‘Technology and the spread of English across the globe have made its rules of grammar redundant. The point is to communicate. Do you agree?’

As anyone who has travelled abroad can attest, communication of meaning is most certainly the primary aim in using any language. In my earliest travel experiences, hunger and thirst were sufficient motivation to force me into surmounting language barriers; often without understanding the relevant language’s grammar or even vocabulary. Pointing to a map in a taxi, scribbling down some diagrams at a hotel, gestures, smiles; in a context-rich environment there are dozens of ways to make yourself understood without even uttering a word. In mediums where context is less clear however, understanding between two people who don’t share the same background in language or culture becomes that much more elusive.

Fortunately for travellers such as me, the spread of English worldwide makes communication easier – at a basic level at least. A few shared words may work wonders in finding where the toilet is or buying a souvenir. When it comes to discussing more abstract concepts however, a grasp of grammar conventions is essential in bridging the language gap. Small grammatical features may significantly alter the meaning of a phrase; a singular noun taking a postfix ‘s’ to become a plural for instance. In English (unlike some other languages) word order is the most salient indicator of which part of a clause is the subject and which is the object. Thus ‘Bill ate the fish’ communicates an unremarkable mealtime activity, while ‘the fish ate Bill’ gives much more scope for consternation and alarm. So rather than a hindrance to communication, grammar becomes a tool for achieving clarity – not to mention avoiding undue panic.

That technology has rendered English grammar redundant is a more difficult claim to support. That technology has enabled anyone with a keyboard and an internet connection to butcher English grammar into incomprehensibility may seem a more valid proposition if you have facebook friends who are anything like mine. Social networking sites and the blogosphere abound with writers unable or unwilling to differentiate between “there” and “their;” “its” and “it’s” – minor infractions people get away with because we all suppose we know what they mean. Let us hope this is the case in the event a hotel website’s breakfast menu mentions “you’re toast.” The problem is that such communication can lack the context
required to be sure of the intended meaning – necessitating messages that are as unambiguous as possible.

It would appear unlikely that English users will kiss the conventions of grammar goodbye anytime soon, in spite of changes in the world around us. If we want to move beyond the expression of only our most basic needs and communicate clearly – especially in mediums where culture and context don’t contribute to our intended meanings – then having a common knowledge of grammar is essential. So although we can get by with gestures and a smile when travelling and understand the misuse of pronouns on twitter, for most of us this is not enough. The ability to understand and be understood without impediment is the kind of communication we can’t do without.