Mostly about pronouns

On manipulations of grammar.

The pronoun wars have been raging around us for at least five or six years now. Like so many toxic developments, this sickness was incubated in the university. We began to take notice when the celebrated Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson fell afoul of the pronoun police at his own institution. He became a public pariah and was almost ejected from the school, but was in effect rescued by the extraordinary success of his self-help book Twelve Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos.

The malady quickly spread, however. Back in 2018, we had occasion to note how the pronoun wars had infected Williams College, always a reliable litmus paper for academic fatuousness, and since then the practice of people “declaring” their pronouns and making up ever more extravagant alternatives for the usual vocables (he, his, she, hers, etc.) has spread far and wide. A couple years ago, the metastasis looked complete, with employees at many businesses—especially “soft” ones like publishing and anything to do with the arts, media, or education—routinely including their “preferred” pronouns in the signature block of their correspondence. The nadir came when the Biden administration added a menu of pronoun choices to the White House website and announced that government employees would be encouraged to pick their own pronouns. Earlier this autumn, the State Department issued an enthusiastic tweet about a glorious new holiday: “International Pronouns Day.”

So it was really only business as usual to discover that Columbia University has issued an instructional video called “Why Pronouns Matter.” It is very brief, but also very, if unintentionally, funny. In some accompanying text, the magi at Columbia inform their readers that “Asking for and using correct pronouns is a way to respect those around you.”

We agree with that. Using correct grammar in general is a way of showing respect, for oneself as well as for those around you. With that in mind, we propose to offer a brief lesson in grammar. We turn first to the rest of that sentence. In addition to “showing respect,” we read that using the correct pronouns is a way to “create an inclusive environment for people of all genders and gender expressions.”

There are several things wrong with this clause. We can leave the psychobabbly bit about creating
an “inclusive environment” to one side. The real problem involves what your grammar teacher called “number.” When we are talking about the sexes (what this text calls “genders”) there are only two, male and female. Therefore, that part of the clause should read “both genders.”

Again, we are all for using the “correct pronouns.” It is actually pretty straightforward. A pronoun is a substitute for a noun or noun phrase. In English, pronouns have number and gender. Agreement in number and gender is essential if one wants to be correct, as the Columbia primer suggests that it does. “James has his own ticket” and “Mary has hers.” “All men love their own children” but “Everyone has his own ideas” (not “their,” it should go without saying, because “everyone” is singular and in standard, i.e., correct, English, the masculine singular is preferred in such cases). You see how it works.

What about “ze/zir/zirs,” “zhe/zher/zhers,” and all the other exotic graphemes that have been put forward as possible pronouns? That’s an easy one. The Columbia primer offers to instruct us about using the “correct pronouns”—to which we say that “ze,” “zir,” and the rest are not correct, or even pronouns. How about this line from the video? “I’m Sen, and I use all pronouns.” Let us draw a veil.

Of course, the real prize in the pronoun wars is not correct grammar but the display of power and exertion of control. Lewis Carroll’s character Humpty Dumpty demonstrated what was at stake in his famous exchange with Alice:

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’ ” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’ ”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’ ” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Our pronoun warriors, and their enablers in the ambient bureaucracy, are a lot like Humpty Dumpty. Not only are they habitually contemptuous of those around them, they are also willfully perverse in their arrogant repudiation of reality. Moreover, alas, they are destined to come a cropper on the heels of their own arrogance. We predict that the fatal fall will happen soon and, as in the original story, will present “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men” with an unsalvageable mess. That is OK, though, because it is time that those calling for the “reform” or “revitalization” of the university face up to the fact that higher education cannot be reformed. It
must be replaced, the fragments of the old dispensation merely tided up and secured in some safe spot for the transition.