

Prescriptivism and Usage. Spring 2004. Handout 2.

1. Second assignments (for CSP course, for 12 April; for SIS course, for 14 April):

Reading: MWDEU entries on “split infinitive” and “preposition at end” (what I’ll refer to as a “stranded” – as opposed to “fronted” – preposition); the Linguistic Concepts Take 1 handout.

Project: Collect examples of split infinitives, of infinitives that *could* have been split but weren’t, of stranded prepositions, and of fronted prepositions. If you have access to Google, try to devise ways to use the (very crude) Google search mechanisms to find some of your examples. Then write a few pages of discussion (much like your discussion of danglers in the previous assignment), concentrating on what factors might be relevant to choosing between alternative expressions. [You might be entertained by considering *choosing between alternative expressions* and looking at MWDEU’s discussion under “between 1” and “alternate” and “alternative”.]

2. Dangler notes:

2.1. Things to set aside: *regarding...*, *considering...*, *given that...*, *turning to...* and many, many others (but note that these fixed or formulaic expressions began as ordinary Sentence Adverbials and that new expressions are always moving towards formulaic status).

2.2. Claim: subjectless Sentential Adverbials are interpreted as having reference to:

- a. the speaker, or a group containing the speaker;
- b. the topic of discourse (the entities that are most foregrounded, relevant, or salient, for the speaker/writer and the addressee(s)/audience) or the Sentence Topic of the main clause (this is usually expressed by the Subject of the main clause, which is also usually the NP closest to the Sentential Adverbial).

2.3. Conceptual issue: syntax as a matter of relationships between *phrases*, or between the (head) *words* of those phrases. This becomes a serious issue when people (Lederer, for instance) tell you to put modifiers as close as possible to the things they modify.

2.4. Another conceptual issue: many advice books assume that subjectless Sentential Adverbials are modifiers of a Noun (or NP) in the main clause. Linguists, on the other hand, almost universally treat the relationship between the missing Subject in the Sentential Adverbial and some NP in the main clause as analogous to anaphora; the missing Subject is a kind of cataphor.

2.5. Good usage advice: Avoid misleading the hearer/reader.

2.6. Second-level effects of explicit instruction: People begin seeing problems where they never had before, and in situations where there was no communicative problem. People begin listening to the Rules, not to their knowledge of their own language and how to use it.

3. White, Richard Grant. 1870. Words and their uses, past and present: A study of the English language. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.

White on the “progressive passive” of *A bridge was being built*:

3.1. Don't innovate. This construction is new (well, was new in the 18th century), and the language already has perfectly good constructions – three of them, in fact – to express this meaning: *was in building*, *was a-building*, *was building* (cf. p. 343). On the other side: *was building* is (potentially) ambiguous; *was being built* parcels out the components of meaning clearly into separate components of form, and merely combines two existing constructions in the language in the obvious way.

3.2. One meaning per form, so combinations of forms of *be* with other forms of *be* are senseless:

p. 353: What, then, is the fatal absurdity in this phrase, which has been so long and so widely used that, to some people, it seems to be an old growth of the language, while it is yet in fact a mere transplanted sucker, without life and without root? It is in the combination of *is* with *being*; in the making of the verb *to be* a complement, or, grammarians' phrase, an auxiliary to itself – an absurdity so palpable, so monstrous, so ridiculous that it should need only to be pointed out to be scouted. *To be...* expresses mere existence...

Note the implicit theory of grammar here, and the reasoning from first principles: A language *couldn't* be like this.

Compare *I did do my work*.