

English for Grammar Freaks (EGF)

Hi folks,

Do you remember Michael Swan's « linguistically gifted idiot », the precursor of English for Grammar Freaks (EGF)? Well the beast is still alive and kicking and rearing its head, much to my surprise, in high brow Senegalese academia as well as in the lowly middle schools where the ubiquitous Go for English textbooks are all the rage. I have recently stumbled across tokens of linguistic oddities veering to grammatical insanity! Check this out:

"Is my wife being mad?" or *"I am not being able to pronounce his name correctly"* or *"Have you a husband?"*

Well, well! Give yourself a break and welcome to the real world where simple comprehensible English is spoken by real people. So next time your wife is showing signs of mental disturbance, just unassumingly say:

"I'm afraid my wife is off her rocker!" or *"My wife is nuts!"* Besides, *"Are you married?"* or *"Do you have a husband?"* would be grammatically correct albeit the second option would sound weird, if not rude.

Grammar should not be pursued for its own sake; otherwise you would end up with what Ann Miller calls "disembodied sentences". You don't have to stretch the language beyond the limits of what is acceptable in authentic discourse unless you are a grammar freak solely concerned by weird constructions. So, if your wife or sweetheart shows no sign of relief, «*Get her to a nunnery*» like Hamlet would Ophelia, or take her to your local shrink before considering a nuthouse!

Grammatical oddities are not the sole province of language teachers and academics. Even the highly publicized Go for English (4e) shows signs of wayward linguistic behavior that have polluted the minds of generations of English lovers with the connivance of "overzealous teachers" (Widdowson). So for the sake of pedagogical sanity, let's start cleaning up with one of the feathers in the idiot's cap: *"The Famous Tuesday of Nder"* in Go for English 4e, second edition page 35.

Even the title is flawed by the lack of idiomatic flavor due to blatant interferences from French and Wolof. Dubbing that day *"famous"* is both insensitive and oblivious of the infamy of the massacre! Nder may well be a famous landmark in our history, but not the infamous bloody Tuesday that made the village so famous! Why not *"Nder's Bloody Tuesday"* or *"Nder's Bloody Tuesday: an infamy"*? By foregrounding the tragedy, *"Bloody and Infamy"* can effectively conjure up the Moors' evil deeds and pave the way for rich pre reading activities blending history and vocabulary.

In *"To attack surprisingly the women"* (line 9), *"surprisingly"* is both lexically and syntactically incorrect: the adverb *"surprisingly"* should not be inserted between the verb and the direct object. Besides, *"surprisingly"* does not mean *"by surprise"* but *"amazingly, to everyone's surprise"*! Viable alternatives could be: *"They raided the village by surprise"* or *"They went on the rampage throughout the village only occupied by women and children."*

Not surprisingly, the follow-up workbook activities (Page 39) are a set of gap-filling quick fixes impervious to CLT procedures:

1. *The women _____ (kill) in the fire.*
2. *Talatey Nder _____ (relate) in history books.*

This type of exercises will lead the “gifted idiot’s” fan club to cheerfully believe that it is a slam dunk until they find out that their idol is still incapable of producing spontaneous discourse in context as in:

A: What’s Talatey Nder infamous for?

B: _____

It can be argued that the need to portray the martyrdom of the victims of Nder will command a passive construction. On the other hand, an active construction would be equally suitable if we want to point an accusing finger at the perpetrator of the massacre: both structures can effectively carry the emotional load of this piece of history. In other words, whether we use the active or the passive, the defining criterion will be the intention behind the speech pattern or the “illocutionary act” (Searle). So instead of indulging in sophisticated transformations, teachers should draw learners’ attention to three critical discourse analysis principles:

- Speaker’s intention arising from the context of situation always determines the word choice and word order (Francis and Celce-Mercia);
- No language is spoken in a vacuum (Widdowson);
- In an utterance, the first cited or theme has a predominant role as the “the point of departure” (Grimes).

Let’s conclude with a morale booster for fledgling teachers and some humble pie for high-brow academics! The sanity of our professional body rests on our resolve to make sure that “ideas and proposals are evaluated on their merits, not accepted passively on grounds of authority, real or presumed” (Chomsky). This is metaphorically a death warrant on any attempt to canonize anyone, be they high-brow academics or humble textbook writers like me. Like I??? No, you’re not a grammar freak to say that, are you?

Authentically yours,

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