need expert opinion, but where, exactly, do we go looking for that?

Nevertheless, as I said before, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a great—the great—dictionary, but it has to be used with discrimination. We must, each of us for himself, decide what in it represents the best in usage—and what is merely a corruption that has become more or less widespread or is, indeed, a mere hapax legomenon (a word recorded only once in a particular language). Someday I hope to write more fully about how one arrives at such distinctions, but obviously logic, concision, and clarity have much to do with it.

Another fine achievement is the *American Heritage Dictionary*. It is perhaps a trifle too short, too selective a tome, but at least it stands for something better than near total permissiveness. After all, if a dictionary does not lay down the law about what is right and what is wrong, then, *pace* Dr. Murray, who will? Yet rules do exist—in spelling, pronunciation, and definition—and it is absurd for today's dictionaries to enforce some of them while being latitudinarian about others. The *American Heritage Dictionary* has solved the problem with a usage panel—well over a hundred experts who are frequently polled by the editors about what they consider correct usage and whose votes for or against a certain usage are tabulated and reported—for example, 60 percent of the usage panel approve of this usage in spoken English, but only 45 percent in written English.

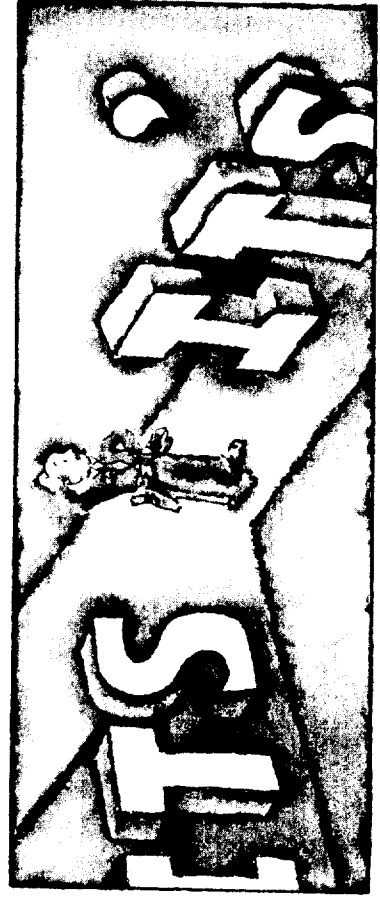
This is, of course, the creation of an ad hoc academy and makes sense—except that the names, as you look at them on pages x to xii of the dictionary, may strike you as a catholic but not consistently compelling lot. Especially startling is the paucity of literary notables (other than critics and editors, though these, too, are a mixed bunch), but this may simply mean that great novelists, poets, et cetera are too busy (or greedy) to bother with such unpaid work. Still, the membership ranges from some persons of impeccable credentials to others from whom you would not want to buy a used car (or a misused word). But it is in this direction that

salvation must lie: the eventual creation of an Academy of the Anglo-American Language.

A Pointed Discussion of Punctuation

In the writing, and even in the speaking, of good English, there is a silent partner: punctuation. Except as a pause, it is not audible (save when Victor Borge does a number on it), but it makes for basic clarity and can provide interesting shades of meaning in the form of undertones. In its first capacity, then, it is a traffic policeman averting chaos in the flow of prose; in its second, a good stage director supplementing the playwright's text with the weight of implication. And it is today in as bad a shape as any other aspect of the English language—possibly worse.

Ignorance about punctuation flourishes everywhere. Have you noticed, for example, how many letters nowadays begin with "Dear X;" when "Dear X," or "Dear Mr. X:" would be correct? Time was when people knew that a semicolon partly closes the movement of a sentence and is out of place where someone is summoned to attend to a message; some people even knew that the vocative is followed by a comma, although the colon provides, at the beginning of a more formal communication, the required



A POINTED DISCUSSION OF PUNCTUATION