

## **The Evolution of Grammar: Electronic Communication Contextualizes the Shavian Dream**

**In 1941, Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw proposed a new English alphabet that would eliminate inconsistencies and simplify the English language. The new alphabet consisted of a set of 42 symbols designed to represent the 42 speech sounds found in spoken English (Shaw 71). He asserted that using an alphabet designed for another language (Latin) was inadequate, and that a new alphabet was vital to the improvement of reading, spelling, and general understanding of English. Shaw's motives were purely economical, he claimed, and implementing a new, phonetic alphabet would save printers and writers vast amounts of time and would drastically simplify written English. Shaw eventually added 6 more phonetic symbols and four semantic symbols, symbols designed to replace the four most commonly used words in English ('the,' 'of,' 'and,' and 'to'), but his argument remained the same; a new alphabet that accurately represented the speech sounds unique to English would save time and increase understanding (71).**

**This proposal never caught on, but it was close. In 1949, Mont Follick proposed the Spelling Reform Bill to British Parliament. Shaw did not participate in the writing of the bill, though his ideas greatly influenced those who did. The bill lost by 3 votes, 87 noes to 84 ayes, illustrating how seriously the issue of alphabet reform was considered in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tauber 137). Advocation of spelling and alphabet reform has quieted in recent decades, but with the advent of the Internet and electronic textual communication, issues of inconsistent grammar and punctuation tradition are once again becoming topics of discussion.**

The primary objective of this article is to address the concern that new avenues of communication are contributing to the decline of proper grammar use and the deterioration of proper, traditional spelling. Modern electronic conventions such as text messaging, instant messaging (IMing), and email are quickly replacing other, less expedient forms of written communication, and alterations in the traditional rules of grammar and spelling are coinciding with that change. What needs to be considered in today's fast-paced, technology-driven society is that, as avenues of communication change and the form of transmitted information is altered, the rules of grammar that govern that new form must also change, must also evolve in order to function adequately.

The evolution of grammar and language is inevitable. Etymologists theorize that language began to develop among Homo sapiens roughly 2 million years ago and has evolved into what is considered modern speech (myriad world language variations, capacity to communicate complex thought, written language, etc.) (King 1). In 2 million years, language has changed, developed, and refined itself into the complex form of communication we recognize today, so why do those who seek to maintain and perpetuate traditional grammatical rules, phonetic inconsistencies, and semiotic drudgery regard the current changes affecting our language as detrimental? Why must the evolution of language and the grammar that governs it come to a standstill?

The most recent (and certainly the most entertaining) publication addressing the current state of English grammar is Lynne Truss's Eats, Shoots & Leaves, a book that seeks to enlighten and convert grammatical miscreants by clarifying

various grammatical rules that lend themselves to confusion. In addition to explanation, Truss chronicles the development and evolution of English grammar from its two thousand year old beginnings: a three part dramatic punctuation developed (for the Greek language) by Aristophanes of Byzantium as a guide to actors when reading text out loud (Truss 72). As Truss narrates her way to the present state of English grammar, she expresses fear and distress for the future of punctuation and, indeed, language in general. Truss is admittedly happy that language has developed beyond the *scriptio continua* of two millennia ago, but, paradoxically, she wants it to develop no further (201-202). As Truss seeks to ennoble traditional grammar and punctuation, she also seeks to stave off any changes grammar may undergo as a result of new forms of communication. While Truss's intentions are admirable, they are misguided.

Truss's concerns as a writer are common to those who seek to preserve such antiquated conventions as the contractual apostrophe. The main problem with this rigid stance on grammar is that it fails to account for the context in which the message is conveyed. Different types of grammar govern different types of communication, so why should the informal, fragmented communication of a text message adhere to the strict, pedantic rules of formal written grammar? Murder is wrong, but, in the context of war, murder is acceptable. It is no different with regard to grammar and language. The context of the message must be recognized and factored into the reading of the message itself.

