You Say You Want a Devolution?

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Online messaging and texting must be taking over the world, or at least every single waking moment of our free time. We are thankful that these two activities make it easy to connect with others on the fly; however, it is important not to forget the more unfavorable and often overshadowed results of living in the age of media. Consider the English language, based on strict grammar and spelling limitations. The acts of texting and instant messaging have mangled the rules and regulations students have followed for centuries. In fact, an internet phenomenon called a meme has brought this devolution of the English language into popularity and acceptance amongst today's teens. While at first glance, a meme may appear to police bad spelling and grammar, ultimately it glorifies the errors and encourages the creation of more, resulting in the deterioration of writing skills.

To understand what a meme is, it is important to know where it originates from. For the most part, memes start out as posts left on the message board 4chan. 4chan, particularly its "Random" discussion board /b/, is a space where people can anonymously comment on any subject of their liking. The result is complete randomness since posts do not have to connect to one another in any way, shape, or form. Most grammatical memes are comments that contain typos, which are funny to the extent that someone decides it must be brought to attention of others. Posts on 4chan are relatively short-lived, as the message board is updated regularly. For this reason, comments are re-posted so that constant stream of visitors cannot possibly miss

them. If the original post is deemed funny enough, it spreads in popularity, eventually taking on an entirely different meaning in the forms of parodies or recreations. Viewers tweak the original comment, adding their own connotations and humor in hopes of gaining recognition and laughs, otherwise known as lulz. At this point, a single post has transformed into a meme because it now serves as a model for others to create their own. Encyclopedia Dramatica is considered the Hall of Fame for memes; this website is a more permanent means of documentation for memes unlike the ever-changing 4chan. It is here that some of the most popular memes are archived and then broken down in a Wikipedia-style format. Scan the pages of Encyclopedia Dramatica and you can view the original post that spawned the meme, rules on forming your own, and plenty of examples demonstrating both the successful and failed attempts to do so. Pay even more attention and it will become clear that grammar shapes the difference between right and wrong when it comes to crafting a thriving meme.

Pretty Cool Guy is a meme that will cause any English teacher to cringe. In December of 2007, an anonymous poster contributed this gem to 4chan: "I think Halo is a pretty cool guy. Eh kills aleins and doesnt afraid of anything." These typos were purely accidental, yet as it spread on 4chan, the aspects of the sentence that needed extreme fixing were the most responsible for its appeal. A great source of humor is how the poster completely uses the wrong subject. Halo is not a character but the title of the video game, so it is completely incapable of killing or expressing heroic traits. This was instantly picked up on by hard-core gamers who would never make such a mistake. Recreations of Pretty Cool Guy all contain misuse of subject, which serves to mock the original poster's apparent lack of video game knowledge. When mimicking the original post, the faulty spelling and grammatical errors must hold in order for it to be considered authentic. Encyclopedia Dramatica declares that all rules of the English language need to be disregarded, so

someone altering would not "be a newfag and do it wrong." Like an English lesson gone wrong, capitalization is denounced, vowel placement does not matter, and apostrophes are nonexistent. All the problems are clearly addressed, but the sole purpose of the extensive explanation is in hopes that others will chuckle and then rush to copy them. The act of policing has good intentions and then ultimately falls short.

This relaxed attitude toward spelling and grammar dominates the way we speak on the internet and is beginning to spill over into writing as well. Taking out a mere comma and ignoring the shift key makes the typing faster, decreasing the time it takes to reach the message board or chat room. We swear that this shorthand method of writing is put away once the computer's power is switched off, but this is hardly the case. High school and college students spend so much time today fiddling with the rules of English that they cannot easily break the habit; it as if they have adopted their own language. Author Hilary Janks explores the underlying significance of language in her review entitled "Language, Power, and Pedagogies." Her chapter insists that utilizing language requires decisions and that these choices do indeed directly impact how others view us in our everyday lives (Janks 45). Everything we record, whether it is online or on paper is definitely a reflection of ourselves; however, those two atmospheres require contrasting states of mind. The internet full of grammatical memes is a safe zone in terms of making mistakes pertaining to the English language. One is not penalized or lectured if they misspell a word or do not capitalize. Although people do notice the errors, it will only produce laughs or even internet fame. Professors and teachers, on the other hand, are not as forgiving towards the laid back attitude grammatical memes have taught us to adopt in response to the English language. Think of the impressions that we make when we hand in papers riddled with grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. This comes across as extremely careless, especially

since teachers expect eighteen year olds to have mastered such elementary basics. Students may not mean to appear unprofessional; the relaxed approach towards proper language on the internet is used so often that it becomes second nature. Even the anonymous poster of Pretty Cool Guy attempted to change his ways without success. Seconds after the infamous post, he tried to post again. Unfortunately, he typed out the exact thing as before, leading to one last post expressing his utter embarrassment. Without a doubt, Pretty Cool Guy is a prime example of how the way we alter language is irreversible and has its consequences.

