Frank's Writing Tips and Bachelor Cookbook: On Good Grammar

I speak two languages. One much better than the other, to be sure, but I can get by quite well in both. It's a tough thing, speaking a language that you didn't grow up with, because you don't have that same familiarity, that same almost preternatural sense of what means what in any given context. You find this out best if you try to translate something from one language to another. You'd think it'd be a simple matter of finding out what word corresponds to what other word and sticking them together, but that's not at all the case; order matters, context matters, word choice matters because connotation matters, and so on. Knowing a language is not just knowing the words and how to put them together, it's knowing how the speakers of that language think.

Languages have a set of rules, you see, a set of regulations on how things should be said in order to convey a certain meaning. Some languages are a lot more loose in this regard, and others more strict. Mandarin Chinese, I've been told, has roughly 5000 words in it. This is the basic set, and complexity is gained by putting the individual pieces of this set together in different ways. Bing = ice. Bao = rain. Bingbao = hail.

That's pretty magical to my ear, but unfortunately, I'm a native speaker of modern English, one of the most unintuitive, bastardized, and word-happy languages on the planet. Chinese has 5000 words, English has almost a million. Many of these words have multiple meanings. There is an individual word in English for nearly every concept imaginable. To throw someone out of a window is to 'defenestrate' him. A personage of pretentious authority is 'panjandrum'. The liquid discharge from a chronically inflamed bodily orifice is known as 'gleet'. The latter, incidentally, also refers to a mucoidal substance found in a hawk's throat. And a horse's nasal discharge. Lovely word, isn't it?

So why exactly does English have so many words? Well, that's a bit of a historical question I don't have the knowledge offhand to answer, but I can tell you what the effect is: precision. Exactitude, perhaps. The ability to convey ideas as you mean to convey them, without fear of misinterpretation. There's a conlang this fellow developed, called Ithkuil, which got the interest of a group of Russian philosophers who felt it was the key to a truer expansion of the mind and faster thinking. Its grammar and writing system include ways to incorporate every subtlety of feeling and emotion you could ever wish to apply to any concept you like. But English, with all its horrendous complexity of vocabulary, is actually sort of like Ithkuil Lite, and that's what makes it a special language. In my opinion.

But, you see, and as you've guessed from the title of this article, the words themselves aren't the whole story. All those little marks that go with the words, those things you probably hate because you had a teacher long ago make you feel bad for not understanding how to use them or what they were for: commas, colons, semi-colons, periods, quotation marks, parentheses, apostrophes. The unfortunate fact is, along with an extensive vocabulary, those little marks are all important in their own ways too, and if you do want to be clear, you have to learn how to properly use them. Concepts like adjectives, adverbs, nouns, prepositions, subjects, objects: you can't

consistently construct proper sentences without knowing what these things are and why they exist.

So, okay. Why am I even bringing this up? Well, it may just be hearsay (a very Chinese looking word, that), but grammar is something it seems like people constantly overlook, something they brush off. Someone will ask for a critique and offhandedly remark "Oh, don't worry about grammar-checking; I have a friend who does that for me!" Seems innocent enough, right? But that kind of thing irks me to no end. You don't understand grammar well enough to check it yourself? How are you a writer, then? How are you able to form sentences that can be read and understood? How can you even think you're capable of doing something as advanced as generating images or emotions or sensations in a reader if you don't even understand what it is that you're putting on the page at that most basic of levels, the rules governing the construction of sentences?

You get it?

Being a writer without being fluent in grammar is like being a physicist without knowing algebra. It's like being a composer and not knowing how to read sheet music. Like, seriously, guys.

Okay, okay. I'm getting a little too panjandrum in my language here. There's a counter-argument to this, and that is that writing, being an artform, is open to interpretation surrounding every aspect of it, including the fundamentals of the language one is writing in (or if you want to be Latin about it, 'in which one is writing'). This is a perfectly valid point. I make no argument on this.

The problem is how people interpret this point. You see, in my experience, this idea often attracts this sort of hippie mentality, this concept that the only important thing is to 'express yourself' and that 'expressing yourself' somehow precludes knowing the nitty gritty details of your craft. Just put emotion into it, just reach for the heart, and people will understand! People will *feel* you, man, they'll get it.

Well... yeah. No. They won't. They'll feel something, I guess, but they sure as sunrise won't get it.

