

## O ate 2 of Jill'r Pairs

If I know anything about readers, the title of this essay is more mystifying than edifying. As a structure of language directed toward speakers of English, it fails to convey anything in particular because it violates several conventions. When I recast it to read “I ate 2 of Jill’s pears,” I clarify meaning, but something still isn’t quite right. The use of the numeral is unconventional here. At first glance, that doesn’t seem like a big deal; after all, the reader is capable of grasping the writer’s intent. Isn’t he? And that’s what we want, isn’t it?

The answer to the first question is Yes. The reader understands the meaning of “2”. The answer to the second question is a resounding No. What we should want is an outcome profoundly different from the reader’s managing, through various athletic maneuvers, to snatch our meaning. What we should want is an outcome where the meaning is easily plucked. That’s what I’m writing about here: the degree of labor we impose on readers. Regardless of our motives, we increase that burden when we are guided by principles that have little to do with how writing communicates.

What provoked me to think about the matter is *Clarity*’s recent editorial decision to use numerals in all cases where a cardinal number is expressed. Dr. Eagleson’s article in Issue 50, “Numbers: figures or words” argues eloquently for expanding the use of the numeral, and I agree with much of what he says. Where I cannot agree, I find that my objections have to do with my sense of exactly how immutable, in the opinion of readers, the various conventions of number use currently are. I suppose I’d better say that my purpose in writing this is not to rebut Dr. Eagleson. Nor is it to address the conventions of number use. My purpose in writing this is to make a broader point about the danger in tinkering with what works.

### **The importance of “invisible” style**

*First, do no harm.* This is the Hippocratic Oath and the guiding principle of the medical profession. Writers and editors should also be guided by this principle, along with another one, usually expressed in crackerbarrel vernacular as *If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.* We do more harm than good when we abruptly change language conventions that are causing no great inefficiency.

When we start from the premise that language is a medium for conveying ideas, it follows that the medium itself should not attract the reader’s scrutiny; style should be invisible, a non-issue, so that the reader has unobstructed access to ideas. When style calls attention to itself, readers abruptly stop seeing the ideas and focus instead on the medium. And here it may be more accurate to say that intruding style actually prevents readers from concentrating on the ideas and forces them to focus on the medium.

When the medium distracts, readers begin asking questions that have nothing to do with what the writer is trying to convey. Suppose I decide that “nud” would be an excellent addition to English. After all, we have “nod” to capture the affirmative shake, but we have nothing simple to convey the negative shake. And sooner or later someone has to introduce the word. And so I write, “When Greenspan asked whether he had made himself clear, the reporters nudded.” What I’ve done is ambushed the reader, and my reward goes something like this: *Nudded? Is “nudded” a word? Am I supposed to be familiar with it? What does it mean? Does it mean shaking your head in disagreement? If that’s what it means, why didn’t the writer say it that way? Did he invent the word? If so, then who does he think he is?* These are a few of the questions that will occur, and there are plenty of others. Some readers, for example, might wonder whether the writer has a shadowy agenda.

It seems to me that we don’t want this outcome. What we do want is invisible style, and in order to achieve it, we need to honor convention when it comes to the innocent things. Without doubt, many conventions of the English language appear nonsensical in the harsh light of logical scrutiny. Spelling springs to mind. In English, the spelling of many words might justifiably be called arbitrary and capricious. And certainly it would be more logical to behave as the Germans do, and spell every word the way it sounds. But insisting on a purely mathematical logic (the logic of consistency) is impractical in instances where a different kind of logic holds sway. In the enterprise of communicating, there is a different logic at work – the logic of expectation – and it is only by employing this logic that a writer succeeds. The logic of consistency yearns for “nud”; the logic of expectation is baffled by it.

## **Evolution works; mutation doesn’t**

We would do well to remember the chilly reception given those who have advocated a phonetically uniform spelling of English words. The same reception has greeted those who, wishing to stamp out the gender bias they find inherent in the promiscuous use of “he,” “him,” and “his,” have suggested gender-neutral pronouns. *Tey* (he or she), *tem* (him or her), *ter* (his or her), and *ters* (hers) flashed across the lexicon in the 1950s. And since then, people have seriously put forth a number of variations on the theme. (These variations include *ve*, *ver*, *vis* and *co*, *co*, *cos* and even – with politics peeking out – *she*, *herim*, and *heris*.) The motive may be laudable from the standpoint of achieving precision, but we do not see these structures in the language. The reason we do not see them is that there is a conspiracy against their use – against their being anointed as “words” – the irrefutable and utterly democratic conspiracy we might call the will of the users of language. Experienced writers know a number of ways to avoid writing *If the applicant passes his physical exam, he will be scheduled for a polygraph*. For less experienced writers, faced with the possibility of sounding sexist, being indicted as sexist seems the lesser of two evils when compared to *If the applicant passes ter physical exam, tey will be scheduled for a polygraph*.

