



Petty Annoyances

Most who read my columns think that I'm only annoyed by politicians, growing government and Americans who have little respect or love for liberty and our Constitution. There are other things that annoy me.

One annoyance is people's seeming inability or unwillingness to differentiate between the number zero and the letter "o." I've had conversations with telephone operators who have told me that I can reach my party by dialing, for example, 31o-3o55. Sometimes I've asked, "If I follow your instructions, by dialing the letter 'o' instead of the number zero, will I reach my party?" They always answer no and that I must dial the zero. Then I ask, "Why did you tell me 'o' when you meant zero?" Our chitchat usually degrades after that. It's not only telephone operators. How many times have you heard a student or teacher say, "He has a 4 point o GPA"?



I wonder whether the confusion stems from the fact that both o's and zeroes are round. Here's a definition that distinguishes them: "O" is a vowel and the 15th letter of the alphabet. Zero is defined as any number that when added to or subtracted from another number does not change the value of that number.

I recently made Microsoft Outlook my default email client, but I'm having a bit of a problem with it. When it's initially turned on, there's a message that reads, "Trying to connect." Similarly, on a cloudy morning, I hear weathermen say that the sun will try to come out later. So if Microsoft Outlook didn't connect or the afternoon didn't turn out to be sunny, could we say it was because Microsoft Outlook or the sun didn't try hard enough? But it's not just computer software technicians and weathermen who use teleological explanations that ascribe purposeful behavior to inanimate objects. Recently, I listened to brilliant lectures on particle physics by a distinguished physics professor, who said that strange quarks want to decay. In a cellular respiration lecture, another professor said that one mole of glucose wants to become 38 units of adenosine triphosphate. I'm wondering how these professors know what strange quarks and glucose moles want to do; have they spoken to them?

You say, "Williams, you're being too picky! What's the harm?" There's a great potential for harm when people come to believe that inanimate objects are capable of purposeful behavior. That's the implied thinking behind the pressure for gun control. People behave as if a gun could engage in purposeful behavior such as committing crime; thereby, our focus is directed more toward controlling inanimate objects than it is toward controlling evil people.



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How many times have you heard a statement such as “Harold and myself were studying”? When one of my students makes such a statement, I sometimes ask, “What if Harold were not studying with you? Would you say, ‘Myself was studying’?” That’d be silly. Words such as “myself” and “himself” are reflexive pronouns. Their proper use requires reference to the subject of the sentence. For example, “Harold injured himself.” A reflexive pronoun can also be used intensively for emphasis, for example, “Harold himself was injured.”

I have another grammar annoyance. How about when people make a statement such as “He is taller than me”? Whenever I hear such an error, I visualize Dr. Martin Rosenberg, my high-school English teacher during the early ‘50s, putting both hands on his waist and sarcastically asking the student, “Do you mean ‘He is taller than me am’?” “Am” is the elliptical, or understood or left out, verb at the end of the sentence. The subject of a verb must be in the nominative case. To be grammatically correct, the sentence should be, “He is taller than I.”

Considerable evidence demonstrates that most people are not bothered by my petty annoyances. I’m willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. It may be that it’s I who is getting old and out of touch, having been educated during ancient times when nonsense was less acceptable.

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