Subordinate Clauses without Any Pauses

Why We Need a Language with Some Lawses

Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation
By Lynne Truss

The War Against Grammar
By David Mulroy
CrossCurrents, 2003, $20.00; 144 pages.

As reviewed by Diane Ravitch

When I was a high school student in Texas in the mid-1950s, the study of the English language was an important part of every school day. Every student took four years of English, and half of each year was devoted to the study of grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation, and speech. The other half was reserved for the study of literature. In every subject, not just English, teachers corrected our work if we made mistakes in spelling or grammar.

Thirty years after my graduation, I returned to an event in Houston and met one of my favorite English teachers, who had recently retired as director of English education for the city schools. When I told her how much I, as a writer, appreciated our careful study of English all those years earlier, she was appalled. “Well,” said Mrs. Ruth Reeves, “it was just terrible imposing all those useless and mechanical exercises on you poor children.” I was as disappointed at her reaction as she was at mine.

Over the past 40 or so years, it has often seemed that the study of proper English had died a sad and unlamented death. During the 1960s, standard English came under attack, not only from academics who considered it “oppressive,” but also as a result of the celebrated rise of the youth culture, which cared not a fig for the King’s English or any other conventions. By the early 1970s, organizations representing English teachers and English professors were insisting that students had the “right to their own language” and that dialects deserved equal status with standard English. In one policy statement, a higher education committee of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) insisted that a student’s reference to “them flowers” was just as acceptable as “those flowers.” Of course, the policy statements and proclamations by the professors and teachers were written in flawless English, but they nonetheless declared their independence from teaching it to their students (or “them students”). When the NCTE and the International Reading Association produced “national standards” in 1994, they neglected to include the study of correct English usage as part of their subject.

The consequences of this era of linguistic libertarianism (or Know-Nothingism) could be readily detected in the collapse of SAT verbal scores in the 1970s, the persistence of these low scores even as SAT math scores rebounded in the 1980s and 1990s, and the rise of remedial programs in reading and writing in universities, where professors became accustomed to receiving error-ridden papers from their poorly educated students. Eventually, it was no longer remarkable to see egregious errors in newspapers, books, and other printed material. To some extent, these errors were mitigated by the introduction of spell-check and even grammar checks in software programs. Even so, large numbers of students, probably a majority, have had no acquaintance with the study of their own language.

And now, much to the surprise of everyone, a book about punctuation topped the best-seller lists for many weeks in 2004. Lynne Truss’s Eats, Shoots & Leaves was first a best-seller in England, where the author lives, and then in the United States. She describes herself as a stickler for correct punctuation, who flies into a rage when she sees anything in print, whether an advertisement or a street sign or an e-mail, in which apostrophes are forgotten or misplaced. Her rage is unbounded when she sees someone confuse “its” and “it’s.” Much of the book consists of examples of the ways in which punctuation can change the meaning of sentences or paragraphs, as in these two sentences:
A woman, without her man, is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

British schools, like ours, went through a long sojourn into grammatical illiteracy. Until 1960, Truss writes, every British school routinely taught punctuation. Then, for more than a quarter of a century, during the “dark-side-of-the-moon years in British education...teachers upheld the view that grammar and spelling got in the way of self-expression.” Not until the adoption of the National Curriculum in Margaret Thatcher’s time were students expected to study their own language.

Why focus so relentlessly on punctuation? Truss says that without punctuation, “there is no reliable way of communicating meaning. Punctuation herds words together, keeps others apart. Punctuation directs you how to read, in the way musical notation directs a musician how to play.”

Why did this book become a huge best-seller? It’s a mystery to me. Perhaps it is because the public is fed up with the academic profession’s indifference to correct English.

It must be said, as well, that Truss’s book contains errors of punctuation and grammar. Her use of commas and semi-colons is maddeningly inconsistent. She writes of a “greengrocers’ punctuation,” when she is referring to a single greengrocer. She is “a-buzz with ideas,” even though the word “abuzz” has no hyphen. Louis Menand, writing in the New Yorker, said, “Either Truss needed a copy-editor or her copy-editor needed a copy-editor.”

David Mulroy’s book did not reach the best-seller list. In fact, when I checked Amazon.com, the book was ranked 471,437. Yet The War Against Grammar is a far more consequential and far more interesting book than Eats, Shoots & Leaves. The latter has verve and sass, but Mulroy’s book has important things to say to American teachers and parents. In 1996, Mulroy, a classics scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, attended a public hearing about the state’s academic standards and innocently suggested that all high school seniors should be required to identify the eight parts of speech in a selection of normal prose. He thought it a “modest and reasonable suggestion.” To his surprise, he was plunged into controversy, supported by parents, but strongly opposed by pedagogical experts, who informed him that the NCTE disparaged the value of any grammar instruction.

After this disturbing discovery, Mulroy began to research the reasons why English teachers have become opponents of grammar, a proposition that he would previously have thought to be an oxymoron. He repeatedly encountered the view in NCTE publications that “decades of research” or “many studies” have shown that formal grammar is not only useless but also harmful to students’ self-esteem and even their mental health! Those who were hostile to grammar instruction cast themselves as progressives and saw proponents of instruction in grammar as rigid traditionalists. These negative views toward grammar, Mulroy writes, became dogma in the nation’s schools of education.

Mulroy’s goal in dissecting “the war against grammar” is to encourage the teaching of grammar in grades four through six. He believes that this will set a strong foundation for all future studies of language, for understanding great literature, and for developing the capacity for eloquent self-expression. He can’t make his case empirically, but his case is powerful on its face. As he says, “Questioning the value of basic grammar is like asking whether farmers should know the names of their crops and animals.”

Mulroy’s brief for grammar instruction is powerful and important. If I had the power, I would place it on the required reading list of every future teacher.

Mulroy’s book also contains numerous lapses, mainly missing words, as in “The body of the report has been long forgotten, but its summary judgment on the value of instruction grammar [sic] has been frequently quoted in NCTE publications.” Or, “No matter how well attuned you may [sic] to the secret harmonies of nature...” Or, referring to a book written half a century ago, “It was a valuable contribution [sic] to the development of modern linguistics.”

Anyone who reads books, magazines, and newspapers with any degree of attention to correct use of language is aware of the pervasiveness of poor copyediting. It is in such places that we can see clearly the corrosive results of the accumulated influence of the “war against grammar.”

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