

## ME AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Tom Nash

*For grammarians, every day is Doomsday.*

—Wiley Miller in *Non-Sequitur*

Maybe the most embarrassing moment of my academic life was the day I was evicted from a local Safeway, not long after giving a reading at the library. I was guilty, of course. The evidence, a black Sharpie, was still in my hand when the manager tapped me on the shoulder and pointed toward the door. I maintain my crime was worth it. There can be no justification for forcing apostrophes into simple plurals such as orange's and potato's. Even today in the Ashland store, I walk with my brim low over my brow. Not infrequently, I wear dark glasses.

For decades, I taught college-level linguistics. I know well that language change is both natural and inevitable. Yet, some changes in language and usage have given me heartburn, such as the pandemic of apostrophes in plural nouns (error's), possessive pronouns (your's), and even verbs (go's). It is clear that these apostrophe storms are signs of the apostrophe's eminent extinction. Like most plural forms in Old English (oxen, sheep), the curious apostrophe will soon be history. For me, it cannot be soon enough. In the meantime, people who have never used apostrophes in their personal writings seem to think they are lacking something when writing for others. So they add apostrophes. For many, as Dave Barry says, "An apostrophe is a sign that an s is coming." Once, in my travels, I found myself in Paisley at a diner owned by Earl. The estimable Earl had littered his menu with dozens and dozens of apostrophes, in words such as egg's, sandwich's, and drink's. To my amazement, there was only one word in the entire menu ending in s that had no apostrophe. You guessed it: Earls Diner.

My fascination with words and grammar began young. Both maternal grandparents were teachers, each schooled in the comforting consistencies of Latin and Greek. One day in the year 1954, Grandpa uncrated a new TV table, a sturdy oak stand, perfect for a bright new RCA or a Motorola. But no. The next time I visited, the stand held an enormous illustrated American Heritage Dictionary, the pages flipped open, words pouring onto the beige carpet. While the kids up the street were enjoying episodes of Hopalong Cassidy or Mickey Mouse Club, I was examining Latin root words. As Grandpa once mused, "The fall of Adam and Eve probably began with a dangling participle."

Grandma enjoyed an occasional glass of sherry and a cigarette, much to Grandpa's chagrin. Indeed, she was a liberal, free-thinking woman, except when it came to grammar. Grandma once told me she had smoked Winston cigarettes until the company started using the slogan "Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should." Everyone knows, she would say, that like is not

a conjunction. It should read "Winston tastes good, as a cigarette should." From then on, it was Chesterfields for Grandma.

Okay, so maybe, with family guidance, I went a little overboard hoping that people would tread gently on the English language, at least dragging their feet when new forms appeared in speech and print. It was never thus. When the Vikings and the French Normans invaded merry old England, they forced violent changes on English, both in grammar and vocabulary. That was just the beginning. As English evolved, it began to change ever more rapidly, so that today a new word ("Muggle") or a different meaning ("unique") will pop up in Los Angeles or New York, arriving somewhere near Topeka in a few short weeks, much to the confusion of English teachers, librarians, and Republicans.

This morning I went for coffee at a place with baristas. As near as I can tell, coffee that costs a buck or so is poured by servers. When the price hits three dollars, you're negotiating with a barista. Anyway, today Brittany and Jeremy were working, and both firmly declared each order "awesome." Somewhere, somehow, the word awesome ("creating a sense of awe") has veered from its narrow semantic path and is now wandering loose in the world, free to mean damned near anything. Once upon a time, awesome was a view of the Grand Canyon or an eagle fishing the Rogue River. Today, according to Brittany, having exactly the right pocket change is "awesome."

I listen to lots of sports talk on local radio. Unfortunately, most former linebackers now working as commentators seem to enjoy punishing the language as much as they liked punishing quarterbacks. Me and my son went to the Eagles game is depressingly common, along with Every receiver ran their routes perfectly. I don't expect Bubba Football to talk like a stolid BBC commentator, but it would be nice to hear ESPN commentary that doesn't careen down the field like Marshawn Lynch. However, these commentators are no worse than most of us when it comes to abusing pronouns.

Pushed by social forces in recent decades, English speakers have consistently fumbled the ball on pronouns. Indefinite pronouns, like anyone and everyone, are obviously singular in form ("every one"). No more. Now the indefinites are used as plurals: "Will everyone please turn off their phone?" Objective case pronouns, like her and him, pop up as subjects of sentences. Remember when pronouns and antecedents agreed in number? Forget it. The state of pronoun usage today is, well, unsettling. Perhaps one linguistics professor at Jonathan Swift's Academy of Lagado had the right idea. When Gulliver visits the campus, the professor is attempting to improve language. His research subjects carry sacks full of meaningful objects, thereby avoiding the problem of slippery semantics. I like the idea. No more pronouns like this and that and those. Just open the sack and point.

