

A CASE OF THE SPLIT INFINITIVES

ET is a forum for the discussion of 'good', 'bad', 'correct', 'incorrect', 'standard', 'non-standard', 'substandard' and other kinds of usage. In this issue, DAVID CRYSTAL considers a bone of contention that has been with us for a long time.

'There is nothing more depressing,' a correspondent wrote, 'than to witness the current degradation of the English language, most noticeable in the trend to use split infinitives . . .' *Current? Trend?* Let's see.

When was the next quotation written? And by whom? 'A man who has spent all his morning in studying the politics of the world – National Finance, German Reparations, Unemployment, Bolshevik Propaganda, International Disarmament, The Yellow Peril, The Kenya Problem, Weir Houses, Singapore Base, Indian Disaffection, Cairo Murders, – will rise up with no fact so deeply bitten into his soul as that he has encountered a split infinitive . . .'

Pass? It was Robert Bridges, in a Society for Pure English Tract, in 1925.

But why begin with him? Let's go back a generation or two. In the 1880s, Andrew Lang describes the treaty negotiations between the British Government and the United States. Apparently, the British were willing to make concessions about the Alabama claims, the Canadian fisheries, and the like, but 'telegraphed that in the wording of the treaty it would under no circumstances endure the insertion of an adverb between the preposition *to* . . . and the verb'.

But why begin with *him*? Let's go back a generation. 'A correspondent states as his own usage, and defends, the insertion of an adverb between the sign of the infinitive mood and the verb. He gives as an instance, "to scientifically illustrate". But surely this is a practice entirely unknown to English speakers and writers . . .' This was Henry Alford, Dean of Canterbury, writing in *The Queen's English* in 1869.

Let's rest here awhile. Alford was wrong. The splitting of infinitives can be traced in English from the early fourteenth century.

Fitzedward Hall, writing around the turn of our century, compiled a catalogue of examples from such writers as Wycliffe, Tyndale, Donne, Goldsmith, Coleridge, Macaulay, Burns, and Browning. The *OED* provides more good examples, from around 1400.

It would be possible, if there were space, to trace the complaints about split infinitives back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. But there we would have to stop. There's no mention of the problem in the main 18th-century grammars. As Barbara Strang put it, in her *Modern English Structure* (1962), 'Fussing about split infinitives is one of the more tiresome pastimes invented by nineteenth century prescriptive grammarians'. Even William Cobbett, who wrote an English grammar 'intended for the use of schools and of young persons in general, but more especially for the use of soldiers, sailors, apprentices, and plough-boys . . . to which are added six lessons, intended to prevent statesman [sic] from using false grammar, and from writing in an awkward manner', made no mention of it – though he has plenty to say about other infamous usage questions, such as double negatives and the use of *whom*.

There is, then, no question of the split infinitive question being a new phenomenon – though it is certainly a mite more recent than, say, the rule about ending sentences with prepositions.

So where are we now? Modern grammarians like to collect examples of cases where the use of a split infinitive actually helps the language to make a distinction of meaning which would otherwise be lost, or ambiguous. Try these (from Schibsbye and Jespersen):

He failed to entirely comprehend it.

To almost succeed is not enough.

No one claims to completely understand it.

He was palpably too ill to really carry out his duty.

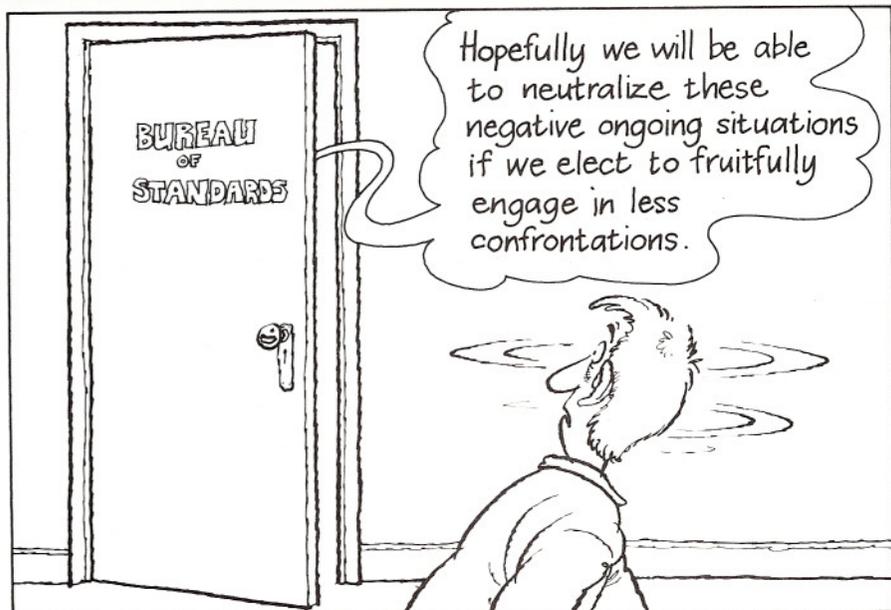
My favourite is Jespersen's 'A vicious back-hander, which I failed to entirely avoid', which means imperfect success, where the replaced adverb could mean complete failure. Then there are all the cases where the insertion of an adverb is promoted by the rhythmic norms of the language (the preference for sequences of alternating strong-weak beats): 'to fully comprehend', 'to boldly go', 'to further ease the tension' (where the alternatives would produce less natural sequences of unstressed syllables).

