Introduction to *Accidence Will Happen*

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Many people are passionate about language. I'm one of them. For some years I've written a weekly column for The Times about questions of English usage. The column is prescriptive. It gives the best advice I can devise on what constructions are possible in Standard English, and how to write stylishly and grammatically.
Opinions on usage have to be based on something if they're to be anything more than prejudices. My columns and this book invoke the evidence of how English is used. That's the only standard we can employ for what the English language (or rather, the various dialects that make up English) consists of. I'm interested in how English is spoken and written. I'm much more interested in those mechanics than I am in complaining about how native English speakers use their own language.

Perhaps you grimace at the phrase between you and I (instead of between you and me), or bored of (instead of bored with or bored by), or different to (instead of different from), or very unique (instead of just unique), or less than ten items (instead of fewer than ten items). I get many letters on these and other alleged errors of English usage, seeking my support in banishing them from public life. Yet constructions like these are used by native English speakers every day. All of them are common and none are (note that I say none are, even though some people will tell you that you must say none is) ungrammatical.

Looking at the way language is used gives you some perspective on a subject that recurs in, and even dominates, public debate about English. Pedants are loud, numerous and indignant. They are convinced that standards in English usage are falling, and they blame schools and the media for tolerating this alleged deterioration. The outcome, so these purists maintain, is linguistic barbarism, in which slang, sloppiness and text-speak supplant English grammar.

Don't believe it. If there is one language that isn't endangered, it's English. The language is changing because that's what a living language does. Linguistic change is not decline. Change is always bounded by the need to be understood. People can make mistakes in English but the grammar of the language never breaks down.

The abbreviations and symbols that make up text-speak follow grammatical rules. Text-speak wouldn't be usable otherwise.

Perhaps it blurs the gap between spoken and written English but that's no bad thing.

If you worry that English is changing so radically that our cultural heritage of language and literature will be lost to our descendants, your concerns are well intentioned but groundless. The prophets of decline have been around for a long time. They appear in every generation and they are always mistaken. This book explains how and why they're wrong. More broadly, it offers guidance and reassurance on the range of possibilities in English usage.

From fearing for the future of English it's a short step to worrying about the way we ourselves use language. It's natural and proper to do this. The task of being expressive is worth thinking about and taking time over. Many articulate people, fluent in the spoken and written word, take this apprehension a stage further, however. How many times have you met people who diffidently, even apologetically, explain that they were never taught grammar? It happens to me often.

Opposite me at The Times sits one of Britain's leading political commentators. Prime ministers seek his advice. Television interviewers vie for his opinions. He is a brilliant conversationalist, columnist, debater and public speaker. Yet scarcely a day passes when he doesn't look up from his desk to ask me if a particular construction in English is grammatical, or to check his spelling and punctuation. Is it possible to say the best candidate if there are only two of them, or must it be the better candidate? Should the word data be singular or plural? Is it illogical to say a friend of mine, when a friend of me should be sufficient?

Almost invariably, I tell him to go with his instinct. Yet I can't shift him from his conviction that he doesn't know the structure of his own language.

My friend is wrong about the state of his linguistic knowledge. In that respect, he is like many Times readers who write to me on questions of usage. They are intelligent and use language well, yet are convinced that their English is sub-standard. Their eloquence proves that they're mistaken.

Perhaps the generation educated since the 1960s is particularly prone to such worries because, for them, instruction in English grammar became quite rare. My impression is that many older people too doubt their abilities in English.

The purpose of this book is to offer advice on usage, and I hope it does so entertainingly and reliably, but it's also to argue that the prospects for the English language are bright. Standards of English are not declining; your standards of English are likely to be high. If you're among these worriers, I recommend you stop now and embrace the language that you already speak and write, in all its sophistication and complexity.

The title of this book encapsulates my reasoning. It's taken from the English edition of Asterix the Gaul. The indomitable Gaul has just bashed some Roman legionaries. One of the Romans says,

dazedly: 'Vae victo, vae victis.' Another observes: 'We decline.' The caption above this scene of destruction reads: 'Accidence will happen.'

