

Wall Street Journal, 26th September 2014.

BOOKSHELF

Book Review: 'Gwynne's Grammar' by N.M. Gwynne & 'The Sense of Style' by Steven Pinker

Good grammar is crucial to clear thinking, say the language grumps. Nonsense, say cognitive scientists. Nobody seems to know why intelligent people write inscrutable prose.

By JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Sept. 26, 2014 The Wall Street Journal pp. C5 and C7

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/book-review-gwynnes-grammar-by-n-m-gwynne-the-sense-of-style-by-steven-pinker-1411765107>

GWYNNE'S GRAMMAR

By N.M. Gwynne

Knopf, 249 pages, \$19.95

THE SENSE OF STYLE

By Steven Pinker

Viking, 359 pages, \$27.95

Grammar is not everybody's idea of a good time. Thanks to the remarkable inefficiencies of the Chicago public school system, I was able to steer happily clear of the subject until going off to college. Until then the entirety of my grammatical knowledge included beginning a sentence with a capital letter and ending it with a period and never using the word "ain't." Commas to me were so many gnats strewn upon sheets of printed paper, a colon was an internal organ, and a dash a synonym for just a touch of ketchup or mustard. As for the semicolon, my understanding of it was equal to my understanding of Mandarin Chinese, in which, for all I knew, it might have passed as a letter.

Part of the problem here is youth, which is often unprepared to receive knowledge that does not immediately excite. How, after all, could a male adolescent, hormones churning, care about a dangling participle when his own participle so seldom dangled? I could scarcely have told you what a split infinitive was because I had no notion of what an infinitive might be. If a sentence wished to run on, hey, that was fine by me. Ask me the meaning of the genitive, the ablative or the gerundive and I would probably reply that it is not nice to mix with Mr. Inbetween. Grammar, fair to say, was not my long suit.

I first learned grammar through instruction in French by a modest man named Philip Kolb, who I subsequently learned was the editor, in French, of the letters of Marcel Proust. Only later, gradually, did I pick up the rudiments of English grammar. When I was a university teacher in a department of English, I corrected my students' obvious lapses in grammar, but I should certainly never correct anyone else's grammar, in public or private, nor do I deign to correct that of the contemporary authors whose books I occasionally review. The critic John Simon has made rather a speciality of this. I once met a man who told me that John corrected a toast he gave at a wedding.

I used the word "speciality" in the penultimate sentence of my last paragraph, and not the word "specialty," and straightaway became a touch nervous. H.W. Fowler, whose magisterial "Modern English Usage" I keep near my desk, informs me that it is all right to do so. The two words, he reports, seem to call out for differentiation, though little progress has been made in achieving it, and "writers use either form for any of the senses according as they prefer its sound in general or find it suits the rhythm of a sentence." The wrestle with language, like that with conscience, is unending.

Not the least notable thing about "Gwynne's Grammar," the work of Neville Martin Gwynne, an English businessman and earlier an Etonian who went on to Oxford, is that it spent some time on best-seller lists in Britain. What makes this all the more extraordinary is that the book is a textbook, one with no pictures—"pictures in textbooks,"

Mr. Gwynne writes, "actually interfere with the learning process"—and with not the least wisp of dumbing-down in its composition.

Mr. Gwynne does not deny that grammar can be hellishly complicated. "Rather," he writes, "the encouragement that I offer is that whatever work is involved is overwhelmingly worth it and also that this work gradually becomes progressively easier as the skills involved become more habitual and indeed as making the necessary effort becomes more habitual."

If any criticism might be made of "Gwynne's Grammar," it might be about the extravagance of its author's promises. Mr. Gwynne holds that grammar is crucial to clear thinking, which may well be right. He also claims that "the rules [of grammar] always have a logic underpinning them," which, alas, isn't always the case. In a five-step syllogism, he contends that "grammar is the science of using words rightly, leading to thinking rightly, leading to deciding rightly, without which—as both common sense and experience show—happiness is impossible." Improvement in grammar, he also argues, unfailingly affects "both mind and character." All of which, as the English say, sounds like overegging the pudding.