Language users are an intractable lot. We balk at changing our conventions, and our reluctance is practical even if it isn’t entirely logical. Why is it practical? Because it

enables us to get on with communicating. So far I haven't heard anyone arguing that our conventional way of forming possessives is biased. We write "Jack's hat" and we write "Jill's hat," and in both cases we are contracting "his." Buried under centuries of subtle etymological metamorphosis are the bald phrases "Jack his hat" and "Jill his hat." Certainly such phrasing isn't logical if Jill is female. More than illogical, it could be yet another example of gender bias. So, if we shrug off the mandate of what readers expect, we might claim that it is logical to leave "Jack's hat" alone but to substitute *Jill'r hat* ("Jill her hat") when we are talking about Jill, and to do the same for all female referents. But to arrive at such a conclusion, we would have to be looking at speech acts in a way our readers never do.

This is an important point. In the ordinary course of events, the reader does not ponder every least aspect of a writer's style. What the reader wants to do, what he tries to do, is simply get the point. If the writer is of sound mind, he understands this, and he clears a path for the reader to get the point. What he should not do is plant little land mines in that path. Regardless of how aesthetically pleasing "enuff" may seem to the logic of consistency, spelling "enough" that way is planting a little land mine. The outraged cry of users of language might be, "Enough is *enough!* Enough is not *enuff!*"

In time, "enough" may become "enuff." How language conventions change – I did not say deteriorate, but change – is not the issue here. The point is that conventions change gradually. They evolve; they do not mutate. Mutations of all sorts, not just in language, are abrupt and unexpected, and because they are unexpected, they deserve and receive a stare. I could suddenly decide, for example, to use "O" as the first-person pronoun. My reasons might range from the metaphysical to the symbolic, and they might even make sense. But O would have to have a screw loose if O believed that the result wouldn't halt the reader in his tracks.

## **Distinguishing convention from idiom**

What should matter to us is the practical result of our choices. To me it's reasonable, and highly commendable from the perspective of pragmatism, to argue for simplifying words and phrases that are unnecessarily complex. It is undeniably an act of good faith to eliminate *Further affiant sayeth not* and its shaggy, inbred cousins, especially when writing to non-attorneys. But there is an important distinction between the idiom of a profession and the conventions of a language. And I think it's unreasonable to argue for tinkering with conventions that cause no harm.

For precisely the same reasons that the practical writer uses "I" as his first-person pronoun, he spells the number when it starts the sentence.

Three of the speakers were excellent, but the other two were mediocre. One actually seemed half-asleep at the podium.

3 of the speakers were excellent, but the other 2 were mediocre. 1 actually seemed half-asleep at the podium.

The first example conforms to convention. In this analysis, what's far more important is that it expresses its meaning in a way linguists call "prereflective" – in plain language, neither writer nor reader has to think about it. It's conventional. It's expected. What all of this means is that the style succeeds in becoming transparent. The transfer of ideas from page to reader is immediate and effortless.

The second example expresses the same meaning, but the transfer is not immediate. Looming between words and meaning is the necessity of performing an analytical effort not required by the first example: puzzling over the presence of numerals. And of course, what ensues is the series of questions unrelated to the writer's intent, as the reader wonders, *Why did he use "3" instead of "Three"? Have the rules changed? Is the writer an iconoclast?* And so on. And that's quite a bit of distraction packed into a single keystroke – distraction that would not have occurred had the writer left well enough alone and simply used the convention.

Now in discussing matters of this sort, each of us is at the mercy of experience: I've developed my sense of language convention from what I've read, you've developed yours from what you've read, and Ichabod, over there in the corner, has developed his from what he's read. As an American, I put my period inside quotation marks. If you were a Canadian, you would put yours outside quotation marks. Ichabod will use whichever placement conforms to his experience. But one thing is certain: as readers, when we see a number at the beginning of a sentence, all three of us expect that number to be spelled.

Let's remember exactly what it is about a usage that makes it a "convention." First of all, it is an agreement, among users of language, to behave in a particular way: to capitalize the first letter of a sentence, generally use "s" to form plurals, and so on. As an agreement, it can be honored or it can be breached. When the convention is honored, it contributes to invisible style; when it is breached, readers notice, and style is yanked into the klieg lights. If we want to minimize the burden on the reader, we must honor the innocent conventions.

Reform has to start somewhere, surely, but we had better be judicious in what we choose to reform. Everyone benefits when we simplify the complex idiom of a profession, but everyone suffers when we violate the conventions of language itself. The rough road needs repair. Smooth pavement does not.

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