Let me be straight for a minute, here, because I realize I'm getting forceful in my tone. People make mistakes all the time, and I have no problem with that. I bet you can find mistakes in this very piece I've written. These are brain glitches, small lapses in concentration or memory that affect us all because we are physical lifeforms that evolved through a somewhat chaotic process involving the motions of atoms and molecules, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, cosmic rays, ultraviolet photons, thermal energy, and radiation. Mistakes are unavoidable, and so hating on someone for making a mistake is like hating on someone for being born with a cleft palette. What annoys me so much is not that; it's the folks who make a conscious choice not the learn in the first place.

There's this misconception, I feel, regarding grammar and its relation to art. People like Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner used to break rules all the time, and regardless of how this was taken back when they were alive, now they're mostly

praised for it. And so you as a budding writer learn this fact, and it puts this idea into your head, this aforementioned hippie notion about feelings and emotion and whatever other hoo-hah you want to use to describe it and to justify it. But you fail to understand something, something that's sitting on a bit deeper of a level than you decided to delve when you formed this opinion, and that is that these authors broke the rules *on purpose.*

Yes. When established, intelligent authors break the rules, they're doing it on purpose. They are not like the ignorant hippies. They know the rules just fine. They just choose not to follow them. You see, there's this other form of writing you might know, which I believe is called 'poetry', and it often involves some of the most egregiously bad grammar you can possible conceive of. Poets don't even print whole sentences on the same line most of the time, or use punctuation or sometimes even capitalization. Basic things, things you learn are proper and good right after you've finished learning the alphabet. But if you've never thought of it before, why do you suppose folks who write otherwise perfectly coherent and correct long works and novels like, say, Victor Hugo, when writing their poetry will smash the rules of language to pieces?

The answer is, because they know exactly what they're doing. They know the rules, why they exist, and, *therefore*, how to manipulate them to their advantage. How to Ithkuil-ize the English language, or any other language.

It's real easy to fall into this particular trap, but you have to understand that to get that feeling, man, to reach those hearts, requires knowing how to manipulate the language. Right? It's not hard to just say words in order. It's even easier to say a lot of words without much order. You know the guy with the sandwich board who stands in the grassy median on a busy street yammering on about morality and judgment and the end of the world? He's got a great deal of emotion; he's pouring it out, trying to drown the streets and alleys with it. But how often when passing him by do you stop and listen intently to what he's saying? And then how often do you find yourself connecting with him? Yeah. Think about it.

But now think about this: what if he had a speech writer?

You ever hear of a guy named Pat Robertson?

When you're a car mechanic, you need to understand how the car works before you can start trying to improve it. When you are a writer, you need to understand the language you're writing in before you can improve it. Parallel ideas here. When you understand the mechanics of the language, you can start to manipulate them, start to use them to precisely convey an idea, an emotion, an atmosphere, a mood. People often love to hate on grammar, but to be clear, this is one of the joys of writing, one of the things that makes it art and not mathematics: the act of playing around the rules to create new meanings, new emotions, double-entendres, puns, all of those great and clever things. Here's a famous example, for those of you who've never seen it:

Mysogyny: "Woman without her man is nothing."

Feminism: "Woman: without her, man is nothing."

Same sentence, different punctuation, completely reverses the meaning. Isn't that cute? You read that and you smile, because you see how those two little marks operate on a sentence, how easy it is to play with peoples' perceptions and expectations. If you didn't know grammar, you wouldn't ever be able to produce sentences like that, and your writing would be stupid boring to read.

That's pretty much it.

Let me finish by saying that I do understand that grammar is hard, and that not everyone can pick it up with ease. Again, I speak two languages, so I've had to deal with this crap twice already. I get it. It takes a lot of work, more for some than for others. I haven't completely mastered it myself, and what's acceptable is mutable over time and from region to region.

But, seriously, do your best, would you? Put in some effort and get it done to whatever ability you can. Don't let your friend tell you what you really mean to say.

Recipe #2: **Frank's Autumnlicious Stuffed Acorn Squash**
Preparation time, around an hour
Ingredients:

1 acorn squash
~1/4 package Kashi pilaf, or something similar (brown rice is fine)
1 apple, sliced and chopped
~2 teaspoons butter
~2 teaspoons brown sugar

Prepare the pilaf according to the instructions (i.e. pour it into boiling water and walk away for 30 minutes). Cut the squash in half and remove the guts, then bake for around 20 minutes at around 400 degrees (F: that's 205 C). Take the squash out of the oven and fill the core with pilaf and chopped apple, then top each half with sugar and butter. Stick it back in the oven until the squash is soft, easily piercable with a fork. Then eat that son of a bitch.
Serves 1 or 2. You can either eat it right out of the rind or dig the squash meat and filling into a bowl and eat it separately. Goes great with warm apple cider on a cold day. I'm sure you could add cinnamon or nutmeg or something like that to it if you wanted.