

Grammatical Annoyances

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There's a lot wrong with English, and I suppose an equal amount wrong with any other natural language. Natural language is invented bit by bit by people who cannot or will not follow the rules of the language they were taught. Some innovations serve a good purpose: to make something expressible that was not previously expressible. Many innovations serve no purpose: someone made a mistake, or made a joke, or perhaps tried to be “cool”, and it caught on. Some innovations reduce expressiveness, and increase ambiguity; those innovations annoy me.

Punctuated Quotations

Sometimes a sentence occurs within a quotation, as in

“I think, therefore I am.”

In that case, the period ending the sentence occurs before the closing quotation mark because the sentence is within the quotation. Sometimes a quotation occurs within a sentence, as in

He shouted “hello” loudly.

Even if the quoted word is last, as in

He loudly shouted “hello”.

the quoted word is still within the sentence, so the closing quotation mark should precede the period.

A long time ago, a dim-witted grammarian made an idiotic rule: that when a punctuation mark and a closing quotation mark occur together, the punctuation mark must come first. The rule makes no more sense than a rule saying that whenever the letters s and t occur together, the letter s must come first. Today, we still find people who thoughtlessly follow the dim-witted grammarian's rule. But there is a growing number of people, most of them computer programmers, myself included, who don't. I invite you to join us in this minor correction to our language.

How would you punctuate

Did he exclaim “I am!”?

Yes, amazingly, and then asked “Who cares?”!

?

Only

Here are four different sentences, with four different meanings.

Only I wanted to see it. (Nobody else wanted to see it.)

I only wanted to see it. (I didn't need to see it.)

I wanted only to see it. (I didn't want to touch it.)

I wanted to see only it. (I didn't want to see anything else.)

Grammarians would have us say the second sentence for any of the last three meanings. That makes the sentence “I only wanted to see it.” doubly ambiguous. I invite you to join me in putting the word “only” where it makes sense.

Alarms and Bombs

I'm sure you can see the problem from this little story.

At 6pm the fire alarm went off, and we had to leave the building. It rang continuously for half an hour, and then it went off, so we went back inside.

At 6pm the fire alarm went off, then at 6:30 it went off. It suddenly went off, and then just as suddenly, it went off. What genius decided to use the same words for the start and finish of the alarm? It would make sense to say “the alarm went on” for the start, and “the alarm went off” for the finish. But the words are now ruined, so I have stopped saying “went off”. I say “the alarm rang”, or “the alarm sounded”, for the start, and “the alarm stopped” for the finish.

Bombs don't have quite the same problem; “the bomb went off” isn't ambiguous. But to me it seems wrong to use the word “off” for something that clearly isn't off in the ordinary sense of that word. So I say “the bomb exploded”.

Sooner than Later

If you say that something will happen sooner, you are now obliged to say sooner than what. Some people started saying “sooner rather than later”, hoping that would discharge the obligation. Then that was shortened to “sooner than later”, which seems to say sooner than what, but doesn't really, because sooner is always sooner than later. In every case where this phrase is used, the speaker means “soon”. Say “Something will happen soon.”. Resist the temptation to add the comparative “er” if you don't have anything to compare with. It is just as silly to say “That will get done sooner than later.” as it is to say “That piece of cake is bigger than smaller.”.

Pronouns

It hurts me every time I hear someone say something like “Me and my friend went to a movie.”. Or “Her and her husband bought a condo.”. It is as ignorant as saying “Me went to a movie.” and “Her bought a condo.”. Adding another person into the subject does not make it right. You can correctly say either “I and my friend went to a movie.”, or “My friend and I went to a movie.”, but somehow the first order is rarely used. You can correctly say either “She and her husband bought a condo.”, or “Her husband and she bought a condo.”, but somehow the second order is rarely used. Isn't that strange?

A subjective pronoun is often used where an objective one is wanted, as in “Mary got it from John and I.”. My guess is that someone once said something like “John and me did it.”, and was corrected to “John and I did it.”, from which they concluded that you should never say “John and me”, you should always say “John and I”. I guess context is too complicated for some people. You can say either “Mary got it from John and me.”, or “Mary got it from me and John.”.

I am blaming ignorance for these mistakes, but there is another target for blame: the English language is unnecessarily complicated. We say both “You saw Mary.” and “Mary saw you.”, which demonstrates that it is unnecessary to have different subjective and objective pronouns; position is enough.