But perhaps the clearest cases are those where there is a coordination of verb phrases, as in 'All they have to do is to sit down and faithfully copy it', or where the adverb is so closely attached to the verb that alternative placements are impossible, as in 'He liked to half close his eyes'.

It is easy to understand how the split infinitive debate began – I devote a chapter to it in my *Who cares about English usage?* (Penguin, 1984), basically arguing that it was the influence of Latin grammar. But I don't understand why *so much* fuss has been made about this particular construction. No one seems to worry about the same thing happening with nouns (e.g. 'the big man') – a 'split substantive', as Jespersen called it. Why should we be so worried about the verb phrase? Sir Ernest Gowers thought it was a 'bad rule', which 'makes for ambiguity by inducing writers to place adverbs in unnatural and even misleading positions'. He even went so far as to call split infinitives a 'taboo' so potent that people see them even when they do not exist. He reports that a correspondent took him to task for writing 'I gratefully record', and adds: 'The split infinitive bogey is having such a devastating effect that people are beginning to feel that it must be wrong to put an

adverb between any auxiliary and any part of a verb, or between any preposition and any part of a verb'.

That is why people who harangue the press about split infinitives are doing the language no service. They are, rather, promoting a spirit of uncertainty which will ultimately do far more harm. My view is that, if you have an obsession, keep it to yourself. Is 'obsession' too strong, with its overtones of psychiatric disease? I will hide behind Robert Burchfield, who is bigger than I am. In his recent book, *The English Language* (OUP, 1985), he talks about people 'suffering from the "split infinitive" syndrome'. That'll do nicely.



CAN WE SPLIT INFINITIVES? – A SURVEY OF SEVEN USAGE GUIDES

no yes yes but

<i>Modern English Usage</i> , H W Fowler (ed. Ernest Gowers), Oxford 1965 ✓
<i>The Oxford Guide to the English Language</i> , E S C Weiner, 1983 ✓
<i>The Britannica Book of English Usage</i> , Doubleday-Britannica 1980 ✓
<i>The Canadian Writer's Handbook</i> , W E Messenger & J de Bruyn, Prentice-Hall 1980 ✓
<i>Encyclopedia of English</i> , A Zeiger, Coles, Toronto, 1979 ✓
<i>The Careful Writer</i> , Theodore M Bernstein, Atheneum, New York, 1977 ✓
<i>Longman Dictionary of the English Language</i> , grammar notes, 1984 ✓

The seven manuals are consistent in their advice: they see the traditional ruling about splitting infinitives as largely artificial but still capable of exercising social control. The infinitive ought normally to be kept 'intact', says Coles – because splitting it 'is widely disliked,' says Longman – and 'reasonable or unreasonable, it is the norm,' says Bernstein. But, says the Britannica, 'the truth is that the split is desirable whenever its avoidance would prove awkward or affected or misleading.' All agree that in such circumstances splitting is not just permissible, but preferable.

THE USAGE GAME

In *ET2* David Crystal referred to 'a new indoor sport' where writers to editors skin each other successively on points of usage and abuse. A recent spate of letters to the editor of *The Guardian* (London and Manchester) displayed the key features of this usage game admirably, as the following selection of closing letters from the series demonstrates:

Sir, – It seems that the time has come for me to abandon my campaign against 'split infinitives.' Since that interesting exchange of letters on this subject in your columns some weeks ago, I seem to have been bombarded with split infinitives by the BBC, ITV, and everybody else.

When I turned on my TV the other day – a programme called *Arena*, I think – and heard the author of the runner-up for the *Guardian's Book of*

the Year telling me 'to topographically reconstruct' something, the camel's back was broken, and I have downed tools. But I will still wince whenever I hear a split infinitive, and I won't buy the book.

(Lord) **Winstanley**. House of Lords. (23 Feb 85)

Sir, – Lord Winstanley writes (Letters, February 23): 'I will still wince whenever I hear a split infinitive.' I shall still wince whenever I hear 'will' instead of 'shall.' – Yours faithfully,

Bernard Withers. Saffron Waldon, Essex. (28 Feb 85)

Sir, – Lord Winstanley (Letters, March 4) may wince as often as circumstances require, but there is no 'future tense' in English.

Future time in English can be

referred to in several ways: he's going to/is to/is about to wince for one group; he may/might/will/shall/can wince for another; and certain present tenses for a third, e.g., he's writing to Lord Winstanley next week; Lord Winstanley leaves for Outer Mongolia tomorrow.

The contrast between these several ways is not that one is correct and the others aren't, but between the different ways in which the future actions or events are regarded. – Yours descriptively,

G. T. Roberts. London E17. (12 Mar 85)

Sir, – One who knows less than I about English grammar is ignorant. One who knows more is pedantic (of Letters, March 23, etc).

Margaret Aitchison. Redhill, Surrey. (26 Mar 85)