On the underegging side, Mr. Gwynne writes that there is "virtually nothing original in [his book] except its manner of presentation." This manner is simple enough. Mr. Gwynne defines the parts of speech, the elements of punctuation and the grammar of writing verse (once considered a standard practice of the cultivated). He then follows up in each instance with examples of these things both properly and improperly used. His definitions—terse, logical, precise—are among the best things in the book. He defines a definition—not an easy thing to do—as "a statement of the exact meaning of a word or phrase that sufficiently distinguishes it from any other word or phrase, preferably in the fewest possible words." A sentence "is most comprehensively defined as a word or group of words expressing a complete statement, wish, command or question, whether as a thought or in speech or in writing." He defines grammar as "being simply the correct use of words."

As Mr. Gwynne moves into the subtler elements of grammar, he sets out the range and use of verbs and their tenses, the basic rules of syntax, the mechanics of punctuation. With his customary precision, he guides his readers through the arcana of the subjunctive and introduces the notion of modal verbs. He makes the clean distinction between a clause and phrase by noting that a clause is a phrase with a verb in it, a phrase a clause without a verb. He takes up the active and passive and those troublesome fraternal twins, transitive and intransitive.

Something quite new to me is Mr. Gwynne's dictum on the placement of multiple adjectives, according to which adjectives of opinion come before those of size, which come before those of age, which come before those of shape, which come before those of color, which come before those of origin, which come before those of material purpose. His illustrative sentence on this point runs: "The book you are holding is therefore a nice little just-published oblong-shaped attractively colored much needed hardcover grammar textbook."

Memorization is a strong element in the Gwynne pedagogical method. He insists on the importance of readers memorizing his definitions and rules. He believes the rote method of learning, currently much despised, essential to acquiring grammar. Returning to that ordering of adjectives, I had myself thought to memorize it but found I could not. But, then, my little gray cells, unlike those of Inspector Poirot, may not be in top condition.

The personality of its author is not the least attraction of "Gwynne's Grammar." Mr. Gwynne is unflinchingly, unapologetically rear-guard. Straight out of the gate he announces that "the word to indicate whether anyone is male or female is 'sex,' not

'gender,' which is purely a grammatical term," an assertion that, if taken up, would wipe out every Gender Studies program in American universities. Excepting the need for new words for new things, he is against any changes in language that "are not in the direction of greater richness, clarity, and precision." His position on splitting infinitives is to note that "Shakespeare never needed to split an infinitive," with the implication that therefore neither should we. Case closed.

Mr. Gwynne's literary opinions are no less firmly held. He attacks Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot for setting verse free. Late in the book he remarks, though by this point he need scarcely do so, "I am not an innovator. On the contrary, my position throughout this book is that of defender and promoter of what has been shown to work over long periods of time and what is real."

N.M. Gwynne and Steven Pinker, the author of "The Sense of Style," would not, fair to say, be ideal cabin mates on a lengthy cruise along the Mediterranean. For Mr. Pinker, Mr. Gwynne would qualify supremely for what in his book he calls a "language grump," or "pedant," or "anal retentive," or "Miss Thistlebottom," his term for the type of the old-fashioned school marm.

For Mr. Gwynne, Mr. Pinker would be written off as a man with no literary standard, a mere psycholinguist and cognitive scientist, which at Harvard is what Mr. Pinker is. As teachers, Mr. Gwynne is a suit-and-tie man, Mr. Pinker, I should imagine, an open-collar guy. Mr. Gwynne makes no effort to charm; Mr. Pinker perhaps overestimates his own charm. Mr. Pinker is at ease using such words and phrases as "feedback," "fun facts," "case-selection circuitry"; he advises his readers to think of grammar as "the original sharing app." Mr. Pinker is a man who goes with the flow, Mr. Gwynne a man who wishes to stop that flow, dead, in midstream.

A psycholinguist, I take it, is someone who investigates the psychological uses and implications of language; a cognitive scientist someone who studies all that has to do with the mechanics of thought, from within the brain and beyond. In "The Sense of Style" Mr. Pinker brings both these endeavors to bear on a book that sets out to improve writing style chiefly through considering the capacity and needs of readers. How much confusion can a reader accommodate is the central question in his book, and how best to eliminate that confusion is his goal. "The curse of knowledge," he writes, in a chapter devoted to the needless complexity of much academic and scientific prose, "is the single best explanation I know of why good people write bad prose."