Oral language is governed by a very different set of rules than written language. When we speak, we express our feelings, thoughts, and opinions in a

fluid, semi-structured way; when we write, we try to structure our thoughts into a concise, lucid form that is easily understandable to those who read it. This means removing unnecessary words like “uh,” “like,” “anyway,” and “you know.” This also means grouping our thoughts into clear paragraphs that represent a calculated, linear thought process so that the reader does not have to work excessively to extract meaning from a muddled mass of words. Oral language does not adhere to comma rules, semicolon dogma, or even the simple laws of the period. It does not adhere to the rules of written language because the form is completely different (relying on aural ability and context in order to create meaning). Oral language creates its own rules, less formal than those of written language.

Even within the realm of written language there are different forms that are governed by different rules. Poetry is not governed by the same rules as an essay, just as a novel is not governed by the same rules as a management report. Run on sentences and sentence fragments are embraced by many poets who seek to illuminate imagery, feelings, and situations through the use of language, and this does not cause a great stir in the grammarian community. This rule is very different with regard to the essay, where complete sentences are necessary in order to convey authority of the subject matter and mastery of the language. Even long prose like the novel is free to violate common formal grammatical conventions. Nobel Prize winning writer Toni Morrison employs sentence fragments in order to manipulate the rhythm of her text. In Beloved, Morrison makes use of a fragment in order to illustrate the spontaneity of memory and how it can be stimulated unexpectedly. As the main character, Sethe, removes chamomile from her legs at a

well, nothing is on her mind until the sound of water lifts out memories of Sweet Home, a plantation she once lived on:

And then sopping the chamomile away with pump water and rags, her mind fixed on getting every last bit of sap off—on her carelessness in taking a shortcut across the field just to save a half mile, and not noticing how high the weeds had grown until the itching was all the way up to her knees. Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet...

Toni Morrison, Beloved, 1987

Morrison uses the fragment in two ways: first, to hypnotize the reader with a wandering, detailed account of trivial happenings that occupy Sethe's mind, and then to startle the reader just as the sudden memory of Sethe's past surprises her.

These violations do not represent a detrimental grammatical shift, but merely represent the various ways grammar is employed even within the umbrella form of written language. All texts should not be treated the same simply because of the technical form they all share. A text message or an email is not bound to the rules of formal written English any more than a note scribbled to friend or family member and left on a counter top should be. The context of the message is as important as the message itself.

The development of new, more efficient modes of written communication has sparked discussions about the correct way to write and punctuate texts. The most alarming development is the shortening of words and elimination of punctuation within an electronic written text; a change that, for experts such as Lynne Truss, is a clear sign that the state of grammar is deteriorating to nothing more than a novelty. What these experts need to consider is the form of communication in which these changes are occurring. The new rules governing these new forms of communication have developed for exactly the same reasons that the new forms of communication were developed in the first place: they are more efficient than writing and sending a letter or preparing a complex, structured essay that explains in three pages what could be typed up in a half page and sent through the Internet in seconds.

Written English has undergone innumerable changes over the centuries, and these changes have brought our language to its current state of complexity and sophistication. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Aldus Manutius, grandson of Aldus Manutius the Elder (the man responsible for the first semicolon ever printed), explained that punctuation was meant to clarify the syntax of the written word (Truss 71). Since then, punctuation has changed to affect the grammar of the written word as much as the syntactical form of the written word has changed to affect the grammar governing it. The possessive apostrophe found its way into written English during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and has become a convention today that seems very logical to the average speaker and writer of English (38). Aristophanes' dramatic punctuation developed into the most commonly used and most widely

understood punctuation mark, the period. Even the convention of capitalizing the first word of a sentence was not commonly used until the 16<sup>th</sup> century (22-23). Words like “thou,” “thine,” and “wherefore” have been replaced with “you,” “your,” and “why.” Were all these changes negative? Absolutely not, according to contemporary grammarians, but surely those involved with language during those times of gradual change might have thought differently.

Even modern formal writing has undergone changes over the past three centuries. Commas are not as excessively used as they once were, a change that speeds up the rhythm of written text. Not all nouns are capitalized as they once were; the current convention is to capitalize only proper nouns, and even that rule is violated for effect with no great grammatical turmoil. Superfluous letters have been eliminated from words such as “labor (formerly ‘labour’),” “color (formerly ‘colour’),” and “program (formerly ‘programme’),” a minor American English alteration that affects the efficiency of the written word. All these changes seem to drive written language toward a common objective: more efficient writing is more effective.

