

ST. JOSEPH'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS), BENGALURU - 27
III SEMESTER BA/ BSc/ BSW (REGULAR)
MID SEMESTER EXAMINATION – AUGUST 2019
GE : 313 - GENERAL ENGLISH

Time: 90 mins

Max. Marks: 30

Note: You are allowed to use a dictionary

I. Read the following excerpt taken from the article, "Why the English-speaking 'desi' elite should stop pretending to be grammar Nazis", by Sanghamitra Baruah published in Dailyo.

The possible ways in which a seemingly trivial typographical or grammatical error can impact our lives are perhaps immeasurable — sometimes to the extent of making it a matter of life and death.

Recently, the Delhi High Court pointed out "errors of syntax, semantics and spellings" in a portion of an FIR filed in July. The FIR, against corporal punishment in a Kendriya Vidyalaya, was registered at North Avenue police station in the National Capital, on July 3, wherein "stick" became "stich", 'traumatised' was spelt as "taimaliezed", and "threatening" become "treating". The high court said: "Let it be brought to the notice of the DCP concerned for action as may be deemed appropriate."

Following the court's observations, New Delhi Deputy Commissioner of Police Madhur Verma has directed all station house officers in his district to check spellings and minimise other errors while filing FIRs.

It's true that such errors, which, at times, are unavoidable, may lead to not just miscommunication, but grave consequences — costing people their jobs, access to social benefits and protection, identity, citizenship and even, life at times.

In a case of bad legal grammar, dating back to 1984, a defendant "appealed a district attorney's burglary indictment, stating that it didn't charge him with anything because it contained bad grammar". This had happened in Mississippi, USA.

Part of the indictment read: "The Grand Jurors for the State of Mississippi, ... upon their oaths present: That Jacob Henderson ... on the 15th day of May, A.D., 1982. The store building there situated, the property of Metro Auto Painting, Inc., ... in which store building was kept for sale or use valuable things, to-wit: goods, ware and merchandise unlawfully, feloniously and burglariously did break and enter, with intent the goods, wares and merchandise of said Metro Auto Painting then and there being in said store building unlawfully, feloniously and then and there being in said store building burglariously to take, steal and carry away..."

The defendant presented an English teacher as an expert witness who testified that "when read consistent with accepted rules of English grammar, the indictment did not charge the defendant

with doing anything; rather it charged that goods, ware and merchandise broke and entered the paint store".

The trial judge, overruling the objection and the motion, observed: "It is very poor English. It is impossible English... Even Shakespeare could not understand the grammatical construction of this indictment."

So, basically good legal writing needs adherence to the rules of grammar. Documents should be written in "complete sentences, have subjects and verbs that agree with one another and contain properly placed modifiers".

Poor grammar, misspellings and overused jargon more often than not can result in various kinds of emergency situations, especially in the case of medical records and legal notifications. What exactly is a person trying to say with "sprinkling of words" passed off as sentences? Yes, it's not always a physician's bad handwriting but also an assessment of health reports and the language used to describe health conditions that can create panic. Sub-editors in Indian newsrooms often complain about job-threatening incomprehensible reports/articles/columns sent to them for "line editing".

But such "hard truths cut both ways".

While the above-mentioned situations demand immediate grammatical attention, there are several examples of the "grammar police" intervening unnecessarily, sometimes taking it to a whole different level.

It has become very common for self-proclaimed grammar police — who, for some strange reason, take great pride in calling themselves grammar Nazis — to interrupt/bully/humiliate friends, family and co-workers for spelling and syntax errors, or both, especially when it comes to the English language.

Indians love pointing out grammatical and typographical mistakes made in everyday English.

While such errors can easily create confusion and obscure meanings, thereby the intended message, for the "neo-grammar Nazis" in India, there is no bigger crime than "poor English". Many often make it a point to specifically mention this on their social media profiles, curriculum vitae as well as matrimonial profiles — how absolutely/strictly/totally allergic they are to errors in everyday English — more often than not using the word 'typo' to mean all kinds of errors, from deliberate to genuine grammatical mistakes.

The "sword of Damocles" hanging over your head gets sharper when the grammar police also happens to be someone influential, because influential people always have the power to change language. While a grammar errorist is accused of "polluting the language", the same contamination is passed off as "clever puns" and honoured as "coinage" when spread by influencers.

Of course, new words can be coined, but those words don't necessarily have to come out of the classist, elitist "wordsmith". Grammatical elitism doesn't have to socially exclude and shame others who are less "English" than them. For all you know, on most occasions these "municipality schoolwallahs" who get your "oh-so-convent-English" goat are not trying to match up to your elitism, but just doing their best to earn a livelihood by appealing to your senses in the language you understand — English...

I.A. Answer the following questions in about 150-175 words. (3 x 10 = 30)

1. A survey conducted by Landmark Bookstores in Delhi shares that wrong grammar become reason enough for one to unfollow someone on social media. What is your opinion about the grammar policing that happens in the society?
2. "The "sword of Damocles" hanging over your head gets sharper when the grammar police also happens to be someone influential, because influential people always have the power to change language." Who is the influencer in the above line? How do they have the power to change language? Elaborate by giving examples.
3. "... good legal writing needs adherence to the rules of grammar." Is good grammar the only requirement for good legal writing? How comprehensible are legal and medical documents in India? Comment.