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THE UNFORTUNATE DIVORCE OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR FROM ENGLISH LITERATURE¹

Abstract: *The disciplines of literature and linguistics have separated: it is possible for a student to earn a degree in English literature without having any linguistic expertise, and more specifically without knowing anything significant about the grammar of the English language. In part this is because of the increasing professionalization and scientific orientation of linguistics. But here I focus on a different issue: that even highly educated scholars of English typically hold mostly mistaken beliefs about English grammar. Education in the subject ossified more than 200 years ago. First, unsupportable claims about the structure of the language — artifacts of indefensible analyses — are still widely assumed; and second, 'ghost rules' that never correctly characterized the language are still commonly trusted. To illustrate the insupportable analyses I consider the definitions of lexical categories like noun or verb, the analysis of the infinitival marker *to*, and the misclassification of prepositions. To illustrate ghost rules I discuss split infinitives, restrictive *which*, genitive antecedents for pronouns, stranding of prepositions, and singular antecedents for *they*. I conclude with a brief plea for reunification of literary and linguistic studies.*

Keywords: *grammar, word classes, prescriptivism, infinitives, prepositions, literary evidence, linguistics.*

1. Introduction

The English language as such has to a large extent disappeared from literature departments in the anglophone world. At many universities in the UK and the US (though the situation is very different in many of the universities of continental Europe) you can earn a degree in English literature while barely knowing what a verb is.

The break between language and literature studies must in part stem from the professionalization of linguistics over the past century — from Saussure's posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) to the present day. As linguists argued for the philosophical autonomy of their discipline from others, and stressed that they took a scientific rather than humanistic view of language, the linguistics programs that had begun in English departments began to yearn to

breathe free. (Others had begun in departments of social, cognitive, or psychological science, but in due course they also wanted to secede.)

But the scientific character of linguistics should surely not be a barrier to supportive interaction with humanities disciplines. Linguistics provides an interesting bridge between the sciences and the humanities, just as cultural anthropology does.

Typical practice in linguistics adopts (or at least feels some moral pressure to accept) certain standard canons of scientific practice. Foremost among them are these two:

- Claims should be grounded in evidence, not opinion or authority.
- Hypotheses, theories, and claims are defeasible (perhaps contingently false); they should be framed with maximum falsifiability rather than protected with vagueness or rhetoric.

Many linguists also adopt other features of the scientific method: formalization of theories,

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making data publicly accessible, use of quantitative methods, designing replicable experiments, and use of computational simulation. But none of this means that linguists' goals are antithetical to those of humanities specialists, be they literary critics, cultural theorists, historians, philosophers, or whatever. The empirical study of manuscript production and scribal practice is not at odds with, say, the literary study of medieval literature. Field research on the cultural practices of preliterate tribal peoples does not have to conflict with interpretive writing about culture. Scientific work in forensic anthropology and archaeology need not be inimical to the work of historiographers. The biological study of evolution is of course compatible with conceptual exploration of the notion of evolution by philosophers.

I believe it is entirely appropriate to suggest that anyone doing a degree in English literature should know a reasonable amount about the work linguists have done on the structure, function, use, and origins of the language in which that literature emerged.

However, the departmental divorces that have separated the linguists off from the literature specialists in most English-speaking universities have radically reduced exposure to language study among literature students.

There is a way in which linguistics has to be blamed for making its divorce from literary study more bitter than it could have been. As theoretical syntax developed in the 1960s and subsequently, and increasingly scientific rhetoric took hold, and today there are linguists who maintain that they are working within biological science on the study of a biologically real and neurologically identifiable "language organ" (see Anderson and Lightfoot 2002 for a popular introduction to this idea, and many contributions the journal *Biolinguistics* at <http://www.biolinguistics.eu/> for some extraordinarily overconfident and scientifically dubious recent examples of the same sort of work). It is unhelpful, to say the least, for linguists to be producing over-hyped pseudoscience of a sort that seems almost calculated to be unintelligible to humanities academics, especially when no real scientific gains seem to be emerging from such work.