In the realm of language, new words (neologisms) are most puzzling for seniors. Last week, I read about some odd new additions to the Oxford English Dictionary. For example, a screenager is a teenager obsessed with digital tablets and on-line devices. Apparently, a remarkable event is no longer amazing to the younger set; it is amazeballs. I recently saw one of those kitten-capers in an internet video, but before I could describe it as "cute," a youngster declared it "adorbs." Last week, a reasonably intoxicated young woman cornered me at a reception to announce that my carefully coordinated (and moderately priced) wardrobe was "a hot mess." I'm pretty sure she wasn't thinking Gentleman's Quarterly.

Other strange additions to the OED include binge-watch, a long, intense period of television concentration, somewhat like pulling "an all-nighter," only featuring episodes of The Big Bang Theory, rather than chapters of European history. A grrrl is apparently a young woman with an attitude (see "hot mess" above). To catfish is to adopt a fictional online presence, like pretending to be Jennifer Anniston or the king of Tonga or Mant'e Teo's girlfriend.

Along with semantics, English grammar is changing, too. Past participles are dropping their endings faster than the Southern states can drop Obamacare. At Safeway (yeah, back again), you can now buy can goods, whip cream, and pickle herring. On the freeway, big trucks are carrying oversize loads. Grammatical changes, like the loss of participle endings, are so pervasive that even the nerds at MIT are getting interested. In a recent study, MIT researchers declared the impending death of the irregular verb. Not long ago, English had nearly 200 irregulars, such as bring-brought-brought or see-saw-seen. According to the geeks, the numbers are falling in numerical patterns, now approaching 160. The MIT researchers, using everything but String Theory, have predicted when—and in what order—each of these irregular verbs will turn regular, eventually engendering forms like teach-tached-tached.

In the twenty-first century, as in all previous eras, language is changing, with English evolving more rapidly than most, considering its wide use as a lingua franca. Like many, I am not sure how I feel about being caught in the linguistic whirlwind. In many ways, I remain my grandparents' scion, fascinated by the English language and appreciative of its rich diversity, but vaguely troubled by its headlong rush toward weirdness. As I wander through a tempest of new words and forms, I wonder what is next. Klingon loanwords? Multi-gender pronouns? Verbs not agreeing with subjects? (Oh, wait, we have that one already). A new tense, like past imperfect? An irritating new substitute for the verbal placeholder like? How about some nifty new conjunctions, such as beforeaft, as in "We drank beers beforeaft the game, not to mention during." Time to do some research. I think I will grab my hat and shades and wander

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All team placings have made SOU number one in the NAIA race for the Director's cup through Winter Quarter. All teams have done very well and produced exciting competition for us to view and something to be very proud of. This should be an interesting and enjoyable program.

We are currently in the process of awarding our second scholarship and ask for your continued contribution to this worthy program. Our first recipient has maintained a 4.0 g.p.a.; she is very appreciative of our award to her and we are proud of her.

We hope to see you on the 22nd of May. ▲

## AT A BAR

A very elderly gentleman, (mid nineties) very well dressed, hair well groomed, great looking suit, flower in his lapel smelling slightly of a good after shave, presenting a well looked after image, walks into an upscale cocktail lounge.

Seated at the bar is an elderly looking lady, (mid eighties). The gentleman walks over, sits along side of her, orders a drink, takes a sip, turns to her and says, "So tell me, do I come here often?" ▲

## SATISFACTION

I was in the express lane at the store quietly fuming. Completely ignoring the sign, the woman ahead of me had slipped into the check-out line pushing a cart piled high with groceries.

Imagine my delight when the cashier beckoned the woman to come forward, looked into the cart and asked sweetly, "So which six items would you like to buy?" ▲

## MORE ADVICE FROM KIDS:

**"Never trust a dog to watch your food."**

—Patrick age 10

**"You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk."**

—Arin age 9

**"Never try to baptize a cat."**

—Eileen age 8



## BOOJUM TREES

Frank Lang

Nature Notes just returned from a 4,000-mile drive from Ashland, Oregon to Cabo San Lucas at the tip of Baja California and back. We saw many exciting sights, biological and otherwise, and drove over miles of exciting highways and back roads, where a few kilometers translated into hours.

What an otherworldly landscape. Fields of boulders decorated with cardon, the largest of the cacti, elephant trees, and one of the planet's strangest looking plants, Fouquieria columnaris, know to native speakers, as Cirio, because of its resemblance to the slender, tapered wax candles used by the Padres in religious ceremonies. One web site thinks the plants resemble upside down turnips. Not me, they look like long slender upside down carrots from someone's unthinned carrot patch.

The species' tall, slender, succulent single stem can rise to over seventy feet where it often divides into flowering branches. Despite its height, it never seems reach three feet in diameter at the base. Its short, spiny branches clothe the tapered trunk from stem to stern. Leafless for much of the year, after enough rain, the leafless branches burst forth with leaves. The trees were leafless on our way south, leafy on our return, which gives you some hint about our weather, relatively wet and cool for a Baja January.