You have to believe me that this is funny. The first legionary's Latin phrase means: 'Woe to the one who has been vanquished, woe to those who have been vanquished.' The scene is a riff on grammar. It was made up by Anthea Bell, the English translator of the Asterix books. She is my mother and I have stolen her joke. I'll render it leaden by explaining why it appeals to me. Victo is the dative singular and victis is the dative plural. The legionary is literally declining, in the grammatical sense. The aspect of grammar that deals with declension and conjugation is called accidence.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of English usage is this: if you are a native speaker, you already know its grammar. The same is true of the vast numbers of non-native English speakers whose command of the language is indistinguishable from that of articulate native speakers.

The grammar that you use may not be that of Standard English – though the fact that you're reading this book, which is written in Standard English, suggests that it probably is. It will be one variant of English among others. You have already acquired a mastery of complex grammatical constructions. We have all done this, through an instinct by which we can learn a set of rules. Those rules, once learnt at a very young age, stay with us. We know, for example, that a plural noun in Standard English is usually formed by adding -s or -es to a noun stem. We also know the exceptions (aircraft, children, feet, oxen, sheep, teeth and so on) to this rule and don't have to learn them afresh.

That's a very simple rule. There are many rules that are less obvious but that we also unfailingly follow. How about the fact that we know John admires himself is fine but that John thinks Mary admires himself isn't? We know that John likes him is about two people whereas John thinks he's clever may be about only one. We know that read is pronounced like reed in give me a book to read but like red in I've now read the book. We know that house ends with an s sound in they made the council house immaculate but with a z sound in they made the council house the family.

I'm not suggesting you grant yourself credit for an achievement that is common to everyone. Learning rules of language is part of what it is to be human. By some instinct, we have the ability to learn and apply those rules. (Not everyone has the same set of rules, of course. The instinct is universal but languages differ. Which language, or languages, you speak as a native depends on the environment in which you grew up. A German toddler doesn't have a biological instinct to learn German grammar, nor does a Japanese toddler have an instinct to learn Japanese grammar. But all toddlers have an instinct to learn some set of rules.)

However, there's no need either to scold yourself for being bad at grammar, because you're not. Granted that the ability to write fluently and speak articulately is precious and there is no easy

route to it. It requires practice and a good ear for language. The tools are already with you, though. It's not conscious knowledge but, believe me, you do know your own language. You know English intimately. You probably know Standard English thoroughly even if you use a different dialect of the language in everyday life. You don't need manuals to tell you how English grammar goes. You've grasped it already.

Why, then, do people use style manuals? And what, given my conviction that you're already a master of English grammar, is the point of this one?

There is a good reason and a bad reason for style manuals. Unsurprisingly, I consider that the good reason is behind this volume. It's that there are many decisions about usage that are not obvious. Some of these decisions are about tacit conventions rather than rules of grammar. Conventions change, and so indeed can rules of grammar.

Every writer of English needs to make judgments, every day, about such issues as the case of pronouns, agreement in number of subjects and verbs, vocabulary and many others. Should it be it's I or it's me? When should you use the verbs deny, refute and rebut, or are they so alike in meaning that it doesn't matter which you choose?

Careful writers (the phrase is a cliché beloved of usage commentators, but I like it and it's accurate) also need to make judg-ments about how to communicate in different contexts. Linguists use the term register to distinguish between these different styles of prose, such as casual or formal.

We all adapt our style of prose according to our audience. We use intimate terms (and perhaps a private vocabulary) with a loved one, casual language with friends, and varying degrees of more formal language in our dealings with strangers, experts or figures in authority. Adopting different registers is known as code switching. Good style depends far more on picking the right register for the occasion – on a decision about code switching – than it does on footling rules such as the precise difference between less and fewer.

Not all conventions of usage will be common to all forms of English, and I'm restricting myself here to the conventions of Standard English. If we know these conventions, and if we inter-nalise them so that we don't have to think about them, it saves us time and gains us credibility with listeners or readers whose attention we want to secure.

Those are important gains. Children (and adults) ought to understand that if they are familiar with conventions of usage in Standard English they will be quicker in writing and more likely to gain a hearing for anything they want to say. Not every opinion is worth a hearing, but any opinion will be at a disadvantage in the public square if it does not adhere to the social contract under which words are given meanings and fitted together in certain ways to form sentences.