The generative grammar view in its present-day interpretation (which has been developing since before 1965) claims that the notion of sharing a grammar is incoherent. The generativist claim is that each normally developed person has an 'I-language' inscribed in their brain. The peculiar technical term 'I-language' is due to Chomsky (1986). The initial 'I' is supposed to suggest simultaneously the words 'internal' (as opposed to external), 'individual' (as opposed to social), and the logician's term 'intensional' (as opposed to extensional).

An 'I-language' is claimed to be inaccessible even to the speaker in whose brain it is inscribed, and unrelatable to anyone else's. It defines structure for our internally represented propositional thoughts in a private way. Only a miraculous genetically mediated innate commonality of structure can account for our ability to exchange linguistic communications with other members of our species, because grammar is not shared, it is private and mind-internal.

Again, it is singularly unhelpful for linguists to be offering such a solipsistic notion of language as a scientific advance, making it incomprehensible that a billion people (or even two people), even in principle, could share a grammatical system.

2. Ignorance about language

What I want to concentrate on here, however, has to do with a more general issue relating to the communication between linguistics and the college-educated general public, particularly in the English-speaking countries (it is quite probable that in many parts of Europe the situation is different). My worry is that the typical level of knowledge and understanding of English literary studies in the anglophone world and its universities is strikingly different from the typical level of knowledge and understanding of English grammar.

When radio panelists or book reviewers or columnists or essayists talk about literature, as far as I can tell, they do know at least something about their subject matter. They are not completely ignorant of the literature they talk about.

They have seen Shakespeare plays; they know who Milton was and may have read him, or at least know that one can look him up; they have some familiarity with the novels of Austen and Dickens and Brontë and Trollope, and the poetry of Donne, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Auden. They don't just make things up.

And they really couldn't, because ordinary members of the public would call them to account if they were to assert, say, that Jane Austen wrote stirring historical novels of naval warfare, or that Dickens was primarily known for love poetry.

Nothing analogous to this holds for what the typical college-educated broadcaster or journalist or columnist knows about the structure of the English language in linguistic terms. The absence of understanding seen in people's grasp of morphology and syntax, even on quite elementary topics, is astonishing. And it is a Bad Thing.

I realize that it is fighting talk to say to people with a degree in English literature that they do not know grammar. They typically see themselves as adequately qualified, even well versed, in the subject. They feel they know a dangling participle from a split infinitive, they know adverbs and prepositions and all sorts of other stuff. That is precisely why they feel empowered to critique the usage of others, whether in correcting student work or in commenting on a colleague's prose or in writing letters to the *Daily Telegraph*.

But as I will try to show with a number of examples, grammar education fell into a deep trough a long time ago. It is not just that the grasp of detail is weak; it's that not even the basics are anywhere close to being understood or taught correctly.

I will be referring throughout to a single dialect of English with a rather special status, often known as Standard English. What makes it special is that through a complex of accidents on a global scale it happens to be in use for all sorts of serious purposes (governmental, journalistic, literary, commercial, etc.) all over the world. It is not better than other dialects or easier to understand; it is just well situated sociologically. In fact it comes close to being a global lingua franca. It is the language described in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston and

Pullum et al. 2002, henceforth *CGEL*). Other dialects can be referred to as nonstandard, but keep in mind that for me that is not a derogatory term. Other dialects are not *substandard*, but they are different, sometimes strikingly so.

Some of my examples will come from America, partly because the majority of my career as a grammarian was spent in the USA and partly because the prevalence of false beliefs about grammar is much clearer and deeper there. But things are almost as bad in the UK, and in other UK-influenced parts of the anglophone world such as Australia.

For example, a retired accountant named Neville Gwynne made headlines a couple of years ago by spouting some nonsense about there being alleged grammar errors in a letter that 100 British academics had sent to Michael Gove, the UK Secretary of State for Education. Gwynne did not identify a single clear grammar error. He spotted one complex construction of debatable acceptability, but his description of the whole letter as being illiterate was ridiculous. Yet Gwynne got away with it, because no British journalist knew enough to call him on it.

It is very different in the blogosphere: a nice dissection of Gwynne's claims appeared on No Wealth But Life (<http://nowealth.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/the-goveites-behind-bad-grammar-awards.html>); another appeared on Caxton (<http://caxton1485.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/too-much-too-wrong/>); and Mark Liberman discussed the topic on Language Log (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=4606>).