This shift toward efficiency is observable everywhere in contemporary life. Business reports are designed to communicate only what is absolutely necessary in the minimum amount of words. The Internet is utilized more and more as a replacement for time consuming correspondence via air mail. Affordable and accessible forms of electronic communication have shrunk the size of the world even further than the telephone. Time is no longer a luxury; it is a hindrance, an obstacle in the path of productivity. In today’s fast-paced society, any means of reducing

time and improving efficiency are both encouraged and praised, so why is the opposite the case with regard to language and grammar? Why do we expect a fast food restaurant to prepare our food as quickly as possible, but cluck our tongues when we read the words “drive thru” on the sign? Is not “thru” a more efficient spelling of the word “through”? The message is still conveyed, and yet the time it takes to create the message is reduced.

This simplification of language is exactly what George Bernard Shaw was advocating in 1941 when he proposed a new English alphabet. If we had our own phonetic alphabet that accurately represented our own language, we could reduce the time it takes to create any given message while still retaining the meaning. The very nature of these new forms of communication requires that our written texts be as efficient as possible. Otherwise, the point of electronic written communication is lost. What is happening is just what Shaw proposed, only it is happening within the context of our original Latin alphabet. Words are shortened, unnecessary punctuation is eliminated, and meaning is still retained within the context of the message. The text message “dont go home. ill c u @ 8” is as effective as the lengthy, “Do not go home. I will see you at eight o’clock.” In fact, it is more effective because of the time required to produce the message. This message may not be easily deciphered by just anyone, but the point of this message is not to communicate to the world. It is meant to communicate a basic message from one person to another in a timely fashion, which is the predominate function of all electronic communication.

Just as linguists assert that all dialects are equal, so should grammarians assert that all grammar is equal. In the southern United States, the contraction “y’all (‘you all’, or ‘all of you’)” is, grammatically speaking, a modification to Standard English that actually improves understanding. If a teacher told a group of students “you need to listen to these special instructions,” the exact meaning of that message is muddled by inference and assumption. Does the teacher want to address all of his students, or simply speak to a select few who require special instruction? If the teacher meant to address all of his students, he could have used the contraction “y’all” to clear up any confusion and eliminate the need for students to assume. Even though this contraction is more precise in terms of grammar and language, it is considered incorrect when written as an actual word.

Change is inevitable, and it is necessary in order for human beings to grow. Changes made to written language in the past have proven to be positive steps in improving the complexity and efficiency of language. With new ways for people to communicate through writing, new rules need to be considered in order to accommodate the form and nature of these new opportunities. It is only recently that words like “CD,” “VCR,” and “IM” have made the leap from the niche language of technology buffs to the common lexicon of our culture. Even as you read this, the word “Google,” one of the most recent additions found in Webster’s New Millennium Dictionary of English, is becoming a commonly used verb. Minor alterations are starting to emerge concerning commonly used acronyms like “CIA” (now acceptable without periods separating the letters). In the not so distant future, instant messaging vocabulary may seep into common language. Executives may tell

their secretaries they will “brb (be right back),” and work colleagues may say “ttyl (talk to you later)” as they end a lunch time conversation.

The changes happening in language before our eyes are not trivial, nor are they steps backward. As human beings, we need to remain open to the changes affecting our language and the grammar governing it, but we must not embrace every single modification that emerges. Despite the confusion surrounding comma usage and the dark waters of semicolon and colon rules, the traditional rules of grammar have benefited everyone who uses written language to communicate. We have progressed beyond the *scriptio continua* of two millennia ago, and we must be careful not to slip back to the days of pages full of words that have to be deciphered before meaning can be extracted. But we must accept these modern changes as legitimate, and realize that many of these modifications to our grammar and language may catch on enough to become an integral part of spoken and written English.

As teachers, we must recognize the validity of these changes and teach our students the appropriate context in which to communicate. The importance of Standard Edited English should not be underestimated, for it is the most widely accepted form of communication in the United States, both written and oral. Contextual grammar should be taught alongside Standard Edited English to educate students on grammar appropriateness, and also to give validity to subcultural vocabulary and grammatical conventions that may one day become conventions of Standard Edited English. If students find teachers who recognize

**that the way they communicate is legitimate, teachers may find students more willing to learn a form of written English that their teachers consider legitimate.**

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