

# Gambit

## Open Letter to Nero Wolfe

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12 August 2002

Dear Mr. Wolfe:

I'm sure that you recall the day you burned your copy of *Webster's New International Dictionary*. It was the same morning (Lincoln's Birthday, 1962) that you took on the case of the poisoning in the Gambit Club. Thanks to your Watson, Mr. Archie Goodwin, burning that dictionary has become possibly the most famous event of your life.

The specific offense that you cited was that *infer* was allowed as a synonym for *imply*. Frankly, I was surprised to read this. *Infer* and *imply* obviously have different meanings, so I looked them up in my own dictionary, and was surprised again: You were right. One of the definitions of *infer* was "to imply." How could this be?

But to return to the burning of the dictionary:

You, Mr. Wolfe, with your fascination with words, know that it's in the nature of language to change. You also know that the rate at which a language changes reflects the rate at which its speakers change. When people "move" -- geographically, culturally, or technologically -- their language "moves," too. When I in college, I was trying to learn Old English (don't ask why -- I don't remember). One of my friends was from Iceland. One day he picked up an Old English text that I had lying around and began to read it out loud -- first in the original language, then in modern English. I was amazed. I asked why an Icelander would learn Old English, and he said he hadn't -- he was reading Icelandic. A thousand years ago his ancestors and (linguistically) mine spoke the same Germanic language, that we call Old English. In England, it evolved into modern English. But in Iceland, where there's been little change or upheaval, it's remained little changed over all these centuries. Although he did admit that Old English "sounded a little archaic" (you know, for being ten centuries old).

A living, spoken language cannot be held static. The French have tried to do this by restricting editions of their dictionary. But while they've kept the written language "pure," the spoken language has been evolving on its own path. All that their meddling has produced is a language where many words are no longer spelled as they are pronounced.

You live, Mr. Wolfe, in a city at a time of rapid cultural and technological change. You can only expect the language to be changing, too. And why is that wrong? Why is the English of the future worse than the English you speak today? For that matter, why is the English that you speak today better than the English of a hundred years ago? Why is *today's* English that must be preserved?

Meanings of words change over time. The word *hero* once meant a coward. Who's to say that today's meaning is an improvement? (Or isn't?) You object to using *contact* as a verb, but nouns often evolve into verbs. Some linguists believe that the modern noun *Jazz* was a bawdy verb a hundred years ago.

And what about that word, *infer*? The principle difference between *infer* and *imply* is that the former is done by the listener, while the latter is done by the speaker. But in Shakespeare's time *infer* also meant something done by the speaker -- not to imply, but to argue forcefully, as in these words spoken by Henry VI, in the play: "Full well hath Clifford played the orator,/ Inferring arguments of mighty force." So even the meaning of *infer* is not sacred.

Having said all this, Mr. Wolfe, I must admit that I am infected with your point of view. I never use

"contact" as a verb. Once, many years ago, a supervisor told me to write a memo in his name announcing a system change. "Tell them to contact me," he said, "if they have any questions." I wrote the memo, and it ended this way: "If you have any questions, please get in touch with me."

My boss said, "I told you to ask them to contact me if they had questions."

I said, "What I wrote means the same thing."

"I don't like it," he said.. "I want it to say 'contact.'"

"Contact," I said calmly, "is a noun, not a verb. It's not correct to use it your way."

He was very irritated. "Just change it!" he said.

So I did. The new ending was: "If you have any questions, please call or see me."

"I told you," he said, "that I wanted it to say 'contact me!'"

"I will not," I said, "use 'contact' as a verb. If you don't like it, then type the d--- memo yourself."

So the final memo said, "please call or see me."

You've also made me sensitive when other nouns are used as verbs. *Spotlight* is one that's irritating, as when my boss says, "Does anyone have anything spotlighting the accomplishments of our department?" And then there's *e-mail* (pardon me, Mr. Wolfe, if you find the subject unpleasant). *E-mail* is an adjective. Not a noun, or a verb. An adjective, as in *e-mail message*, or *e-mail list*, or *e-mail address*. Not a noun, as in "Send me an e-mail" (you mean "Send me an e-mail message") Or (worse) a verb, as in "E-mail me." When I hear "e-mail" used as a noun or verb I feel the way you must when the Heron hits a pothole. And I have you to thank for this. So... thank you!

But, Mr. Wolfe, why do you so resist change in language? I have a theory, Mr. Wolfe: Your resistance is a metaphor for you, and for Archie, and Fritz and the brownstone, remaining unchanged for seven decades. If you and the people and things around you aged, then language would age with them. Because they don't, it doesn't.

But wait! Is *this* how you do it, Mr. Wolfe? Is this how you prevent age from taking its toll in the brownstone? By the sheer effort of refusing to accept the aging of the language? Is that the secret?

I have one final word, Mr. Wolfe. It's been forty years since that memorable morning when you burned the dictionary, and, despite the passage of forty years, *infer* still isn't widely used to mean *imply*. Despite what the dictionaries may say. You feared the barbarians were at the gate. Take heart, Mr. Wolfe. It's been forty years, and they aren't necessarily inside yet.

Good day to you, sir, and I am in your debt,

Gregory Smith ([www.beaglewriter.com](http://www.beaglewriter.com))

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