

Friday, February 13, 2004

Constitutional amendment a federal issue, not national

Setting aside for the moment his complete lack of understanding of U.S. government and politics, let us examine Tim Dreier's basic component arguments against the national government's imposition of a Constitutional amendment strictly defining marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman ("Feds should not regulate marriage," ODE, Feb. 2). (And yes, Timothy, I'm starting this response out by indicating your insatiable lack of comprehension by correcting your erroneous error of assuming that the national government is somehow the "federal" government. Don't forget that the "federal" government is defined as the combination of the national, state, and local governments inclusively).

Let us first examine his proposition that to pass the Federal Marriage Amendment would somehow "undermine" federalism. However seductive and entertaining a thought that might be for Jarrett White and those of his ilk who look back on the Confederacy as some beacon of light in a smoke-filled, poorly lit room at the seedy basement of a strip club, it bears no basis in reality or fact. Indeed, federalism as the founders of this country understood it disappeared rather suddenly with the adoption of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments and the subsequent limitations placed on state sovereignty.

GUEST COMMENTARY

That being stated, we next move Dreier's assertion that Article IV's "full faith and credit" application simply cannot be construed as to require States to recognize other states' gay marriages. And on what do you base this supposition on? Relying on Supreme Court precedent is at best unavailing, as no actual case-law exists in this matter, and lest we forget the time-honored lessons of history that you so disingenuously insist upon, some of the greatest Supreme Court decisions handed down have relied not upon the sacredness of stare decisis, as you would hope, but rather upon lone dissents and far less. Or have you forgotten that Brown was decided not on established case-law, but rather on the lone dissent of the first Justice Harlan from Plessy?

Relying on the argument that history is not in the corner of the national government playing a part in the institution of marriage is untenable as well. Or have you forgotten again that Utah's admission to the Union was conditional not upon economic or governmental changes, but rather upon the dropping of polygamy as a legal practice. I simply cannot believe that someone who asserts so forcefully as you have a self-proclaimed knowledge of history and government forms and functions could be so utterly lacking in actual knowledge. All in all, this is an issue that must in the end be decided, one way or the other, and I assure you all that the first time that gay couple married in Massachusetts can compel the State of Kansas to recognize its marriage, the conflict will indeed spill into the political battlefield, and the war will be an ugly one. But I suppose we can always turn to Mr. Dreier for solace when that day arrives, now can't we?

Scott Austin lives in Eugene.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

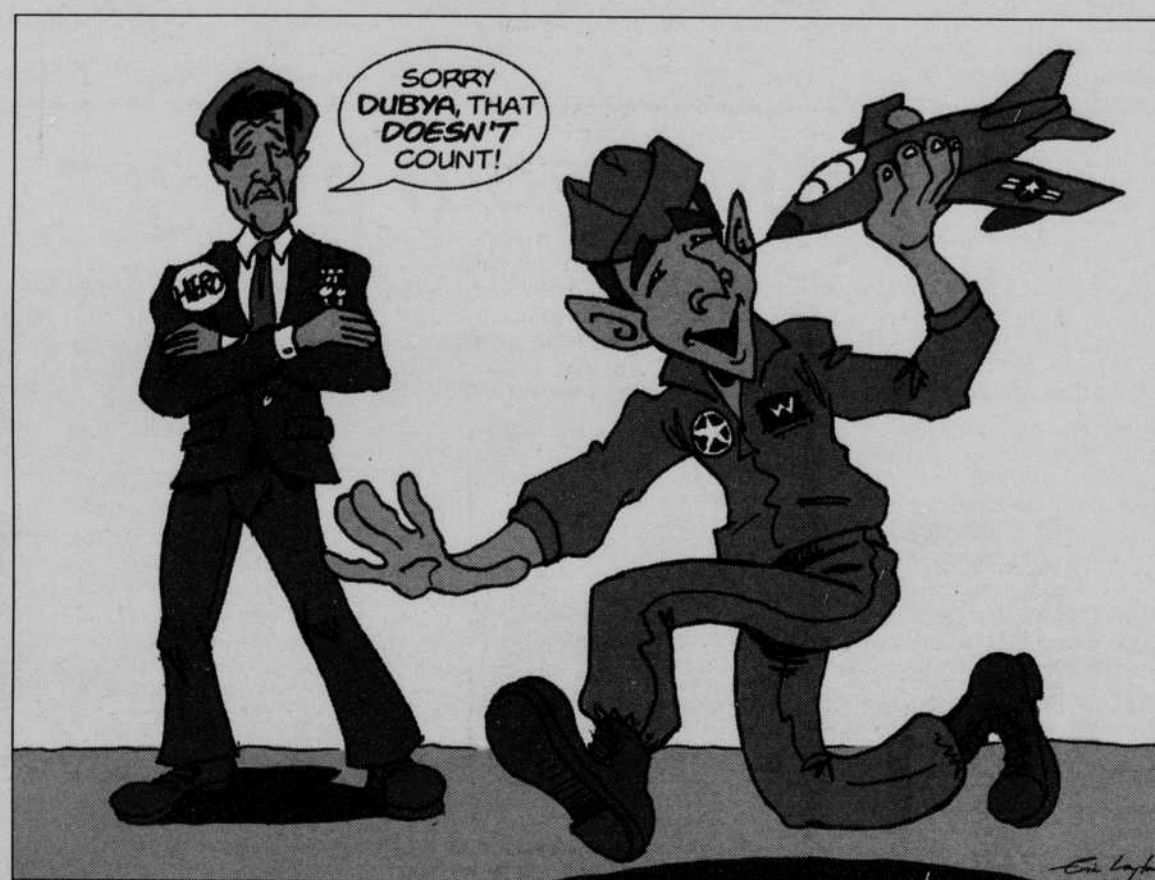
Textbook costs too high to be considered affordable

I am very pleased that you have covered the topic of high textbook prices. I, like thousands of students at the University and like millions of students throughout the U.S., am appalled by the staggering prices of textbooks. Just last quarter I paid \$300 on textbooks for only three classes, and I will only be able to reuse one of the books I purchased in later classes.

