

Study indicates bad grammar wigs us out

Written by By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
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It's science — hearing bad grammar raises our stress levels. I always knew this implicitly, but a recent study from the University of Birmingham shows this explicitly.

In a small sample of 41 British English-speaking adults, researchers played speech samples to the subjects, half of which featured grammatical errors. The subjects, connected to heart rate monitors, showed a decrease in heart rate variability and an increase in heart rate. These two indicators reveal stress in the nervous system — a fight-or-flight response to egregious grammatical gaffes.

I've always maintained that good grammar makes your life better regarding career and relationship success, but now I'm comfortable going one step further by declaring good grammar also makes you healthier. True, there's probably a large overlap between word nerds and people who shop at Whole Foods, but the Birmingham crew hasn't yet measured that phenomenon.

We're also told regular dentist visits and steady exercise lead to healthier lives, but that doesn't mean we do it. Just because someone tells me kale is good for me doesn't mean I'm going to eat it. So, is there a way to convince people to improve their English language skills?

Unfortunately, the answer is “probably not.” You can lead a horse to water, as they say, but you can't make him stop dangling his modifiers. If a watched pot falls in a forest, the grass isn't necessarily greener for whom the bell tolls. Or something like that.

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Yet, even a wince at «This needs washed» is a tiny tremor in the earthquake of bad grammar. Each slip-up, each misplaced «who,» each forgotten comma chips away at the foundation of our shared language. If my biology classes in high school taught me anything, it's that survival of the fittest includes developing your muscles into Arnold Schwarzenegger-level behemoths — and your brain is a muscle!

So, while we may not force-feed everyone a thesaurus, we can at least acknowledge the subtle stress of a misplaced comma. We can celebrate the elegance of a well-turned phrase and the clarity of a concise sentence. Because for good grammar to truly prevail, it takes a village — a conscious, comma-loving, apostrophe-appreciating village. It's time to give our mental lexicons the workout they deserve for the sake of our sanity, our shared language and, perhaps, even our heart rates.

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