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FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Cartoons and Pronoun Trouble

In a relatively famous linguistic exchange, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and Elmer Fudd are trying to determine who is going to be shot. First, the question of whether it's duck season or rabbit season has to be answered. Second, Elmer has to suffer through a barrage of claims and counter-claims in which Bugs and Daffy try to avoid being Elmer's target.

Although I couldn't find a copy of this video, I believe it is Chuck Jones's "Rabbit Seasoning" (1952), and the premise is very similar to 1951's "Rabbit Fire," which I was able to rent on video. At any rate, the situation goes something like this. While Bugs and Daffy argue about which season it is (duck or rabbit), Elmer looks on, dressed in his hunting camouflage and carrying his shotgun. The following dialogue is approximate. Bugs first addresses Elmer:

Bugs: Would you like to shoot me now or wait till you get home?

Daffy: Shoot him now! Shoot him now!

Bugs: You stay out of this. He doesn't have to shoot you now.

Eventually, Daffy says to Elmer, "I demand that you shoot me now!" KABLAM! Elmer obliges Daffy's request. Of course, this isn't exactly how Daffy wanted the negotiation to

end. So as smoke rises off of him and he readjusts his bill, he suggests to Bugs that they run through that conversation again. Bugs agrees, and they proceed to review their previous exchange in very business-like tones:

Bugs: Would you like to shoot me now or wait till you get home?

Daffy: Shoot him now. Shoot him now.

Bugs: You stay out of this. He doesn't have to shoot you now.

Daffy: A-HA! Pronoun trouble.

The reason Bugs is able to focus Elmer's attention onto Daffy is that he changes perspective. The meaning of the pronouns "you" and "me" are fluid — they can mean someone different each time they're used. In fact, they are usually understandable only if everyone knows who the speaker and hearer are. So when Bugs changes the expected "He doesn't have to shoot me now" to "He doesn't have to shoot you now," Daffy, swept into an emotional fit, isn't able to correct the perspective and ends up getting shot a number of times throughout the cartoon.

Why all the fuss? Well, even though most pronouns are some of the shortest words we have in English, they are also some of the most frequently used. There are personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, indefinite pronouns, interrogative pronouns, and relative pronouns. And even though Daffy's lesson about pronoun usage was a hard one for him to learn, most of the time we have no difficulties at all using the right pronoun in the right situation.

However, even outside of cartoon land there

are some moments of egregious pronoun shift. For example, in first-year college composition classes, when writers are beginning to think seriously about the process of writing, freshmen regularly confuse the he/she perspective with the you perspective. Grammatically, this is called a shift in person, from he/she (3rd person) to you (2nd person). But it isn't just inexperienced writers who get mixed up; even famous people shift pronoun perspective. Stevie Nicks notoriously changes pronouns in some of her songs, as illustrated in this excerpt from her 1983 hit "Stand Back":

*No one knows how I feel
What I say unless you read between my lines
One man walked away from me
First he took my hand...take me home
Stand back...stand back
In the middle of my room
I did not hear from you.*

It's hard to know exactly who she's talking to/about, but because it's music and because it's poetry, we don't have too much trouble figuring out that the words man and him and you all refer to the same person. Even with this significant shift in perspective, we can still understand what Stevie's singing about.

Many prescriptivist grammarians will tell us that any funny business with pronouns is destined to cause insoluble problems. Recently, I read an article by James Kirkpatrick, a syndicated columnist who writes about language use. In that column, Kirkpatrick discusses pronoun agreement. Specifically, he doesn't like the following sentence, which he quoted from the *Washington Post*: "...nearly every staff writer removed their name from articles appearing in the newspaper."

According to prescriptive grammar, writers and speakers must maintain proper perspective with pronoun use by adhering to agreement in person, number, gender and case. In other words, if a pronoun is referring to a woman other than the speaker or hearer, that pronoun should be third person, singular, feminine and either subject, object or possessive case. For instance, if we're talking about Mary, then each of the following sentences would exhibit "correct" pronominal usage:

She donated part of the lottery prize to several local charities. (subject case)

Local charities received substantial donations from her. (object case)

Her generosity was noted by the leaders of local charities. (possessive case)

The complaint that Kirkpatrick makes is that writer and their do not agree in number; writer is singular and their is plural, so Kirkpatrick claims the use of their is incorrect, or at least aesthetically revolting.

Another example of pronoun trouble is the dreaded everybody/their conundrum: Everybody brought their own beverage to the party. According to prescriptivist tradition, everybody is grammatically singular and therefore any other pronoun referring to everybody should also be singular. What many prescriptivists forget, though, is that even when an utterance fails to meet their grammatical standards, the meaning of the utterance can be absolutely unambiguous. Even though everybody is grammatically singular, I think most people understand it to mean plural.

The prescriptively correct version of the above sentence is "Everybody brought his own beverage to the party." But the pronoun his only refers to males. (Prescriptivists sometimes disagree and say that he refers to both males and females. However, linguistic research has shown otherwise; this use of the pronoun he excludes women and is therefore sexist.)

So what is a conscientious English speaker/writer supposed to do? I would suggest that we pay full attention to the environment we find ourselves in. Almost all situations allow everybody/their constructions. The exceptions might be documents written for a formal or semiformal audience, like the boss, the teacher, the president, etc.

And unlike Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny, who were unable to reach a consensus about which pronouns to use, everybody else can make up their own mind about it.