

Language threatened by bad grammar, poor spelling, profanity and incorrect word usage

by Diana Rossetti

For years, retired English teacher Merle Kimmel has been in the back of my mind as I put pen to paper. She called the first time to inform me gently that I had used a non-word, "heighth." I never made that mistake again. "The correct word is 'height,'" she explained, "and I'm not surprised you used the wrong one. So many people do."

Fortunately, Kimmel, who was chafed by chalk dust in Louisville, Ohio, schools for 30 years, does not suffer fools gladly. Especially those who write for a living. There were two other calls to correct my English and grammar. And she remembers sending a basic grammar book to someone else in the newsroom. Don't get me wrong, hers is not a mean-spirited upbraiding. Kimmel just loves the language as do her fellow English teachers still in the trenches.

BAD GRAMMER - Bad grammar, poor spelling, profanity and incorrect word usage is rampant in our society. CNS Illustration by Eri Hashimoto. "Using 'who' in a headline when there's plenty of room to put 'whom,' that really bothers me," Kimmel continued. "And don't say 'she only spent a few cents.' The correct thing to say is 'She spent only a few cents.'" And, 'I seen him at the store.' Please! It's 'I saw him at the store.'"

Kimmel confesses to cringing when she hears someone say, "He gave a gift to him and I."

One of the football players (in a recent Repository story) said, "My mom and me will do it two times."

Use of the word "irregardless" makes her a little crazy. Several of her language colleagues agreed. (Note: For the diehard debate team, irregardless is included in Webster's New World Dictionary and is defined as follows: Adj., Adv. REGARDLESS: a nonstandard or humorous usage.)

IF IT IS UNIQUE, IT IS THE ONE AND ONLY

And if something is described as unique, it is one of a kind.

"It can't be more unique. It could be more nearly unique," Kimmel explained.

Punctuation is another pet peeve. "It drives me crazy when I see people putting periods outside the quotations marks," Kimmel declared. And when two people divide objects, they are divided between them. If more than two persons must divide up a group of objects, they are divided among them.

Andrew Bruno, a Timken (Ohio) High School teacher with 11 years of experience under his belt, concedes that poor grammar is a problem but he is just as troubled by the level of profanity and obscenity used by students.

"The 'N' word bothers me big time. So does the 'F bomb.' They think nothing of saying the word 'bitch,' consistently," said Bruno, who teaches sophomores and juniors. "They really don't think twice about swearing at any given time. They'll apologize but it's so ingrained in them. There was a new kid walking down the hallway. He was doing a rap. It was 'F' this and 'F' that. He was free-styling. You have to watch the language and we have to battle that every day. They are not very motivated to change."

But he is undeterred.

"There is always 'Let me ax you a question,'" he continued. "And students will say 'They is' or 'They be.' And I'll make fun of it by saying, 'They be skeebee deebee weebee.' I'll talk to them about it and they'll correct themselves."

POP CULTURE PLAYS A PART

While Bruno, who has been teaching for 11 years, places the onus on parents to set a good grammar example, he also acknowledges that students are influenced greatly by pop culture in music and film.

"They listen and it keeps feeding the beast," he remarked.

For Sheri Dornhecker of Bolivar, Ohio, a retired English teacher, the computer sometimes is the culprit.

"Plagiarism, or as it is more commonly known today, copied and pasted directly from the Web site where it was taken and pasted into Word," she said. "Teachers need only Google a sentence or two from the report to find the actual source. One academically challenged student once used the phrase, 'inalienable afflictions' to replace the more common term, handicapped. It signaled me to look at the book jacket summary where I found his report word for word."

There is a four-letter measure that is especially egregious as far as Dornhecker is concerned.

"Using 'alot' to mean many drives me nuts. Not only is 'alot' not a word but it is a grossly overused word error," she said. Though Karen Spidel has retired after 30 years as an English teacher, her ear remains attuned while she works as a college connector and graduation test interventionist at Timken High School.

WHY WONDER WHY?

"My husband and I went to see 'The Pursuit of Happyness' and that's how they spelled the word, though I understood why later in the movie. But I turned to my husband and said, 'No wonder our kids can't spell,'" said Spidel.

"Advertising and the media do creative spelling and little kids will pick that up. Last night, I was listening to a Ford dealer talk about cars at an auto show and he said, 'We need new cars that move quick.' It's quickly. I used to read the Repository's (James) Kirkpatrick's (syndicated) article all the time. But we have all gotten so lazy. I hate to say it but things come out of my mouth that embarrass me."

The use of the phrase, "My bad," she said, is "a sloppy way of saying 'I'm sorry' without acknowledging blame. In the school, you hear it a lot."

Profanity is ubiquitous, she said. "I hate the 'F bomb.' We've gotten used to it and it has lost its effect. I'm back in the '50s or '60s where Ozzie and Harriet couldn't sleep in the same bed."

The problem is not all young people, observed David Anderson, an English teacher at the McKinley Freshman Academy in Canton, Ohio.

"I had a professor, I think his Ph.D. was in relativistic cosmology, and I thought I was lost in the backwoods of West Virginia," Anderson recalled. "He would say, 'I'd a-went with you, if I would-a knowed you were going.'" Another source of aggravation, he said, is listening to teachers complain about students' language when their own grammar is flawed.

ENGLISH FRAUGHT WITH INCONSISTENCIES

Finally, Anderson explained, the English language itself is hardly consistent. He said he has found 13 ways to spell the sound "sh."

"The kids who start out with 'myself' and then move on to 'hissel' and 'theirsell' aren't stupid. They are being logical. So when a teacher smacks kids down for that, they're actually more correct than incorrect because they're thinking rather than memorizing," Anderson remarked. "The logician in me is at odds with the linguist."

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