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English may be a living language but that doesn't mean anything goes

By Diether Haenicke
September 16, 2009

Who would have thunk it? I first had a lot of reservations about offering comments in this column about misuses of grammar and syntax, but every time I do write about the English language, reader mail starts flowing.

I had expected that there would be one or the other fuddy-duddy like me who still appreciates the correct and precise usage of our tongue, but no: It appears that many more people than one commonly thinks are concerned with the proper use of English. On this issue I receive mail from senior citizens and pupils, from bankers, artists, homemakers, engineers, teachers and accountants. All of them ask that I write additional columns about language use, and all of them offer as a topic their own linguistic pet peeve.

I have to be careful, of course. First of all, I do make mistakes myself and can't ride on too high a horse. And second, I can't forget what my friend Ilse Lehiste, a very distinguished linguistics professor at Ohio State, tried to hammer into me, namely that a living language changes, develops, mutates and redesigns itself constantly, and that if enough people accept a new grammatical or syntactical usage it becomes part of the language. She said, in short, that there is no such thing as correct or incorrect use of English; there are only different, and perfectly legitimate, ways of using the language. Well, excuse me, Ilse. I know you are right, but you can't tell me nothing no longer anymore. How is that for living language?

So here comes some more nitpicking, just for the heck of it.

I opened the Kalamazoo Gazette one day and found on a giant ad placed by an agency of the U.S. government, the Food and Drug Administration. It shows the faces of 11 children, most of them minorities, and the text reads:

"Every day, 3,000 kids become regular smokers. One of every three will die from it." Then, under three of the faces, the captions read: "Will it be him?" "Will it be her?" Will it be "him" who will die from it?

Every sensitive ear aches to hear: "Will it be he who dies from it?" Why would anyone use "him" in this case?

Who would say: "It is him who is hungry?" or "It is them who invited us?"

(The subject of the sentence must be in the nominative case, the grammarian notes.) Deduct three points from the Food and Drug Administration. They should know better.

But wait! Each one of us, when asked who was knocking on the door, has at least occasionally responded: "It is me." The purist would indeed have to answer: "It is I (who is knocking on the door)." Even I give this grammatically correct response seldom and only when I knock on the door of certain English professors.

Should I go further on thin ice and comment on another related problem? Here it is:

Who and whom -- a vexing problem for many speakers of English. "Who did you invite?" would appear to many as proper English although one should correctly say: "Whom did you invite?"

"Who did invite you?" asks which person gave you the invitation, whereas "Whom did you invite?" asks for the person to whom you gave the invitation.

That is exactly why we hear increasingly: "He invited my brother and I," or "Just between you and I," or even "I bought a present for he and she "(Ouch! That one really hurts.)

It used to be easy. When in doubt if it is "he" or "him" or "I" or "me," so I was taught, one merely needs to ask "who?" or "whom?"

However, if he or she no longer knows the difference between "who" and "whom," then the proper answer doesn't come any longer to he or she.

Not to worry, says Ilse.

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