

Word nerds and status anxiety

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Among my writerly friends and kin, debates about language rules are routine. I tend to wave the descriptivist flag, arguing various versions of the point that if almost everyone defines / conjugates / pronounces a word a particular way, there just isn't any coherent reason to call it *wrong* anymore.

But it's easy to say that language is always changing and that's okay. It's harder to follow that thought through by relinquishing your own pet peeves. I insist on pronouncing the second syllable of "mature" as "tour," even as the rest of the American-English-speaking world says "muh-CHUR" with Merriam-Webster's blessing. I'm a dead-ender for the cause of using "disinterested" only to mean "unbiased"—not "bored" or "indifferent"—though I let myriad similar issues go without a second thought. And while I've mostly grown out of the need to correct others in conversation, I do nerd-fantasize about the following exchange:

ME. So Tony Jones doesn't think liberal theo-bloggers talk about God enough?
Meh. I'm nonplussed...

SOMEONE ELSE. Hold on, I'm gonna have to correct your grammar first...

ME. No you're not, you're going to have to correct my *usage*. And it looks like you'll be doing it second.

Hard to get just the right setup for that one. Anyway, I enjoyed Josh Kamensky's rant against word nerds this week. Here's a taste:

Like most language-nerdery, [David Cross's routine about the word "literally"] is not just factually wrong, but it's riddled with status anxiety. The fact that it makes such a good standup routine is a clue here. Comedians are bubbling tubs of status anxiety, verbal dexterity, and little else, so of course they're going to use wrongheaded ideas about language to jockey for superiority. The rest of us are ostensibly in the business of communicating.

But word nerds, gripped by the fear that meritocracy is a sham, tattoo STRUNK and WHITE on their knuckles and pummel everyone around them who's just trying to make it to the end of a thought. Obsessed with efficiency, they deride their *mots noirs* as "wastes of space". They see their cause as embattled as Ayn Rand saw her capitalists, and they look at language as Howard Roark looked at building plans, to be stripped of all fripperies, all bells and whistles melted down into One Ring To Usage-Rule Them All. (Mixing references but [they hang together well](#), you know?)

What is their hurry?

Delightful and insightful. If you enjoy a good rant—and you don't mind if it's rated R—you should really [read it all](#).