Unlike Pretty Cool Guy, the "I accidentally X" meme goes as far as completely omitting crucial parts of a sentence. The inspiration for this meme popped up on 4chan in May of 2008. The original poster, or OP, wrote, "I accidentally 93MB of .rar files…" A post mimicking it soon followed, saying, "I accidentally 40 lbs. of mangos." The main formatting rule for this particular meme is clearly the absence of the verb. It is essential to a sentence, for without it, the action is lost and open for interpretation. Our minds run every which way frantically trying to determine the missing space that will help us to understand what a sentence is about. "I accidentally X" is exaggerating and glorifying mishaps that students constantly make in their writing. It may not be as obvious as forgetting to include a verb; however, young writers often use the wrong verbs or pick the wrong tense, which still creates an overall sense of confusion surrounding the meaning of a sentence.

According to Constant Leung, contributor to the SAGE Handbook of Sociolinguistics, knowledge of the different types of verbs and the occasions in which they are used is essential to two things: gaining the best understanding of what we are reading and expressing ourselves most accurately when we are writing (Leung 552). College writing is an enormous shift for the majority of incoming freshmen due to the fact that their analytical skills are not up to par. This is

yet another unnecessary burden on the teachers who must instill these not yet mastered skills all while keeping up with the current curriculum. I noticed that when it came to both reading and writing, my classmates found it tremendously easy to summarize. While describing was no issue, providing deep meaning in conjunction with the subject matter proved to be more difficult. Janks considers language the ultimate tool for making sense of our realities (Janks 46). Without a doubt, it is one of the most crucial ways of exploring and gaining insight about the world around us, human nature, and where we stand amongst it all. When students cannot grasp how to use language properly, they risk losing a method of expression that inspires curiosity and self-discovery.

This incapability to explore and analyze can definitely be linked to online behavior such as instant messaging or posting in a message board like 4chan. Just as with the disregard for capitalization and punctuation evident in Pretty Cool Guy, the extent that we use verbs in online activities is very minimal. Pretty Cool Guy only uses the verbs "think" and "is" in its first sentence. Even though verbs used in the following sentence could allow for expansion of ideas, they continue to be of the describing variety, such as "become," "kill," and "troll." Furthermore, language on the internet is based more on telling, which does not help to develop the critical thinking skills needed in the classroom. "I accidentally X" looks as though it is shedding light on the issue of verb usage, yet it fails to teach us anything about the mechanics and proper usages of verbs. Consequently, this allows for the continuation of shallow analysis that students should be able to push past in their years of higher education.

The teenagers and young adults who center their lives around the Internet could defend themselves against their more traditional superiors by insisting that we are headed toward an inevitable evolution. History dictates that with the arrival of a new generation come changes in

style, attitudes, and beliefs. In this day and age, our advanced means of communicating should be expected to lead to serious changes in the English language. Scholar Robert Scholes holds a fascination with modern culture and media, and in his article "On Reading a Video Text," he explains that language is key to bringing people together under the umbrella of a modern phenomena. Whether or not the paring down of reading, writing, and comprehension is intentional, the majority of students comply with it, as this confirms "their membership in a collective cultural body" (Scholes 372). Although he focuses on commercials rather than activities on the internet, Scholes's concept of social and cultural unity holds for all types of media. The current generation has utilized and spread grammatical memes to the point where it gains popularity and respect points amongst members of the group. The transformation of the English language is visible and has no intentions of stopping, but this does not mean that the change is revolutionary or beneficial to society. It cannot be labeled an evolution if the regulations of writing and the associated thought processes of our students are regressing. Even Scholes feels that our generation is deficient in the fundamental abilities to scrutinize and assess (374). When college students struggle with researching and outlining a topic or organizing their ideas in the form of an essay, they are experiencing the detrimental effects of their online behavior firsthand. Personally, my English Writing course nurtures my need to explore, as should most college classes. The necessity to think critically, respond, and record these findings in the proper format are crucial beyond the college years. Our future bosses and mentors expect us to be mentally prepared to handle the working world, which is bound to involve creativity, problem solving, and above all else, professionalism in everything that we do. Grammatical memes may exemplify the language which has become the norm for young people in today's

society, but they will only pull us farther away from the mindset and expertise needed to succeed in the real world.

Although grammatical memes put a spotlight on the deterioration of the English language, they are only adding to the problem. The success of a meme is linked to its continuation, so others are encouraged to form their own examples and abide to the improper mechanics that uphold its reputation. The more this behavior is practiced, the more it becomes innate, sneaking its way into the classroom where negligence toward the details in writing is not tolerated. Our generation can have their devolution of the English language as long as they accept that it will ultimately dim the bulbs of their once bright futures.

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