

Teaching Unit 19: Opinion writing on English grammar over time

Background

Among grammatical mistakes, I may mention the use of one little word, which occurs so often, that if it be improperly introduced, is a certain mark of vulgarity, I mean the word "them," when it is used instead of "these," or "those;" as when you say, "I have done them things now," instead of "those [t]hings;"

(*The Vulgarities of Speech Corrected*, 1829, p. 210)

Accomplished use of the gerund suggests sophistication because it also suggests a grasp of grammar usually associated with those who have been taught English grammar, or (sometimes and) the grammar of foreign languages. It is not a usage that comes easily to the uneducated.

(Heffer 2010, p. 98)

More than 180 years lie between the two quotations cited above. The value judgements expressed by the two authors are, however, very similar. Both proscribe against specific usages and attach labels to speakers who use non-standard feature. While the anonymous author in the first quotation considers the use of *them* as a demonstrative pronoun as vulgar, Simon Heffer, journalist-cum-usage guide author, attributes the incorrect use of gerunds to uneducated speakers who did not receive an education in grammar, be it English grammar or the grammar of a foreign language. The two quotations reflect prescriptive attitudes towards language use according to which some linguistic features are considered improper, vulgar, incorrect, sloppy or illiterate, and as a consequence should be avoided. While this prescriptive approach has persisted over the last three hundred years, the subject of controversy has somewhat changed. Some linguistic features have become acceptable, while others have remained disputed. New features have also been added to the group of so-called usage problems. In this teaching unit, we will focus on opinions on grammar and how they may have changed over the course of time. First, a brief description of the usage problems included in this teaching unit is presented. Changing attitudes towards these usages are presented in Table 1 below. Last, we will present some qualitative data in the form of meta-commentary on language change in British English.

Links to relevant Linguistics Research Digest and other articles are available at:

<http://www.teachrealenglish.org/TU19>

Opinion writing on grammatical usage over time

The split infinitive

A 'split infinitive' involves the insertion of one or more adverbs between the infinitive marker *to* and the infinitive, as in the famous line from the opening credits of *Star Trek*: *to boldly go where no man has gone before*. According to prescriptivists, *boldly* should not split the infinitive *to go* in this sentence. The split infinitive is often considered an "old chestnut"¹ or prototypical usage problem in the debate on correct usage. It is "probably the best-known topic in the whole of the English

¹ Weiner, 1988, p. 173

pedagogical grammatical tradition”² and was first criticised in 1834 by an anonymous author in *The New England Magazine*.³ In recent times the proscription of this form has reduced and it has been removed from many publishers’ style guides.

The dangling participle

The dangling participle describes a mismatch between the subjects of a modifying (participial) clause and its main clause. Take, for instance, the following sentence: *While delivering the post, my neighbour’s dog kept barking at the postman*. From a syntactic point of view, the subject of the main clause (*my neighbour’s dog*) does not match the intended subject of the modifying clause (*the postman*). This mismatch is often said to cause ambiguity and confusion and has thus been widely proscribed, or discouraged, in usage guides since the early 20th century.⁴

Literally as an intensifier

The use of *literally* as an intensifier has been the subject of heated debate in the past few years, fuelled by the *OED*’s acceptance of *literally* in a non-literal sense in September 2011 (*OED*, s. v. *literally*). Prescriptivists insist that the correct meaning of *literally* should remain *to the letter*. However, *literally* has extended its meaning and is used nowadays also as an intensifier, much like *extremely*, *really* and *very*, as in the sentence: *His eyes literally popped out of his head*. If *literally* is understood in its original meaning, this person would no longer have eyeballs. If understood in its “new” meaning as an intensifier, *literally* simply adds intensity to the narrator’s description and can be understood as an exaggeration. The use of *literally* in a non-literal sense was first criticised in the early twentieth century.

