

Writers espouse return to grammar but without tears

Justine Ferrari, Education writer | May 26, 2009

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SURVIVORS of school grammar classes support teaching traditional grammar under the national curriculum but not in the traditional way, which censored change rather than taught students how language worked.

Writers who teach grammar to professionals and bureaucrats sitting on a panel discussion about grammar at the Sydney Writers Festival argued old-school grammar adopted a moralistic approach, under which a split infinitive became a moral failing.

Plain English Foundation executive director Neil James said old-school grammar took a "rigid, dull, moralistic approach to language learning that fortunately fell out of favour three decades ago".

"The problem was, we threw the rest of grammar out with it, and ever since we've been turning out graduates with little understanding of the mechanics of English," he said.

"(It) tended to conflate grammar and usage and taught overly simplistic rules ... and too often censored change of any kind. It was a prescriptive grammar and made it clear that any deviation from accepted usage was seen as a sign of moral failing."

The forum, sponsored by the Plain English Foundation, was moderated by English Teachers Association of NSW executive officer Eva Gold, who said her introductory comments were aimed at dispelling some furphies about grammar, the first being that it was not taught in schools.

"It is," she said. "It thoroughly permeates the NSW English curriculum documents as 'language forms and features and structures of texts' and is dealt with by teachers in the close study of texts that students read, write, speak, listen to, view and represent (that is, which students compose and to which they respond)," she said.

But founding member of The Chaser turned novelist Dominic Knight told the 300-strong crowd that as a student at an elite Sydney boys school, he learnt no grammar in English, only in Latin.

"Like all products of the education system in the 1980s and 90s, I didn't do any formal study of grammar," Knight said.

"In fact my parents probably could have sued Sydney Grammar School for false advertising."

Knight said his speech was intended to be humorous rather than a serious reflection of his views. "I was joking about it being unnecessary for people who SMS and want to truncate everything," he said.

"My actual opinion is that there's a problem ... people I work with all the time are frustrated because they can't work out the right form of a sentence.

"(Ms Gold's) view was that it's taught by another means but I'm not sure that's true. I'm not sure there's any particular systematic approach to studying good writing and bad writing."

In his speech, Mr James applauded the re-elevation of grammar to the school curriculum but warned against repeating the mistakes of the past, saying the biggest crime of old-school grammar was that it was "drop-dead boring".

"It was rote learning without understanding," he said.

While lawyer and novelist Michael Meehan described old-school grammar as the "disciplinary hub" of the school, with beatings administered to students who failed to memorise their irregular verb, he said grammar was a necessary survival skill in the modern world.

"We are all using language in more and more complex forms ... and we need the technical vocabulary to discuss the way meaning is made," Meehan said.