

THE ADVENTURES OF WORD MAN

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Literacy is in a parlous state. Whether the causes lie in our educational system, the influences of the mass media, the jargon and informality of e-mail, or some other factors, I will leave to others to determine.

Even as language standards decline, they merit a spirited defense. Today, errors of usage, grammar, and spelling proliferate in both written and spoken communication, and cry out for correction. But is it wise to point out such solecisms, especially when they are committed by strangers? The consequences can't always be predicted.

Following are three of my own experiences in this well-intended if quixotic endeavor, exactly as they happened. Well, almost.

Episode #1: The Clueless Customer

Founded 80 years ago, Arthur Brown is a stationery and art supply store in midtown Manhattan.

One day while in that venerable establishment, I overheard a young woman talking to an employee.

"I want to paint on material," she said.

"What kind of material?" asked the salesman.

The woman was flustered and flummoxed. "You know," she sputtered. "*Material!*"

My attention was piqued. "This looks like a job for ... Word-Man!" After rapidly changing from mufti into my superhero costume, I valiantly intervened.

"Excuse me, what I believe the young lady wants to do is paint on *fabric*."

The woman's relief was palpable. "Yeah! That's it! Like he said! Whatever!"

"My work here is done," I proclaimed. "I must now be off to help others in linguistic distress."

Neither the customer nor the salesman offered any expression of gratitude. But as I departed, I imagined them wondering, "Say, who was that unmasked man anyway? We never had a chance to thank him"

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Some people scoff at the concept of proper English, and the legitimacy of any rules. A common objection: "What does it matter as long as the meaning is understood?"

The answer is that bad usage often *fails* to communicate, resulting in ambiguity, confusion, or lack of clarity, as the above anecdote demonstrates. Moreover, social conventions and civilized discourse still matter. A series of articles in *The Wall Street Journal* reported that poor speech habits can damage an executive's career prospects.

Lamentations on the deterioration of English as well as attempts to preserve its purity date back at least to Daniel Defoe in 1697. Jacques Barzun and Allen Walker Read took opposing sides in the "prescriptivism vs. permissivism" battle. Two recent books prove that the debate is

far from over. John McWhorter bemoans declining standards while fellow linguist David Crystal celebrates the infinite variety of language and rejects the idea of "correct English."

Here is another true story.

Episode #2: The Mistaken Menu

As I walked by a restaurant in my neighborhood, an employee stood on the sidewalk, handing out menus to attract patrons. I took one, walked a few paces, then stopped to examine it.

"Do you haff kvestion?" asked the hawker.

Outdoors, it was impractical to switch to my impressive Word Man outfit. Instead, I drew a pen from my pocket, scribbled on the menu, and handed it back. "No, just a correction."

The words *prix fixe* had been rendered as "prix fix." This is surely one of the most frequent misspellings. I've also seen such creative variants as "price fix" and "price fixed." But this typo is mystifying. Many restaurants are French or serve French dishes. So it's not unreasonable to expect proprietors to know the right spelling.

The befuddled individual just stared silently at the helpful suggestion. Once again, my daring and heroic feat received no recognition. But that doleful situation was soon to change

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Of course, the motivations of those who engage in this activity are not entirely altruistic. Showing off our hard-won knowledge provides ego gratification and fun.

As my recreational linguist colleague Gary Hallock wryly observes, "It allows us to feel slightly superior and smug for a while—until the horrible and inevitable moment when our own shortcomings are embarrassingly revealed."

On that cautionary note, I will recount my final tale of public pedantry.

Episode #3: The Esthetic Encounter

Last year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art announced a special exhibition of the Hudson River School. This group of 19th century painters favored romantic and dreamlike landscapes. I was eager to see the show but procrastinated, finally managing to attend on the closing day.

As I strolled through the gallery, I encountered a couple intently studying the wall label describing a work. "Hmm," the man remarked to his wife. "*Crepuscular*. I don't know what that means."

The temptation was irresistible. Once again, Word Man to the rescue! Calling upon my powers of super-speed, I didn't miss a beat. "Twilight," I said.

"Oh!" he responded, surprised but pleased. "Thank you!"

And so we arrive at a happy ending. For those of us who champion the English language, it's gratifying to know that our efforts do not always go unappreciated.

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