

Prescriptivism and Usage. Spring 2004. Handout 4.

1. Fourth assignment (for CSP course, for 26 April; for SIS course, for 28 April): When advice givers tell you not to write/say X, but to use Y instead, they almost always provide a rationale, from communicative values, for proscribing X; the communicative value most often cited is avoidance of ambiguity: either using X for Y (*infer* for *imply*, *lay* for positional *lie*) eliminates a useful distinction, thereby introducing ambiguity; or introducing a new use for existing material (logical as well as temporal uses of *since* and *while*, speaker-oriented as well as subject-oriented uses of *hopefully*) creates pernicious ambiguity.

1.1. Riffle through MWDEU – this is always an entertaining exercise – and find two examples of each type (eliminating a distinction, introducing a new use). Discuss these four cases very briefly from the point of view of ambiguity. In particular, how likely is it that the ambiguities would be troublesome in context?

1.2. Linguists usually respond to the distinction-eliminating cases by finding other communicative values (usually, regularity/generalality/simplicity) for the non-standard usages. For *lie/lay*, they'll point to the general pattern for intransitives and related transitives:

intransitive state	intransitive change of state	transitive cause change of state	verb type semantics
<i>stand</i>	<i>stand (up)</i>	<i>stand</i>	
<i>sit</i>	<i>sit down</i>	<i>sit</i>	

<i>rest</i>	-----	<i>rest</i>	
----	<i>crash</i>	<i>crash</i>	

BUT <i>lie</i>	<i>lie down</i>	<i>lay</i>	

and note that using *lay* for *lie* eliminates an irregularity in the general pattern. (The replacement is undoubtedly facilitated by the fact that in the standard variety *lay* is the past tense form of *lie*.)

Briefly discuss your two distinction-eliminating cases in similar terms. Look for communicative advantages (regularity, in particular) for the non-standard, merged forms.

2. In the media. Some subtle adverb examples from the press:

But it doesn't follow from these problems – or from the Bushes' admittedly shameless business deals – that America's continuing indulgence of the Saudis is...
(Jonathan D. Tepperman, review of Craig Unger's *House of Bush, House of Saud*, in the 4/18/04 *New York Times Book Review*, p. 11)

[NSOED2 has only “as is acknowledged (by a person, or by people generally) to be true”, from E19. AHD4 has both “by general admission” and “confessedly”. I read *admittedly* here as

speaker-oriented; Tepperman, specifically, grants that the Bushes' business deals were shameless.]

...But Marea has a more interesting question for her therapists: Was her father's premature death actually a suicide?

(Nathaniel Bellows, review of Kate Wenner's *Dancing with Einstein*, in the 4/18/04 *New York Times Book Review*, p. 28)

[*Actually* (and similar adverbials like *really*, *in truth*, and *in fact*) conveys a reversal of expectation – AHD4 “used to express wonder, surprise, or incredulity”. So its interpretation in context depends on the prior expectations of the speaker and addressee. If Marea's father's death had been supposed to be a suicide, then by asking if it was, Marea is suggesting that it might not have been. But with no previous mention of the suicide possibility – and there is none in this text – then we fall back on the default assumption that deaths are not suicides, so that by asking if it was, Marea is suggesting that it might have been. In fact, since a yes-no question allows for the possibility of either answer, the question by itself, without the *actually*, can (rather subtly) have either interpretation.]

3. Some recap and some extensions. The standard names for phenomena are not definitions, and they're often misleading.

3.1. The classic cases of dangling modifiers, for instance, involve not just any old modifier – only sentence adverbials that are missing a subject that's needed for their interpretation, and the really classic cases are all sentence-initial adverbials – and what makes them “dangle” is not just that they're hangin' out in odd places, but that they fail to satisfy the subject-to-subject rule. On top of all this, the term “dangling” suggests that they're all bad, though what we've said is that some danglers are impeccable, many are acceptable or not depending on the context, and some are irreparable.

Similarly, the more general category of “misplaced modifiers” takes in many modifiers that are in no sense misplaced, but instead have the potential for misinterpretation as to their parsing with respect to preceding material. Recall Lederer, and consider these examples from <http://www.english.vt.edu/~grammar/GrammarForTeachers/readings/materials/danglingmodifiers.html>

He kept a black book of all the girls he had dated in his desk.

I read that a skier was injured in the newspaper.