I should perhaps make it explicit that when I talk about ignorance of grammar I am not talking about making usage mistakes: I am not concerned here with critiquing the usage of literature professors, literary critics, usage advisors, or anyone else, on their own writing. If they are native speakers I take what they write mostly at face value: when a distinguished professor uses a construction, I take it as *prima facie* evidence that the construction is grammatical. However, even a distinguished professor can (like anybody else) make unintentional slips in either writing or speech, so the evidence must be regarded as *de-facto* and any analytical inferences based on it

will be tentative — as with the evidence for any scientific hypothesis.

Notice that although I have no interest in identifying alleged errors of usage made by distinguished professors, it may sometimes appear otherwise: I may appear to be engaging in ad hominem argumentation when I point to the usage of a person *A* who has voiced a view about the incorrect usage of person *B*. But this will typically be because I am paying *A* the compliment of presupposing that his usage is correct, so that (under this assumption) *A* himself provides a source of evidence that his critique of *B* cannot be taken seriously.

I want to distinguish two kinds of ignorance about grammar. One consists in an uncritical implicit acceptance of claims that are clearly unsupported because they are artifacts of indefensible analyses. These analyses may have been presupposed and widely taught since the 18th century, but they shouldn't have been. This is a matter of holding false beliefs about the subject matter. The remedy is to replace them with true ones.

The other kind of ignorance is more like a belief in ghosts. It is extremely common for educated people to exhibit a naive faith in the validity and importance of rules that not only fail to hold for the language but never did hold. They believe, wrongly, in ghost rules. Here there is really no option but to debunk the myths: linguists have to try to convince people on the basis of evidence that some of their beliefs should be completely abandoned.

3. Misconceived analyses

I will briefly review three examples of analyses that treat the subject matter wrongly and should long ago have been abandoned: first, the definitions given for classes of words like noun or verb; second, the analysis of the infinitival marker *to*; and third, the misclassification to which prepositions have been subjected.

3.1 *Defining lexical categories*

Traditional grammar has always insisted on defining the basic “parts of speech” — the classes into which words have to be divided for purposes

of grammatical analysis — in terms of fuzzy meaning-based notions: nouns as naming words, verbs as action words, adjectives as describing words, and so on. There is simply no hope for this kind of basis for classification.

Fire is unquestionably a process, something that happens (rapid oxidation producing radiant heat), but *fire* is a noun (*one fire, two fires, the fire's origin, both fires' origins*).

When we say that something stinks, we use the word *stinks* to give a description, but of course *stinks* is a verb, not an adjective.

The crucial point here is that we cannot first catalogue the world's contents to identify all the things that exist, and then tag as nouns the words that turn out to be the names of those things.

Take the abstract relation *R* that holds between two things *a* and *b*, where *a* is an active and typically animate agent, and *b* is some other (typically inanimate) entity, and *R(a,b)* means that *b* ceases to exist because of some action undertaken by *a*. Should we regard *R* as a thing?

It seems unclear what answer we should give to that question. But what is fully clear is that there are two English words that would appear to name it: *destroy* is one, and *destruction* is another. One of these is a verb and the other is a noun. The metaphysical nature of *R* itself cannot possibly provide a basis for categorizing these words.

So nouns cannot be defined as the thing-naming words. But they can be defined. They are (to summarize very briefly) the words that have plain and genitive case forms, and singular and plural number forms, which are found as heads of the phrases that function as subjects and objects in transitive clauses.

What I am stressing is simply that definitions of grammatical notions have to rest on grammar, not on vague and naive semantics or metaphysics.

3.2 *Infinitival 'to'*

Traditional grammar has adopted the practice of saying that *to be* is the infinitive of the copular verb, and *to do* is the infinitive of the verb *do*, and so on. This is utterly incompatible with

the way the language works. The sequence *to do* consists, quite obviously, of two words that function independently. In a sentence like *I was asked to do it* they appear together, but in *They made me do it* we see only *do*, and in *I didn't want to* we see only *to*. There is no sense in which *to be* or *to do* are words; they are word sequences, and not analogous to infinitive forms in Latin.

