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Writers and speakers should be more careful about their grammar

*By Diether Haenicke
November 04, 2009*

Were I to win the lottery, I would establish a well-endowed prize for teachers who still instruct their students in the old-fashioned basics of grammar.

In my German language courses, I spend too much of my time teaching college freshmen plain English grammar. I can no longer assume that high school graduates are familiar with even basic grammatical terminology. Only with great hesitation do I throw out terms like “adverb,” “possessive pronoun” or “transitive verb,” realizing full well that most of my students are no more familiar with these terms than they are with the train stops of the Trans-Siberian Railroad.

Last semester I prepared a lesson on the use of the personal pronoun. I explained that in German, as in English, a pronoun must agree in person, number and gender with its antecedent, as in “Henry loves his father” or “These people need their heads examined.” But I met some blank stares. Why? Many of my students use personal pronouns incorrectly, following an unfortunately wide-spread trend.

And how can I blame them? When it comes to pronouns, our linguistic environment is flooded with grammatical monstrosities. I'll give just a few randomly collected examples. Our payroll department announces, “All benefit-eligible employees will receive an adjustment to your annual leave balance.” It hurts to read that. The Computer Center writes, “If your student does not know their unified account name, they should go to the lab.” My student not knowing “their” account name? Should it perhaps be “names”? And “my student” followed by “they”? That one hurts even more.

The writers are college people, for Pete's sake! A union representative on PBS opens a session: "We will allow each participant to introduce themselves and tell us where they are from." Expect long speeches where each participant makes several introductions. A parent comments on the superintendent search, "I would have thought that they had taken the candidate they interviewed and hired them." How many superintendents should they have hired? The Western Herald opines, "A student must broaden their mind." One mind per student is usually all I ask for.

James Carville, neither an English major nor a gentleman, advises: "It is hard for somebody to hit you when you've got a fist in their face." The Gazette tells us that "Anyone can vote in the primary if they are registered." The writer must be from Cook County, where one allegedly votes early and often. And a state senator advises, "What's important is how much someone drinks, not what kind of person they are." Obviously, he expects multiple personalities.

I keep collecting examples of such linguistic misdemeanors, and they are legion. While they make me shudder, they roll smoothly off the tongues of even educated speakers and are to be found in print everywhere.

The reason for this irritating sloppiness lies, of course, in our almost fanatical desire to produce politically correct speech. Getting enraged by the appearance of a "he" in a sentence where a "she" would also be possible, some people see a need to sacrifice grammatical correctness on the altar of sensitivity. That's why we frequently see "he/she" or "s/he"; the latter I don't even know how to pronounce. But even "s/he" still has the offensive odor of gender, whereas "they" is gender-neutral. So "they" is used liberally, even where it is wrong. It is less dangerous to offend English grammar than the crusading PC.

What to do? First, the clumsiness of he/she or s/he can usually be avoided by recasting the sentence using a plural antecedent and pronoun, as in: "Students who don't know their accounts..." Second, let's remember that "anyone," "everybody," "each," and "someone" are singular, even though many people see double when they hear these words and use "they" and "them" in connection with them. But lastly, writing that every employee will get "your" annual leave balance is not sensitive; it is plain wrong English. At least that's what I am still trying to teach my students.

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