

Grumbling about grammar

'Hopefully', said the politician being interviewed on the radio recently, 'the trains will be running again soon'. And in the follow-up programme, where listeners write in and give their points of view, they rounded on the poor politician — not for what he was saying, but for the way he was saying it. He had begun his sentence with *hopefully*, and — according to those who wrote in — he should have known better.

What are the listeners objecting to? They want the word to be used literally, instead of idiomatically. 'Trains can't hope', they say, so the sentence should be recast as 'I hope that ...' or 'It is to be hoped that ...'. What is not clear, of course, is why this particular adverb has been singled out for attention. There are many other adverbs which can be used in the same way, to reflect the attitude of the speaker, but no one ever objects to them. If the politician had said 'Surprisingly, the train was on time', there would have been no letters.

Why hate *hopefully*? The most widely-cited theory is that this word stood out in American English when it became widely used as a translation of *hoffentlich* by German-speaking Jewish immigrants, following World War II. The usage caught on, but many people nonetheless felt it to be alien, and singled it out for criticism. It's a plausible view — though I'd like to see some historical evidence before accepting it.

Grammatical change

Grammar moves at a snail's pace, and only a tiny number of words or constructions is affected at any one time. There are only a few dozen cases like *hopefully* in the entire language. The majority of grammatical patterns are the same from one generation to the next — and most of the grammar of modern English has been the same for centuries. What is surprising is the amount of emotional heat which can still be generated by these few cases of grammatical change.

Where do the changes come from? Several in current British English are due to transatlantic influence. If you hear people saying things like *This is a different hotel than the one I stayed in last year*, they are following the American trend to use *than* after *different*, instead of *from* or *to*. If you hear them answer the question 'Do you have a car?' with *I don't* instead of *I haven't*, then again they are following a US trend. And likewise, the use of the subjunctive (as in *I insist that he go*

now) is increasingly to be heard in Britain, instead of the construction using the indicative (... *that he goes*) or an auxiliary verb (... *that he should go*). Quite a number of British people dislike the grammatical patterns of US English, and say so loudly, whenever they get the chance.

But not all changes are due to American English, of course. Some take place because a grammatical contrast is not supported by a clear difference of meaning. One instance is the 'rule' which tells you to use *less/least* before non-count nouns (*less cake*) and *fewer/fewest* before count nouns (*fewer cakes*). This has been breaking down for a long time, with *less/least* coming to be used for both types: *There are less apples on the tree this year. He's made the least mistakes*. There's no clear meaning difference, so people have gradually begun to lose their sense of what the source of the contrast is. Left to itself, the language would stop using the contrast, after a while. But, of course, people are very reluctant to leave language to itself. They feel it needs caring for. So they complain about the change, in the hope of reversing the trend.

Mythical change

There are several other contrasts kept artificially alive by grammar books and stylistic manuals — such as the difference between *due to* and *owing to*, *like* and *as* (*like/as I was saying...*), or *will* and *shall*. But at least in these cases, the language has been changing in recent decades — and is still changing.

By contrast, there are a number of cases where people condemn a usage as a 'recent change' in the grammar of English, when in fact the usage has been around for centuries. There are two famous examples here. One is the use of split infinitives — putting an adverb between *to* and the verb, as in *They wish to medically examine the child*. The other is the placing of a preposition at the end of a sentence, as in *Who is he talking to*. Both are regularly condemned as examples of the way the use of grammar is deteriorating in the 20th century.

But neither of these usages is a recent happening in English. The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that we have been splitting infinitives happily since at least the 14th century. And we only have to look a few lines down Hamlet's speech 'To be or not to be ...' to see a sentence ending with a preposition: '... and makes us rather bear those ills we have



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Than fly to others that we know not of.'

It's the criticisms which are recent, not the usage.

A matter of identity

For native speakers, all of these issues raise the question of social identity. To speak or write according to the rules of the traditional grammar books is considered to be a mark of educatedness by most influential people in society. If we do not follow those rules, we run the risk of being thought uneducated. In everyday conversation, it is rarely a big issue; but in formal contexts (such as being interviewed for a job, or making a radio announcement), and in the written language, the issue is real indeed. There have been cases of people losing their jobs because they have not observed grammatical distinctions of this kind.

And foreign learners? Knowing about these issues is, I would suggest, an important part of a developed linguistic awareness. Learning a language is more than just knowing about structures and uses; it is knowing about the attitudes people hold to their language, and about the identities such attitudes convey. Native speakers take sides on these matters. The nearer learners come to native-like fluency, the more they will need to take sides too.

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