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The English Journal, Vol. 85, No. 7, The Great Debate (Again): Teaching Grammar and Usage.
(Nov., 1996), pp. 77-78.

Stable URL:

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The English Journal is currently published by National Council of Teachers of English.

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Never Say Never: Teaching Grammar and Usage

Peter Brodie

As I get older and mellow, I am less certain about what should be taught in the way of English grammar and usage; but I have become quite certain of one blight: the Negative Injunction. Lawgivers since Moses have acknowledged the power of telling people what not to do, and the Ten Commandments are accordingly unforgettable—trouble is, even the forgettable ones (coveting thy neighbor's ass?) are unforgettable. When I ask parents what they recall from their English classes, they most often mention the Nevers: Never Split An Infinitive, Never End A Sentence With A Preposition, Never Begin One With *And* or *But*, Never Use A Double Negative or The Pronouns *I* and *You*. Etc.

CANARDS AS HOLY WRIT

You would think that these and similar canards had been sufficiently derided; but they are still passed on unthinkingly as Holy Writ. I was recently looking over the shoulder of a young colleague, who sports a Yale degree and many a summer seminar certificate, as he tapped out his semester reports. His writing is normally fluent and limpid; but I noticed that he clogged many of his sentences with an initial *However* or *Moreover*. (Yet he does not lard his speech with *Indeed*'s, or puff on a pipe.) So I asked him if he had been told to never begin a sentence with *And* or *But*, and he said, yes, his mentor at Yale refused to read a paper gargoyled with such grotesqueries. Then I asked him if he knew of a single reputable writer of the last 400 or 500 years who acknowledged, much less obeyed, such a rule (a challenge I once put to William Safire, who had written a column espousing the same irresponsible, and silly, proscription)—if no writer followed the rule, what was the point of it?

And (!) what is the point of the other rules—which merely cripple young writers as they check every phrase with “What have I writ wrong?” Take the split infinitive. We know that the veto stems from some gram-

marian who wanted to pour the new wine of English into an old Latin bottle, and that Latin infinitives—being one word—cannot be split. But (!) English has a different kind of grammar: it builds its verbs from the front, not the back—you can even argue that, properly speaking, it has no infinitive at all and therefore nothing to be split. (It's odd that the same person who might blithely say, “She is capable of fully understanding the issue”—even though “fully” is splitting a similar preposition and verb.) Yet educated writers and speakers daily pretzel their sentences to avoid the solecism—one of life's minor pleasures is catching (as I did yesterday) a labored “He tried to divide equitably his assets” or an ambiguous “They decided gradually to relax the HOV restrictions.”

RULES DULL WRITING

One can go on. (And on—about sentence fragments, for instance.) When I raise these questions—ever so delicately—with my students, I am struck by how many of their inherited rules seem designed to dull their writing (as well as dampen their ardor). You mustn't verb nouns, they remind me piously—as I think of Shakespeare's animal verbs (to shark, to spaniel) and his bodypart verbs (to nose, to fat) and of all the great verbs they have spawned (to beaver, weasel, ferret, buffalo; to stomach, belly, scalp, kneecap). And what of his double comparisons (more wider), double superlatives (most unkindest), double negatives (passim)?

Not only do all these negative injunctions have a negative effect on the aspiring writer, but they are all—except where they spare us absolute gibberish—wrong. Even the egregious “between you and I” can be shown to be grammatically acceptable—as Steven Pinker argues so persuasively in his brilliant book *The Language Instinct* (New York: HarperCollins) (he also reminds us that these rules are generally dictated by snobbery and conceived as mere shibboleths: consider, for instance, the campaign against the splendidly versatile and once

The author provides a whimsical look at issues of language right and wrong.

aristocratic word *ain't*—now mocked as a mark of the unlettered).

Do I have any positive offerings? Well, I welcome *hopefully* (thankfully, it has eluded the grammar police) and *like* as a conjunction and *alright* (on the analogy of *already* and *altogether* and quite different in meaning than *all right*). Oh, I also like *different than*. I think we should promote *they* and *their* as the all-purpose third-person pronoun and adjective we so badly need (“If anyone disagrees, they should speak now or forever hold their peace”). I don’t understand about *lie* and *lay*, which have been used interchangeably by the best writers for centuries—without ambiguity (no one ever heard “Go lay down” and fancied copulating with feathers), except where a modest suggestiveness was perhaps intended. Nor the fuss about *its* and *it’s*—both of which deserve an apostrophe (the one as a possessive, the other as a contraction). If you have a fetish about apostrophe’s, that is—I’d like to go further and abolish them altogether (all together?): they are largely decorative, like the French circumflex, and—unlike the comma

—rarely clarify meaning. They can cause offense: *Parents’ Day* insults the proud single parent and *Parent’s Day* the orthodox nuclear family, whereas *Parents Day* honors all—especially in upper-case, where any apostrophe looks foppish. In fact, most people are so baffled (but awed) by apostrophes that they sprinkle them like confetti over any tempting sibilant; and so few people now know whether they are dining at the Jone’s, the Jones’, the Jones’s, the Jonese’s, the Joneses, or the Joneses’ that they give up dining out altogether.

And do I have any prohibitions of my own? I must admit I draw the line at “hypercorrectitude”—the sin of those with just enough learning to get it wrong. With those who smugly asseverate that “The police have arrested a man whom they know is guilty” or “He is one of those fathers who always knows best,” I am inflexible: it’s not just Latin that demands “who” and “know.” But would I codify these prohibitions as Mosaic Nevers? Never.

Peter Brodie teaches at the Menlo School in Palo Alto, California.

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