If a time machine whisked us back to the era of Beowulf, we would have difficulty in understanding the people, and they would have a tougher time getting meaning out of what we say. The language—the English language, mind you—would be what both groups were speaking. But times change.

With that passage of time, words change, vocabularies change, meanings change. We no longer say “ye” or “thou”, but we do spout reams of “byte”, “ram”, “windshield wiper”, “zipper”, “static”, “boob tube”—all created in recent years. Because of the growth of civilization, our language had to expand and change. English undergoes changes because of newly created situations but also because of changes in use. Language must follow the advances of our society—or the way we use the language.

“Ain’t” is a great example. According to Fowler, it originated in the middle 1700s and was common among English cockneys. Later it became strongly discredited and finally was totally frowned on. Today it is considered nonstandard, vernacular, and colloquial and is so listed in many dictionaries; still it gets used in the exceptional case. But most conversations and writings eschew it.

I thought a lot about this problem over the last few months as I heard and saw the repetition—in print and in sound—of what I think is the most frequent mistake in English grammar today: failure to have a personal pronoun agree with its antecedent noun in number (or gender).

The list of examples in the sidebar is purely illustrative—and collected in a matter of a couple of days without actually searching the subject. And they come not from uneducated or unsophisticated people. In fact, rarely a day passes that I do not hear on television or read in newspapers or magazines or see in my mail blatant examples of this error. It gets on my nerves.

The Associated Press Stylebook says, “Never alter quotations even to correct minor grammatical errors or word usage. Casual minor tongue slips may be removed by using ellipses but even that should be done with extreme caution.” That raises several questions: Is disagreement in number between noun and pronoun “minor”? Or is it a slip of the tongue? Who decides? When?

Alternatively, the writer could stay away from direct quotations and say, “Sam Collins said that his team doesn’t make any effort.” Problem solved, but the reporter has to be able to recognize that there is an error.

The more I think about these situations, the more I ask myself whether it is time for us to change what we consider acceptable. This is the question: If more and more people are using it, should we (or shouldn’t we) change the rules to keep up with the times—and the common usage? If many educated people—

ARNOLD MELNICK recently retired as executive vice chancellor and provost of the Health Professions Division of Nova Southeastern University. He is a columnist for the Journal of the American Medical Writers Association and enjoys further forays into his lifelong interest—writing and editing.
including writers, editors, advertising people, and politicians—are doing this daily, maybe it is time for a change. Has the time come for modification of the grammar rules—or acceptance by general consensus?

Here’s the dilemma. If so many people use this “incorrect” construction, especially in speech but also frequently in writing, should we consider it no longer an error? Should we classify it as a colloquialism (which position “ain’t” now occupies) that makes half the population shudder while the other half uses it regularly? What are we to do with essays in school (if they get reviewed for grammar)? What is to become of careful editing?

Several options are open to us:
- The easiest approach would be to do nothing and continue to burn up inside at each exposure. Hardly acceptable.
- Set up a Grammar Police to call this mistake to attention every time it is made, and try to enforce proper grammar. Also hardly acceptable.
- Have some “official” body notify every publication (newspaper and magazine), advertising agency, radio station, and TV outlet of the mistakes being made and the proper form. Once more, this is hardly acceptable and probably impossible and impractical.
- Accept a modification of the rules.

So, we are between a rock and a hard place. We are damned if we do and damned if we don’t. Are we ready for a change? Are we ready to concede?

Maybe the answer to this current “abuse” is for us purists (I am not a purist, merely obsessive-compulsive!) to do both: accept it (grudgingly) as a common but shoddy speech pattern in today’s world and also look to writers to modify the statements they quote.

I do not know any exact answers to the problem, but this I do know: In either case, I am going to sit and burn—and burn—and burn!

**References**