3.2. And “preposition at end” isn't a great label for stranded prepositions, since they don't necessarily come at the end of a sentence. A number of MWDEU's examples don't, in fact, although MWDEU uses the terminology “preposition at end”. On the other hand, we have to take the term “preposition” seriously, since there are many words that look a lot like prepositions, but are in fact something else (variously labeled as “adverbs” or “particles”); contrast *We sent them up a hill* (with a preposition) and *We sent them up a sandwich* (with a particle). Prepositions can sometimes be fronted along with their objects, but particles never can.

3.3. As for “split infinitives”, the name assumes there’s a word-like unit that shouldn’t be split up – that is, it presupposes that the marker *to* combines with a following verb word, to give a two-part verb that then combines with objects and other stuff, rather than that *to* combines with a verb phrase. The two hypotheses for the VP *to love folk music* are:

Analysis 1: VP = [*to* + V] + NP (i.e. V + NP)

Analysis 2: VP = *to* + [V + NP] (i.e. *to* + VP)

The very existence of “split infinitives” (in the practice of elite writers) is an argument for Analysis 2, since on this analysis split infinitives come along automatically. But there’s other evidence, from Verb Phrase Ellipsis in English, supporting Analysis 2:

Kim won’t **eat sashimi**, but I will ____.

They’ll try to **eat sashimi**, but I don’t think they can _____. [note antecedent for ellipsis]

I let them **eat sashimi**, but they don’t seem to want to _____. [note “remainder” *to*]

4. The advice literature assumes a (mostly covert) theory of grammar, much of which is faulty (see the Pullum rant from LanguageLog).

4.1. Confusion of semantics and syntax. They’re intimately related, but they’re not the same thing. Consider semantic modifiers vs. syntactic modifiers (sometimes called “adjuncts”, embracing various types of adjectivals and adverbials, plus determiners and some other stuff).

It must be raining. ‘It’s necessarily true that it’s raining’

I think pigs can fly. ‘Pigs can fly, I think.’

4.2. Confusion of syntactic function and syntactic category. Again, they’re intimately related, but they’re not the same thing. Lots of adverbials aren’t adverbs, and some adjectivals aren’t adjectives (*jute* in *a jute carpet*).

4.3. Insufficient distinctions among syntactic functions and among syntactic categories. There are at least two very different sorts of prenominal adjuncts, determiners and adjectivals. Possessives (as in *my toes* or *Einstein’s discoveries*) are determiners, not adjectivals (and they certainly aren’t adjectives). As for syntactic categories, we need to discriminate between prepositions and particles, for instance.

A striking deficiency in the treatment of syntactic functions is that these “traditional” treatments of grammar have no easy way to talk about the relationship between unexpressed (omitted, elliptical) material and the overt expressions that provide the interpretation for the missing stuff (what are sometimes called the “controllers” for ellipsis). In some cases – sentence-initial subjectless sentence adverbials, most strikingly – the traditional treatment maintains that the expression with ellipsis inside it actually modifies the controller; that is, the story is that in

Before entering the room, Kim checked the temperature with a device from the lab.

the expression *before entering the room* actually modifies the subject of the main clause, *Kim*. This treatment seems to result from nothing more than a conceptual (and terminological) poverty; “modifier” is the only available concept. When you combine this treatment with the (generally reasonable) advice that it’s usually a good thing to keep modifiers close to the things they modify, you get the subject-to-subject rule as a consequence – but this rule isn’t quite right, and looking for the nearest thing to modify gives exactly the wrong results for some sentence-final modifiers:

Kim checked the temperature with a device from the lab before entering the room.

(Here, something like the subject-to-subject rule applies even though the subject *Kim* is not at all close to the sentence adverbial and four other nouns are closer. Note that, in truth, the sentence adverbial is right next to the thing it modifies, namely the clause *Kim checked the temperature with a device from the lab*.)

4.4. Disregard for discourse considerations. Instead, everything is treated as if it’s a matter of syntax. Example: treating anaphor-antecedent relationships as the (more or less literal) replacement of a repeated expression by an anaphoric element, as if *Kim imagined herself as president* were really *Kim imagined Kim as president*, and as if *Kim said that she would go* were really *Kim said that Kim would go*, and so on. Instead, we want to say (roughly) that some expressions establish “discourse referents” (where “discourse referent” is a semantic notion) and anaphoric elements point to these discourse referents (not to other expressions).

