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LING 203 Workshop Week 8

Types and structure of phrases

Talk Good: 10 Useful Hints for Everyday Grammar

by Sean Nelson

If you're a product of the American public school system and are reading this newspaper without difficulty, congratulations: You're one of the lucky ones. Even if you have successfully run the gauntlet of mediocrity and social engineering that U.S. education represents, chances are you have been given little instruction in the finer points of grammar. But don't worry (not that you would). You're not alone.

As educational standards wither and literacy rates plunge, and as television and tabloid journalism cement themselves as our common tongue, it's not surprising that the pleasure of being well-spoken has become about as popular as vaudeville. Now, I'm not such a language snob that I can't appreciate the art of grammatical violation — in fact, it's practically my job. But the rules of grammar form the foundation of intelligent human interaction. And spelling counts.

I'm all for bending and breaking those rules in the interest of expression, but only when there's a reason, and plain ignorance is never a very good reason.

The following is a list of 10 of the most common crimes against grammar, and tips to help you avoid committing them. I can't cite chapter and verse from *Strunk & White*. But you don't have to be a grammarian to be aggravated by seeing and hearing mistakes like these perpetrated by people who should know better.... So forgive me for a moment while I get my Safire on. (If you get that joke, feel free to stop reading.)

1

It's vs. Its: This one is simple, even though it represents an exception to the rules of possessive apostrophe (see next tip). "It's" means "it is" (as in, "It is cold," "It is time to clean the bong," or "It is not that I don't like you, I'm just not attracted to you"), and sometimes "it has" (as in, "It has come to this," or "It has been a long time since I read an article by such a snob"). Meanwhile, "its" means "belonging to it" — as in, "The bear wiped its ass on the rabbit," or "This article is certainly taking its time to come to the point."

2

Apostrophes: I don't have time to get into the whole world of apostrophes. The important thing to remember is this: Apostrophes NEVER make a word plural, they usually make it possessive (i.e., "Fred's" = belonging to Fred; "Freds" = a roomful of dudes named Fred). All you need to do to make something plural (generally) is add an "s" to the end. I wouldn't mention this at all, but I have seen approximately 4.7 billion signs that add unnecessary apostrophes to advertise "apple's," or "auto's" or "egg's," and it always makes me want to kill someone.

3

I'm well vs. I'm good: Tricky territory, because of the nature of the verb "to be." There's nothing technically *wrong* with answering, "I'm well," when asked "How are you?" since "well" in this context is an adjective that generally means "not sick." It's just that "well" is also an adverb that modifies "am," and not "I" (which sort of makes the question "how do you am?"— which in turn makes no goddamn sense). The adjective "good" does describe "I," which seems much more to the point of the question. But "good" can feel wrong to folks with painful memories of being corrected by their grandmothers (see also: Me and I). May I suggest "I am fine"? There's no absolute here, but it's probably better to save "well" for when someone asks you how you are *doing*.

4

Literally: I once saw Bill Clinton give a speech to the Democratic Leadership Council. It was 1998, in the heat of the Lewinsky scandal, and I couldn't make up my mind about what the President deserved. Then I heard him say, "The changes implemented by the DLC are literally sweeping the globe." I jumped to my feet and yelled at the television, "Wrong on two counts. Impeach the bastard!" The changes weren't *actually* sweeping the globe, and even if it were technically possible for "changes" to lift a broom, there's no such thing as "literally sweeping the globe." Literally is a perfect word in this sense, because it is self-defining. Don't fuck with it.

5

Me and I: More and more people seem to be abusing the "I" lately, probably as another result of repeated correction during childhood. "That's between my girlfriend and I" sounds correct to certain ears, but those ears are clogged with foolish misconceptions. "That's between my girlfriend and me" is correct. The rules here are clunky and hard to remember, so here's a simple trick: Before you speak, remove the other party from the sentence. Would you say "that's between I"? Not unless you were from Jamaica. It works the other way around as well: "My dad and me went to the Promise Keepers convention and testified to the glory of the lord." Would you say "Me went to the Promise Keepers convention"? Not unless you were stupid. Then again, even if you said, "I went to the Promise Keepers," chances are you're stupid anyway. Stupid Promise Keepers.

