

Why the Bad Grammar?

“New grammar” was as bad for writing skills as “new math” was for arithmetic skills.

By Veda Charrow

Have you ever wondered why so many reporters don't know that "criterion" is singular and "criteria" is plural? How many times have you read something like this in a magazine: "The student who brings a knife to school to peel their orange may be expelled"?

How many times have you heard a newscaster saying, "The new phone bill is different than your previous bills"? Or hypercorrections like "The judge admonished the driver whom everyone knew had struck the cat"?

In short, have you ever wondered why so many people who should know better make grammatical errors?

Earlier in the 20th century, professional writers and educated speakers could be expected to make few, if any, grammatical errors. Newspapers and magazines were edited not only for content and length, but for grammatical correctness.

This is no longer the case. Newspapers, magazines, newscasts and, of course, the Internet are rife with errors like the ones above.

I have no doubt that the reason for this profusion of grammatical errors is that most American elementary and high school students aren't taught English grammar anymore. And I'm afraid that my own discipline, linguistics, may be largely to blame.

Linguistics is a social science whose goals, among others, are to describe languages and dialects, to show how various languages are related, to explain how children acquire their native language, to discover how language is understood and to demonstrate how different forms of a language are used in different situations.

Linguists are trained not to make value judgments. Thus, if asked whether a non-standard variety of English is worse than standard English, we would unhesitatingly say "No."

As a result of linguists' refusal to be prescriptive, non-standard usages

have crept into areas where they would not have been allowed 30 years ago, and have become accepted. The effect has been to lower the bar for students and their teachers.

But even more damage to the teaching of grammar was wrought by the misuse of a linguistic theory called transformational-generative grammar, which was developed by Noam Chomsky.

Mr. Chomsky, better-known today for his anti-Israel and anti-Iraq war stances, originally made his name as the father of transformational-generative grammar, or T-G.

In the '60s, Mr. Chomsky, a prominent MIT linguistics professor, proposed a theory of grammar that could easily explain the different meanings of an ambiguous sentence such as "Visiting relatives can be boring."

Traditional grammars would have some trouble providing different grammatical explanations (and sentence diagrams) for the meaning "Relatives who are visiting can be boring" versus "When one visits relatives, it can be boring."

But Mr. Chomsky's method could elegantly explain the "deep structure" of such sentences – the underlying conceptual relationships among actors, actions and objects. His method of diagramming sentences became standard in linguistics.

Transformational-generative grammar was the beginning of the end of the teaching of grammar in the schools. Since it was the up-and-coming thing, and since Mr. Chomsky had great charisma, T-G spread to other fields in the humanities, and particularly to university and college education departments.

Attempts were made to incorporate T-G into elementary and high school curricula. But educators and writers of school textbooks had missed the point that T-G was a theory of grammar, and not a pedagogical tool.

Using T-G to teach elementary school students grammar was like using the General Theory of Relativity to teach school children about gravity.

Teachers did not understand T-G, or found it too complicated for their students, and were unable to teach it. Students viewed it as another incomprehensible subject like "new math".

Fortunately, in the 1960s and '70s most teachers knew the English grammar that they had been taught, and so could help their students learn at least some grammar.

Within a few years, however, grammar ceased to be taught as a separate subject, and was just sprinkled through basal readers. Somewhat later, even fewer grammar rules were to be found in school textbooks. But, went the thinking, why should American children have to be formally taught their own language?

Twenty years later, the elementary school students who had not formally learned English grammar were now teaching English.

They had never been exposed to the traditional grammar books of the 1940s and '50s, so they could not explain even rudimentary grammatical forms. (What is a dangling modifier? What is the difference between a clause and a phrase?)

The grammatical "herd immunity" conferred on teachers in the '60s and '70s by their own exposure to traditional grammar had worn off, and there was no one to teach grammar to our children – who have become today's reporters, journalists, writers and newscasters.

It's time again to formally teach traditional grammar in the schools. (And, yes, I know I split an infinitive, but English doesn't have true infinitives, so it's OK.)

(Adapted with permission from The Washington Times, Dec. 16, 2004. Veda Charrow is the author of Clear and Effective Legal Writing.)