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Grammar Freaks Really Are Strange

Dennis Baron · Thursday, July 19th, 2012

It used to be we thought that people who went around correcting other people's grammar were just plain annoying. Now there's evidence they are actually ill, suffering from a type of obsessive-compulsive disorder/oppositional defiant disorder (OCD/ODD). Researchers are calling it Grammatical Pedantry Syndrome, or GPS.

Maybe you've heard of the grammar gene—its technical name is the FOXP2 gene—which may be responsible for a variety of grammatical ills, such as the inability to construct compound/complex sentences or to effectively deploy the passive voice. Now there's evidence that a variant of that gene, FOXP2.1, may actually cause us to obsessively correct other people's grammar, or should that be, *to correct their grammar obsessively*? The discovery of this gene, alongside new evidence from fMRI scans of brains exposed to real-time grammatical errors, has led some scientists to predict that soon we may be able to find a cure for GPS, for many sufferers a debilitating, off-putting, sociopathic syndrome.

At least that's the conclusion of two researchers writing in the current issue of the *Journal of Syntactic Cognition*. A team led by L. Malevich and H. D. Lo studied the fMRIs of self-identified grammar sticklers as they were exposed to a variety of solecisms ranging from split infinitives and sentence-final prepositions to phrases like *between you and I* and *apple's \$2.49 a bag*.

The fMRIs of the language purists showed markers of brain activity also commonly observed in OCD/ODD patients, along with several surprises: Wernicke's and Broca's areas, the parts of the brain associated with language, were actually smaller, or exhibited reduced activity, in grammar sticklers and language purists, than in normal subjects. DNA analysis showed they also had a higher likelihood of having the FOXP2.1 gene than the general population (Len Malevich, Hi Ding Lo, et al., "Correlation of instances of grammatical pedantry with the expression and suppression of an underlying FOXP2.1 gene" *JSynCog* 34.3: 1135-39).



fMRI scans of normal and GPS brains, from the Journal of Syntactic Cognition, used by permission.

Malevich and Lo found, paradoxically, that compulsive correctors of other people's grammar had smaller Broca's and Wernicke's areas, or their brain language centers exhibited reduced activity when shown grammatical errors, compared with a control group having a more relaxed attitude

toward language correctness (see image above). In contrast, nonpurists, lacking FOXP2.1, showed increased activity in those same cerebro-cortical regions, and a significant number of control-group participants showed particularly strong fMRI evidence of language activity when texting. “We expected just the opposite,” Malevich told reporters at last month’s annual Symposium on Syntactic Therapy in Toronto. “After all, texting is usually seen as signaling decreased morphosyntactic competence. We don’t know what this data means.” And then he added, “or is it, what these data mean?”

According to Malevich, identification of an underlying physiological basis for this alienating disorder could eventually lead to curative stem-cell treatment plus, in the near term, the development of pharmacological palliatives. There’s even a push to add GPS to the DSM-5, the latest edition of the standard catalogue of psychological disorders, scheduled for publication in 2013.

Malevich and Lo, as well as other cognitive syntacticians, are convinced that classifying linguistic purists and grammatical pedants as obsessive-compulsive could go a long way toward explaining why a group of people so convinced that they are right can be regarded by the rest of us as, well, a bit off. Interpreting the data, Malevich concludes, “grammar rules feed the desire of OCD sufferers to impose normative order on language that seems to them to be out of control,” and those exhibiting oppositional defiant disorder “revel in their ability to flout social conventions and correct other people’s language even when it is perceived to be rude or insensitive to do so.” “Or,” he asked, “are they flaunting those conventions?”

On a more positive note, the authors suggest that strict adherence to grammar rules is a safety valve for GPS sufferers, helping them avoid full-blown OCD/ODD episodes: “If you mark out sentence-final prepositions with a red pen and regularly change the passive voice to active, that’s more socially acceptable than repetitive hand washing, the incessant touching of doorknobs and parking meters, or refusing to step on sidewalk cracks.”

Pathologizing correctness in grammar may not win over all of those who are symptomatic. After all, the purists are convinced that they’re the ones rooting out the language ills of others. Bob Lowth, founder and president of the Society for the Propagation of Pure English (SPoPE), strongly objects to this kind of medicalization of grammatical correction. “It’s bad English that’s sick, not correcting it,” Lowth complained. “I suppose the next thing is that workers will want health insurance coverage for their misplaced modifiers.”

But with the shuttering in recent years of many of our mental health facilities, and an increased focus on patients’ rights, more and more compulsive grammar correctors are roaming our streets unchecked. GPS goes a long way towards finding, explaining, and helping us deal with, their obsession with enforcing on the hapless public an idiosyncratic and often undertheorized idea of what’s right or wrong in speech and writing. If defining this kind of intrusive purism as a psychological syndrome helps us find a cure, then ultimately both society, and language itself, stands to benefit. Or is it that they stand to benefit?

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