Singular and Plural, Male and Female

In English, no-one quite knows whether to treat zero as singular or plural, does he? The previous sentence is grammatically correct, according to grammarians, even though the word “he” has no referent. What male person does “he” refer to? It wouldn't help to change “does he” to “do they”, because “they” would have no referent.

Some genius divided verbs into singular (one) and plural (more than one), totally forgetting the possibility of less than one. Here are four sentences.

Many people go to the theater.

Only one person goes to the theater.

Nobody goes to the theater.

No people go to the theater.

With a plural subject (“Many people”), the verb is plural (“go”). With a singular subject (“Only one person”), the verb is singular (“goes”). The last two have subjects that are neither singular (one) nor plural (more than one); they both mean zero; one uses a singular verb, and the other a plural verb. In a better language, there wouldn't be singular and plural verb forms; there isn't any need because the subject says how many.

In English long ago, the second person singular pronoun was “thou” (subjective), “thee” (objective), “thy” (possessive adjective), and “thine” (possessive noun, and possessive adjective when followed by a vowel). The words “you”, “your”, and “yours” were plural. Then an idiotic protocol began: a person of importance must be referred to using plural pronouns. Thus the queen says “We are not amused.”. Someone speaking to an important person must treat the important person as being plural, and say “you” to be polite; saying “thou” as though the important person were singular would be impolite. Soon everyone was being polite to everyone else, always saying “you”, and the words “thou”, “thee”, “thy”, and “thine” disappeared. But it was ok to refer to an absent important person in the singular as “he” or “she”, because he or she wouldn't know. So those words stayed with us. But they have a problem: they have a gender attached, and sometimes, as we just saw two sentences ago, we want to refer to a person of unknown gender. The grammarian says to use masculine for unknown gender, but the grammarian is sexist. People have tried inventing gender-neutral third person pronouns, like “himer”, and “s/he”, but they haven't caught on. What has caught on is to use the plural “they” and “them” as neutral singular, as in “First the merchant wrapped it, and then they put a ribbon around it.”. I go so far as to say “The author wrote it all by themself.”. If that sounds wrong, remember that “yourself” sounded just as wrong a few hundred years ago. By the way, we say “myself” not “meself”, “yourself” not “youself”, and “ourselves” not “usselves”; so why is it “himself” not “hissself”, and “themselves” not “theirselves”?

In 1971 *Ms. Magazine* appeared, introducing the title “Ms.” for women. Before that, a woman had to use either “Miss” or “Mrs.” depending on whether she was single or married. Males have the title “Mr.” which does not say their marital status, so women wanted a title that doesn't give away their marital status. There were howls of outrage from all quarters. Some objected to the period at the end of “Ms.” because it isn't an abbreviation of anything. Some objected to it because it sounds ugly. Some just don't like change. I objected to it for quite a different reason. We use the titles “Mr.” and “Ms.” on official forms, and in speaking to or about someone we do not know intimately. The only information those titles convey is gender, but in such situations, gender should be irrelevant. For almost all jobs, gender should be irrelevant. For reserving an airplane ticket, gender should be irrelevant. For paying taxes, gender should be irrelevant. But the forms ask you to choose a title, and it's a required field. You must tell them your gender before they will sell you an airplane ticket. I think you could make a successful court challenge to that requirement. Gender

becomes relevant when people become intimate, and then they use first names and not titles. The right change would have been to get rid of titles, not to introduce another one.

Out Of

Sportscasters and military people are fond of this annoyance: “He's based out of Atlanta.”, meaning “He's based in Atlanta.”.

Adjectives as Nouns

In North America, we have cell phones, and people sometimes refer to them by the one word “cell”, as in “I'll call you on your cell.”. The noun “cell” means a small biological entity, or a room in a jail, or a group of people in a terrorist organization, and maybe other things. The area covered by a cell phone tower is also called a “cell”, and that's why that kind of phone is called a “cell phone”. But the phone is not a cell. If you want to use just one word, you can say “phone”, because it is a phone, not a cell.

In Europe, that same kind of phone is called a “mobile phone”, and people shorten it to the one word “mobile”. Many things are mobile, fewer things are phones, so the word “mobile” is not as good at identifying a mobile phone as the word “phone”.