English actually has no form that is appropriately called the infinitive; it has a plain form that is used in a multiplicity of constructions including imperative clauses (*Be there*), subordinate subjunctive clauses (*It is vital that you be there*), a few relic main clause subjunctive clauses (*Be that as it may*), and bare infinitival clauses (*You should be there*), as well as *to*-infinitival clauses (*You ought to be there*).

Because there is no infinitive word form, and *to be* is a sequence of words, there is no sense in which anything is “split” in the construction traditionally known as the split infinitive: in a sentence like *I want to really understand the subject* an adverb has been placed immediately before the verb in a verb phrase that is preceded by infinitival *to*, but nothing has been split.

A verb phrase is a phrase headed by a verb, such as *understand the subject*. Infinitival *to* can attach as a marker to a VP that has its verb in the plain form, forming a larger VP, *to understand the subject*. Adverbs such as *really*, and other modifiers, can similarly attach to a VP, forming VPs such as *really understand the subject*. There is no reason why *to* cannot attach to this latter kind of VP, forming a VP like *to really understand the subject*. There is no splitting here, just prefixation of the marker *to* onto the beginning of a VP that has a preverbal modifier. If the syntax of English didn't allow that, people wouldn't be saying *to really understand the subject*, or *to just stand there doing nothing*, or *to at least try it*. Yet people have been using phrases of exactly this sort for centuries.

3.3 Misclassifying prepositions

Traditional grammar has maintained a definition of ‘preposition’ that might be appropriate for Latin but is indefensible for English: preposi-

tions are defined as words prefixed to nouns (actually noun phrases, though the tradition neglects that point, treating the other elements of a noun phrase as if they were transparent satellite words that can be ignored and only the noun matters). But that analysis leads to a word like *after* being assigned to three different categories. This is absurd, but unfortunately it is exactly what all published English dictionaries do.

In *soon after our quarrel* the word *after* is treated as a preposition. But in *soon after we quarrelled* the following material is not a noun phrase but a clause, and “conjunction” is the term used for words that introduce clauses, so *after* has to be assigned to the “conjunction” class as well.

And sometimes *after* is not followed by any closely associated constituent: in *We quarrelled soon after* the word *after* modifies the verb by specifying that the quarrel followed a certain contextually-designated time point in the narrative, so it has to be called an adverb.

Nesfield (1900: 41) warns that ‘A Preposition must not be confounded with an Adverb, though the two words are often identical in form.’ How is the student to avoid confounding these allegedly separate words of identical form and identical meaning? According to Nesfield, “The only way to distinguish them is to look to the *work that each of them does*.” When it “affects” two elements it is a Preposition, and when it affects only one it is an Adverb.

It should be completely obvious that this is a mistake: the meaning of the word is the same in each case; so is the spelling; so is the pronunciation; so is the syntactic distribution of the phrase that *after* forms. Otto Jespersen (1924) cogently questioned the wisdom of any such analysis, and saw clearly what should replace the traditional analysis. But he was only elaborating views that emerged nearly two centuries before. Kirkby (1746) complains: “we have several instances of the same word being used at one time as a conjunction and at another time as a preposition.” John Hunter (1784) argued in a paper presented to the Royal Society of Edinburgh that neither conjunctions nor adverbs were in all cases usefully distinguished from prepositions in English (or in Latin and Greek). He stressed that classifi-

cations were being based on the “merely *accidental*” differences in what constituent (if any) happened to follow the word. The sensible analysis is to treat *after* as simply a preposition taking an optional complement that can be either a noun phrase or a clause.

After we quarrelled is treated by traditional grammar as an “adverbial clause” that is introduced by the “subordinating conjunction” *after*. It is not a clause at all. *After we quarrelled* is a preposition-phrase, with *after* as its preposition head. In English, many prepositions (*after, before, except, given, since,*) accept clauses or preposition phrases as complements, not just noun phrases; and some others (*although, because, lest, though*) take clause complements but do not take noun phrase complements.

It should not take 250 years for observations as simple and cogent as those of Kirkby and Hunter to gain currency. Yet that is what happened. The first systematic descriptive grammar of English to adopt a reanalysis of English prepositions along the lines proposed by Kirkby in 1746 and Hunter in 1784 came more than two centuries later, in *CGEL*.

