

Wednesday February 26, 2014

Things we never knew we'd learned

By Jim Taylor

It sounds wrong to speak of “an apple old tree.” Or a “cotton Egyptian blue lovely shirt.” Because the adjectives don’t come in the order we expect.

In case your eyes glaze over at any mention of grammatical terms, adjectives are the words we use to describe things: colour, size, shape, age....

As a writer and editor, I know lots of rules about the English language. I’ve also learned that most of those rules really aren’t rules at all. Someone invented them at some point, in a misguided attempt to impose rigidity on a language as fluid as glycerine.

Like a demented vacuum cleaner, English sucks up bits from every other language it encounters. French, German, Latin, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Hindi, Chinese, even the pidgin of the Pacific islands – all have given us words and/or ways of organizing those words.

The order of adjectives

But one rule I had never even heard of – until just recently -- deals with the order of adjectives. Almost always, apparently, adjectives follow this sequence:

Determiner (*many, a, this, the*)

Opinion (*frightening, fine, beautiful*)

Size (*large, tiny*)

Age (*new, ancient*)

Shape (*round, square, bulbous*)

Colour or pattern (*blue, green, striped*)

Origin (*Chinese, German*)

Material (*glass, wooden, silver*)

Purpose (*what something is used for, like a sleeping bag, budget statement, garden gloves*)

Noun (*the thing that all those adjectives describe*)

So you can string together “a lovely little old long brown Italian wooden stirring spoon,” and be understood. But if you mess with that word order, you’ll either confuse people or sound silly.

Like all the other English rules, this one isn’t carved in stone. Little Red Riding Hood’s “big bad wolf,” for example, violates the rule.

Absorbing knowledge unconsciously

So how do English speakers learn to put adjectives in the right order, if they didn’t learn a rule? The same way they learned almost everything else – by absorbing it from their social settings.

No one actually teaches infants how to move their feet for walking. Or how to shape their tongues for talking. Children generally don’t take classes to learn how to play together, how to fall in love, or how peer pressure works. They soak it up unconsciously.

That’s why it’s so difficult to change social attitudes.

Lieutenant Cable was wrong, in *South Pacific* – what you’re carefully taught can be un-taught. But what you’ve absorbed – about the roles of men and women, about racial differences, about authority – settles into the soul like gold-dust into bedrock.

Especially about religion, I suspect. Long ago, I quit believing that God – by whatever name -- meddles with the physical world. And I refuse to believe in a God who deliberately causes landslides, typhoons, and tsunamis. But I cannot rid myself of the notion that Something influences events in my life.

One understanding, I’ve thought through. The other, I absorbed. Just the way I unconsciously absorbed the order of adjectives in my language.

Other people will have different convictions they can’t get rid of – perhaps about blacks, socialists, gays, women, or governments. It’s hard to un-learn something you never knew you had learned.

Copyright © 2014 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups, and links from other blogs, welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns. But if you forward a column, please identify yourself as the sender, so that I don't get accused of sending out spam!

To send comments on this column, to subscribe or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

Fran Ota wrote about last week’s column, “Do I believe in elves? Absolutely! (It's the Celtic-Norse genetics.) I don't think of them as tiny little beings a foot high who make mischief, but rather the tall wise beings of Tolkien... When J.R.R. Tolkien wrote ‘Lord of the Rings’, he wrote of small people called 'hobbits'. The notion that small people could exist was taken as part of a fantasy fiction, and yet in 2003, on Flores Island in Indonesia, a very small skeleton was discovered -- homo floresienensis, Flores Man -- nicknamed ‘hobbit’. Partial skeletons of nine individuals have been discovered. Who is to say the stories of ‘elves’ which have come down throughout history don't have some basis in older oral traditions when such 'persons' might have lived?”

Alison Playfair missed a few columns, because of some kind of an Internet glitch, but got this one. “I have always had a special place in my heart for the hidden folk, no matter what name they go by... The world would be a much drearier place for me if only provable entities were allowed.”

Pauline Finch also had some columns hijacked by cyberspace, but wrote, “I've just finished reading "Faith in Invisible Beings" (Elves) for the third time. It not only made my day, but probably my whole week, even my whole month ... maybe longer!”

Margaret Carr assured me, “Of course there could be elves in Iceland. Just like there is a Santa Claus, Tooth Fairy and Fairy Beds in the snowdrifts here in Saskatchewan. I have even seen where the Fairies slept in too late and a chunk of snow has fallen down into their bed and they have not been able to make their beds tidy before a human sees them sleeping.”

