



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on February 14, 2022

Does Our Language Use Reflect Why We're in Decline?

You don't have to be a linguist to grasp that language use tells us much about a society — and this goes far beyond whether vulgarity is accepted. One man who might agree is columnist John Kelly. Lamenting how even journalists and people creating product packaging today don't measure up to a 1950s Catholic-grammar-school graduate, he writes in a Sunday title, "You can quote me: 'Doesn't anybody know how to use punctuation any more?'"

Of course, concern over boys and girls no longer learning proper punctuation may seem trivial in a society in which many people no longer know what boys and girls are. But what if this phenomenon reflects the precise reason, or at least part of it, that we witness the civilizational decay evident all around us?

Writing at the *Washington Post*, Kelly [begins by discussing](#) an NBC screenshot of an Instagram post from skier Eileen Gu, the American-born Olympic athlete who punctuated her own lack of patriotism by competing for China. It read, "made finals!!" It wasn't the 18-year-old's social-media language use that rankled Kelly, however, but that of the "professionals" at NBC. For they'd surrounded the Gu screenshot with quotation marks that weren't.

That is, "They were a simulacrum of quotation marks," writes Kelly. "They were flipped on their vertical axis. Even if they hadn't been, they were in the wrong places. They were quotation marks as rendered by a cargo cult, as if someone had once seen a quotation mark but hadn't ever actually used one."

This isn't unusual, either. While examples of journalistic technical ineptitude were relatively rare many decades ago, they're seen continually now. The worst case was a 2010 Channel 13 Action News (ABC) article that, as I [wrote at the time](#), was "plagiarism proof" and "so bad that it's impossible to print all the errors contained therein without running afoul of Fair Use Doctrine."

"It brings to mind that oft-heard journalistic advice that, put loosely, instructs one to write at an eighth-grade level," I also quipped. "Only, I didn't know it referred to the eighth grade in a non-English-speaking country — when writing in English."

(The piece smacked of pidgin English.)

Focusing solely on punctuation, however, Kelly provides several examples of punctuation perfidy; he also [relates some interesting history](#) about punctuation's evolution (though it's really Intelligent Design). In addition, he relates how a nun taught him to avoid NBC/screenshot-like errors.

"'One quotation mark looks like '66,' she said," Kelly writes. "The other looks like '99.' You know 66 goes first because it's a lower number than 99." That's top-notch instruction right there.



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Kelly acknowledges that some may level a “grammar police” accusation here. They may say, he writes: “‘Who cares?’ Or, probably: ‘Who cares?’”

“I care!” he responds. He should, too. This isn’t just because the punctuation situation irks him, but because it reflects something far, far deeper and more troubling.

Question: Is it possible, even perhaps probable, that a journalist not conscientious enough to be technically sound also won’t be conscientious enough to be factually sound? If he can’t be trusted in the little things, should he be trusted in the big ones?

Moreover, is the slacker mentality this reflects confined to just journalism? Or is it possible that it will impact everything people thus inculcated do, from hamburger-making to doctoring to auto-parts production to teaching and beyond?

Some may say about a given written communication that “they get my meaning — it’s good enough.” Yet there’s another name for an “It’s good enough” society: a failing one. A mark of true civilization is that its citizenry, put simply, tries to get things right — in all matters, from great to small.

Insofar as language (and other things) goes, a great onus belongs on schools. Not only are teachers not as educated as they once were, but too often today the only correctness prioritized is political correctness. And as more instruction time is spent on woke nonsense, less time is available for what makes sense.

Another issue is the intra-school lack of discipline and obedience, for children can’t learn from you unless they’re first conditioned to *listen* to you. Today, however, much time is expended trying to cajole undisciplined students into just toeing the line.

The deeper issue concerns a lack of *virtue* (good moral habits), which must be instilled when young. To the point here, when parents and authority figures don’t demand high standards and exactitude from young children — and model those things themselves — kids often don’t develop the virtue of Diligence. A lack of this leads to the slacker mentality, and, of course, this is precisely what plagues us (among other things) society-wide.

Also evident is the lack of the virtue Humility. For pridefulness, a character defect, can preclude us from seeing flaws in ourselves and having the realization that improvement is always possible and necessary. This is apparent in so many today who, victimized by childhood “self-esteem” training, fancy themselves infallible.

Just consider the story about the [young woman who insisted](#) her spelling of “hamster” (yes, the rodent) was correct. Then there’s the leftist [who rationalized](#) his errors to me in an email by writing, “I am under 40. Your vs you’re is interchangeable.” Yet that’s only acceptable if what’s under 40 is a man’s I.Q.

There was a time when people understood that our speech and writing speak volumes about us. This is true nationally just as it is individually. As the Founding Fathers [warned](#), for example, only a virtuous people can enjoy freedom — and a virtuous people never confuse “good enough” with competence.



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