

Kerr, Robert (1995) "I miss the adverb real bad!" *The Secondary Teacher*, 24(1), 17

## I MISS THE ADVERB REAL BAD!

Robert Kerr

I grew up in those medieval days when grammar was not just taught but was considered to be the backbone of any language. Even in primary school we could not only name the eight parts of speech – could anyone under 25 do that much now? Under 30? Anyone at all?? – but we could parse them completely and analyse any sentence into which they were inserted. "Ah!" you might say, but did it do you any good?" I hate the smug grin that comes over people asking that question but, at least in this case, one can have the satisfaction of answering "yes" quite truthfully.

As editor of a school year-book for several years I received a large number of articles and contributions for consideration. By far the worst standard of writing, both in spelling and grammar, featured in those submissions from English teachers. The student-centred curriculum has very many advantages, but the raising of standards of syntax is not one of them. Nowadays we have children taught under this system themselves becoming English teachers, with the consequent reinforcement of the casual habits and laissez-faire attitudes so prevalent when the topic of grammar rears its beautifully symmetrical head.

I am not proposing an about turn in so-called "progress" nor am I hankering after a time when nobody would confuse oxymoron with synecdoche (the spelling checker on my computer hadn't even heard of these!) but I do feel that things have become just a little bit too, well let's face it, American for my taste. If we want to all speak and dress like those 3000 miles to our west, why not just become the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the union?

Most of us, I am sure, will remember a time in school when we had to correct sentences of the "He done it lovely" variety. How we shook with mirth at the stupidity of the speaker of such an horrendous statement! How we rocked with laughter in our little desks when someone failed to correct all the errors! How hollow that laughter now seems when we hear adults – normal, intelligent adults at that! – using comments like "You did real good." If that doesn't sound believable or you cannot imagine anyone being quite so ridiculous, just try it with a New York nasal twang and, there, see what I mean? Don't you hear that, or its like, rather frequently on American television shows or films? Now what on earth is wrong with the words "really" and "well" that they simply never feature in an American's vocabulary? Is there some extra element of the politically correct movement which I have missed and which forbids the use of adverbs completely? One person with whom I was talking recently said that this was "not near as bad as" some pet hate he had, which may have been upsetting for him but which caused me not nearly as much angst as finishing sentences with prepositions, starting them with conjunctions, or (worst of all) the very common practice of elevating a phrase to the stature of a sentence and then dignifying this horror with a full stop.

Let me, as the miscreants are wont to say, run a few other examples by you and see what you really think. I know that there has been a tendency for a very long time to use nouns as verbs (e.g. to “table” a motion or to “chair” a meeting) but nowadays we are expected to “key” data into a computer instead of typing it in, we can “access” information rather than retrieve it, and we must “source” a product and not merely locate it. I find American spellings like “theater” and “program” popping up everywhere, and other Americanisms like “movie” and “Monday through (or “thru” – ugh!) Friday” are ubiquitous. Why did “9th August” have to become “August 9”, and since when did “enjoy” cease to be a transitive verb requiring an object? (Doesn’t the instruction “enjoy” sound rather threatening?)

At a meeting recently I listened spellbound as a young man told his audience some of his tricks for making his lectures more interesting. He advised us as potential speakers to use our hands to “reference” things around us and we were urged to “accent” the things we felt were important and generally make our presentations “more impactful.” “Out there,” he told us (another phrase I detest, along with “the whole area/question of”), “there is a real strategic delinquency” but if your talk “has a learning curve content” things should come right in the end (I think!). He was endeavouring to begin a new training course or, as he put it, “we’re still in start-up mode” and he asked if I was interested in taking part. I told him that I wasn’t in a hands-free situation at this point in time. He’s still looking at me; for some reason he thought I was being facetious – I can’t imagine why!