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Guilty Of Good Grammar: You're Right And Your Right & ur rite

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"You know the difference between 'your' and 'you're.'"

That line shows up in a JDate profile. It's from the section where you tell prospective partners what you're looking for in a match. The sentence that comes before it is, "You love to dance." The one after is, "You keep up with the news." If someone's profile had included that, she'd definitely have aroused my attention. And since you insist on dragging it out of me, the profile I'm quoting is (or was, actually) mine.

What reminded me of that snarky line was a recent email from a friend, who at one point wrote "it's" when it should have been "its." When I came across his error, my heart gave a little sigh.

It was an involuntary, embarrassing and ridiculous sadness.



Involuntary, because I can no more hold back the thought that I know better than that than King Canute could hold back the tide. The rules of grammar and usage, of punctuation and pronunciation, had been thoroughly drubbed into me by the time I graduated from high school (not, of course, “graduated high school”). I was grateful for that instruction. Everyone knew that learning to write and speak educated English was a prerequisite for an elite higher education and a successful career. Ever since, when I see “your” where “you’re” should be, a phantom arm of mine reaches for a red pencil to circle it; when I hear “primer” pronounced “primmer,” or “off-ten” instead of “off-en,” an interior voice corrects it, whether I want it to or not.

A tangle of guilt and ambivalence, which amounts to embarrassment, accompanies that silent correction, especially if the mistake has been made by someone I think well of (yes, it’s okay to end a sentence with a preposition). I’m pained that he or she doesn’t realize that the error is a flashing signal of (at best) carelessness or (at worst) ignorance. I’m concerned that someone less forgiving than I am will think less of this lovely person the next time it happens. I often couple this with an excuse or dispensation. If the mistake is in an email, I tell myself it must be that damn auto-fill that got it wrong. If it’s in conversation, I swat it away as so widespread a mispronunciation, really anyone might have been led astray.

Then I reproach myself for being such a condescending snot. Then I fault my self-reproach as cover for my caving on excellence. Then I remind myself that I write most of my own emails in lower case; punctuate my texts as if I were a drunken sailor; and use plenty of juvenile emojis and acronyms like rotflmfao (if you don’t know what that is, please don’t google it). Then I defend myself from that charge: It’s exactly because I know the rules that I can break them, with impunity, for effect. Then I’m back on the attack: Face it, bro, what you’re doing is lexicological slumming. By that point, I want to take a nap.

What makes my inner warfare over standards and class so ridiculous, and what stings when I think about the dude who wrote that JDate profile, is how little any of this yammering matters. “It’s,” “its” – who cares? The only threat to my understanding what you mean when you write “your right” or “ur rite” when “you’re right” is right is the tribally constructed black hole that sucks attention away from the meaning you obviously intend and sucks generosity from the act of communication.

I get the case for good grammar. Sloppy language makes for sloppy thinking. To think clearly, write clearly and speak carefully. Grammatical norms are guardrails that protect us from intellectual anarchy. Consensus rules aren't tools of oppression; they're the foundation of democratic culture. The discipline you exercise as you master those rules is a transferable skill, a mental muscularity that will benefit you for a lifetime, at home, at work and in society.

But I just can't get myself to argue that universal competence in the use of apostrophes would have made it less likely that we'd now be living in a world where two madmen seem to be tweet-taunting each other, and the rest of us, into nuclear war. Orthographic fastidiousness seems kind of silly in the shadow of climate change. When an earthquake or hurricane – or a biopsy or drunk driver – can rob you of hope or life in an instant: that limits the upside of peerless pronunciation.

The best case I can make for impeccable language is the aesthetic punch it packs. Its power is not in the rules it follows, but in the infinite it reveals. Perfect prose contains multitudes, including imperfections, and is as beautiful as a perfect rose.

Measured by outcomes, my JDate profile was a bust. If I were to redo it, I'd drop the crack about contractions. I might not go quite so far as to write U ♥ 2 dance. But I'd definitely hang on to the stuff about lexicological slumming at least until the second date.

This is a crosspost of [my column in the Jewish Journal](#), where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.