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The Language of My Father

Dustin Grinnell

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, my father and two of his friends got lost during a long motorcycle ride in Mexico. When his friends stopped to study maps of the area, my father made a gut decision and led them down an unknown road. His instinct turned out to be wrong, and they ended up backtracking. According to my father's friends, on motorcycle trips like this one, he is mistaken about nine times out of ten.

In matters of navigation, my father likes to believe he has a superior sense of direction because he's part Native American. Given this claim of heritage—for which there is little evidence—and the fact that his gut decisions during motorcycle rides are often wrong, his friends nicknamed him Tonto, after the fictional Native American companion in the TV show *The Lone Ranger*. In Spanish, *tonto* means “fool.”

As a general contractor in a small town in New Hampshire, my father has spent the last three decades as a self-employed contractor—doing every kind of construction project: from roofs to interior renovations, from single-room remodels to full houses. In the last few years, he's found a niche in building custom homes. The process involves working with an architect to design a house, build it on land he's bought, and then find buyers with his veteran realtor. It's called speculative housebuilding because the project is carried out before a buyer is found. It's a risky business, especially in an uncertain economy, but my father has done it several times and plans to do more.

After my father has built a home on spec, prospective buyers can contact his realtor, who puts them in contact with my father. My father is quick to arrange a meeting with the clients at the house—oftentimes on the same day, sometimes within the same hour. The sixty-year-old builder displays adept conversational skills when meeting with clients. No one would call him eloquent, but he's well-spoken. He's polite, listens attentively, and responds respectfully. No

hard sell. He charms without trying, giving off an air of nonchalance. And when the economy is strong, people buy his spec houses.

At one point, however, a deal fell through after a client had “lost faith” in him. Trying to understand what might’ve happened, I asked my father to tell me the story. It wasn’t until we dissected my father’s written communications that I realized what had caused the deal to fail. The emails he had sent weren’t just poorly written; they were incomprehensible.

To illustrate my father’s written style, here’s an email he sent to a friend, in which he discusses where they could potentially find land to buy.

“doesn’t matter 2 much.what about water.what about that place over by the squam lake.by the birdie place.it overhangs the water.has a bowling alley.it;s near the foreign car place.113 and 3 mayb toward ashland”

To read an email from my father is to read a long string of symbols barely recognizable as letters, words, and sentences. As you can see, the prose is a series of thoughts jumbled into disjointed sentence fragments. It uses incorrect punctuation and grammar, and misspellings are rampant. Few breaks are provided by commas or spacing after periods. In short, my father’s emails are gobbledygook.

After receiving emails such as these, the same friends who nicknamed my father Tonto coined a name for his writing style: Tontonese. The language of Tontonese lacks due diligence. When an important thought enters my father’s brain, he grabs his laptop or phone, types within an email until he’s exhausted the thought and presses send. He doesn’t double-check to make sure what he’s written is comprehensible. He doesn’t edit or proofread. He thinks it, types it, and fires it off.

One might think that writing emails in Tontonese is a benign quirk, the somewhat amusing trait of a baby boomer with anti-technology tendencies. But this language has serious consequences in business dealings. On the job site, clients meet a friendly, sociable man, yet his emails look like they’re written by a kindergartener. Tontonese strains his credibility. The clients my father charms in person question his intelligence, not to mention his construction skills, after receiving his indecipherable emails.

In the following email, my father writes to his friend about mountain biking. What he's trying to get at, though, is anyone's guess.

"i got there they had left.i was there at 10 till 6.John said it was 5:30. talk 2 him about his bike.we could meet him.i am going 2 try and slip a ride in this afternoon.tc may go.time will depend on the Jackson folks.haven't heard bak from them.i e mailed them yesterday aft.i ride a santa cruz blur carbon.my last bike was a blur lt.they are a smoking bike.do u no of 1 for sale?i will bring my puta.i may have time 2 ck today"

After some reflection, I realized the first major problem with Tontonese is that there's no Rosetta Stone for this language, so clients, friends, and family who receive my father's messages often can't understand his point. The biggest issue, however, is that my father's friendly nature—his charm, his *humanity*—are lost in translation.

This was all the more frustrating because as a full-time copywriter, my emails are well-crafted and almost always error-free. With a decade of experience, I've developed a kind of meta-consciousness, where everything I write is simultaneously evaluated through the lens of my imagined reader: Is that sentence clear? Do I need more or less? Do I even need that sentence? Before sending any written communication, I check it several times. Call me neurotic, but I want to communicate clearly. A reader has to decipher tiny symbols on a screen or page; I want to make their job as easy as possible. Right or wrong, I think that using language to communicate effectively reflects on intelligence and thoughtfulness, and I wish to make a favorable impression. And yes, I care about language and cringe when I see my father treating it with the same delicacy a lion uses when its devouring its lunch.

I decided to stage an intervention, thinking I might prevent future business dealings from falling through. I recommended that my father stop emailing clients and conduct all his business dealings where he flourishes: in person or over the phone. One language dies out every fourteen days, according to *National Geographic* magazine; I told my father that Tontonese must go extinct.

Alas, my words fell on deaf ears and he continued writing emails in Tontonese. He told me that dashing off an email in Tontonese saves

time compared to picking up the phone or arranging an in-person meeting. If a job requires an excavator and my father knows one who could start the next morning, why not quickly relay that through an email? And why fancy up the language with periods and commas when sentence fragments should get his message across? My father's been self-employed for thirty years, with enough demand to cover his expenses and keep food on the table. If a client doesn't want him to build their home because of his emails? "Who cares," he likes to say. And, without further thought, he moves on.

Eventually, I stopped hassling my father about his emails, because I accepted that he'll never take the time to learn even the most basic tenets of grammar. I doubt he'll read through an email before hitting send. While often bewildered, most folks who receive my father's emails eventually accept that Tontonese doesn't reflect his intelligence or his competence as a builder. Self-employed and extremely busy, he's just more interested in building than spending time talking about building. For better or worse, Tontonese is his mother tongue. And while he may be Tonto, my father is no fool.