The bad reason is to believe that the benefits of internalising conventions of usage amount to learning 'proper English', and that a style manual will teach it to us. There is not proper English and sub-standard English. There are Englishes, all of which conform to grammatical rules. Standard English is one form of the language. Its conventions are vital to know, and for children to be schooled in, as a means of gaining fluency in a recognised and universally recognisable form of the language.

By the use of the word and the sentence we have a -near-infinite range of expressiveness. Dismayingly, pedants aren't much inter-ested in this potential. The aspect of language that most exercises them is not what we can do with it but what we can prohibit. In the media, popular books and public life, arguments rage about split infinitives, when to say hanged rather than hung, and the true meanings of words such as disinterested and decimate.

I want to convince you that the English language has never been more popular or in better health. You should be far more relaxed about modern usage than the pedants are. Language is a richer subject than these purported purists imagine.

Modern English, so far from being embattled and denigrated, is powerful and vital. Pedants mistake linguistic change for impoverishment. Yet the conventions of Standard English aren't objective and eternal truths. Instead, they are tacit agreements that in a small but not trivial way aid communication. These implicit understandings are in operation now but may not have been in the past. We don't know if they'll hold in the future. We can say confidently that the language will follow rules of grammar and have conventions of usage but we don't know which rules and conventions that make up Standard English will be superseded twenty, fifty or a hundred years from now. Nor is it always clear whether we're dealing with a genuine rule of grammar or a looser convention of usage. Scholars of language spend much of their time trying to work out the rules of grammar from the evidence of how native speakers use the language. It's not an easy task and it can't be done in advance of looking at the evidence.

We don't know, because there is no one in charge of the language. No one, that is, apart from us, the users of English. In the apt phrase of Steven Pinker, of whom we shall hear more, the lunatics are in charge of the asylum. This is a difficult truth for language purists to accept.

An autobiographical note: I am a reformed stickler. I was a reasonably moderate one, in that I'd happily disregard edicts that I thought made no sense and that had no effect on fluency except to undermine it. I would split infinitives and use stranded prepositions, and sometimes say who where pedants would insist on whom. But for a long time I did hold that a word such as disinterested or enormity had a specific meaning and that treating variant uses as legitimate would erode its nuance. In reality, language is stronger than that.

I'm much influenced by the argument of Noam Chomsky, the seminal scholar of linguistics, that language is the realisation of an innate human faculty. We use it for communication, and if our meaning is obscure then we recast it till it isn't. Whatever changes happen to a language, it still has a complex structure that allows the expression of a full range of meanings. Its grammar has rules and we follow them.

Above all, language is interesting. Pedantry isn't. The sticklers can pursue their obsessions in private if they wish, but their voice in public debate is loud and lamentable and it ought to be accorded the disrespect it deserves. Contrary to the pedants, I don't insist that a form of words that's alien to the way native speakers use the language must be correct. If it isn't used, it isn't English.
Apart from code switching and convention, there's another sense in which expressive users of English are constantly making judgments about language. Though I reject the notion that there is a 'correct' form of English that stands apart from the way people use the language, it's not mandatory to adopt in your speech and writing whatever is in general use. Nor is it illegitimate to criticise other people's use of language.

Consider the way that terms such as chairman and fireman have been increasingly supplanted in the past 40 years by non-gendered alternatives (chair and firefighter), or handicapped has been replaced with disabled. Racial epithets that were once common even on primetime television as recently as the 1970s have all but disappeared from public life through the force of social disapproval. One or two of my recommendations in this book (for example, my advice to avoid the word authoress, even in jest) are based on similar judgments about what's appropriate to modern mores.

Those are important changes in the way language is used. They aren't arguments about what constitutes 'proper English', however. They are choices. By dispensing with the notion that there is a 'proper English' that stands apart from the users of the language, we can better appreciate the range of expressive possibilities that are open to us. This book argues that the choices open to good stylists of English prose are far more expansive than most style manuals conceive of.

Taken from *Accidence Will Happen* by Oliver Kamm.