

Cranky Language Lady Flips Out

YESTERDAY I was driving home from work, half listening to National Public Radio, when I suddenly heard the announcer say, “They had rode many miles.”

I was shocked. Had rode? Surely NPR knows better than that! My brain automatically switched to Cranky Language Lady mode and started its “What is the world coming to?” thoughts. As it was spinning out of control, suddenly a few schoolmarm brain cells scooted aside for a moment and allowed a bit of the actual NPR story to penetrate my consciousness. Water was mentioned. Oars.

Ah...It was a story about rowing. They had *rowed* many miles.

Sometimes the cranky language lady part of my brain is a little too alert for its own good.

Talking in Questions

THE TRENDY TALKING in questions? You know, the way people bring their voices up at the end of sentences that aren't questions? Making them seem not very confident? Or even kind of dippy?

Like the scientist I heard being interviewed on the radio once? She said something like, "The experiment on slithy toves gyring and gimbling in the wabe? Done in our laboratory last year? It was very controversial? Because of the use of the borogroves? But that wasn't really fair? Because the borogroves were used in only part of the experiment?"

And did I think she sounded authoritative and knowledgeable? No?

Do people think turning statements into questions makes them sound nicer? Gentler? More cooperative? Would people like traffic cops better if they said things like, "Those signs there that say 'Speed Limit 65'? They aren't for show? So I'm going to give you a ticket?"? Would kids like the assistant principal more if he said, "That wet toilet paper you wadded up and threw on the ceiling of the bathroom? Where it stuck? That wasn't a good idea? You didn't make a good choice? So you're going to have a week of detention?"

Or is talking in questions simply a spoken language trend? A trend that will pass? Soon? I hope? Before it drives me crazy?

Troll Lane

I'VE OFTEN WONDERED about people who have survived a life-threatening situation and said, "I saw my life flash before my eyes." How could a whole life flash before their eyes in the seconds it took to fall from a cliff or brace themselves for an impending car crash?

I'm rethinking my skepticism. It's not that I've survived a fall from a cliff or anything. It's just that I've been reminded that our brains do some pretty weird things. Friday night, for example, my husband and I were driving to Denver when I happened to glance to my left. A sign next to an overpass said, "Troll lane."

At least that's what my brain told me it said. In the milliseconds it took before my brain came to its senses, I found myself envisioning trolls under that overpass, all lined up obediently and lumbering along in their designated path.

That made me think of the Fremont Troll, a sculpture I love under a bridge in the Fremont neighborhood of Seattle.

That reminded me of my grandpa and how I loved having him tell me the story of "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" when I was a child.

That reminded me of how I also loved having my dad tell the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," all in German. My brothers and sister and I couldn't understand a thing, but we loved the sounds and laughed hysterically.

That reminded me of how funny my dad can be and how he used to kill flies in our house with a cork gun, absolutely cracking up a friend of mine who talks about it to this day.

My brain was looping through all this and on its way to venturing even further afield when it realized that the sign said, “Toll lane,” not “Troll lane.” A disappointment, actually—but it did make me have a more open mind about those life-flashing-before-the-eyes stories. Brains do work in mysterious ways.



Language and Music

ONE OF CHARLES DARWIN'S speculations was that music might have come before language. Many species use song for sexual display, so perhaps humans did, too. Maybe those first vocalizations were later applied to topics such as basics of survival and then became more varied and complex.

A fascinating *Discover* (August, 2006) magazine column by Jaron Lanier takes a look at music and its relationship to language. “Sing a Song of Evolution” points out that language “might not have entirely escaped its origins... Perhaps speaking well is still, in part, a form of sexual display. By being well-spoken I show not only that I am a clued-in member of the tribe but also that I am intelligent and likely to be a successful partner and helpful mate.”

Students in English classes often complain, “How come we have to learn this stuff?” Maybe teachers ought to tell them, “So you’ll be more attractive to the opposite sex.”

That would be a reason they might actually take seriously.

“These Ones” Is Driving Me Crazy

I’M NOT PROUD to have such a fuddy-duddy reaction to a pretty harmless speech trend, but the popularity of “these ones” is driving me crazy. Where the heck did this phrase come from, and why? Everyone used the perfectly adequate “these” until, as near as I can figure, about 15 years ago. Then “these ones” took over.

Go into a store, and the clerk will say, “Did you see these ones?” Ask your kids if they want the plain or the peanut M & M’s, and they’ll point and say, “These ones.”

The phrase just grates. But what really bugs me is that I can’t easily explain why it’s wrong. “This one” is perfectly acceptable. Why not “these ones”? I’ve asked experts, but the explanation only makes sense to me, sort of, as I’m listening. Then it floats out of my brain almost immediately.

