

I think a lot about words—both spoken and written. It seems to me that our reactions to how other people speak and write are both varied and personal. How we grew up, where we live, the speech patterns of people around us—all of this has an influence on how we perceive speech and written compositions.

We reveal much about ourselves when we speak or write. If someone tells me that she has to hurry home to do the chores, I am quite sure she is a farmer. “Chores” can mean tasks of any kind, of course, but to most of us rural dwellers, the term implies going to the barn and taking care of livestock. If I hear from someone that he has a big pile of rocks out in the field, I can be quite sure that the individual making the statement didn’t grow up in this rural area. We have stone piles, not rock piles. And when we remove them from worked up fields, we “pick stones,” we do not “pick rocks.”

People native to this area—unless under thirty, when all rules fail—put a chunk, stick, block, or even piece of wood on the fire. “Logs” aren’t firewood; they are destined for the sawmill.

A milk pail is never a milk bucket. In fact, the use of the word “bucket” was quite unusual in our area until recent decades. We had sap pails, carried water to the chickens in a pail, and picked wild fruit in a berry pail.

A creek is a “crick.” Lake Olga is “Olgie.” Aspen trees are “popples.” A steer, bull, calf, or heifer is not a “cow.” A cow is a female of the species that has calved.

Then, too, there are the sayings that seem like fingernails on a blackboard. All of us have experienced hearing phrases that are particularly annoying. These aren’t the same for all of us. One could say that they are in the “pet peeve” classification.

Perhaps, being of Scandinavian descent makes me more noticeably bothered by overstatement. If every talented person is “amazing,” what do we have left for something that is truly worthy of amazement. And a dessert that “is to die for,” as the saying goes, certainly can’t be. Why can’t we tone down our descriptions a little? And awesome? Not so very many things deserve this designation.

The overuse of certain terms and ways of speaking and writing change as time goes on. Right now, one can read over and over some variation of this statement: “The weather was very cold. Until it wasn’t.” Or, “Everything went according to plan. Until it didn’t.” This has become an increasingly popular device of writers during the past few years. I have read it again and again in all kinds of newer books.

I don’t pretend to speak with perfect grammar. But, still, some common mistakes are still grating. It bothers me to hear “I seen” or “he done” or “they haven’t went.” But, one error I heard years ago tops them all. It wasn’t because I had never heard that misuse before. It was, instead, particularly noticeable because the speaker had graduated at or near the top of her high school class, and the person she was addressing was her former English teacher, a man of exceptional teaching skill. What she said was something like this: “Me and my brother were arguing about “....some point of grammatical

usage , and she was enlisting the aid of an expert to straighten her brother out. The teacher answered her question, not correcting the young woman's own incorrect grammar. I am not so sure I would have been that kind.