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It Ain't Necessarily So

By DAVID FREDERICKS
 Orange County Chapter

Do you believe that any person on earth or in the heavens ever possessed the power to decide what is correct in language and what is not? Has any person now living, or in all of antiquity, had the power to issue edicts such as "Thou shalt not begin a sentence with a conjunction, nor end with a preposition"? I don't think so.

It would be humbling to meet such a personage. You'd have to meticulously sift each thought before giving it utterance, lest you be tossed into a literary inferno with other language abusers. Who would measure up? Even Shakespeare began some of his masterful sentences with conjunctions and ended them with prepositions.

Yet in listening to many technical writers, editors, et al., I might get the notion that the rules of language usage are immutable laws, like those of gravitational force and the speed of light. That in shaping our words, we must bow to some invisible entity who wields a wand of grammatical good and evil. That by failing to abide by the set rules for case, mood, number, agreement, and so on, we might incur the stigma of stupidity.

Might this explain why many of us technical writers write stiffly, as though laboring in some kind of literary straitjacket?

I'm reminded here of the inimitable Mike Royko of *The Chicago Sun Times*, a favorite columnist of mine. He became curious as to how many errors the grammar checker on his computer would find in *The Gettysburg Address*. If memory serves me right, the checker identified no fewer than 169 errors. Can you imagine? *The Gettysburg Address* flunked the grammar test, which so many take as gospel. Humph!

But whose ideas and whose rules formed the basis of this test? Whose ear could best decide whether the fanciful "four-score and seven" was better in a particular context than the prosaic "eighty-seven?" Who do you believe was a more effective communicator: Abraham Lincoln or the test maker?

Talk about rhetorical questions. This is tantamount to Mohammed Ali (arguably the greatest boxer ever) learning that a computer simulation of a fight between him and legendary Rocky Marciano (a white boxer) had him as the loser. Ali quipped, "Well, that computer must be in Alabama." We all create our own reality, don't we?

A tendency toward conservatism in grammar is natural enough. Success breeds conservatism in language as in politics. But most progress in language has come historically from "illiterates" who unwittingly simplify, tighten, expand, and enliven the language, having no interest in preserving either its Anglo-Saxon origins or its Greek and Latin traditions.

Conservative tenets often reject relativism. Absolutism is cleaner and easier—right or wrong, on or off, black or white, one or zero, the language of a computer. No gray areas. But, alas, computers can't write; I doubt they will anytime soon. (When they do, we'll truly have artificial intelligence.) The art of language, like all art, doesn't lend itself to pat formulations. Even itty bitty concepts can defy description.

And hard and fast rules in language are mostly for people who can't quite grasp the concepts.

Let's, for the fun of it, illustrate the point with a deceptively innocent word, such as the auxiliary verb *should*. For openers, *should* is one of nine modals—will, shall, may, might, should, would, can, could, and must. In modern American usage, *should* conveys the notion of duty or necessity, as in, "You should finish your work before you go home."

Now because *should* is also the past tense of *shall* as *would* is the past tense of *will*, these two auxiliaries are governed by the rules propounded originally in the seventeenth century in Britain for *shall* and *will* (*The Oxford English Dictionary* provides an elaborate discussion of this topic.)

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Viewpoint

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However, it's less and less idiomatic in American English to use shall to express mere first-person futurity, as, for example, "I shall be happy to see you again." Will is used instead. But shall, despite its pretentious sound, remains textbook English. And since should derives its r-rule from shall when first-person futurity is conditional, such as "I should like to see him soon," it also remains textbook English, even though few use it correctly. Would takes its place.

I shall not belabor this point further because I should need to write a thick and incredibly boring textbook just to do justice to the subject of should. Can you imagine what tedious would be visited upon you if we were to discuss such flaming topics as which and that?

You've no doubt gotten the essential point of this article. Whatever anybody tells you about correctness in absolute terms, remember: *It ain't necessarily so.* ■

Reprinted from the May 1996 issue of TechniScribe, the newsletter of the Orange County chapter. This piece has been edited for length.

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