4. Prescriptivist poppycock

Now I want to consider the problem of belief in ghost rules. And my section title, a phrase coined by Heidi Harley on Language Log (<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll>), implies two things: first that ghost rules are poppycock (i.e., silliness), and second that the silliness involves what linguists refer to as **prescriptivism**.

Calling a rule a ghost rule doesn't just mean that it is somewhat insubstantial; I mean that although it may make people scared, it does not genuinely reflect anything about the language. Nor did it at any earlier stage in history. The alleged rule has no credentials that should lead us to respect it.

And to call a rule prescriptive is to say that it is not meant as what the philosopher John Searle would call a **constitutive** rule, one that aims to provide part of the definition of the language system (like saying that the verb in English precedes its object or other complement—a

statement that no one disputes). Instead it is explicitly **regulative**: it aims to settle a dispute on some thorny point by ruling one way or the other, or to convey a stipulation about how you ought to use the language.

For example, prescriptive usage advisors often warn quite sternly against using the passive voice, and criticize writers who do use it. They often do not know what they are talking about, and cannot tell a passive from an active (see Pullum 2014), but the intent is clear. Where a constitutive rule would state that a passive clause has a head verb in participial form (usually the past participle) and may have a preposition-phrase complement in which the head is the preposition *by*, a prescriptivist will tell you things more comparable to George Orwell's “Never use the passive if you can use the active” (in his 1946 essay “Politics and the English language”). It's not about acquainting you with the principles of clause structure in the language; it's about telling you what to do.

And prescriptive rules are usually associated with judgmental attitudes: prose that violates prescriptive rules tends to be regarded (by the sort of people who favour the rules in question) not just as amusingly eccentric or unfortunately incomprehensible, but as deserving of a socially-tinged contempt. The examples that follow should make all of this clear. They are: the so-called “splitting” of infinitives; the ban on *which* in restrictive relative clauses; the strange belief that a pronoun cannot have a genitive antecedent; the similarly strange myth that prepositions should not be separated from the phrases that are understood as their complements; and the prejudice against linking *they* to an antecedent that is syntactically singular.

4.1 Splitting infinitives

People still, after more than a century of silliness, regularly write letters to UK newspapers lamenting the placement of a verb phrase modifier between the infinitival complement-marking word *to* and the plain-form verb that is the head of the infinitival VP. People who have done hardly any study of English grammar usually think

that such modifier placement is an error. Yet none of them ever seem to have looked at either the evidence of literature or the actual statements in serious books on usage and grammar.

The construction in question can be found in some of the earliest English literature, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (14th century). There are examples from literature in every subsequent century. Even Ambrose Bierce, one of the fiercest prescriptivists ever (see Freeman 2009), did not think the split infinitive was ungrammatical or ever had been. And he was right. It was never ungrammatical, and no serious description of the language ever said it was. Even highly conservative usage manuals acknowledge this. The *New York Times Style Manual*, for example, says:

- [1] **split infinitives** are accepted by grammarians but irritate many readers. When a graceful alternative exists, avoid the construction: *to show the difference clearly* is better than *to clearly show the difference*. (Do not use the artificial *clearly to show the difference*.) When the split is unavoidable, accept it: *He was obliged to more than double the price*.

Yet we find clumsy, desperate attempts to avoid splitting infinitives in many magazines and books. This is from *The Economist*:

- [2] *a bill that would force any NGO receiving cash from abroad publicly to label itself a "foreign agent"*

The adverb *publicly* is supposed to modify the verb *label*, but placed where it is, it could be modifying *abroad* or *receiving*.

Mindful of the prejudice that says they should avoid putting an adverb after *to*, some writers misguidedly avoid it even when there is no infinitival construction. This is from Joanna Trollope:

- [3] *Living, as she had since she was fifteen, on the edges of so many other people's lives, she had become used not to talking much herself, as if to talk was to thrust herself into the limelight, into the centre*

of attention in lives that she depended upon for sustenance and thus could not afford to alienate by the wrong sort of behaviour. [Joanna Trollope, *Next of Kin*, 26]

The phrase *not talking much* is a **gerund-participial** clause. The *used to* construction involves the preposition *to*, not the infinitival marker (which never takes the *-ing* of the gerund participial on the following head verb). Joanna Trollope intended to write *she had become used to not talking much herself*, but lost faith, thinking that *to not* could never be grammatical (because *to not talk* would be a split infinitive). As a result she seems to have been panicked into writing something completely ungrammatical.

