

## The Modern Tower of Babel

by Marilyn Reeves

In ancient times, as people separated from one another and migrated to the far reaches of the earth, the usage of a once common language evolved over time into separate and distinct iterations as used by each individual group. In Europe, the various Romance languages of Italian, French, Portuguese and Spanish were the result of the influence of other languages spoken by those who intermixed with the Latin speaking people who settled in each region.

English developed as a conglomeration of words influenced by Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon and Germanic languages, with a few others thrown into the mix as well.

I happen to love languages, especially English, which once had a set of rules and regulations that are currently in the process of being broken down. While I feel that I have retained a reasonably good grasp on the proper use of English, I am also guilty of knowingly breaking many of those rules, and unknowingly breaking still others. Why does it matter?

From back in the days when I attended Sunday School, I recall – if somewhat vaguely – a story about the Tower of Babel. I believe the gist of the story had to do with how well people can work together and get along when they understand one another, and how confusion, misunderstanding and mistrust can occur when people can no longer communicate.

Not only has our language suffered from the Americanization of the King's English, but such modern influences as the deliberate misspelling of words by advertisers, and the shortcuts and abbreviations employed with our modern modes of communication, such as text messaging, have brought our society to the point of simply casting aside all rules of language and leaving the usage of words to the whim of the individual. Pity the poor person from a foreign land trying to learn English as a second language! Does the instructor simply say, on the first day of class, "Relax! There are no longer any rules. Make up your own. Make up your own words, for that matter"?

Punctuation has also gone by the wayside, except for those few brave souls who are making a last-ditch effort to salvage it. You may be familiar with the efforts of Lynn Truss, who wrote a best-seller called "Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance to Punctuation" based on the following story:

A panda goes into a café, orders a sandwich, eats it, takes out a revolver, fires it into the air, and goes out. When the waiter chases him down to ask what is going on, the panda hands him a badly punctuated wildlife manual and growls: "Look me up." The waiter finds the entry: "PANDA. Large, black-and-white, bear-like mammal native to China. Eats (comma), shoots and leaves."

So you see, the appropriate use of language – even proper punctuation – does make a difference after all.