Negative Concord

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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There is a famous passage from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, in Act IV, Scene I, which invokes the notion of life's dreamlike qualities, and particularly the illusions that are inherent in it: "We are such stuff | As dreams are made on" it reads. And perhaps one of the greater illusions in life, is the very medium that Shakespeare uses – language.

That's not to say that language isn't important, or impactful… or *real* for that matter. I am using language right now, and much of our church's life, including this moment, is centred around the power of language. But, just like life, there are inherent illusions in language, which can take on a power of their own, some of which helps us communicate more clearly, and others which… complicate matters.

The very fact that we can convey the meaning of… *anything*, by making sounds, or drawing lines, or moving our hands, is based on our mutual agreement on what those sounds and figures are supposed to mean.

In English, for instance, we can use the word *church* to refer to a spiritual community like this one (and perhaps, by extension, the building that houses it some of the time). This is a mutually agreed-upon code, which allows us to understand each other when we're talking about each other in a time and space such as this one.

Of course, it takes only some brief exposure to another language – perhaps during grade 4 French, or when travelling abroad – to realize that different groups of people have chosen their own not-so-secret code to communicate with each other. Whether they have landed on the word *église*, or *iglesia*, or *kirche*, to describe a spiritual community, the specific word that is used can seem somewhat arbitrary, and it becomes clear that our attachment to certain words to describe certain things can have little relation to the thing itself. After all, there's nothing inherent about a spiritual group of people, or about our shared building, that forces us to use one collection of sounds, or lines, or signs, over another. As long as we have some agreement as to what the code means, we are happy to accept that meaning.

Some of the other illusions of language are its rules. Sometimes we treat them as if they were divinely ordained and unchangeable, but we need only look at works from William Shakespeare, or Jane Austen, or Edgar Allan Poe, or Gene Roddenberry (of *Star Trek* fame), or even more recent writings, movies, and TV shows, to see that language, its words and its rules, have shifted across the centuries, decades, and even in a matter of years.

And again, that's not to say that these rules don't matter – they give structure to our speech and help make mutual understanding easier and clearer. Without some version of them, we wouldn't be able to still understand Shakespeare. But these rules might not always matter in the way we may think, and those very rules might not even be the rules we think they are. As tools for communication, they are invaluable; as rigid frameworks, they can get us into trouble.

Take the case of former US President Barack Obama's inauguration in 2008, when Chief Justice John Roberts – a notorious stickler for grammar rules – prompted Obama to recite the US Oath of Office in Justice Roberts' preferred word order… which differs from the wording that is required in the US constitution.

While many lawyers generally considered that oath to still be valid, the White House nonetheless took the precaution of having a do-over with the original wording in the constitution, to have all bases covered. And so, we see that when one person in power decided to enforce their own interpretation of the rules, fear of a constitutional crisis ensued.

And when it comes to English grammar, the rules really are quite often a matter of interpretation. The elementary school lore that we can't split infinitives (as is the case with "*to* boldly *go*"), comes from a 19th century *opinion* that it was best to avoid them, because they didn't conform with the rules of Latin (never mind that English isn't Latin). The same goes with the notion that we cannot end sentences with prepositions, such as with words like "with" or "on".

But that's simply not the way people speak English, based both on the norms that have been passed down over centuries, as well as current usage. Our old friend Shakespeare ends a phrase with that so-called "mistake" in today's reading: "We are such stuff | As dreams are made *on*", modern movies use the same form: "Who are you talking *to*?" and no one bats an eye… except for specific folks who have been trained to look for that sort of thing. Most people don't find it unusual, because it follows the rules that we have learned and that continue to serve us in communicating, rather than rules that someone thought we're supposed to use.

Lately, we have been seeing more of this kind of discussion around the pronouns that people use to better reflect their identity. Some trans and non-binary folks feel that the pronoun *they* allows them to express who they are in a way that *she* or *he* simply can't. And there has been some resistance to that usage since many of us are often accustomed to using *they* as a plural pronoun – or so we think. Most people will use phrases like "someone took my coffee mug and they need to give it back", without even noticing that they used the *singular they*, as do many people everyday. Heck, even Shakespeare used it.

We even use plural-sounding words like *are* for individuals in standard English all the time. Think about it, when I say to one of you that "you *are* an attentive listener". No one raises an eyebrow when you are using *are* for a single *you*. Actually, some people do raise an eyebrow: people who had to learn English later in life (such as myself) – only then did that quirk of the language seem unusual.

