

The Baseball Subjunctive

By Jonathan Tiemann

One way native speakers of any language distinguish themselves from even the best-trained foreign learners of their language is through a subtle system of situational styles and usages. We learn in school to write essays according to the strict conventions of Standard English, but even in the first year of high school thoughtful teachers will remind their students, as Mrs. Hay told my ninth-grade English class, “You may break any rule you like, so long as you do it effectively!”



Even in formal settings, the topic, audience, and circumstances determine how we use language. In conversation we often speak in sentence fragments, and no one objects. In fact, sometimes a rigid insistence on complete sentences can seem stilted or affected. An orator delivering a formal address will typically adhere to Standard English, but effective, formal speakers do not sound as though they are reading written texts. Speakers often use figures of speech that would seem odd in writing. For example, alliteration may appear peculiar on the printed page, but in speech it can tickle an audience whose attention is beginning to wander.

Our language is so rich that it gives us modes of expression with very narrow applications. An “Earthling” is always an inhabitant of Earth in a science fiction story; the word is not suitable in any other setting, unless the intent is to make a subtle reference to science fiction. A “tot” is a small child, but only tabloid newspaper headlines call small children “tots.” Editors use the word for the simple reasons that it is symmetric and short.

The English language even has special-purpose tenses and moods. My favorite example is what I call the “Baseball Subjunctive.” One of the great pleasures of baseball as a spectator sport is the opportunity it creates for speculating on the counterfactual. Suppose, for instance, that a runner from third attempts to score on a shallow fly ball, but is out in a close play at home plate. Suppose further that the runner tries to score standing, rather than sliding. Fans watching the game would then naturally discuss whether sliding would have made a difference. In Standard English, using we might say, “If he had slid, he probably would have been safe.” This would be a correct use of the subjunctive in Standard English. In the Baseball Subjunctive, however, we say, “If he slides, he probably makes it.”

The Baseball Subjunctive construction sounds natural, knowledgeable. The Standard construction sounds stilted. Some few great writers and announcers could describe the game in Standard English and excel the rest of us. But those few — Vin Scully, Ring Lardner, Roger Angell — possessed the gift of poetry. The very best, the most poetic, A. Bartlett Giamatti, showed how it was done, describing a home run during a desperate, but ultimately failed, attempt by the Red Sox to reach the post-season:

“*Now comes a pinch hitter, Bernie Carbo, onetime Rookie of the Year, erratic, quick, a shade too handsome, so laid-back he is always, in his soul, stretched out in the tall grass, one arm under his head, watching the clouds and laughing; now he looks over some low stuff unworthy of him and then, uncoiling, sends one out, straight on a rising line, over the center-field wall, no cheap Fenway shot, but all of it, the physics as elegant as the arc the ball describes.*¹”

Even Giamatti, though, makes skillful — poetic, really — use of a special-purpose form of expression, one from the law. “Now comes a pinch hitter” — “Now comes” is the opening phrase of a type of legal pleading in which one of the parties in a case appears before the Court for one of the formal purposes of the proceedings, just as Carbo appeared at the plate to plead for the Red Sox with his bat. The legal formalism mirrors the formal structure of the game, and simultaneously contrasts with Giamatti’s description of Carbo himself. After all, a baseball game has a formal structure, but it is not a court case. Giamatti’s deliberately, deliciously run-on sentence also expresses Carbo’s contribution to the Red Sox’ fans’ hope that their team would win and the season would last a while longer. He ends that sentence with an appeal to another strict formalism, physics, bracketing the human, the emotional, the athletic, with the formal. Just like baseball. In the next sentence, a contrast again: “New England is on its feet, roaring.”

¹ A Great And Glorious Game, Baseball Writings by A. Bartlett Giamatti, 1998



Speech coaches counsel public speakers to use humor in their talks if they have the knack for making people laugh, but to avoid humor if they don't. In a similar way, most of us should stay with the casual language of baseball when we talk about the game. Mike Krukow and Duane Kuiper, broadcasters for the San Francisco Giants, are brilliant at it. They don't lard their descriptions of a game with baseball expressions; they simply describe the game in lively baseball language. Jon Miller, in contrast, tries to describe the game in Standard English. The trouble is that he is no poet. His knowledge and love of the game are unimpeachable, but he can sound prissy and stilted.

The rest of us can take a lesson from Krukow, Kuiper, Miller, Giamatti, and the rest. In any area of life that has its own language and mode of expression, being able to talk about it effectively in any other manner of speaking — including in Standard English — requires special talent. If we stick to baseball language, we sound better at a baseball game.

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