

Goodbye *Whom*—and Maybe *Shall*

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SHE was a college professor, a Ph.D., and she wanted to write what magazines of fairly general circulation might use. She brought me some of her writing.

"This would scare the life out of most people," I said. "It's too literary, too bookish, too crude. It's correct English, college style."

"Is there anything wrong with correct English?" she asked with scorn.

"Nothing except that nobody uses it but college professors and Adlai Stevenson."

A bit later she brought me another story. Tacked to it was a note winding up, ". . . and if there is any erudition in this, I shall be glad to eliminate it."

I ringed *shall* and wrote a little note saying, "*Shall* is dying out of the language except in the asking of a question. I will not say *I shall*. And since I will not say *I shall*, then shall I not say *I will*?"

The lady's sense of humor forced its way through the thick veneer of

academic procedure, and for weeks she had a lot of fun shocking her fellow professors by informing them that *shall* is dying out of the language.

Whether *shall* dies out of the language, except in the asking of questions beginning with *Shall I*, is of no concern to me. All I know is that I will not say *I shall*—and neither will about ninety per cent of my fellow Americans. And I will not say "*Whom* do you wish to see?" even though there was a temporary flurry in favor of the dying *whom* after Mr. Hemingway's epic of open-air fighting and love, Spanish style.

These changes, which amount to open violations of grammar, and many others like them, are taking place; which merely illustrates the fact that language is a growing thing that cannot be confined by any set of rules or it becomes "Latin" and what the people speak becomes "Italian."

Anyone who has studied linguistics knows that a language grows

without rules, and the rules are set up later to explain how the thing works the way it does. Any prolonged effort to hold a language to the rules at a given time is sure to meet with defeat. The language goes on; it will not freeze. If you doubt that, try reading Chaucer in the original.

But there is a tendency among those on high, those in the academic world, to deny this — to fight change.

AS A SORT of hobby, I teach a class in writing, an adult class whose members range in age from twenty to seventy. In this class college professors sit alongside mechanics and merchants and salesgirls.

One of the first things I suggest in opening a new term is this: "When grammar gets in your way, stomp on it. (No, I will not use the "correct" word, *stamp*.) Make the language serve you; don't be a slave to it." Then I try to prove the point.

Proving it isn't difficult. All I have to do is pick up the average college textbook and read a few paragraphs. That deadly, flat, academic, "correct" English simply is not written to be read by anyone except those compelled to read it. Still it is correct English — or, let us say, it was *once* correct English.

Is there such a thing as correct English? Years ago I read a comment, I think it was one of H. L. Mencken's offhand comments, that the dictionary is a generation behind

the people. I put that down as a cute saying. I know now that it is true.

But that is no criticism of the dictionary. It *must* be that way — it simply puts down as correct what the learned people of a language group accept as proper. But oddly enough, the language quite frequently is changed by the "improper" usages of people, in spite of all the professors can do to defend it.

In fighting such changes, the academician may be making a mistake. He tends to widen the gap between the language *he* speaks and writes and the language of everybody else.

And the change takes place anyway.

When I was a college freshman, I was solemnly warned never to use the word *fix* when I meant *repair*. Now the word *fix* is used more generally than *repair*. It may, eventually, replace it entirely.

I was warned never to say *while* when I meant a passage of time. The warning was silly even then. Now nobody would take it seriously.

I was told not to split an infinitive — a warning no longer heard, since splitting an infinitive often enriches a sentence, giving it a slight difference in meaning that can be achieved in no other way. I was warned against ending a sentence with a preposition — another warning no longer heard.

Above all, I was told never to use a plural verb with *none*, which, my

professors informed me, is nothing more than *no one* run together. Now the *New Yorker*, no slouch for good English, uses a plural verb with the subject *none*. And most other magazines and newspapers are following suit. Why? It sounds better. And is there any better reason?

SOME changes in the language are long overdue, and ought to be deliberately sought as a solution to confusing situations. A clear example is the use of the subjunctive form of the verb *to be* in sentences such as "If I were king."

Most moderately well educated people will say, "If I were king," not "If I was king." But when you leave the king and move on to situations that are probable, you run into utter confusion. Nobody seems to know what to do. You find, in the most learned of journals, such expressions as, "He said if I were going home he would like to go along." There is nothing impossible about my going home. In this sentence there is nothing improbable about it. The *he* in the sentence is pretty sure I'm going home. Then why use *were*?

In hundreds of other similar sentences, where the action or state of being is probable and quite likely, *were* is used. The same "authorities"

will use *was* in sentences with almost the same meaning. In other words, confusion reigns.

Then why not abandon the *were* in this sense and simply say, "If I was king?" The answer is: it's being done.

I am astonished again and again to hear learned people, broadminded, intelligent people, condemn certain practices in this nation because they do not follow a pattern set years ago in England, and probably abandoned there for all I know. There simply is no point in fighting change in the language.

There is, however, an extremely sound reason for learning as much as can reasonably be learned about it. No person, particularly a writer, should be without a sound knowledge of the language, including all the complexities of grammar and the fine shade of meanings in words.

Then, and only then, will you be equipped to stomp on grammar effectively. If your blunders are due to pure ignorance, you may be lending a hand toward eventually changing the language. But the immediate effect will be to sound "wrong," sometimes even to those who don't know why.

So goodbye *whom* — and maybe *shall*. I will miss you. But I will shed no tears.

And whan that he wel dronken hadde the wyn,
Than wolde he speke no word but Latyn.

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400)
The Canterbury Tales, Prologue



He Killed All the Rabbits

By EDWIN MULLER

ONE MORNING in January, 1952, the postman delivered a small package to Dr. Paul Armand-Delille, an elderly French physician. Perhaps no other package since the postal service began has contained so much suffering and death for the animal world.

Dr. Delille, who is retired, lives on a big estate near Chartres. There he leads the typical life of a country gentleman: gardening, landscaping, puttering. Nobody could look less like an evil-doer. But he had one aversion: rabbits. Every spring they destroyed some of his young plants and shrubs. The old man brooded over the little beasts.

He had read how the Australian government introduced a disease called myxomatosis which, in less than two years, killed off the greater part of the plague of rabbits in Australia. The doctor made inquiries. He found that the virus of myxomatosis could be obtained in Switzerland. He wrote for a tube of

it. His son set snares and caught a pair of young rabbits. With a hypodermic needle, the doctor injected the virus into their veins, then turned them loose. By this act Dr. Delille doomed to a painful death most of the rabbits in France, perhaps in all of Europe.

The rabbit was an important institution in France — both the wild and the domestic varieties. There was never a census of wild rabbits; probably there were something over 50,000,000 of them. A doe can have a litter of four to eight every two months. They would have covered every square foot of the country if nature hadn't maintained a balance. Hawks, foxes and many other predators kept the numbers down.

Man also kept them down. Rabbit hunting was far and away the leading sport. Every year 1,850,000 Frenchmen paid 1500 francs (\$4.30) each for hunting licenses. They were people of all classes. The President of France hunted rabbits on