We use a remote control to control our TV screen, and many other things. People often refer to the remote control by the one word “remote”. Many things are remote. A village in the arctic is remote from population centers. The stars are remote. That thing that controls the TV is not a remote; it is a control.

Tuna comes in a can, and that can used to be made of tin. So it was called a “tin can”, and then it was called a “tin”. Even though those cans are no longer made of tin, people still say “a tin of tuna”. When there are only two words, an adjective and a noun, and people want to shorten them to one word, they often choose the wrong word.

The word “decimal” is an adjective describing a number representation. A decimal digit is a digit in the decimal representation of numbers. And a decimal point is a point also used in that representation. But my students call a decimal point a “decimal”. This causes a problem when I teach them the binary representation of numbers. In the binary representation, there is also a “point”; it is a “binary point”; but my students call it a “decimal”. If they had reduced “decimal point” to “point” there would have been no problem.

My home has two ovens; one is a heat oven, and the other a microwave oven. A microwave is an electromagnetic wave whose wavelength is around a centimeter, and heat is an electromagnetic wave whose wavelength is around 10^{-4} meters. It is just as wrong to call a microwave oven a “microwave” as it would be to call a heat oven a “heat”. But that's what people do.

When someone says “Send me your email.”, they usually mean “Send me your email address.”. So what do I say if I want you to send me your email (not your email address)?

Spacing

Grammatical annoyances are not among the most interesting and important issues facing humankind. Within this unimportant topic, the question of whether to use one or two spaces between sentences is surely at the bottom of the list. So I was surprised when Farhad Manjoo of the New York Times and Wall Street Journal wrote about the topic in a heated and passionate way. He insists that one space is correct, and went so far as to say “Typing two spaces after a period is totally, completely, utterly, and inarguably wrong. And yet people who use two spaces are everywhere, their ugly error crossing every social boundary of class, education, and taste.” (http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2011/01/space_invaders.html). He offers no reason for this opinion except to say that typographers agree with him. Count me among the “totally, completely, utterly, and inarguably wrong”. Here is my rebuttal.

The practice among conscientious presenters of mathematics is to use more space around operators with lower precedence, and less around operators with higher precedence. For example, in $2 + 3 \times 4 = 2 \times 7$ there are no spaces around \times because it has highest precedence (do the multiplications first), one space on each side of $+$ (do the addition next), and two spaces around $=$ (compare the two sides last). This spacing helps the eye to parse the formula correctly. If the same equation were written as $2+3 \times 4=2 \times 7$, the spacing would tend to mislead the reader. A conscientious mathematical presenter also puts an extra space on each side of a formula that occurs within text to make it easier to see where the formula starts and stops, and to distinguish letters and marks that are part of the formula from those that are part of the surrounding sentence.

The same principle applies to writing natural language. There are no spaces between letters in a word. There is one space between words in a sentence. There are two spaces between sentences in a paragraph. There is more space between paragraphs in a chapter; some people leave a blank line between paragraphs; others start a new line and indent it. There is yet more space between chapters. The spacing serves to help the eye group together what belongs together, and to separate parts that are less bound together, exactly as in a mathematical formula.

People who do not understand the function of spacing may think that the rules are just arbitrary; whoever shouts loudest wins. Or perhaps they think that it is esthetic, and choose the spacing they find most pleasing, as though the text were artwork, ignoring the function of spacing. Apparently typographers are among the people who do not understand the function of spacing. This is not so surprising; typographers are absolutely unconcerned with the content, or meaning, of what they are typesetting. They are concerned with its look, and perhaps with saving paper. Personally, I don't think two spaces look worse than one, and I don't use paper much anymore. I do care about readability, and it helps to use spacing that shows the grouping and separation of grammatical units.

a Million and a Half

People often read 1,500,000 as “a million and a half”. If they say “one and a half” they unambiguously mean 1.5. If they say “ten and a half”, I suppose they mean 10.5 and not 15. If they say “a hundred and a half” they might mean 100.5 but maybe they mean 150. If they say “a thousand and a half” they probably mean 1500, not 1000.5. What do they say if they mean 1,000,000.5? Is it too hard to say “one and a half million” for 1,500,000 and leave “a million and a half” for 1,000,000.5?

Summary

Finding faults in English is much too easy. Most we just live with. But some cause real problems, and can easily be fixed. So why not fix them? And let's not add any new faults and inconsistencies.

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