**The Language of Twitter**

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| 110203040505611020304044 | **Should We Care About Grammar and Spelling on Twitter?***by*[*Anne Trubek*](https://www.good.is/contributors/anne-trubek)<https://www.good.is/articles/should-we-care-about-grammar-and-spelling-on-twitter>**Many people assume** I am a guardian of grammar. The typical plane-ride conversation goes like this: “What do you do?”” “I am an English professor” “Oh! I better watch my grammar.”Their worries are unfounded. I wouldn't flinch if they were to split an infinitive, use the singular "they," or dangle modifiers. I don't get huffy when I read grammatical mistakes in blogs—and I certainly don't care when I see them on Twitter. So when *The New York Times* ran a [lengthy article about grammar trolls on Twitter](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/29/fashion/29twitter.html), I could only think of the wasted column inches. John Cusack misspells "breakfast"; "your" is used instead of "you’re"; semi-colons are used with dependent clauses. Does it really matter?To many it does. GrammarCop ([@GrammarCop](http://twitter.com/grammarcop)) corrects people's tweets, but a common error GrammarCop likes to correct is the misspelling of grammar as "grammer," which is not a grammatical mistake but a spelling one. YourorYoure ([@YouorYoure](http://twitter.com/YouorYoure)) jumps on those who mistake one word for the other by reposting tweets placing "[Wrong!]" in front of them—but drops the apostrophe in "you're" in his or her handle. YouorYoure's profile sends you to a [webpage that explains the rule](http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/your.html%29).Nothing elicits comments like a story on grammar (are you composing your response to me right now? Does it begin "You are an idiot"?). William Safire has said that his column that inspired the most reader letters was a piece about grammar. Joseph Epstein has a column in the *Weekly Standard* on the [long letters readers used to send him](http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/why-cry-over-split-milk) pointing out typos and errors in his books. And the *Times* article was quickly weighed down with 135  “Yeah! I hate bad grammar!” and “We are all becoming illiterate” comments.Language is a means to communication. Grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation have developed over time to ensure intelligibility. Rules change as cultures and people do. Why can’t we split infinitives? The rule against split infinitives was invented in 1834, when a writer for *New-England Magazine* noted that people were beginning to split infinitives, and told them not to: “To, which comes before the verb in the infinitive mode, must not be separated from it by the intervention of an adverb.”  As Jack Lynch writes in his excellent book *The Lexicographer’s Dilemna: The Evolution of ‘Proper’ English from Shakespeare To South Park*, the author of that rule supplied no reason why splitting infinitives was wrong. It may be because he was imposing Latin rules onto English (in Latin verbs in the infinitive are only one word, not two), or it may have been a way to mark social class and separate oneself from the infinitive-splitting rabble. Truth is, there was, and remains, no good reason why splitting infinitives is wrong.All grammatical rules are like the one against split infinitives: They are all manmade. So too are spelling conventions. Some make little sense. Why does “receipt” have a “p” in it whereas “deceit” and “conceit” do not? Why do we abbreviate “shall not” as “shan’t” if an apostrophe is supposed to replace one missing letter, as in “don’t”?What interests me about grammatical and other “mistakes” on Twitter is what they signal about our changing culture—a thread of inquiry entirely absent in the *Times* article. John Cusack spelled “breakfast” as “breakfasy.” Why this error? Surely not because he cannot spell—no one confuses “t” for “y.” But look at your nearest keyboard: The two letters are next to each other on the keyboard, and Cusack clearly mis-hit the keys. QWERTY keyboards were developed in order to prevent exactly these sorts of mistakes on the typewriter—the letters are spaced so to avoid common letter pairs hitting the carriage at the same time. When we hit the digital age, we kept the typewriter-based keyboard. So now we make new errors.Cusack’s misspelling indicates an out-moded keyboard layout, not a reigning illiteracy. The loss of apostrophes and "e"s—your for you’re—is another smartphone-created change. I have myself sometimes sent a text message using “your” when I knew it was wrong because I was too impatient to figure out how to get my iPhone to do an apostrophe—and I knew the messagee would get my message.We are living in a moment of seismic linguistic change, and attention should be paid—but not to errors. Our changing language signals evolution, not degradation. "OK," the most popular American word in the world, was invented during the age of the telegraph, because it was concise. No one considers it, or the abbreviations ASAP or Ph.D. , a sign of corruption anymore. Someday, there may be only one way to spell “your;” someday, *The New York Times*may use “fwiw” without irony. And who knows? One morning in America, we might all awake to breakfasy.**Twitter language****Is Twitter killing the English language?**http://www.languageonthemove.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/twitter-birds-700x400.jpg*This story was authored by Antra Kalnins and first published at*[*Macquarie University’s*The Lighthouse*.*](https://lighthouse.mq.edu.au/article/4u-is-twitter-killing-the-english-language)*It is reproduced here with permission.*\*\*\*If the question in the headline makes you flinch a little, you’re not alone. As the popularity of social media – and its associated ‘cyberspeak’ language forms – continues to grow, there is concern that sites like Twitter and Facebook are leading to a ‘dumbing down’ of the English language. Actor Ralph Fiennes even went so far as to say Twitter was the reason why today’s drama students struggle to understand Shakespearean texts.But while new technology has unquestionably given rise to new types of language use, we shouldn’t be so quick to judge social media against Shakespeare, according to [Ingrid Piller](http://www.languageonthemove.com/ingrid-piller/), Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie and editor of [*Language on the Move*](http://www.languageonthemove.com/), a sociolinguistics research site focusing on multilingualism, language learning and intercultural communication.“If we measure social media language use, which has characteristics of both spoken and written language and is relatively informal, with the yardstick of formal written language, the impression may arise that the language is being degraded,” said Professor Piller.“But it’s like complaining that apples don’t taste like pears.”“It’s important we don’t confuse the medium through which we communicate with the level of formality we use to communicate.”The good news is that most of us are actually very good at switching between levels of formality. So there’s no reason why your tweeting teen can’t also knock out a fantastic formal job application letter.“Unless a person has a specific impairment, they will always adapt their language to the context,” Professor Piller said.“That includes adapting our level of formality to suit the person we are talking to, the situation or medium we are in, and the purpose we are trying to achieve.”And while sites like Twitter might see someone using shorter words and abbreviations to fit their message into the required 140 characters, it doesn’t necessarily mean they don’t have mastery of a wide range of multisyllabic words.“Social media use is relatively irrelevant to the size of a person’s vocabulary,” Professor Piller said.“Rather, it’s a function of the education they have received and is also associated with specialist knowledge – for example a doctor might use ‘fracture’ instead of ‘break’.”Piller argues that online communities can, in fact, provide good opportunities for language learners to actually increase their vocabulary.“This is particularly true of international students who may not have easy access to offline communities outside the classroom,” she said.As for those who pine for the pre-social media days when people spoke ‘proper’ English, Piller suggests adjusting our expectations and embracing the fact that wherever there is rapid social, economic, cultural or technological change, there will be accompanying language change.“No living person uses English as it was used in the 16th century, or even in the same way as their grandparents did,” she said.“Furthermore, no one speaks the standard language – or what we imagine to be the standard language – at least, not all the time. Language change and linguistic diversity are a fundamental fact of life.” |