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Beyond Snobbery: Grammar Need Not Be Cruel to Be Cool

By June Casagrande

It's another radio station in another city in the overwhelming and terrifying process known as a book tour. I'm a first-time author on a very controversial subject—grammar snobbery—just beginning to realize I'm in way over my head.

The radio show host wants to know my thoughts on all those people out there who don't even try to use or to learn proper grammar.

Everything about my host tells me that he is, by nature, a democratic and diplomatic kind of guy. But between the lines I think I catch the scent of something else—the passion of the people who see my grammar column in their local newspapers and send me e-mails saying, “As a fellow grammar and usage Nazi ...” or, “Keep fighting against abuse of the language!”

In my columns, I don't fight abuse at all. I don't bemoan others' crimes against English or wail about how it's going into the crapper. I'm not a grammar or usage Nazi. I'm not a snob, a snoot or even a stickler. I'm not “fellow” anything to them at all. Just because I write a column offering help to people who want to use better English doesn't mean that I would impose good grammar on others.

Short of coughing and fanning the air in the presence of a cigarette smoker, grammar provides the easiest way for an American to get off on and get away with looking down on others.

I'm just giving information to the people who want it, with nothing whatsoever to say about the people who don't.

But grammar is exclusive with a capital "exclude." It's like a secret handshake between a few who like to think of themselves as a select few. The first thing a person learns about grammar may be that "cat" is a noun, but the second thing he learns is that this knowledge immediately elevates him above everyone who doesn't share it.

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And I mean that in a sympathetic way.

It's all too human to want to feel superior. But the superiority impulse is not the only dynamic in play. Grammar snobs' attacks aren't exclusively offensive. There's a defense motive as well. On some level, they feel their values and priorities are under attack.

After all, if you go out of your way to learn how to use "whom," if you go so far as to learn a rule even most of the whom-savvy crowd don't know—that a pronoun that is both a subject and an object always takes subject form because it's acting as subject of a clause—you're going to feel a little sting when you notice others eschewing "whom" entirely.

Was I wasting my time in learning about this in the first place? Were my efforts for nothing? Could I have been led astray by the beloved parent or teacher who impressed upon me that grammar is important? Have I just been a sucker all these years?

Not a tasty pill to swallow.

The alternative—grammar snobbery—seems a perfectly natural defense mechanism.

Human being to nutjob in sixty seconds under the influence of the crystal meth of academic disciplines—grammar.

That is, for the split second it takes some people to go from, “Why you dissin’ my ‘whom?’” to “All ye who split thine infinitives and begin sentences with ‘hopefully’ are morons of the first order whom I’m morally justified in ridiculing ad infinitum.”

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And the amazing thing—the thing I can’t get over—is how many grammar bullies don’t even bother to make sure they’ve got their facts straight. They’re so stoked about playing gotcha that they just can’t contain themselves.

For example, not long ago I came across a guest column in a Florida newspaper written by an English tutor. She was utterly disgusted by a whole range of other peoples’ grammar mistakes, not the least of which was the dreaded split infinitive.

I sent the columnist/tutor an e-mail, starting off softly: “Enjoyed your column, blah blah, impressed you also know so much about math, blah blah. And by the way, you might want to check your source on the split infinitives stuff. *The Associated Press Stylebook*, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*, *Garner’s Modern American Usage* and others all say there’s no such rule.”

The columnist wrote me back. Her response: “I could not disagree more.”

These kinds of grammar superstitions cause problems. They distract us from more important stuff. For example, there are a lot more people in the country who will tell you there's a rule against splitting infinitives than there are people who can tell you what part of speech the word "therefore" is (it's an adverb).

So I canned the candy coating. I sent her excerpts from a number of these style guides, and threw in three or four more. Basically, every grammar book and style guide in my possession, I told her, says there's no rule against splitting infinitives. If "to go" is truly acting as a single unit, these books all agree, there's still no rule against putting a "boldly" right in the middle. Some bona fide grammar books say that the very idea of a split infinitive is hooey because in English "to" is not really part of the infinitive. "Go," they say, is the infinitive. "To" just introduces it.

Her response: "I still disagree."

It's not immaterial that much of her grammar wisdom came from her now-deceased father—a stickler of the first order whose parental nurturing included lessons against the evils of split infinitives right along with loving injunctions like "eat your vegetables" and "look both ways before crossing the street."

In effect, I was telling her: My *Garner's* and *Oxford* and *Chicago* and Strunk and White and *AP* can beat up your daddy (your dead daddy).

Really, what was I expecting?

The people who go around saying that you can't split an infinitive or end a sentence with a preposition or begin a sentence with a conjunction are just reciting something a misinformed parent or teacher told them decades before—something they chose to believe with a vengeance.

My radio host is not of this ilk at all. He is firmly rooted in sanity. Yet he doesn't seem to like my answer to his question about lowbrow language lunks: "I really don't feel it's my place to tell others they should care about good grammar."

There's a moment of silence. We're live, or at least it feels like we are, with that black foam-covered microphone pointing in my face and taunting me. So I keep talking. I pull out an example, a fictional person of my own invention whom I hereby dub Ain't Got No Time for Grammar Annie.