Unlike Mr. Gwynne, Mr. Pinker does not blame the Internet for the barbarization of the young and the encouragement of slovenly writing habits. He believes there are many occasions in which one not only may but is well advised to split infinitives. He holds, with Calvin Trillin, that the person who invented the word "whom" had little more in mind than to have those who use it sound like butlers. Mr. Pinker thinks, contra Mr. Gwynne, that it is not always true that "good prose always leads to good thinking." In his book, he occasionally uses cartoons and tells old jokes to reinforce and underscore points. He does not feel that sloppy writing bodes the end of civilization and suggests, if he does not come right out and say it, that those who do may require psychotherapy.

Many of the long-standing rules about grammar and usage that Mr. Pinker's language grumps get worked up about—ending a sentence with a preposition, using "decimate" to mean anything other than wiping out a 10th, and many others—he considers little more than bubbe mieses, Yiddish for grandmother's tales. Where Mr. Gwynne stresses the importance of etymology, Mr. Pinker highlights the fallacy of etymology, pointing out that "deprecate used to mean 'ward off by prayer,' meticulous once meant 'timid,' and silly went from 'blessed' to 'pious' to 'innocent' to 'pitiable' to 'feeble' to

today's 'foolish.' " Etymology in defense of restricted meanings, in other words, is for him no defense.

All this makes Messrs. Gwynne and Pinker sound like stalwart opponents in the old battle between the Prescriptivists and the Descriptivists, or between those who believe the rules of grammar and usage ought to be rigidly prescribed and enforced and those who believe that common use dictates regular changes in the rules and in the meanings of words. But Mr. Pinker argues that this battle is ultimately phony, a myth. Few rules in the realms of grammar and usage hold up as true rules; they are instead, in his view, "tacit conventions." The last third of "The Sense of Style" is devoted to demolishing the most cherished of putative rules of grammar and usage; he does this by coming up with exceptional cases that do not prove but blow up the rules. Of the age-old distinction between the words "can" and "may," he holds that "the distinction is usually moot, and the two words may (or can) be used more or less interchangeably."

Such quotations are made all the more compelling because of Mr. Pinker's linguistical learning, which is considerable. His knowledge of grammar is extensive and runs deep. He also takes a scarcely hidden delight in exploding tradition. He describes his own temperament as "both logical and rebellious." Few things give him more pleasure than popping the buttons off what he takes to be stuffed shirts.

Mr. Pinker makes a useful distinction between formal and informal writing and speech and claims—who could dispute him?—that ours is an age of informality. He seeks to have academics write less woodenly, and especially less obscurely. Not inflexible in his rebellion, he often sensibly suggests staying with conventional usage lest one offend the easily enraged "gotcha" crowd by departing from it. He does not argue that anything goes but instead fills his readers in on the fact that they are already freer in their use of language than they might have thought. He wants them unfettered by hollow dicta. All this should be liberating.

Why, I wonder, isn't it, at least not for me? I would find making use of Mr. Pinker's loosening of the rules, as Robert Frost said of the writing of free verse, like playing tennis without a net. I feel a certain elegance in what I have been taught and still take to be correct English, and so, except when doing so results in a barbarous construction, I choose never to split an infinitive. I prefer not to end my sentences with prepositions because I have learned that the best-made sentences tend to close on strong words. "Disinterested" for me will always mean "impartial"; "literate" will mean "able to read and write," not "reasonably well-read." I plan to continue to observe the old distinction between the words "can" and "may," to use "each other" when referring to two people and "one another" when referring to more than two, and I'm sticking with "directly" or "soon" as the only meanings of the word "presently." As for the reader, that figure with whom Mr. Pinker is most concerned—I've never met the guy and therefore feel no obligation to make things all that much easier for him. All I owe him is clarity and such relief as I can provide him from boredom. In the end I write for myself and for anyone who cares to eavesdrop on my conversations in prose with myself.

Rather than align myself with the Gwynnians or the Pinkertons, I say a blessing on both their houses, and I would add: Let the language battles between them rage on—except that to do so would expose me to the charge of ending this review on a preposition, which I cannot allow.

—Mr. Epstein is the author of "Friendship," "Snobbery" and the new collection "A Literary Education and Other Essays."