

Ain't nothing wrong with ain't (cont.)

says, "I do not know not" (Je ne sais pas), and the modern Spaniard, "I don't see nobody" (No veo nadie). And what's wrong with our own Tin Pan Alley lyricists, who defy Lowth's dictum with "I Ain't Got Nobody."

The 18th century speech dictators also invented the still-observed silly locution, "It is I!" Again, the French - and most of the English - speaking world - say "it is me."

No wonder Edward J. Gordon, Yale lecturer, says, "Most grammar teaching has little relation to the way the English language really works," and that Henry Sweet, another scholar, observed, "Most grammar has neither usefulness or validity outside the classroom."

The verb "shall," says our textbook, applies to future action, as I shall start on my trip tomorrow. The verb "will," on the other hand is concerned with decision and determination, as I will start on my trip tomorrow. See the difference? You don't?

Then you can blame your density on a chap named John Willis, a "mathematician, logician and grammarian" of the 1600s who was disturbed to discover that the Latin "shall" and "will" had just about the same meaning. So, all on his own, he set them apart, to the consternation of defenseless pupils ever since.

There are indignant teachers who will accuse me of debasing our language and avow that so-called grammar based on usage will corrupt English and lead to slovenly speech.

Debase our language? Language has no fixed bases. Like everything else in life, it is a process, and while purists argue, the language pattern changes. Ungrammatical expressions often are clearer and more forceful than their grammatical superiors. As Will Rogers once said, "Maybe ain't ain't correct, but I notice a lot of folks who ain't using ain't ain't eating."

There's nothing new about my views on grammar. "language," said the old Roman rhetorician Quintilian around the first century B. C., "is like money, which becomes current when it receives the public stamp." And Charles Carpenter Fries, in his American English Grammar, declares: "There is no necessary connection between a knowledge of systematic grammar and a practical control of English."

A short while ago I got hold of an 8th grade grammar used in our schools, and prepared an examination paper of 15 questions for some of my business associates. Here's what I threw at them:

Define and illustrate (1) a compound predicate; (2) a copulative verb; (3) expletives; (4) demonstrative pronouns; (5) homonyms; (6) correlative conjunctions; (7) a prepositional phrase; (8) noun clauses; (9) gerunds; (10) a substantive phrase; (11) an appositive; (12) a co-ordinate clause; (13) a past-perfect participle; (14) a predicate nominative, and (15) a subordinating conjunction.

I got one right - homonyms. My colleagues did better, but flunked miserably. Yet we're all authors, making our living writing, editing and publishing.

Today's professional writer pays no attention to grammatical gobbledegook. He's too busy writing his thoughts clearly and forcefully. Why not apply his technique to the schools, at least to the upper elementary grades and certainly high school? Let pupils see the fun in writing and invite them to think of reading as a great experience.

The few accepted formal language patterns can come in little by little, largely through exposure and imitation.

Let's throw the old textbooks out the window, along with the words "correct" and "incorrect," because there's really no such thing as "grammar," but only an ever changing language pattern formed by everyday usage.

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