I am frustrated by new additions with seemingly minute changes and extra cassettes and CD-ROMs that skyrocket the cost and are frequently unused. Something needs to be done. This is supposed to be a public institution that anyone can attend, but how can anyone afford these outrageous costs?

OSPIRG is working on a campaign to ease the textbook crises. OSPIRG and other groups should be supported in the goal to make textbooks affordable.

Morgan McFadden
 sophomore
 pre-psychology



Eric Layton Illustration

Plural pandemonium

Ah, the English language. It's an intricate tangle of more than 100,000 living words, a robust, flexible syntax, a healthy battery of rules, and has more exceptions than you can dangle a participle at.

Wait — this is one of those confounded grammar columns, isn't it? No, it isn't. Well, maybe a little. But I'm not writing here to talk about why every writer should follow obscure rules all the time. More important and interesting is that writers (and people in general) know the rules, and how people use words and apply the rules that govern them in order to better communicate with each other. George Orwell recalled this point in his brilliant and only mildly pretentious essay, "Politics and the English Language."

"Our civilization is decadent and our language — so the argument runs — must inevitably share in the general collapse," he wrote in the essay. "It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes."

By the way, did you catch that? At the end of the lead paragraph. I ended a sentence with a preposition. Just two sentences into the piece and I'd already committed a blunder so egregious that even greenhorn English graduates are wincing.

But rules are meant to be broken, as any fourth-grader with a football indoors on a rainy day could tell you. After all, a tongue-tying linguistic abortion such as "... and more exceptions than those at which one could dangle a participle" will probably bounce off your pars opercularis as soon as you read it — about the time you stop caring and turn to the sports page.

No one in a street brawl demands, "For whom is this can of whoop-ass?" In the less-than-seminal French action flick "The Transporter," Jason Statham didn't triumphantly proclaim of his fallen enemy, "He did not know with whom he was fucking." The point is, rules can and should be broken, when the moment calls for it. Unfortunately, too many

people seem not to know when those moments are.

Whether by a poor copywriting decision or simple ignorance, signs in Bath & Body Works uselessly ask hapless Valentine's Day shoppers, "Who do you love?" rather than the more elegant (and correct) "Whom?"

Countless ads and billboards confuse the singular possessive (the grammarians'), the plural possessive (the grammarians') and the plural (the grammarians). Worse, distinguishing between its (third person gender-neutral possessive pronoun) and it's (the contraction of "it is") is becoming more arcanum than application.



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The real distinction here should be between knowing violation and simple ignorance of rules.

Aside from the above, wrong pluralization ranks among the commonest offenses and is probably among the most important things to learn. In defense of English speakers, irregular pluralization is probably harder than in most other languages. While some languages have a smattering of different plural suffixes, not one of them is particularly dominant. In English, however, most words take a simple -s or -es suffix, with the occasional -y to -ies (penny, pennies) and -f(e) to -ves (wolf, wolves) rules. Thanks to English's bipolar history and the readiness with which it absorbs foreign words (and often plurals formed by foreign rules), the lexis has accrued a long litany of exceptions. Ox changes to oxen and woman to women (Old English); larva goes to larvae, genus to genera,

matrix to matrices, nucleus to nuclei and ovum to ova (Latin); virtuoso to virtuosi (Italian); cherub to cherubim (Hebrew) and schema to schemata (Greek).

Learning important Latin plurals is especially troublesome in this world of higher education. On the first day of each term, you'll collect several syllabi, letting your friends and you compare collegiate curricula. While doing research to support your hypotheses, you might start by thumbing through a few indices. Administrators in Johnson Hall might shuffle around memoranda about addenda and errata to the minutes for the meeting about enrollment data.

With all of this linguistic flotsam bobbing around, it's amazing more linguistics graduate students don't develop neuroses while writing their theses.

Pluralizing nouns whose modifiers follow them can be just as bad, but at least the rules are learned easily enough. Attorneys and postmasters general can order Whoppers Junior while passersby — who are, incidentally, playing their Game Boys Advance — might favor Tacos Supreme.

The point of all this? Learning grammatical rules is more important than most people think, but knowingly give it credit for. (See, I did it again.) Just as important is understanding that learning a system as convoluted as the web of English grammatical rules and their exceptions is probably a lifelong process. I certainly might have missed a few subtle slips in this column.

As for how you can write better, at the end of his essay, Orwell lists six general rules for clear writing. The final and most important rule mandates, "Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

And clear (but not outright barbarous) communication is probably a goal upon which we can all agree.

Contact the editorial editor at traviswillse@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.