

Is Our Children Learning Enough Grammar to Get Hired?

July 1, 2012

“Grammar is my litmus test,” the C.E.O. of iFixit wrote recently in the Harvard Business Review. “If job hopefuls can’t distinguish between ‘to’ and ‘too,’ their applications go into the bin.”

But grammar often seems to be a low priority in education. A student could pass the New York State English Regents exam by writing: “These two Charater have very different mind Sets because they are creative in away that no one would imagen just put clay together and using leaves to create Art.”

Good Applicants With Bad Grammar

By John McWhorter

August 13, 2012

All will agree that we must require good grammar skills of people in jobs that involve the composition of text for clients and/or the public. Language may always change, and most of what we are taught as “proper grammar” may not even make any real historical or logical sense (as I have often argued). We cannot help associating “bad” grammar with low intelligence, sloppiness and lack of refinement. However, beyond those jobs that are largely about communication requirements that viable job candidates write with perfect Standard Written English are highly questionable.

For one, flubbing the difference between “it’s” and “its” is not a sign of mental laxness or congenital inattention to detail. People are typically more attendant to some things than others. How many brilliant computer programmers are likely to have kept their bedrooms tidy as kids? How many do now? Who’d be surprised that a brilliant jazz artist tended to let his modifiers dangle?

Anyone concerned about applicants’ grammar is probably dismayed at the state of public education today, and understands that the people most poorly served by this system find it increasingly challenging to find work providing a living wage or upward mobility, much less satisfaction. After we pat ourselves on the back for upholding grammar standards, how many of us can really justify barring someone from a decent job because he or she isn’t always clear on the difference between “your” and “you’re”? Especially when it’s more likely the fault of the individual’s education than laziness?

There is an extent to which scornful condemnation of “bad grammar” is one of today’s last permissible expressions of elitism. Here’s one way we know. Notice how much meaner it sounds if someone says that they won’t hire someone who can’t do algebra, despite math not being required in the job beyond elementary calculations. Even with an additional argument along the lines that algebra trains the brain in precision, it sounds arbitrary – as if deep down the person just has a thing about math.

We have a thing about grammar. As I noted, we don’t need to pretend that someone who doesn’t know how to spell or use commas can write promotional materials or legal documents. However, if all a new hire is going to write is the occasional memo – or less – I’d rank giving people a leg up over throwing away their résumé because they write “truely” instead of “truly” and don’t quite know their way around a semicolon.

John McWhorter, contributing editor at The New Republic and columnist for The New York Daily News, teaches linguistics, American studies and Western civilization at Columbia University. His latest book is “What Language Is, What It Isn’t and What It Could Be.”