

Non-standard English and the New Tribalism

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Dave Frohnmayer, President Emeritus of the University of Oregon, defines the New Tribalism as,

the growth of a politics based upon narrow concerns, rooted in the exploitation of divisions of class, cash, gender, region, religion, ethnicity, morality and ideology, 'a give-no-quarter and take-no-prisoners' activism that demands satisfaction and accepts no compromise.

I believe that much of the misuse of standard English that we are witnessing is linked to the New Tribalism.

Nonstandard English is a tribal marker. Consciously or unconsciously, speakers who have been taught standard grammar and word formation, but persist in saying or writing such stuff as,

*Me and my friends play video games.
They invited my wife and I.
The detour effected our plan's.
Your my best friend.
I'll definately be their.*

They do it because they identify with a group that feels that the use of standard speech does not reflect who they are.

In the first half of the 20th century, when not every child had the opportunity to progress all the way through high school, learning to speak a standard dialect in addition to one's home dialect was not seen as an optional by-product of education. The teaching of standard grammar, pronunciation, and spelling was one of public education's major goals. Standard English was seen as a passport to a job in a bank or an office or a high class department store. It was a goal that ambitious young people mastered before having to leave school at the age of 13 or 14.

Two interviews in a documentary about life in the 1930s and 1940s illustrate the change that has taken place in U.S. educational outcomes since the early 20th century.

One of the interview subjects was a white man who grew up on an isolated farm and attended a one-room school house. The other subject was a black man who grew up in a poor neighborhood in Chicago. I can't say with certainty, but I'd guess both grew up speaking nonstandard dialects at home. In the interviews, both men spoke standard English. They spoke with regional accents and inflections, but neither man made the pronoun and verb errors that are so common these days.

In the 1940s, only about 50% of the school population graduated from high school. The other half did well to complete eighth grade. Nowadays, school attendance is compulsory to the age of 16 in nineteen states, 17 in eleven states, and 18 in twenty states. Mastery of English grammar seems to have dwindled as time spent in school has increased.

A lot of critics blame the modern plague of sloppy English on texting and computer use. I don't buy that.

Texting and Twitterspeak are dialects in their own right. They operate under their own sets of rules. There's no reason an excellent texter can't also be an excellent writer of standard English.

Doctors may talk about "phalanges" at a medical conference, but they talk about "fingers" and "toes" to their patients. The toughest punk on the street corner probably doesn't go home and address his mother as "Yo, Bitch!" Most speakers instinctively shape their language to suit their listeners and readers.

When native speakers pass through eight or more years of formal instruction without mastering standard English, something psychological is going on.

Certainly there are other contributing factors, but I'm convinced that a great part of the problem is a fear of tribal rejection.

What standard English needs is a lobby, like the ones that exist to fight bullying and domestic abuse. It needs well-funded activists and celebrity spokesmen urging young people to say "My friends and I play video games." It needs more employers like Kyle Wiens, iFixit CEO and founder of Dozuki. He requires all job applicants to pass a grammar test before interviewing them for a job of any kind. Says Wiens,

Grammar signifies more than just a person's ability to remember high school English. I've found that people who make fewer mistakes on a grammar test also make fewer mistakes when they are doing something completely unrelated to writing — like stocking shelves or labeling parts.

Now, as in the 1940s, the ability to speak and write a standard form of English is the ticket to a better life. Even if tribal identity requires speaking a distinctive dialect within the group, the ability to speak and write a standard form of English can be a great social equalizer.