6

You're vs. Your: "You're" means "you are," as in "You are sexy," "You are a liar," or "You are probably going to hate me, but I just cheated on you (again)." "Your" means "belonging to you," as in "Your friend is really cute," "Your diary was hilarious," or "Keep your laws off of my body." There is no wiggle room here. If you write "Your welcome," you're wrong.

7

They're, There, Their: A lot of people still can't get this right, which is, you know, sad. "They're" means "they are," as in "They are old enough to be expected to know how to spell."

"There" means "there," like "Over there," "There, there," "There you go," "There's no reason for not knowing how to tell one there from another," and so on. "Their" means "belonging to them," as in "Their grammar is an embarrassment," or "Their teachers have failed them."

8
Who and Whom: This is a killer, but there is a shorthand way to remember which one goes where. The code: "who = he/she" and "whom = him/her." That is to say that the answer to the question provides the telltale clue. So, with "*Who* is that?" "He" is that. "With *whom* did you get high?" I got high with her. It can be a bit of a hassle sometimes (not to mention the stodginess factor), but you never know whom you'll have to impress.

9
Split Infinitives: Contrary to what you may have been told, the splitting of infinitives with adverbs (as in "to boldly go") is not only acceptable — unless you're translating Latin — but often preferable. That doesn't mean you should always do it —"to boldly go" was a poor example; it should be "to go boldly" (or baldly, since it was William Shatner) — but usually, it's all right. And sometimes it's more right.

10
Prepositions at the End of a Sentence: Technically, you're not supposed to end a sentence with a preposition, but generally, the only people who really care about this rule are too uptight to recognize that "What did you come up with?" is always better than "Up with what did you come?" Generally speaking, it varies from case to case. There is, however, one inviolable law: NEVER NEVER NEVER ask someone where something is *at*.

I. Summarise B&B (2001) Ch.6

II. Summarise B&B (2001) Ch.7

III. Linguistic analysis 1

Consider the text above then answer the following questions:

1. In discussing verb phrases one important notion is that of the FINITE verb. Following B&B's (2001) analysis of TENSE, i.e. a category that is marked on the verb *morphologically* — which for English yields only a two-way distinction, PRESENT tense v. PAST tense — identify 5 finite verbs in the text, and 5 non-finite ones. If they are finite, what tense are they?

2. We've seen in the lecture that sentences consist of at least one CLAUSE, but may contain several clauses (SIMPLE sentences v. COMPLEX sentences). How many clauses do the four underlined sentences, above, contain? (Hint: look for the lexical verbs.)

3. As explained by B&B (2001:154ff) in English we may distinguish between MODAL and PRIMARY auxiliaries. Find 5 examples of each in the text. For the primary auxiliaries, specify their type (i.e. perfect auxiliary *have*, passive Aux *be*, progressive Aux *be*, dummy Aux *do*).

4. Draw a tree structure for the following sentences. Remember that the X-bar notation advocated by B&B requires that one write V' and N' (as opposed to VP/V or NP/N) when the sister node is *not* a COMPLEMENT (but instead a modifier, determiner):
i. Your friend is really cute.
ii. Their grammar is an embarrassment

IV. Linguistic analysis 2

Consider the text above then answer the following questions:

1. Consider the sentence *Educational standards wither*.
a. Think about the event of 'withering'. How many entities does this involve?
b. Given that complementation patterns are based on the cognitive structure of events, how many complements do you therefore expect the verb *wither* to have?
c. In terms of the classification of verbs into INTRANSITIVE, MONO-/DI-TRANSITIVE, COMPLEX TRANSITIVE and INTENSIVE/COPULAR, how would you label *wither*?
d. Draw a tree structure for this sentence.

2. Draw a tree structure for the following sentences. Remember that the X-bar notation advocated by B&B requires that one write V' and N' (as opposed to VP/V or NP/N) when the sister node is *not* a COMPLEMENT (but instead a modifier, determiner):
i. The bear wiped its ass on the rabbit.
ii. Their teachers have failed them.
iii. Apostrophes NEVER make a word plural.

3. Using all of the following words **except one**, construct a verb phrase that consists of an auxiliary verb, a lexical verb, a determiner, two premodifyers, a head noun and a complement (in that order): *film, very, some, of, serious, Barry, has, criticism, that, expressed*.