Changing attitudes towards disputed usage features

Below you can find some of the results of two studies⁵ that investigated attitudes towards the usage problems described above. More than 40 years lie between the two studies, and so they provide snapshots of the prevailing attitudes towards linguistic norms at two different points in time. Comparing the findings of these two studies enables us to assess whether attitudes towards features such as the split infinitive have become more lenient or stringent.

For each usage feature the average acceptability rate was calculated. Table 1 shows that in the more recent (2017) study 63.5 % of all judgements on the use of the split infinitive fell into the “acceptable” category. In contrast, the level of acceptability was only 40 % in the study conducted over four decades earlier. The level of acceptability for the other two forms remains steady and much lower than the acceptability of split infinitives among contemporary British English speakers.

Table 1: Average acceptability rates compared

Proper English Usage survey (2017)	average acceptability (%)	change (%)	Attitudes towards English Usage (1970)	average acceptability (%)
split infinitive	63.5	+ 23.5	split infinitive	40
dangling participle	25.2	+ 8.2	dangling participle	17
<i>literally</i>	37.1	+ 2.1	<i>literally</i>	35

² Pullum and Huddleston (2002, p. 581)

³ Bailey, 1996, p. 248

⁴ Ebner (2017, p. 266)

⁵ H.W. Mittins (1970) Attitudes towards English Usage and Ebner (2017) Proper English Usage

Lay people's opinions on language change

Below you will find five responses from lay people who were asked for their opinions on the current state of the English language.

1. "I don't think that texting/e-communication are negatively affecting the English language, although they are definitely affecting it. I do think that because there is perhaps a greater difference between formal and informal types of grammar than there u[s]ed to be, and therefore that moving between them is a skill which we need to cover in more depth when teaching grammar."
(Archaeologist, 26–30 years old, female)
2. "English is changing, as it always has, in response to the changing demands placed on it by the society that uses it and its contexts of use. Individuals need to be made aware that everyone makes judgements on people's use of language and different context demand different patterns of use - answering job interview questions for most jobs with Facebook-style comments are unlikely to secure you the position. The only thing that does not change is the desire to harness the power of language by select groups w[h]o then place a hierarchy on different patterns of use & declare their own arbitrary patterns as superior."
(University lecturer, 41–60 years old, male)
3. "It is evolving and changing - just as it always has! But perhaps somewhat more exponentially due to mass media, communications and the internet. There has been an explosion of new words linked with technology. Teenagers and other sub-groups have created n[e]w ways of communicating that are sometimes hugely creative and innovative. It's exciting."
(Literacy Consultant, 41–60 years old, female)
4. "Yes, language is a living thing which adapts and changes over time. Grammar and spelling aren't always the most important thing. However, I think people use this as an excuse. If you apply for a job, your potential employer is first looking at a resume an[d]/or email in the first instance. They WILL make a snap judgement about you based on how well or poorly it is written. To say proper grammar serves no purpose (which some people do claim) is unrealistic. Conversational and formal English are two different [t]hings and children need to be taught how to utilize both."
(Customer service administrator, 31–40 years old, female)
5. "English is both an evolving language and one that needs defending. Without a resistance to changes in language, books written a mere hundred years ago would be indecipherable today. At the same time, it is inevitable that it does change, and this is not a bad thing, but change should be gradual and not simply the result of fads and trends."
(Civil servant, 31–40 years old, male)

Suggested tasks and discussion points

- Task 1: Look at the table and discuss possible trends in usage. Have attitudes towards specific usage features changed? If so, how?
- Task 2: Over the past 40 years what social and cultural changes (events, inventions ...) might have influenced language change and might help to explain differences in attitudes?
- Task 3: Now that you have seen some research findings and lay people's opinions on language change, share your own opinions on these questions. How important is grammar? Is English

on its deathbed or fit as a fiddle? Write a short opinion piece incorporating concepts and findings presented in this unit.

Task 4: Read the article in the Guardian (link provided above, *Grammar Lovers Split Over Infinitives*) and write a reply comment expressing your opinion on the topic.

References

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