"Somewhere out there is a single parent working two jobs, trying to support four kids, maybe also caring for a sick parent, maybe suffering from some illness herself. Who am I to tell her she should make grammar a bigger priority in her life? It's just not my place to tell her to care."

Being diplomatic and democratic, my host has no choice but to accept this. But he's not done with me yet.

"Well, do YOU care?"

In retrospect, I think the subtext of the question was, "Surely you're not telling me that you share none of my concern about and passion for grammar?"

Still, I answer the question as it is asked of me. Do I care?

"Yes, I do."

Fifteen minutes later, I'm back in a stranger's car, careening through a strange city, looking forward to the next strange experience, without a moment to process what I meant by, "Yes, I do."

But that was months ago. And, in the interim, I've figured out what I meant and why, when thrown the curveball of this unexpected question, my answer was yes.

I don't think grammar is necessarily in serious danger. I don't think grammar is even all that important. I don't think it's imperative that others learn it. I don't think it rightly separates superiors from their inferiors. I don't think grammar is the last lifeline of civilization in society so increasingly uncivilized that we're in immediate danger of fornicating in the streets and flinging our poo like monkeys.

I just think it's cool.

I mean, think about a sentence like, "In the summer, I enjoy watching professional hopscotch." Every part of that sentence is like a gear in a machine working together to create an expressed thought. A prepositional phrase acting as an adverbial, followed by a subject, a verb phrase and an object.

And there's coolness in the details of language and grammar, too, devilish though they are.

"Longtime" as a modifier of a noun is one word, but "long-term" as a modifier is hyphenated, and both of them, when functioning as nouns, are two words.

We can learn these things one by one, over a whole lifetime, enjoying the feeling of being "smart" without having to be "smarter than."

The Los Angeles Times writes about students' grades as "A's and Bs," with a single apostrophe whose sole purpose is to prevent the spelling the word "as." And this is as defensible a choice as "A's and B's" or "As and Bs."

Nouns can premodify other nouns, "breakfast eater," and adjectives can act as complements to linking verbs, "I feel bad."

We can take apart the gears of any whole sentence, reassemble them in different ways, replace certain parts with other parts and retain the same meaning or change it subtly or drastically.

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Focusing on others' language shortcomings is a sucker's game. Sure, it can make us feel big in the short term. But it's just a matter of time till we get knocked on our butts. And that sucks the fun and excitement out of language faster than you can say "dangling participle."

The desire to learn usage and grammar and style should transcend such petty motives. We don't have to like grammar. We can learn some just because we know that bosses and colleagues and clients consider it a priority. Or we can pursue it as an academic curiosity. Just as the ecology of a coral reef or the battle strategies of Napoleon or the social constraints of Jane Austen's day can fascinate, so can grammar.

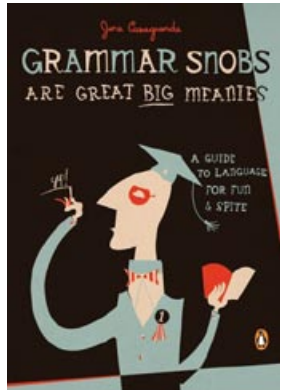
But not everyone feels this way. And not everyone functions in a world where grammar is a priority. That doesn't make us any better than them. Ain't Got No Time for Grammar Annie is made of some amazing stuff, and anyone who would look down on her is just dead wrong.

Every time I get an e-mail attacking me for beginning a sentence with “hopefully,” which is perfectly grammatical, by the way, it sucks some of the “cool” out of grammar for me. Every time I get an e-mail pointing out a real problem with my writing, such as my unhealthy attachment to the redundant, “the reason is because ...” it’s even less fun (though at least I’m learning something).

The “gotcha” game is usually played with the professed motive of aiding good grammar. But in truth it’s as counterproductive to grammar learning as any Eminem song. The “gotcha” business leaves an English user just two options: develop completely bullet-proof grammar or become disgusted and give up altogether. And seeing as even language experts like Bryan Garner, William Safire and William F. Buckley get busted making mistakes, bullet-proof usage clearly is not an option.

But if we can avoid the temptation of grammar snobbery, if we can give ourselves permission to make mistakes, if we can think of grammar as a tool or even a toy, well, that’s when grammar really can be cool.

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For more details or to buy a copy of June Casagrande's, *Grammar Snobs Are Great Big Meanies* [click here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

June Casagrande was born in March and lives in a small house.

She worked as an editor and community news reporter before launching the self-syndicated weekly grammar column, "A Word Please," which appears in community newspapers in Southern California, Florida and Texas. She has written articles for a number of regional and national publications including the *Los Angeles Times*.

June attended the University of South Florida, where she earned her bachelor's degree. She attended the improv comedy school at the renowned Groundlings Theatre, where she flunked out (much tougher program). June lives in Pasadena, Calif., with an embarrassing number of cats (four) and a just-right number of men (one).

Grammar Snobs Are Great Big Meanies is her first book. She's currently working on her second Penguin grammar book, a look at the 101 most-criticized usage choices; the working title is *Mortal Syntax*.

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