



I was at Pigeon Point Park the other day, watching my five-year-old spinning away on the merry-go-round ad nauseam (my nauseam, not hers) and chatting with a woman I'd just met, another mom who happens to be a teacher at a local elementary school. We were discussing the recent reopening of Waterfront Park, specifically wondering when the playground might be ready for business. We both agreed that the new park was looking good; then my companion added, "I hope it don't get tore up again, or nothin'."

I smiled and nodded, maintaining my external composure even as my heart began to pound and my throat to swell. It had been a long time since I'd suffered a full-fledged attack of Grammar Righteousness, but the symptoms were unmistakable. All I could do now was claw my palms, take slow, deep breaths, and keep my mouth shut until the feeling of indignant superiority passed. I would not be a jerk; I would be gracious. I would remember that there are things more important than good grammar – things like kindness and honesty and generosity. I would not condemn this perfectly pleasant woman on the basis of something as superficial as her language skills. I would not think about the fact that she was an EDUCATOR OF YOUNG CHILDREN...

I've been a grammar snob for as long as I can remember; it's practically in my genes. My mom ran a household where cleanliness was nice, but good grammar was next to Godliness. My sisters and I were constantly corrected, "reared" not "raised" in a small Alabama town where we spent our summers "lying" in the sun while all our friends were "laying out." Anyone we brought home was promptly evaluated on the basis of his (not their!) grammar, as if speech were an actual indicator of character, a measure of morality. When a particularly eloquent child did something mean or petty to one of us girls, or exhibited bad manners of any kind, Mom was always a bit thrown. "But she has such good grammar!" she'd say, a look of bewildered disappointment on her face.

In my mother's defense, she was quite egalitarian in bestowing her favor. If you spoke well, you were a-okay with her. She never saw good grammar as the exclusive province of the rich and well-connected, and, indeed, prized it much more highly than wealth or social status.

"That new plumber did such a good job fixing the toilet today... and he has the best grammar!" she'd say, utterly delighted to have made a worthy new acquaintance. She taught us that a regional accent was nothing to be ashamed of (perhaps a little sensitive about her own syrupy drawl?), but that there was simply no excuse for poor grammar in a society blessed with public education.

Of course, when educators don't know how to speak, that argument falls apart. Mom knew this all too well. She once had my sixth grade Language Arts teacher transferred to Science for using the phrase "ink pen" in class. I'm telling you – she's hardcore!

While I've inherited my mother's passion for proper usage, I've tried, over the years, to temper it with humility and a sense of proportion. Every time I feel myself flare up at the sound of the word "ain't," or the nails-on-chalkboard screech of a sentence like "This car belongs to her and I," I remind myself that it's only language... that bad grammar does not a bad person make. As I child, I took offense at my mother's implied insistence otherwise, her habit of judging my friends according to their linguistic competence. As an adult who writes for a living, I'm ever-mindful of the admonition 'judge not lest ye be judged.' I've no desire to set myself up as some two-bit, small-time William Safire, inviting my readers to scrutinize my column ruthlessly, delighting in my every inevitable mistake. As a mother, I worry about passing the family obsession along to my daughter, though I fear it's already a *fait accompli*. Lately, I've caught her correcting the neighborhood children like some pint-sized, jump rope-wielding, scooter-riding school marm. "Hannah, it's he doesn't, not he don't!" Charming, huh? I cringe, even as my heart swells with pride.

I realize there's something a little prim about my fixation. After all, language is fluid. While not as fickle as fashion, it changes over time and differs from place to place. Occasionally, what was once a grammatical no-no makes it into the realm of the universally accepted through sheer force of repetition. Even some of my most literate friends now say "lay" when they should say "lie." Why can't I just "lay back" (ouch!) and go with the flow? I finally got used to white shoes after Labor Day; why can't I get used to "their" as a singular pronoun? (This new usage, of course, has been foisted upon us by a different kind of language police – the ones who prize political correctness over the grammatical type. I expect the word "history" will morph into "theirstory" by the end of the century.)

I've been musing this week about why it is I'm such a stickler. Aside from the fact that said stickler-ism is a family legacy, there must be some reason I cling so steadfastly to the classic rules of speech. (And don't go telling me that "stickler-ism" isn't a word. Those of us who know the rules inside and out may break them with impunity whenever we see fit. It's one of the perks.)

For me, I think "proper English" is a little bit like a life raft – something to hold onto, modest but sturdy, in a rudderless world moving faster than a whitewater rapid. In an indulgent era of flexible standards and ephemeral values – an era when "thou shalt not discriminate" seems to be the only hard, fast rule – insisting on grammatical correctness is my own mini-rebellion, I suppose. Bombarded daily, as we are, with thousands of media images, hundreds of information fragments, and dozens of conflicting opinions, it's almost impossible to get at the truth about anything anymore. And that's assuming you even believe in such a concept as truth.

The other night, my husband and I were watching a news report about how the "botched" execution of Saddam Hussein had made America look bad. I was confused. Had there actually been any Americans on the scene? Did we have any control over the way the execution played out? I honestly didn't know, so I put these questions to my husband. His reply: "It doesn't matter whether or not we had control. It looks like we did. The world thinks we did. Perception is truth."

That's an increasingly popular opinion, but I'm not ready to accept it. It may be fast upon me, but I'm not going gentle into that good night of relativism. I believe there are absolute truths. We may not always like them, or even recognize them, but that doesn't make them any less absolute or any less true. A suicide bomber may believe himself a martyr; the truth remains that

he is a murderer. "The world" may believe that America botched Saddam's execution; that doesn't make it so. Perception is mutable; truth is not.

This, of course, is merely one woman's conviction. If you don't agree with me already, I probably won't change your mind. But, if I write with precision and grace, if I speak with care and accuracy, if I honor the grand old language of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Whitman, I might just have a shot.