I’m not a language cop or fussbudget. I don’t care much about the difference between “who” and “whom,” and I’m only mildly bothered by people saying “goes” instead of “said.” But “these ones”? I can only compare it to the tension I feel when someone says “like” so often that I think they’ll, like, never get to the end of a sentence. It drives me crazy.

Where the heck did this phrase come from, and why?

Little Writing Gems

LAST NIGHT I WAS READING a new article by David Sedaris, “Loggerheads—Sea Turtles and Me,” and I found myself noting phrases that I love, love, love. He just kills me sometimes with his ability to turn a phrase.

For example, he describes the home of a childhood friend like this: “Their house had real hardcover books in it, and you often saw them lying open on the sofa, the words still warm from being read.” *Warm from being read.* That is just so darned wonderful that it warms me just to read it.

Then he describes some baby sea turtles he took inside as a child, and he wonders, now, why someone didn’t stop him. “Animal cruelty hadn’t been invented yet,” he writes. “The thought that a non-human being had physical feelings, let alone the wherewithal to lose hope, was outlandish and alien, like thinking paper had relatives.” *Like thinking paper had relatives.* What kind of person comes up with wonderful similes like this?

I love this man, at least on paper—paper filled with warm words.

“...the words still warm from being read.”

Disappearing Capital Letters

THERE IS A COLUMNIST in the *Denver Post* whose writing I have always admired. Over the past few years, I have e-mailed him five or six times, usually just to comment on how much I liked a piece he wrote. I have always received very brief but kind notes in return.

Then last summer I sent an e-mail and received a reply that surprised me. He had resorted to the all too common practice of eliminating all capital letters.

I can't help it. It bothered me a lot. In trying to figure out why, I decided that, in addition to his intended message, he was getting across three other messages:

1. You are so insignificant that I can't even bother to hold down the "shift" key when I answer you.
2. I am too important to bother with language conventions.
3. I know that e-mails without capital letters are harder to read, but your time is less important than mine.

More baffling to me is how, as a writer, he even managed to do it. I could no more leave out capital letters and punctuation as I write than I could skip signaling when I make left or right-hand turns. I think it would be hard for any writer not to punctuate and capitalize more or less correctly.

His e-mail seemed so odd to me, in fact, that I wonder if he might not have had an intern answering his e-mail that day.

I still read this man's column, and I still admire his writing. But every time I do—and I'm not proud of this—I think a teeny tiny bit less of him than I used to.

You are so insignificant that
I can't even bother to hold down
the "shift" key...

Wince Words

YESTERDAY I heard a radio announcer pronounce “jewelry” as “joo-luh-ree.” I winced.

Only a few days before, I’d heard a television reporter talk about Realtors. She pronounced it “ree-lah-tor.” I winced again. The word is “ree-ul-tor.” (And since almost everyone I know pronounces it “ree-lah-tor,” I wince a lot. And, yes, I know that the dictionary gives the “ree-lah-tor” pronunciation as a variant that “occurs in educated speech but that is considered by some to be unacceptable.” I guess I’m one of those who consider it unacceptable.)

I know that my knowledge of the “correct” pronunciation is nothing to feel superior about. After all, I’m the person who, as a grown woman, told my husband that I thought something would “look chic.” Only I pronounced it “chick.” I had no idea that a word I’d always heard (*sheek*) was really the same as a word I’d always read (*chic*). Similarly, I never knew until recently that the California city La Jolla was really the same place as that city La Hoya that I’d always heard about.

Sheek?

So I'm humble. That doesn't keep me from having an overpowering urge to say to people, "Look at the word 'Realtor.' The way you're pronouncing it makes no sense!"

Then I remember that sense has nothing to do with it. A perfectly intelligent boyfriend I went out to brunch with years ago looked at "quiche" on the menu and said, "What the heck is *kwee-chee*, anyway?"

We all have our little black holes when it comes to language.

Good Riddance to the Apostrophe?

THE SIGN SAID “Employee’s only.” Why the apostrophe? No one knows.

Another sign said “Actors room.” Why no apostrophe? No one knows.

Well, actually, we do know. People just don’t understand apostrophes. Even people who write pretty darned well often don’t understand apostrophes. They may flawlessly use “to,” “too,” and “two,” but then they run into the need for a plural possessive, and they freeze. Does the apostrophe go before the “s”? After the “s”? Should an additional “s” be added?

It is confusing. Maybe it’s just as well that the apostrophe seems to be a dying punctuation mark. When people are text messaging, an apostrophe certainly isn’t something they consider. Web site addresses leave out apostrophes. Many businesses have streamlined their names to eliminate the apostrophe that originally appeared in them. Signage of all kinds misuses them.

And does it really matter all that much? I’m pretty traditional when it comes to punctuation rules, but with apostrophes...well, I’m coming around to the position that maybe, just maybe, we would be better off eliminating them altogether. Would it be better to have no apostrophes, rather than apostrophes haphazardly tossed in—or left out? I’m beginning to think it might be.