

Linguistic Salvation

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Sometimes loony ideas become so pervasive, addictive, and endemic that people forget they represent anything other than the way things should be. Seen in a broad perspective, recent examples include America's belief in the inevitable future of the Cold War, our trust in banks, and our faith in the purity of our air, water, and food. If we are not to surrender all responsibility and free will, when the loony and the wrong displace the sane and proper then we all have some obligation to intervene. However, as decades of work with habitual addicts has shown, such interventions must be attempted cautiously and tactfully. Over time, successful approaches have been developed and are now widely used.

It is perhaps time to adopt these tactics to another problem which, in its rapid spread and easy acceptance, threatens the very foundations of our sanity. That problem is the prevalence of linguistic laziness, manifested in the widespread practice of constructing sentences from common but empty phrases borrowed from the mass media. Like intellectual viruses, catch phrases periodically infect the entire population and corrupt the native speech. Fortunately, most of these infestations are temporary, and after everyone has sufficiently heard and repeated the magic phrase of the moment, such as "Where's the beef?" or "Turning slowly in the wind," immunity sets in, the phrase loses its power to infect our minds, and gradually it disappears.

Unfortunately, some of these phrases seem particularly resistant to our rational antibodies and establish themselves in the language, threatening to break into our dictionaries as permanent language artifacts. Current resistant phrases are "at this point in time" and "hopefully." Both have been frequently and rightfully identified for their respective problems: one is hollow and redundant, the other awkward and inevitably misused. And yet we continue to hear them incessantly.

Until now, that is, because for the first time an appropriate intervention strategy for countering linguistic barbarism has been discovered. If this intervention strategy—which we are about to reveal—is adopted and used widely, like an antiviral serum, it can help eradicate these phrases. If this strategy is successful other phrases can be targeted, using the same intervention, until people

eventually will learn to state their thoughts directly, unmediated and unfiltered through the idiom of advertisers and television comedies. And, at that point I dare predict America's much heralded basic skills crisis will suddenly disappear.

Therefore, the next time you hear someone say "At this point in time," in any usage, or "Hopefully" to mean "I hope," gently but firmly intervene as follows. Your efforts will be appreciated and when the next great American poet appears, he or she will truly be able to say "I hear America singing" without resorting to earplugs.

"Sometimes phrases like the one you just spoke (repeat the phrase here) come into your mind as a result of things going on outside your conscious control. We all hear phrases spoken by politicians or sung by animated fruits in television advertisements, and we then hear them repeated by talk show guest hosts. It probably seems easy and clever to interject the phrases into our own conversations even if they don't make any sense, and even if by using them we keep ourselves from thinking about what we mean. Now this may not be true in your case, and it's really none of my business. However, it is true sometimes, and each of us is responsible for the language we speak, more so than we ever imagined. This is because, dear friend, it has been revealed to me that the good Lord has created a Linguistic Salvation Scorecard in your name. This scorecard is free to you and it's confidential. In fact, you don't have to do anything except pay attention to how you speak and listen to the speech of others around you.

"Here's how it works. Every time you use a phrase like the one you just spoke (repeat the phrase here) a negative mark will be entered on your Linguistic Salvation Scorecard. But every time you hear someone else repeat that phrase and you speak up or call to complain or write a letter pointing out the inappropriateness of that usage, a positive mark will be entered on your Linguistic Salvation Scorecard. Then, at the end of your life when you show up at the pearly gates, this scorecard will be one of the factors determining whether you will enter Heaven. We can't guarantee that a positive score on your Linguistic Salvation Scorecard will get you into Heaven, but we have heard that anyone there saying "At this point in time" is immediately banished. Feel free to use this information however you wish. May you think and speak clearly for now and for all eternity."