5. Back to the PAP, for Take 2. (Also see the Nunberg column.)

5.1. How Louis Menand got it so wrong, in three acts. According to Menand:

Act I: Possessives are adjectives, or at least adjectivals.

Act II: Adjectivals do not refer to entities, but rather to properties of entities.

Finale of Act II: Possessives, it follows, do not refer to entities (but instead merely evoke them, in the same way that the adjective *Norwegian* merely evokes the country Norway).

Act III: Anaphoric pronouns are replacements for repeated referring expressions; the other occurrence of the expression is the antecedent for the pronoun.

Finale of Act III: Anaphoric pronouns, it follows, cannot have possessives as their antecedents.

Responses:

As for syntactic function, possessives are determiners, not adjectivals. As for syntactic category, they are NPs, in possessive form (NP’s), not AdjPs. They can do virtually everything other NPs can do: introduce referents into a discourse, refresh (foreground) them, etc. Some introductions of referents in the very first sentences of short stories:

Isak Dinesen, *Winter’s Tales*. New York: Dell, 1942.

“Alkmene”, p. 174:

My father’s estate lay in a lonely part of Jutland, and I was his only child.

J.D. Salinger, *Nine Stories*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1953.

“Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut”, p. 27:

It was almost three o’clock when Mary Jane finally found Eloise’s house.

Flannery O’Connor, *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973.

“Enoch and the Gorilla”, p. 108:

Enoch Emery had borrowed his landlady’s umbrella and he discovered as he stood in the entrance of the drugstore, trying to open it, that it was at least as old as she was.

In any case, adjectivals can (in appropriate contexts) set up discourse referents. This is true of adjectives, both prenominal and predicative –

McCarthyite politicians are now puzzled by him.

Yes, we’re **ciderless**. You should have told me – I would have bought some ____.

and of adjectival nouns, in N+N compounds –

There’s a **Thurber** story about his maid...

I’m a **mystery-story** buff and read a lot of them.

(Examples adapted from some provided by Gregory Ward.)

5.2. Well, the “core” version of the PAP (covering the things that virtually all versions cover) is much more specific:

A (1) non-pronominal (2) prenominal possessive cannot serve as an antecedent for a (3) following (4) overt (5) non-possessive (6) non-reflexive (7) definite (8) third-person (9) pronoun.

This is consistent with every version I’ve seen except Jacques Barzun’s, which restricts (1) further, to proper nouns. A Menand-style argument, however, would proscribe much more than the core version does.

(6) Reflexives: ...in a phrase that became the city’s name for itself... [Boston is the city; “The Hub” is the phrase] (Menand, *The Philosophical Club*, p. 7)

(9) Anaphoric non-pronominal NPs: Einstein’s discoveries made the/this/that Swiss physicist famous.

(1) Pronominal possessives: His discoveries made him famous. [Almost all – but not all – of the advice manuals allow this one. One of the SAT prep manuals, strikingly, does not.]

(2) Possessives (apparently) serving as heads of their NPs: Globmort’s discoveries were entirely overlooked, but Einstein’s made him famous.

(3) Cataphora: Though he didn't seek fame, Einstein's name and face quickly became known all over the world.

(3+4) Covert ("zero") anaphor: While studying gravity, Einstein's attention was drawn to questions about the nature of time.

So far as I know, nobody limits the scope of the PAP to a single sentence: Wendell Holmes's riot control skills were not tested. Still, he had, at the highest point of prewar contention... (Menand, *The Philosophical Club*, p. 31)

On the other hand, so far as I know, nobody extends the scope of the PAP from the 's possessive to the *of* possessive: The discoveries of Einstein made him famous. [Apparently acceptable to all the advice givers. The PAP is intended as a condition on syntactic structure, not just on semantic relationships.]

6. A difference between linguists and advice givers. Linguists look at formulations of rules as hypotheses about what's in some variety of a language and what's not; they are hypotheses to be tested against the evidence of actual usage in this variety. Advice givers look at formulations of rules as summaries of error types, codes you could put on errors that you detect in someone's writing; a system of rules of this sort is fine if it provides a code for all the errors, but isn't necessarily accountable for non-errors, since those could be a matter of the right "ear for the language". (Recall White on stranded prepositions.)