What a tragedy that delusions about grammar should trammel and mislead even fine novelists like Joanna Trollope!

4.2 Restrictive 'which'

Some time in the 19th century, or perhaps even earlier, grammarians began to wonder if there should not be more regularity about the distribution of words introducing relative clauses. The way the language had evolved, *which* was used for either restrictive relatives (the kind without the commas) or nonrestrictive relatives (the kind with the commas), but *that* was hardly ever used in nonrestrictives:

- [4] a. *The city which I visited seemed very pleasant.* [restrictive]
b. *Banja Luka, which is in Bosnia, seems very pleasant.* [nonrestrictive]
c. *The city that I visited seemed very pleasant.* [restrictive]
d. *??Banja Luka, that is in Bosnia, seems very pleasant.* [nonrestrictive]

Grammarians who perhaps had too much time on their hands and were too keen on tidiness began to wonder whether it might be a good idea to ordain that *which* should always and only be used in nonrestrictives while *that* should always and only be used in restrictives. It makes little sense to regulate a natural language in this sort of way: it is like suggesting that perhaps rivers with

an even number of letters in their names should always and only flow east, and rivers with an odd number of letters in their names should always and only flow west. But it appealed to some, and at the end of the 19th century Henry and Frank Fowler, building on a few suggestions in earlier works, made an explicit case for reforming English relative clauses (Fowler and Fowler 1906).

Unfortunately, some English teachers took the Fowler recommendation to be an established rule, and taught it as such. The myth that *which* was never correct in restrictive relatives slowly gained currency, particularly in America, and by the late 20th century copy editors all over the USA were busily changing relative *which* to *that* whenever there was no comma before it. They continue to waste time in this way, causing bafflement when they occasionally have to deal with British authors (for in Britain the Fowlerian rule never really made much headway).

4.3 Genitive antecedents

Louis Menand is a professor of English literature at Harvard who firmly believes that it is a “solecism” (a grammatical error) for a personal pronoun to have a noun phrase in the genitive case as its antecedent. In correspondence with Arnold Zwicky (see Zwicky’s Language Log post at <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/000048.html> and earlier posts linked there) Menand staunchly maintained that this is so, even despite the fact that plenty of counterexamples could be found in his own book *The Metaphysical Club*. The claim is that a sentence like *Einstein’s discoveries made him famous* is ungrammatical if *him* is taken to refer back to the noun denoting Einstein. The claim also entails that all of these sentences from *The Metaphysical Club* are ungrammatical (I mark genitive antecedents with boldface and pronouns with underlining):

- [5] a. *in a phrase that became **the city’s** name for itself* (p.7)
b. ***Dr. Holmes’s** views on political issues therefore tended to be reflexive: he took his cues from his own instincts* (p.7)
c. ***Emerson’s** reaction, when Holmes showed him the essay, is choice* (p.25)

- d. ***Brown’s** apotheosis marked the final stage in the radicalization of Northern opinion. He became, for many Americans, ...* (p.28)
e. ***Wendell Holmes’s** riot control skills were not tested. Still he had, at the highest point of prewar contention ...* (p.31)
f. ***Holmes’s** account of his first wound was written, probably two years after the battle in which it occurred, in a diary he kept during the war.* (p.38)

What can one say about a professor of literature who cannot even believe that his own well-formed sentences are well-formed?

4.4 Preposition stranding

Possibly the hoariest and most ridiculous of all the myths about English is that prepositions must not be used in contexts where they are separated from their complements, as in:

- [6] a. *the place they took me to*
b. *I wonder what he was looking at.*

This is a ghost rule that John Dryden invented out of thin air. It has never been a true generalization in the whole history of English that prepositions could not be left behind in the verb phrase in this way. Linguists refer to the phenomenon as **preposition stranding**.