And there are dialects in English that have different rules from what many of us may be used to, yet they do have rules that allow their speakers to understand each other. A notable example is African American Vernacular English. It has practices that are less common in standard English, such as using double negatives: “don’t go nowhere”.

For some us, the math of that sentence may seem odd… won’t a double negative make it a positive? But language isn’t math, and people will understand what that means. Linguists even have a name for this kind of construction: Negative Concord. It’s a way of emphasizing the negative meaning in a way that feels consistent throughout a phrase, and it makes perfectly good sense, when you have learned to understand that sense. It’s also not unusual in many languages. French and Spanish use *negative concord* all the time and people have no trouble understanding each other.

The rules in these languages, including African American Vernacular English, are internally consistent, and everyday speakers will recognize when you break those rules of everyday usage. The fact that African American Vernacular English is sometimes looked down upon, is more an indication of who is often in power, than an issue with the dialect’s grammar itself.

And to be clear, this is not a call to abolish or ignore rules – it is a call to be mindful of what they are, why they are, who uses them, and how they are meant to serve us, rather than us being subservient to them.

I generally stick to the norms of standard English when I speak from the pulpit, as I know that this will allow me to communicate more clearly with most of you, though I also don’t worry too much about breaking with those opinions that are sometimes received as rules – I split infinitives, I end sentences with “on” and “with” (I’ll leave it as homework for you to see where I did that in this sermon!) – I have faith that you'll understand me when I speak the way that many of us speak.

Linguists that pay closer attention to *how* language is spoken are said to take a more *descriptive* approach to understanding our speech and its many illusions. Those who take a more proactive approach in maintaining certain norms might be called *prescriptivist*, when they seek to promote rules that aren't necessarily followed – even though people in everyday speech do follow the rules that serve them well in communicating clearly.

The tension between descriptivism and prescriptivism is familiar to anyone who works in the art of dictionary making. Lexicographers often find themselves in an awkward position as both observers and authorities of language. And while many of us look at dictionaries for reference on proper usage and spelling, those who put these collections of words together usually see their work more as mirrors of how we are *already* using those words. When their use changes enough, the books eventually follow suit.

My friends, our spiritual tradition can play both of these roles, and there is that inherent tension in it, though I would say it often takes more of the descriptive approach, recognizing the sources of inspiration and wisdom that offer the most insightful guidance in our current lives, and usually limiting our prescriptions to reminding us of how we have agreed to be with each other, with norms that serve us, rather than the other way around.

My friends, Unitarian Universalism has built an identity around stepping back from prescribing what individual members' spiritual path should be. The practice of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, involves a recognition that simply enforcing what meaning should be upon others, seldom serves the needs of individuals or communities. And, the practice of a responsible search still calls us to work on common understandings and guidelines on how we may carry out that search mindfully, intentionally, and with respect for each other's needs as members of a community with common needs and goals.

Of course, my friends, there are occasional shifts, as we recognize evolving needs. Our statements of faith have given way to what was once our six principles, eventually seven. A year or so ago, we added an eight principle in Canada, to better reflect how we have said we wanted to be with one another, and particularly in dismantling racism and systemic barriers to inclusion in our communities, small and large.

My friends, in a couple of weeks, we are invited to join in a national service, where ministerial colleagues of diverse backgrounds will explore more deeply how we may live more fully into this 8th Principle, that we may better understand what this norm has meant to us, and how we may better reflect it in our communities and lives. To get a clearer sense of how we may adhere to the norms of justice that we proclaim to seek.

My friends, there are many ways to express ourselves, and when we agree that we want to understand each other – we can.

So may we be,
In the spirit of mutual understanding,
Amen

Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #142 Let There Be Light

Words: Frances W. Davis, 1936-1976
Music: Robert J. B. Fleming, 1921-
CONCORD

Hymn #187 It Sounds Along the Ages

~)-| Words: William Channing Gannett, 1840-1923
Music: Melody of the Bohemian Brethren, *Hemlandssånger*, Rock Island, Illinois, 1892, arr.
FAR OFF LANDS

Closing #186 Grieve Not Your Heart

Words: Confucius, 551-479 B.C.E.
~)-| recast by John Andrew Storey 1935-1997
Music: From *Kentucky Harmony*, 1916
PRIMROSE