

VOLUME XXIII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2022/23

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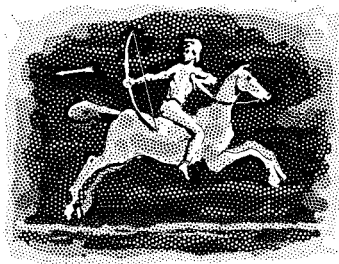
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PRICE: \$9.95

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PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



My Native English Must I Now Forgo?

THE DECLINE OF OUR LANGUAGE MAY HAVE BEEN CERTIFIED when the new term for teaching English in K-12 schools, “Language Arts,” substituted vague complexity for simple precision, as it is in K-12 that English dies. For anyone of the old school, recent graduates have made reading even the leading newspapers exquisite torture.

When language is ungrammatical, asyntactical, or illogical, everything follows—the practice of medicine, flying of airplanes, building of bridges, writing of love letters, and *ars gratia artis*. Carelessness in expression infectiously hastens the general decay. Here are just a few choice examples from publications that should know better.

Whereas one advocates *for* a person, one advocates a policy—*of* which, not for which, one is an advocate. You do not arrive *to*, but in or at a place. As Cleopatra might say, there is no such thing as an *ask*: it is a request. You don’t *resolve* obstacles, you overcome them, just as you don’t *solve* questions, but answer them. Although an issue can be a problem and a problem can be an issue, they are not synonymous, and when they are used as such it’s a problem, not an issue. “This” is not an indefinite article. Missing an antecedent, you don’t say, “I saw this dog,” but “I saw a dog.”

Unlike *The New York Times’s* bedeviling usage, now everywhere as people pretending to be journalists migrate from one asylum to another, “on” is not the universal preposition—as a study *of*, not on, this would show. One expresses concern *for* or *about*—not on—something and finds clues *to*, not on, it. Even my favorite newspaper, for which I wrote for decades, has decided that national adjectives are too much to bear. Hence, “Turkey restaurant” (you wouldn’t know if you were getting cranberry sauce or shish kebab), the “Italy government,” though not yet the “America Constitution.”

Battlefield momentum is not *taken*; it is achieved or restored. China’s population does not “take a drop,” it drops, although falls or decreases would be better. Residents and fellows are not “unique from other healthcare workers,” although they may be different. “Majority” requires a quantity of at least three. There is no such thing as the majority of Paris, rather than most of Paris. Assuming it isn’t simultaneously specious and fallacious, and doesn’t use a cigarette holder and sip martinis, no weapon is *sophisticated*; rather, it is complex, advanced, or highly capable. An *acute* problem is not necessarily intense, but of limited duration. “Like” is a comparative for nouns, “as,” for verbs, as I just said.

But even such things as these pale against the genocide of conjunctions, suddenly the most widespread and rapidly growing abuse of English grammar. From a recent article: “A federal judge ordered on Thursday the suspect be remanded in custody,” rather than “that the suspect be remanded,” or “the suspect to be remanded.” Are our newspapers written by Borat? Even Borat might know that “lay” is the past tense of “lie,” and transitive (as in “I will lay down the law”), and that “You should lay down” is incorrect.

Caption writers know neither how to write (supposedly their job) nor, apparently, what they see. Long ago, I read in *The New York Times* a caption identifying an American soldier, with his M16, atop a tank. Except that it was a British soldier, with an FN, atop an armored personnel carrier. Just the other day, a ship that anchored in (rather than, actually, off) a Russian city was in fact *two* ships, and they were tied up at a pier.

As for atrocities of style, real estate prose is perhaps the worst, but how about this ad from *The Wall Street Journal*:

I am not a bracelet.... I sipped sake with the Empress of Japan.
I flirted with fishermen on the Amalfi Coast. I sat front row for
the Beatles. I danced with nobles along the Aegean Sea.

Oh yeah? Gimme a break. As in a binary munition, the deadly effects of this effusion were amplified by mixing pretension and alliteration, the two monsters of poesy.

RICHARD III SAID, “NOW IS THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT.” These days, if you say, “Now heads of state speak—like—Valley Girls?” you will be told to shut up and surrender to the evolution of language. But there are objective criteria for distinguishing between simple ignorance and legitimate evolution.

First, rate. Like biological evolution, its linguistic equivalent only gradually accommodates new words, sound shifts, grammar, and historical upheavals. It took hundreds of years fully to integrate Scandinavian, Saxon, and French into English. Unaccompanied by political coercion (of which we have a lot) or rapid and ubiquitous mass communication (same), in general, invasions, plagues, changes in climate, and new technologies exert slow pressure upon language. Though political coercion and mass communication favor the quick adoption of new words, they should not rapidly change grammar, syntax, and the meaning of old, non-political words.

That is, unless grammar and syntax don’t come into play because they aren’t taught; or because the meaning of old words or usages—“sophisticated,” “lay” and “lie,” etc.—were misunderstood in the first place or simply not known; or if a miscreant hasn’t taken the trouble to know the origin and root of the word itself, or stopped to think of how he is using it; or if he has not read enough to have a store of guiding examples that honor a word as it has been artfully fixed by the long historical usage of countless others.

Add to absence or absurdity of instruction the attitude of privileged generations that, whether one is right or wrong, to be corrected is to suffer an assault upon one’s existence. Everyone makes mistakes. Undoubtedly there are some above. In the richness and complexity of our language these are easy to come by (including almost failing to avoid a hanging preposition). But when accurately corrected, one should be only grateful so as better to levy the power of English and increase one’s store of riches.

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