And there cannot be any doubt about whether Standard English has preposition stranding. Take the language used by Lady Bracknell, surely Oscar Wilde’s greatest epitome of intimidatingly precise upper-class standard British English. She strands prepositions at least three times in the 18,000 words of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895):

- [7] Lady Bracknell’s preposition stranding:
a. *A very good age to be married at.*
b. *What did he die of?*
c. *To be born, or at any rate, bred in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I*

presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?

Lady Bracknell is a sterling example of pompous and pedantic Standard English as voiced in the most ingenious and delightful of Oscar Wilde's comedies (often cited as the finest stage comedy in the English language). Her evidence should be recognized for what it is: clear and convincing evidence that preposition stranding is grammatical.

4.5 Singular 'they'

William Strunk, who was a professor of English at Cornell in 1918, self-published a booklet called *The Elements of Style* containing guidelines for student writers. And what he said about *they* was as follows:

- [8] **They.** A common inaccuracy is the use of the plural pronoun when the antecedent is a distributive expression such as *each*, *each one*, *everybody*, *every one*, *many a man*, which, though implying more than one person, requires the pronoun to be in the singular. Similar to this, but with even less justification, is the use of the plural pronoun with the antecedent *anybody*, *any one*, *somebody*, *some one*, the intention being either to avoid the awkward "he or she," or to avoid committing oneself to either. Some bashful speakers even say, "A friend of mine told me that they, etc."

But again, as we seek evidence that this holds for English as spoken and written by its expert users, Oscar Wilde lights our way with words he puts into Lady Bracknell's mouth (I mark the instance of *they* with underlining and the antecedent with boldface):

- [9] *It is my last reception, and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when **everyone** has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.*

E.B. White revised Strunk's booklet 50 years after it was first published, and he retains

the prohibitory injunction. Yet there are instances of *they* with a syntactically singular antecedent in his own writing:

- [10] *'But **somebody** taught you, didn't they?' [Character in *Charlotte's Web*]*

White is quite to correct to represent people as using the language in this way. The use of *they/their/them* with syntactically singular antecedents goes back as far as Shakespeare and even Chaucer. It is commonplace in the work of Jane Austen. She puts singular *they* into the mouths of people from all walks of life. I suppose someone could try to maintain that this shows only that the novelist knew some people engaged in this practice conversationally; so let me just exhibit a few examples from the narrator in Austen's novels (taken from the much fuller listing at <http://www.crossmyt.com/hc/linghebr/austhliis.html>; I truncate many of the quotations, and continue with the same use of boldface and underlining):

- [11] Examples from *Emma*:
- was still unwilling to admit ... that there would be the smallest difficulty in **every body**'s returning into their proper place the next morning.*
 - advise **every body** to come and sit down, and not to heat themselves.*
 - it would be quite a pity that **any one** who so well knew how to teach, should not have their powers in exercise again.*
- [12] Examples from *Mansfield Park*:
- Nobody meant to be unkind, but **nobody** put themselves out of their way to secure her comfort.*
 - every one** concerned in the going was forward in expressing their ready concurrence*
 - the only one out of the nine** not tolerably satisfied with their lot*
 - that favouring something which **every body** who shuts their eyes while they look, or their understandings while they reason, feels the comfort of.*
 - Every body around [Fanny Price] was gay and busy, prosperous and important; **each** had their object of*

interest, their part, their dress, their favourite scene, their friends and confederates

- f. **Every body** began to have their vexation.
- g. she found **everybody** requiring something they had not ...Everybody had a part either too long or too short; **nobody** would attend as they ought; **nobody** would remember on which side they were to come in...
- h. **everybody** being as perfectly complying and without a choice as on such occasions they always are
- i. **Nobody** was in their right place, nothing was done as it ought to be.
- j. **every body** had their due importance
- k. **nobody** could command attention when they spoke.
- l. It had been a miserable party, **each of the three** believing themselves most miserable.
- m. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore **every body**, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.
- n. **every one** may be at liberty to fix their own
- o. **nobody** minds having what is too good for them

[13] Examples from *Persuasion*:

- a. she felt that were **any young person**, in similar circumstances, to apply to her for counsel, they would never receive any of such certain immediate wretchedness, such uncertain future good.
- b. Elizabeth ...indignantly answered for **each party's** perfectly knowing their situation.
- c. **Every body** has their taste in noises

[14] Examples from *Pride and Prejudice*:

- a. **every body** was pleased to think how much they had always disliked Mr. Darcy before they had known any thing of the matter.

