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### On Language and Change

The English language is a mess--but a beautiful mess. We accept the absurdities that swarm the language without much protest. But where's the sense when *bough* rhymes with neither *cough* nor *dough* nor *tough* nor *through*? English--like any language--evolves as time goes on: it changes to reflect our time and our culture. However, though we willingly accept the present peculiarities of the language, we remain very resistant to change in our lifetimes--or at least, we think it to be pernicious. In fact, the opposite holds true: this attitude toward change holds back our language and threatens its growth.

Back in high school, I was something of a language purist. The school walls were always plastered with various posters advertising current events. So often they were rife with errors. I would take out my pencil and do the readers a favor by correcting these errors. Apostrophes appeared where they were required and *every* would get its much needed space from *day* when the meaning wasn't adjectival. Even today, those changes are indisputably correct. But I didn't stop there. My vigilante work led me to be the judge of even the disputable matters of the language. And I took it upon myself to also be the jury and executioner. I would insist that *all right* exist only as two words and that *they* never be used as a singular pronoun--among other things. I saw any usage of the contrary to be instances of dumbing down the language.

Beyond my haughty disdain for what I felt was incorrect use of the language, I also disapproved of many recent slangs being used. I would roll my eyes at any mention of the words *selfie* or *hella*. It enraged me that the Oxford English Dictionary accepted them--and the rage was further fueled when they chose *selfie* to be 2013's word of the year. Introducing those words to English seemed to me like injecting poison into the bloodstream--as if the language would slowly decay once they were welcomed. I would scoff at my friends for using such words and criticize them for encouraging such destruction. But now the words have become commonplace. And now, I find that me repulsive.

One day I stumbled upon a talk given by Mignon Fogarty, better known by the moniker Grammar Girl, about how English changes over time. She made a point that language change is a democratic process: we "vote" for new words or phrases by whether or not we use them. She also pointed out the similarities between already-accepted words and those that are still in the election process. Suddenly the side of the purists--my side--seemed so hypocritical. But more than that, I began to see language change as something amazingly beautiful. What she said that stuck with me most, however, was that "you don't *have* to love every change." It's all right to vote against a word, but when the results have come in, they should be accepted. This talk changed me forever.

I came to accept the modern slangs I once despised. The most important purpose of language, I believe, is communication. Words and phrases that color the language and promote clarity in thought and expression should be embraced, not shunned. The word *selfie* was born out of our modern technological culture. It refers to an action that no other word in the English language can accurately describe. Therefore, it is a vital word that we must adopt, no matter what

aversion to it one might have. There are many adverbs that suitably substitute *hella*, but which of those can bear the same connection to the millennial culture? *Hella* represents a people and a time in the history of our language. We need it. Despite it all, many are hesitant to accept modern slangs for fear of sounding uneducated.

We have reached a point where many variants of English exist throughout the world and none of them is standard. Often people think that English has fallen from grace since the times of Chaucer and Shakespeare. After all, it's such a struggle for modern speakers to understand the old writings. But likewise, Chaucer and Shakespeare would be lost in our modern English. Not one variant is better than another, and no one is inferior for preferring one to the next.

Still, it doesn't mean we should be liberally sprinkling slangs in academic and professional writing. Formality exists as a way to take ourselves seriously. While slangs should be welcomed into the language, there are proper and improper times to use them. Words and meanings may change, but one thing remains constant: we should always strive not to write good but to write well.

Change in language is an inevitable occurrence. That much is certain. As we continue to grow as a people, we need our language to keep up so we can describe and record our modern lives. To do that, we invent new words and new meanings. As Mignon Fogarty said, if a change seems inappropriate, campaign against it--don't use it. But if--and often times, when--it wins, acknowledge it as another rich layer of our complexly beautiful language.