

Follow the wisdom of the Grammar Guru at the peril of losing your audience, says The Economist's **LANE GREENE**

A Close **READ** of Rules

IN THINGS GRAMMATICAL, ONE OFTEN HEARS the complaint about the language slouching toward a lowest common denominator: teens, text-speak and Twitter ruining our collective ability to string a noun and a verb together. But in corporate language, we often see the opposite effect: an impossibly high common denominator.

I mean this: Every office has a Grammar Guru, either officially or unofficially an editor of things that go out in the company name. This is often the only person in the building who can define a subordinate clause or use *whom* with confidence. Everyone else fears a Grammar Guru, who gets away with almost any changes to copy because no one else can refute their arguments.

But there's a countervailing desire when companies communicate with the world: to sound human. There are a lot of usages in English that show a distinction that Geoff Pullum, a linguist at the University of Edinburgh, calls Normal versus Formal. We all know that there are more relaxed and more buttoned-up ways to say certain things, like *it's* versus *it is*, and that both are acceptable. But there are also many cases where people like the Grammar Guru think only the Formal form is right. This can mean that your company ends up talking like its customers never do – and this is a bad thing.

Take *whom*. Yes, it's still used in serious writing. But it's rare in spontaneous speech – a hallmark of Normal. This is why ad copy and other informal types of language, which mimic speech, tend to avoid it. Twitter – by default – recommends “who to follow.” But if you set your account to UK English, you will, for some reason, get “whom to follow.” (In fact *whom* is not used more commonly in the UK, though both Britons and Americans seem to think that it is.) In both countries, *who* is Normal and *whom* is Formal, and in certain circumstances *whom* just looks weird, even when Formally correct.

My employer, The Economist, recently put “Who Cyril Ramaphosa should fire” on its cover. The editors knew that *whom* was traditional here, but couldn't bring themselves to put “Whom Cyril Ramaphosa should fire” there. Though our readers are grammatically astute, not a single letter

of complaint came in. Or take the singular *they*. Editors have wrongly frowned on *they* to refer back to pronouns like “anyone” (anyone who wants to bring their partner can do so) or to a generic person like “a student” (any student who wants to use their calculator may do so). For a couple hundred years, people used *his* instead, leaving half the human race out of such references.

But singular *they* is even older, first attested in 1375, and appearing in the King James Bible, Shakespeare and especially often in the works of Jane Austen (and in this article's second paragraph: Did you notice?). It is now making a comeback in print, and it has of course long been ubiquitous in speech. Don't let Grammar Guru win this one: Singular *they* is perfectly normal, and acceptable, in any copy meant to sound even a little conversational. And “sex-neutral *he*” is on its way to the dustbin of history, as it should be.

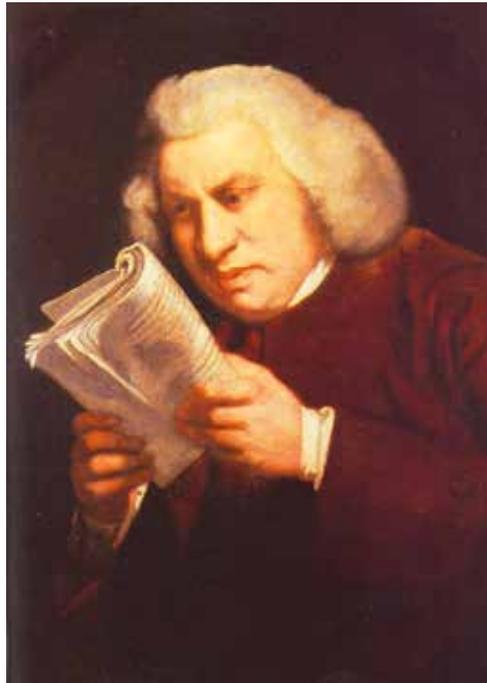
And if your office

Grammar Guru insists on never ending a sentence with a preposition, or never splitting an infinitive, put your foot down. Real Grammar Gurus have always recognized the so-called rules against these to be baseless, from the great H.W. Fowler in 1926 to Steven Pinker in his excellent *The Sense of Style* in 2014. Many elegant writers avoid split infinitives, of course. But those less elegant torture good English into some awkward stress position to avoid these harmless usages.

The point? In order to avoid offending those for whom the highest pleasure is an outraged letter to the editor, too many writers insist on prose that goes against the grain of Normal, the way the vast majority of English-speakers use their own language on a daily basis. Good grammar matters, but so does reaching your audience. Most of the usages above are impeccable, and even letting a judicious *who* in place of a *whom* may be just fine.

If your goal is to make a human connection, use the language your audience does.

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THE ECONOMIST'S Johnson column on language was created by Stephen Hugh-Jones in the 1990s. It is named after Samuel Johnson, the 18th century writer and creator of the English language's first great dictionary. This portrait by Joshua Reynolds shows Johnson's intense concentration and the weakness of his eyes.