

Linguistics 30Q. Split infinitives, prepositions at end, and other horrors.
Spring Quarter 2005. M W F 9-9:50. 460-334.

Catalogue copy: In one manual on English grammar or another, each of the following sentences is labeled ungrammatical: "Einstein's discoveries made him famous. He called last night to considerately check up on me. As a parent, my concern is for the children. Which parent does Kim take after? I'm smarter than them." We will briefly consider where the manuals get the (often fanciful) "rules of grammar" that they cite and then turn to the real system of English grammar and usage, asking questions like these: What are parts of speech like preposition and syntactic functions like subject and word forms like accusative case? How are pronouns used? When can material be omitted in a sentence? What kinds of modifiers are there and how are they used? What gives rise to ambiguities, both potential and practical? This is not a writing course, but a course on basic ideas in syntax as they apply to English, and a course about where those basic ideas come from. Be prepared to question authority and to rethink things you've been taught.

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[This is where my mailbox is.]

AMZ on the web: I am a contributor to the Language Log (<http://www.linguistlist.org>), a linguists' group blog; to the American Dialect Society mailing list (archives available at <http://www.americandialect.org>); and to the eggcorn database (<http://eggcorns.lascribe.net/>), an inventory of one type of language error. You might find some of this material entertaining, or even enlightening.

Text: Gilman, E. Ward (ed.). 1989. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage. Springfield MA: Merriam-Webster. (*The authority on disputed points of English usage. Nothing's perfect and nothing's complete, of course; and it's been about 20 years since Gilman and his staff assembled this material, so that there are new things to say; and the book uses a fair number of technical terms without explanation. But it's still the first place to look.*)

Web materials: I'll put copies on my website of all the handouts that I write myself. The URL: <http://www-csli.stanford.edu/~zwicky/SIS05.html>.

Aims and nature of this course: Superficially, this course is about the "rules" of grammar and usage that advice-givers provide to speakers of English. But this material isn't being presented for its own sake; instead, we'll look at these phenomena as a way to discover what the syntax of a language (in this case, English, in its many varieties) is like.

This is a learning-by-doing course. The task is not to learn stuff given ahead of time – a bunch of terms and definitions for them and ways of using them and a pile of formalisms and how to use *them*, etc. The task is to decide what terms and formalisms we need and what we want to do with them. We'll get at this task by trying to make sense of what the advice-givers are telling us and by trying to improve on what they say.

You will collect data on your own and be given some, and you will critically examine claims about those data (and other people's). You will have to be actively engaged in discussing what's going on with these collections of data, entertaining alternative hypotheses about how they are to be described and testing these hypotheses.

This is not a course about the virtues of “standard” formal written English as against non-standard, innovative, regional, informal, and/or spoken varieties. No one's denying the possible social utility of commanding a standard formal written variety, but in this course we're treating such varieties as just a few among many, all of which are systematic, structured, complex, and worthy of study and analysis. As a slogan: Look for system everywhere, and try to figure out what the system is in each place.

You should come away from the course with an appreciation of the complexity of (English) syntax; with some understanding of the degree of variation within English; and with a basic command of the concepts of syntax, not as something you've memorized but as something you understand the rationale for. Ideally, you should be able to explain these rather abstract ideas, with examples, to an intelligent and well-disposed friend.

Coursework: There will be things to think (and talk) about for each class, and written assignments each week, normally given out one Friday and due the next.

You will also write a paper – details to be described in week 5 – analyzing some bit of (some variety of) English. You'll discuss your plans in class in (roughly) week 7, give an oral presentation of a semi-final draft of the paper in week 10, and turn in the final written version at the end of finals week.

Syllabus in outline

Week 1. W 30 March, F 1 April. Introduction. Grammar vs. usage vs. lots of other things. Getting beyond words words words.

MOSTLY PURE SYNTAX

Week 2. M 4, W 6, F 8 April. Prepositions at end. Which parent does Kim take after?

Week 3. M 11, W 13, F 13 April. Split infinitives. He called last night to considerably check up on me.

DISCOURSE ORGANIZATION

Week 4. M 18, W 20, F 22 April. Possessive antecedents. Einstein's discoveries made him famous.

Week 5. M 25, W 27, F 29 April. Dangling modifiers. As a parent, my concern is for the children.

SEMANTICS AND MORE

Weeks 6-7. M 2, W 4, F 6, M 9, W 11, F 13 May. Subject-verb agreement. There was liquor and good music.

Weeks 8-9. M 16, M 18, F 20, M 23, W 25, F 27 May. Case marking. I'm smarter than them.

Week 10. [M 30 May: **no class – Memorial Day**] W 1 June [technically, this is the last day of classes], F 3 June [technically, this is during the exam period]. Student presentations. Papers due by 3 p.m. on F 10 June in AMZ's mailbox in the Linguistics main office; earlier submissions are welcome, of course.

Some references

A web rogues' gallery

BaalObsidian "How grammatically correct are you?" 3/24/04:

[http://quizilla.com/users/BaalObsidian/quizzes/How%20grammatically%20correct%20are%20you%3F%20\(Revised%20with%20answer%20key\)/](http://quizilla.com/users/BaalObsidian/quizzes/How%20grammatically%20correct%20are%20you%3F%20(Revised%20with%20answer%20key)/)

MSN Encarta 2005 "Are you grammatically incorrect?":

http://encarta.msn.com/quiz_51/Are_You_Grammatically_Incorrect.html

Jesse Kornbluth 3/21/05 on "Ten usage and grammar errors that could (or should) cripple a career": <http://mediabistro.com/articles/cache/a4028.asp?pntvs=1&>

followups 3/28/05: <http://www.mediabistro.com/articles/cache/a4085.asp?pntvs=1&>

A (highly selective) hard-copy rogues' gallery

Cazort, Douglas. 1997. *Under the grammar hammer: The 25 most important grammar mistakes and how to avoid them*. Updated ed. NY: Barnes & Noble.

Feierman, Joanne. 1995. *Action-Grammar: Fast, no-hassle answers on everyday usage and punctuation*. NY: Simon & Schuster.

Fiske, Robert Hartwell. 2004. *The dictionary of disagreeable English: A curmudgeon's compendium of excruciatingly correct grammar*. Cincinnati OH: Writer's Digest Books.

Opinionated, but more scholarly, reference works on usage

Brians, Paul. 2003. *Common errors in English usage*. Wilsonville OR: William, James & Co. [Brians's website: <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html>]

Garner, Bryan A. 1998. *A dictionary of modern American usage*. NY: Oxford Univ. Press.
- 2003. *Garner's modern American usage*. [2nd ed. of Garner 1998] NY: Oxford Univ. Press.

Recent comprehensive reference works on English grammar

[CGEL (Huddleston & Pullum) is now *the* authority on the grammar of established general formal standard written English. The Longman grammar (Biber et al.) takes in more varieties of English and relies on extensive corpus searches. I put these references here because I think you should know about them, not because I expect you to consult them regularly; remember that this is a learning-by-doing course, so there's not a lot of point to your looking up what the authorities say.]

Biber, Douglas; Stig Johansson; Geoffrey Leech; Susan Conrad; & Edward Finegan. 1999. *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.

Huddleston, Rodney D. & Geoffrey K. Pullum. 2002. *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.