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My language, 'tis of thee

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Although it was years ago, I remember distinctly that I blinked. Twice. I thought, perhaps, that I was suffering from an embarrassing waxy build-up in the ear canals. But no, she had said it. In fact, she said it again.

The woman with whom I was speaking had said: *supposably*.

She had said it as though it were a real word, as though it were something more than a fabrication by those who couldn't distinguish between the words *probably* and *supposedly*. And I wanted to tell her ... I wanted to cry and kick and scream and ask her to please, please, please not do that anymore.

But it's not like I had a leg to stand on because, as of a few years ago, *supposably* became a word, somewhat officially. A hybrid born of laziness and misuse, it earned its place among the basic building blocks of the English language in our dictionaries.

And it tears at my soul. Assuming, you know, that I have one — but that's an entire column topic unto itself.

Every year, a handful of words gain "official" entry into the English language, showing up in black and white print in the pages of the tomes we turn to for linguistic guidance. Countless others are made up, those hybrids that, fortunately, may not make it as far as the dictionary but seem to lodge themselves irreversibly into the public parlance.

Not to come across as the Charlton Heston of grammar, but it's not the words themselves that are to blame — it's how we use them. No matter how many times I hear it, I can't stop cringing when I hear the unnecessary preposition at the end of "where's it at?" instead of the nice and tidy "where is it?"

The woman who tossed me *supposably* also repeatedly started her paragraphs with *irregardless*. Yes, technically a real word, it drives me nuts that people use it or other words improperly. My experience is that most people who say *irregardless* mean either *regardless* or *irrespective*.

I know adults who think the words *good* and *well* are interchangeable or say that they "could care less" when what they mean is that they couldn't. There is a difference between further and farther, healthy and healthful, nauseous and nauseated.

And shouldn't we master the simple things before we complicate them further? Why are people always busy conversating when they could just be conversing? And for goodness sake, determine whether you are actually uninterested or disinterested in my work before you write me complaining about it!

It all makes me nervous. The same way, I think, that those who champion the First Amendment get nervous whenever the Religious Right starts waxing poetic about censorship.

There's even an official group of people dedicated to preserving the integrity of the English language from such heinous abuses — the Society for the Preservation of English Language and Literature. (Known as SPELL, which is another thing most of us can't do.) I give them props, as the kids say, but I hate to tell them I think they're fighting a losing battle.

Yes, these are the complaints of one slightly obsessed — but only slightly. I used to tell people that it was a pet peeve of mine when people abused the English language, didn't bother to learn how to use words properly or grasp their real meaning. Yet I'm realizing as time goes by that my reaction to these abominations is far more than a mere pet peeve.

As a writer, the English language is my tool; it's what I have to work with, and I need it in order to do my job. I also need a readership to read what I write, to understand what it is that I communicate. Is it really any different than a stockbroker worrying about the integrity of the market?

I grew up in a household where it was a far greater crime to misuse the word "hopefully" than to spout out a four-letter whopper. As long as we used it correctly in a sentence, we got off pretty easily. My parents read far more than they watched TV, and we learned early how the careful turn of a phrase or the purposeful selection of a word was the key to making people laugh, cry, feel, react.

To many, my complaints are those of an uptight literary-snob-type. But that's really not it. (Okay, it's part of it). I think it's also love, a deep-seated passion for language and the power of words. I don't take the construction of a sentence lightly. People say, "It doesn't matter" or "Who cares?" and the truth is... it does and I do.

Friends have said that I'm just highly sensitive to it because of my vocation, just as an architect is more attuned to the structural integrity and design of buildings. There's a difference, though — architecture isn't our main source of communication with one another. Our language is.

Yes, I use slang, embrace colloquialisms and welcome the chance to dash to the dictionary when a word I don't know crosses my path. There are thousands that I'll never know, and probably hundreds I've been using incorrectly, unwittingly for years. But if I find out, it won't happen again! I swear it!

I am a linguistic patriot, if you will. Just as there are those who fight to maintain historical traditions and keep the basic precepts of our forefathers alive even today, I think the English language deserves the same respect.

So I'll keep carrying the flag of proper word usage and proudly stand corrected when I fail. I won't start my sentences with *hopefully* and you'll never catch me using *impact* as a verb — irregardless of what everyone else does.

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