

How to make your professor cringe

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, 5 – 7 January 2011

Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

mark.mercer@smu.ca

“What are your issues?” “We had some issues with the plumbing.” “An issue we had interpreting the instructions slowed us down.”

Before the late 1990s, people would have asked what are your concerns or what's bothering you. They would have said they had some problems with the plumbing. They would have explained that a difficulty they had interpreting the instructions slowed them down.

A concern, a bother, a problem, a difficulty—similar and overlapping, yes, but with shades of difference a speaker concerned to be precise would be keen to respect. Now each is simply an issue.

An issue didn't used to be just any old problem. An issue was a problem of a specific kind. An issue was a problem about which there was controversy. That is, a problem wasn't an issue unless there were two opinions about its solution. Actually, the problem wasn't the issue, the controversy itself was.

A blocked drain is merely a problem. Only if there are two incompatible suggestions regarding how to clear it is there an issue. The issue is whether using a solvent or using a plunger will clear it best. The issue is the intellectual problem raised by the physical problem of the blocked drain. The issue, the intellectual problem, is which competing view is the true one. At least that's how it was fifteen years ago.

The shift in meaning of “issue” from intellectual problem, the problem of figuring out which proposed solution is best, to any old problem, bother, concern, or difficulty constitutes a loss in the expressive power of our vernacular. We've lost the ability to mark a distinction quickly and easily just by the words we choose.

The same thing happened a few years earlier to “impact.” An impact used to be a specific kind of effect. An impact was the effect produced when something struck something else forcefully, when it ploughed into it. An impact, or its sign, was a crater, or a hole, or twisted and melted iron.

The difference between “the effect of gamma rays on man-in-the-moon marigolds” and “the impact of gamma rays on man-in-the-moon marigolds” was the difference between not knowing what will happen and staring at smouldering vegetable debris.

Back then, “impact” could be used to conjure an image. “The impact of these policies on the poor...,” one would read. One would imagine an asteroid smashing into the needy.

Nowadays, “impact” means only what “effect” does. Where we once had genus and species, now we have two different words for the genus.

It's currently happening to "refute." "Refute" seems to be coming to mean nothing other than "deny." To refute a claim is, of course, to deny it, but it's to deny it while showing conclusively that it is false. (Philosophical sceptics deny that any claim ever made has ever been refuted, at least as far as anyone knows.)

"The reason Sally is late is because she had car trouble." "The reason is because" became standard in the mid-nineties, though it appeared decades earlier.

"The reason Sally is late is that she had car trouble" is how people used to express the claim. The problem with using "because" instead of "that" is that the concept "because" includes the concept "cause," just as the concept "reason" does. "The reason is because," then, involves a strange doubling of causes.

It's hard to think just what, literally, "the reason is because" means. "Is because" means "has as its cause." "The reason Sally is late is because she had car trouble" means, then, taken literally, "the reason Sally is late has as its cause that Sally had car trouble." This is a sentence about the cause of the cause of Sally's lateness.

Not all changes in the ways people talk are unfortunate or worth resisting. Occasionally a change is for the better. Most changes, probably, don't either help or hurt our ability to say precisely and fluently whatever's on our mind.

Some changes, though, deplete our linguistic resources. "Impact," "issue," and "refute" each used to denote a species within a genus; nowadays, many people use them to mean exactly what the genus term means.

Other changes pry the literal meanings of our words apart from our purposes in speaking them. This is the case with "the reason is because." When a person says "the reason is because," her words mean something other than what she means by speaking them. This would be confusing were we not ready to understand her to be using an idiom, a figure of speech. Speaking in idioms, though, is often at least inelegant, especially when one does so in ignorance.

"I refute the fact that Sally's reason for being late is because of the negative impact of her issues with her car." If you ever want to make your professor cringe, say something like that to her.