

On the Democratization of Typography

by Gunnar Swanson

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The clerk snapped at Degarmo's back like a terrier.

"One moment, please. Whom did you wish to see?"

Degarmo spun on his heel and looked at me wonderingly. "Did he say 'whom'?"

"Yeah, but don't hit him," I said. "There is such a word."

Degarmo licked his lips. "I knew there was," he said. "I often wondered where they kept it."

—Raymond Chandler, *Lady in the Lake*

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HAS CHANGED over the last few hundred years. It used to be highly inflected (with nouns changing depending on what part they played in a sentence) like German, Latin, or its closer relative, Old Icelandic. The remaining inflections (such as who/whom) seem to be passing rapidly. Our less-inflected language isn't as good for writing Skaldic poetry as Old Icelandic but it's more convenient for other kinds of communication. We don't think of it as debased; it's just different.

The problem with rules of language use is defining right and wrong during a transition. Usage that may be proper in the future is considered wrong today. The common pattern is that a usage is dead wrong, then an irritatingly common mistake, then common usage that indicates how everything is going to hell in a handbasket,

then normal, then absolutely right. A similar situation applies to the visual presentation of language. Spelling, punctuation, and the aesthetics of reading have, like spoken language, changed due to the communication needs of language users.

It would be easy enough to write about the ill effects of the “democratization” of type. There is no doubt that we have seen the standards of typography eroded by non typographers’ use of computers and, before that, rub-on type. In the long run we will not think of this as debasement; it will just be different.

Language changes because it is used by people. People are imperfect. They make mistakes. Sometimes they find out that the mistake didn’t matter. Sometimes they never know they made a mistake. Sometimes they learn from people who make mistakes. People also have different communication needs. What works in an academic journal fails in a basketball game or a singles’ bar. People (philosophy professors, street gang members, or graphic designers) adapt language to their particular needs. Typographic usage has, until recent years, been relatively conservative. Type was, after all, created and used by a much narrower range of people than was spoken language. That range is widening; one can only expect change in usage to accelerate.

What will be the result of that change? Like other language shifts, some of it will be good, some bad, and, in the long run, it will all be just different. Will common usage make tick marks replace “real” quotation marks or will more sophisticated software leave such typewriter traditions as an obscure historical footnote only remembered by guys who can tell you exactly when imported French type caused the thorn to be replaced by a Y in English typography? Will a range of tones similar to speech replace the relatively flat look of set type? Will the interrobang have its day? Will those obnoxious little happy faces that appear in email to aid the humor impaired show up in books and journals? Whomever this last idea disgusts—and I’m one of them—may have to get used to it.

“Did he use an em dash”

“Don’t hit him--there is such a punctuation mark” ;-)

“I knew there was. I often wondered where they kept it” :-)

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