James Harbeck added a personal comment about Iceland: “Another thing about Iceland is that you can see for miles and miles and miles, but whatever you're looking for you won't see until you're pretty much on top of it. We think of waterfalls as things that fall down from above, but in Iceland, their waterfalls – there are many important ones – start in a valley and fall into a deeper valley. All the interesting stuff is down. And hidden.”

Ted Wilson commented, “I didn’t realize that Ireland and Iceland had so much in common, but then looking at their names I see the only difference is an ‘r’ instead of a ‘c’.”

Ralph Milton found a connection to a magazine article about philosophy: "It said that philosophers who use logic to counter theistic claims miss the point. Religion has nothing to do with rational conclusions. Religion has to do with experience.

"Our guide in Iceland told us that the majority of people had actually encountered or heard or experienced elves in some way. When asked if he had (he was a university grad) he evaded the question."

Steve Roney objected to my suggestion that "the invisible hand of the market" implied belief in a hand, metaphoric or not. But, he added, "There is nothing irrational or unintelligent about belief in invisible entities. Most cultures have accepted their existence; it is racist to assume they are all idiots. Christians believe in demons and angels; Buddhists and Hindus in apsaras, demons, gandharvas, non-corporeal Bodhisattvas; Taoists in immortals, demons, dragons, phoenixes; Muslims in angels, demons, and djinn. Such beings of pure spirit are [only] heretical to our modern Western, radically materialist world view. But is materialism rational? That ought not to be simply assumed."

Frank Martens responded to my comment about the lack of responses to my previous week's column about Ayaan Ali's book "Infidel." "I'm surprised that you didn't get more comments from readers," Frank wrote. "I read the book some time ago as part of my personal attempt to learn about as much as possible about the Middle East.

"I think the reason that people are reluctant to make comments about other's religions is that they will, in turn, be challenged about their own beliefs. People take themselves far too seriously, and their religious convictions need to be questioned -- not only by themselves but by those people from outside who can look at them from an impersonal point of view. But this is the problem, of course. Everybody has some sort of a belief in a deity... The simplified versions are held by aboriginals whose gods can be anything that can be seen, heard or touched -- in other words, those things that are found in Nature (even elves!). If you have been persuaded by some person in ancient times that there is a heaven and a hell, then your fears make it so. And because you don't want to be the only one with certain beliefs you are left with just a few choices -- you proselytize others; you beat others into submission; or you kill those that don't have your beliefs.

"This was the situation with Ayaan Hirsi Ali. That she had the determination and the intellect to reject her family's religious beliefs, strike out on her own, and eventually convince others of the sheer stupidity of Muslimism (as practiced by the people she knew), was heroic."

Ted Spencer also pondered the reluctance to write about Ayaan Ali's experience: perhaps they were "nervous about 'who should cast the first stone...'. Fundamental Christians have spoken at length from positions unassailable, and done unspeakable harm from their lofty positions. I couldn't honestly add to the fomentations without lobbing one into our own camp."

Laurina Tallman also responded with a letter twice the length of my original column. All I can include is a few excerpts.

"Sometimes a week is not long enough to contemplate some of the subjects you tackle.

"You wrote, 'I don't know enough about Islam to judge the validity of her analysis.' How possibly could you have held responsible positions in a mainline Canadian church and know so little about the competition? Your notion of religious tolerance probably overrides your knowledge of paganism.

"I do not find it difficult to believe the account of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's experiences. The only thing that surprises me is your naïveté. As Christians we are taught to hate evil but to forgive and to convert the evil-doers, not to be tolerant of their atrocities.

"Christians are not called to turn a blind eye and deaf ear to ignorance or impoverishment or harm or injustice. The atrocities Ayaan Hirsi Ali describes have been the subject of TV specials and news reports and personal communications that only sometimes make the headlines. How could you have missed these?... It is one thing to allow people of differing religions to live without persecution; it is entirely another to suggest that religions are equal or that they should not be criticized or analyzed or expected to change.

“Of course, this Muslim author is not a Christian. She cannot foment love. But she can draw your attention to harsh reality so you will know that some kinds of systemic religious behaviour are intolerable. There is an enemy... As a system of religious thought it is primitive in some of the ways fundamentalist Christianity in the southern US can be primitive: cruel and rigid and ignorant.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Psalms 131 is very short, just three verses. I'd like to dedicate this paraphrase to homemakers and secretaries and other important people.

- 1 I do not want to seem proud or ambitious.
I keep my eyes on the ground;
I don't push my own views;
I don't meddle with business or politics.
- 2 But I take care of little things.
I keep life running smoothly.
I have learned to be content, not to be brazen or demanding;
I accept whatever life brings me with humility.
- 3 Is there hope for people like me, too, Lord?
Does glory go only to the great and the mighty?

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemlikeGod" page, www.seemlikegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