- b. **Every body** began to find out that they had always distrusted the appearance of his goodness.
- c. **Each** felt for the other, and of course for themselves

[14] Examples from *Sense and Sensibility*:

- a. **each of them** was busy in arranging their particular concerns, and endeavouring, by placing around them books and other possessions, to form themselves a home.
- b. she was a great wonderer, as **every one** must be who takes a very lively interest in all the comings and goings of all their acquaintance.
- c. **every body** had a right to be equally positive in their opinion, and to repeat it over and over again as often as they liked.
- d. **each** found their reward
- e. **each** felt their own error

Many other authors could be mined in a similar way for evidence of their use of *they* with singular antecedents.

To sum up briefly, the notion that singular-antecedent uses of *they* are ungrammatical, illogical, or uncharacteristic of good Standard English writing is ridiculous.

5. Conclusions

What I have tried to do here is to exhibit, very briefly, a few ways in which the educated general public's grasp of even elementary parts of English grammar (never mind more technical syntactic analysis) is in a terrible state. Myths are given widespread credence; readily available evidence is ignored; long-discredited edicts are treated as gospel truths. This is not a happy situation.

One part of the solution would be for students doing literature degrees, and for the professors teaching them, to commit at least a small amount of time to developing an acquaintance with grammatical analysis of the relevant language — not so much the arid outer reaches of theoretical linguistics, but just the elementary and uncontroversially established general properties of English and of language in general.

Mark Liberman of the University of Pennsylvania, co-founder of Language Log, has estimated that the number of linguists on the payrolls of universities in the USA is sufficient that, if the labour force could somehow be spread out equitably across the country's universities and colleges, there would be enough teaching academics to enroll every undergraduate taking any kind of a degree in any subject in at least one linguistics course. I think the same might be true for the UK. This should be a goal to aim for, especially when the degree subject is literature.

People study English literature mainly because they love the artistry that the best of the diverse users of the English language have created in that medium. In pointing out they would profit by knowing something technical about language, I do not aim to be saying anything more controversial than that a jewellery expert would do well to know something of geology and metallurgy.

All those who are serious about the study of literature should know at least the elementary structural principles of the language in which it is composed — enough that they are will not be so ready to believe in the myths, legends, misconceptions, and empirical errors that I have briefly sampled above.

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НЕСРЕЋНИ РАЗВОД ГРАМАТИКЕ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА ОД ЕНГЛЕСКЕ КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ

Резиме

Језик и књижевност су се развојили као научне дисциплине: данас је могуће стећи диплому из енглеске књижевности без икаквог стручног знања о језику или, да будемо прецизнији, без познавања граматике енглеског језика. Једним дијелом, разлог лежи у чињеници да лингвистика све више подразумејва професионално усмјерење и научни приступ. Ипак, усредредио бих се на други проблем, а то је чињеница да се чак и стручњаци који се баве енглеским често држе погрешних ставова у погледу граматике тог језика, што и није изне-

нађење, пошто се на том пољу готово ништа није радило пуних двјеста година. Прво, још увијек су на снази неодрживе тврдње о структури језика – артефакти неообраћивих анализа; друго, још увијек се, у великој мјери, вјерује неким „фантомским“ правилима која никад нису правилно уређивала језичке норме. Да бих представио неодрживе тврдње, у раду разматрам дефиницију лексичких категорија попут именице или глагола, обиљежје инфинитива (to) и погрешну класификацију приједлога. Када се ради о „фантомским“ правилима, разматрам раздвојени инфинитив, апозитивну употребу замјенице *which*, референте у генитиву који претходе приједлозима, помјерање приједлога на крај реченице и референте у једнини који се тичу личне замјенице у 3. лицу множине. Чланак завршавам кратким апелом за поновно уједињење језичких и књижевних студија.

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