

LANGUAGE USE SOMETIMES AIN'T ELEGANT

Second Thoughts

By J. B. Leftwich, Columnist

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Errors in grammar in a couple of comic strips recently prompted response by readers of a Nashville newspaper and, in turn, response to the response.

One writer, reacting to criticism of the use of the word "ain't," quoted the late Dizzy Dean, one of the all-time great baseball pitchers and later a radio and television commentator. Said Dizzy: "Some people who ain't saying 'ain't' ain't eatin'."

At the time Diz made his immortal remark, one could have said, probably with a higher degree of accuracy: "Some people who aren't saying 'aren't,' aren't eating."

I loved old Diz, and I don't want to sound critical. During his tenure with the St. Louis Cardinals, I was an ardent fan. But if Dizzy had made as many errors on the playing field as he did in grammar, his tenure never would have begun. Dizzy Dean made use of errors in grammar a fine art. This was his trade mark. But if other television and radio personalities had copied his act, the practice would have become annoying. Diz was unique.

Calling on Old Diz as a reference in use of the language would have equated well with calling on me as an authority on baseball. (Let's see now, is right field on the pitcher's right or on the catcher's right? From a logical standpoint, right field must be on the pitcher's right since the fielders face in the same direction as the pitcher. Right?)

One wonders how much truth is in Dizzy's statement about the word "ain't?" Wonder if a survey was conducted by some data gathering agency, with an error margin of 4 percent, which showed 16 percent of the population who didn't use the word was hungry? Wonder if the survey showed the eating frequency of people who didn't use "aren't?"

In truth, "ain't" has crept into the language. The language evolves. New words appearing in dictionaries include: No-brainer, ditz, Mulligan, slimeball, upside and wifty. (My computer spelling program beeped at all except two of these words.)

"Aint," along with many other superfluous words, is here to stay. Its meaning is perfectly clear. Ain't nobody gonna misunderstand "ain't." My parents, who were fairly well educated for the time, used it in conversation. So did most of the people in the neighborhood. But neither parent would use "ain't" in his or her written language. Just as I did in this paragraph, I occasionally use it to make a point.

The fact of life is, you are branded by the language you use. A junior executive in a corporation would delete "ain't" from his or her vocabulary. Ministers seldom use

“ain’t” in a sermon. Politicians are very discrete about uttering it, at least without implied quotation marks. Still, in specific levels, its use flourishes. The trick is in determining the sophistication of an audience.

The elegance of the language is eroded by the introduction and the use of such words, but perhaps a majority of the population cares not a flip for language elegance. Indeed, the purpose of language is communication. “Ain’t” conveys an idea as well as “aren’t” or “Isn’t.”

But the conveyance is not as pretty.

*I was saddened by the death of former First Lady Pat Nixon. I thought her loyalty to her husband in times of travail, her poise and her dignity clothed her in an aura few can hope to attain.

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