

To what extent does our grasp of grammar affect our chance of romance?

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Grammar

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matter

on a

first

date.



I recently broke up with a girlfriend because she misused an apostrophe. Yes, I know it's not a capital offence to write *two bottle's of wine* in an email, but this minor grammatical blunder irked me just enough to pull out of that night's barbeque. Some relationships break down because one partner is too possessive; ours ended because the two bottles were not.

Obviously this was not the only slip-up that this girl (let's call her Je's'sica) made during our brief relationship, but the 'bottles incident', as I now call it, was the straw that broke the camel's back. There was a *your/you're* episode in a love letter that left me loveless, there were double negatives crammed into conversations that turned me right off, and there were countless text messages strewn with errors that, in hindsight, were probably written deliberately to wind me up. Basically, the relationship was destined to fail because I care about grammar and she, it seems, CUDNT CARELESS.

I didn't care so much when I was a teenager. Growing up in a coal-mining community in the north of England, it was difficult enough to find a girl who could speak in full sentences, let alone in grammatically correct ones. I took what I could get, and this often meant me putting up with clauses enclosed by *like* and *intit* in the hope of copping a feel behind the bus shelter. In those days, the most desirable quality in a girl was not her grasp of grammar; it was her willingness to go behind bus shelters.

But then came university in the south of England where I was surrounded by young women who could construct sentences without fillers. They all spoke properly, like BBC newsreaders, and they all mocked my Northern knack of truncating the *to* and omitting the definite article in sentences about me *going t' pub*. Suddenly it was my grammar that was under the spotlight, and I knew that I would have to pick up my game if I hoped to attract such sophisticates.

So I went t' library and buried myself in a big book of grammar with a penguin on it, studying all the things that my middle school English teacher would probably have taught me had she not always been popping out for fags during lessons. I learnt about subjunctives, superlatives, conditionals and participles. I studied predicates, prepositions, pronouns and proper nouns. I learnt so much about language that I was able to crawl confidently from my study cocoon and proudly unfold my grammatical wings. I even learnt how to create butterfly-related metaphors, albeit clichéd ones.

But this new-found knowledge didn't get me laid. In fact, it probably had the opposite effect. I became convinced that everyone could benefit from my wisdom and I thought nothing of pointing out where pretty girls had wrongly used adjectives instead of adverbs. I honestly thought I was helping; they genuinely thought I was a dickhead. We were both right. But my chance of romance was slipping faster than Australian school standards, and I had to learn to keep my mouth more shut, more often. My crusade had come to an end.

It seems that it is not possible to point out grammatical gaffes and still expect to sleep with the person who made them. Having good grammar is sexy, but the highlighting of others' mistakes is a passion-killer, a cold shower on any conversation. People like to be told how smart they are, not that *for all intensive purposes* is a malapropism. No-one likes to be told that *fastly* is not a word; if they really cared, they would have figured it out by now.

So what do language pedants like you and me do if we want to be loved? (I am assuming that you are a pedant since you have read this far into the article; everyone else stopped reading after missing the

clever word play at the end of the first paragraph.) Do we just let our partners get away with syntactical murder? No, we do not. We explain to them that our grammatical nitpicking is a symptom of an obscure mental illness. We tell them that grammatical mistakes bring on anxiety attacks in us. We tell them that if they truly loved us, they would stop using *could of* in third conditional sentences. We do not drop our standards; we help them to raise theirs.

Je's'sica, however, had more problems raising her standards than she did the hem of her skirt, and it was with great regret that I had to end it. Yes, she had great legs, an angelic face, and at least two bottles of wine, but these things were only going to take her so far; a grammar geek like me wants all the boxes ticked. She sent me a text message after we broke up, after I told her that it was me and not her, after I lied about me not being ready for another serious relationship. ITS A SHAME WE CUD OF BIN GUD 2GTHR. X. Yes, I did the right thing.

Mark Butler will be performing his new comedy show *Grammar Don't Matter on a First Date* at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. Find out more by visiting www.funnymark.com



A comedy show for all those who have broken up over a misused apostrophe

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