Sometimes the slender stems or branches loop and swoop around making the weird, weirder. In 1922, Godfrey Sykes was with a group of scientists when he spied these unusual plants from a distance through his telescope. He apparently was familiar with Louis Carroll's poem The Hunting of the Snark for he proclaimed, "Ho, ho, a boojum, definitely a boojum". We Gringos have known Fouquieria columnaris as the boojum ever since.

There is an Oregon connection with the Boojum. The person who first brought what we now know as the boojum to the attention of science, was the Texas frontier doctor J A Veatch. Veatch was a Jasper County, Texas man, active in the Texas Revolution. Soon after, he went out west for the 1849 California Gold Rush. Veatch was a chemist, surveyor, botanist, plant collector, and teacher, who discovered borax deposits at Tuscan Spring near Redding California. Veatch also collected the plant specimen that the California physician Albert Kellogg used to described Idria columnaris, our boojum tree. Later Kellogg shifted the species to the genus Fouquieria. Most of us botanical types recognize Kellogg's name as the specific epithet of California black oak Quercus kelloggii.

So, what is the Oregon connection? In 1868, Veatch was appointed professor of chemistry, toxicology, and materia medica at the Willamette University Medical School. He died two years later in Portland. His Oregon connection was brief. Makes you think of Louis Carroll's mythical Snark and Boojum, a very special, dreadful, kind of Snark.

*In the midst of the word he was trying to say,*

*In the midst of the laughter and glee,*

*He had softly and suddenly vanished away---*

*For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.*

## FROM PRESIDENT SAIGO

Dear SOU Retirees,

When I arrived in Ashland last July to take over as President of Southern Oregon University, I began by simply watching and listening to the University and the community. From the outside, I heard a lot of questions: Are you a destination university? Are you a regional university? Are you focused on liberal arts? Are you focused on economic and workforce development? Members of the University community had questions as well, and many that I spoke with felt that they didn't always know in which direction the previous administration was taking SOU, or whether or not they had a role in devising the plan.

I could tell from my first days on campus that this was a great University, but if we want to continue to be great and even expand and grow, it is up to us. Each and every member of the SOU community must be empowered to make a difference in the University and in the lives of our students.

I have already issued this charge to faculty and staff at the University, and now I would like to charge our retired employees and emeriti as well: At some point in your lives, you decided to dedicate your career to educating and helping students.

You decided to make a difference in the lives of students and, consequently, have a positive impact on society. I ask you now

to return to that point and help SOU be the finest institution of higher education that it can be.

When I gave that charge to our current employees, the entire campus community responded with an esprit de corps that helped launch the University onto a positive path that resulted in an increase over previous projections in fall enrollment and retention, and I would like to see a similar boost among our retirees.

By subscribing to this newsletter, you have made the choice to remain in touch with your colleagues and your University; the opportunity is before you now to become reengaged with SOU and to once again become part of our culture.

If you haven't been to campus lately, I invite you to come and see the new developments and new construction—some beautiful facilities have been built in recent years; come watch a musical or dramatic performance put on the by Oregon Center for the Arts at Southern Oregon University; come watch a home game or match of one of our outstanding athletic teams; join the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at SOU; or find another way to re-connect and reengage with YOUR University.

I look forward to hearing from you, and I thank you for your service to SOU and to our community.

Warmly,  
Dr. Roy Saigo

## FROM THE PRESIDENTS' DESK

Our Spring Luncheon on May 22 is fast approaching and we are hoping that attendance is similar to the good numbers at our last luncheon. At our Winter Luncheon we were honored to have President Saigo give us an inspiring presentation on the University and its hopes for the future. We also had a presentation from Lyn Guetierez, our liaison with OLLI, who gave us a short briefing on how we can assist OLLI by teaching classes or joining OLLI to attend classes. In addition the general membership approved reducing the size of the Retirees Council to nine members with two thirds being retired faculty.

The Spring Luncheon will be held in the Stevenson Union's Rogue River Room using the same format as previous lunches this year; members obtain their lunch from the food court in the Union and bring it back to the Rogue River Room. We will assemble for socializing at 11:30 am, followed by lunch.

Our speaker will be Matt Sayre, Southern Oregon University Athletic Director, who will update us on the status of our athletic teams and changes being made at the University athletic facilities. He will introduce the coaches of our athletic teams who will give us brief talks on their teams. This year has been a very productive year for the teams with a national championship in football, a second place finish in wrestling, fifth for men's basketball, ninth for women's basketball, and an appearance in the na-

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*The Retirees Association  
Fall Luncheon  
GUEST SPEAKER  
Matt Sayre  
SOU Athletic Director  
May 22  
11:30am-1:30pm  
SU Rogue River Room*