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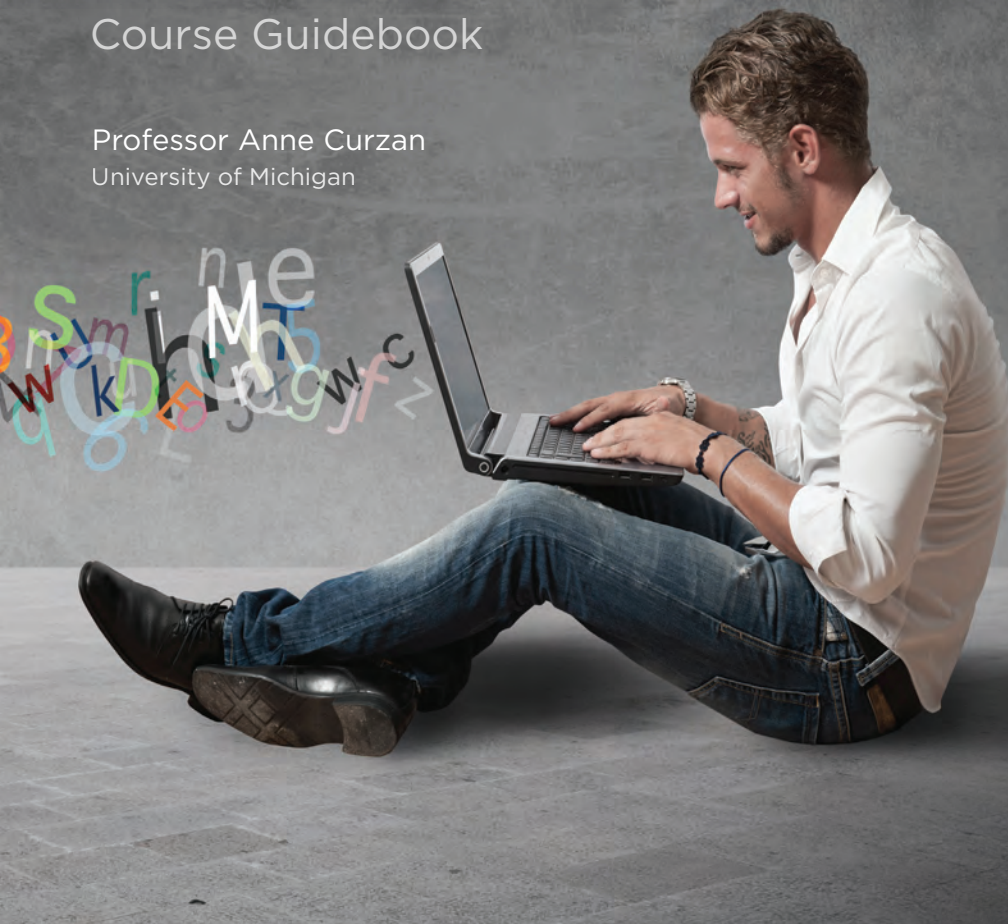
Course Guidebook

Professor Anne Curzan
University of Michigan



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In 2007, Professor Curzan received the University of Michigan's Henry Russel Award, one of the highest honors for midcareer faculty; she also has been honored at Michigan with a Faculty Recognition Award and the John Dewey Award.

Professor Curzan has published on a wide range of topics, including the history of English, language and gender, corpus linguistics, historical sociolinguistics, pedagogy, and lexicography. She is the author of *Fixing English: Prescriptivism and Language History* and *Gender Shifts in the History of English*. She is coauthor, with Michael Adams, of the textbook *How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction*, now in its third edition. She also coauthored, with Lisa Damour, *First Day to Final Grade: A Graduate Student's Guide to Teaching*, also now in its third edition. Professor Curzan's other Great Courses are *The Secret Life of Words: English*

Words and Their Origins and *How Conversation Works: 6 Lessons for Better Communication*.

Professor Curzan served as coeditor of the *Journal of English Linguistics* for nine years and is now a senior consulting editor for the journal. She has been a member of the Usage Panel of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* since 2005. Professor Curzan shares her insights on language in short videos on the website of Michigan University's College of Literature, Science, and the Arts; on the blog *Lingua Franca* for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; and on Michigan Radio's weekly segment "That's What They Say." In her spare time, she is an avid runner and triathlete. ■

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ENGLISH GRAMMAR BOOT CAMP

Is it *who* or *whom*? When do we use *between* instead of *among*? What is a comma splice or a misplaced modifier—and why do they matter? Is it true that you shouldn't end a sentence with a preposition? This course explores all of these well-known usage questions alongside some less well-known ones, such as whether it's legitimate to criticize the past participle *proven* or the use of *however* at the beginning of a sentence. In each case, you will get clear explanations of the terminology and judicious advice about how to handle the usage issue as a writer and as a speaker.

This course delves into the technical details of everything from pronouns to participles to passives to punctuation with a liveliness that will delight the grammar geek. You will learn why the verb *go* turns into *went* in the past tense, how "go slow" works differently from "feel bad," and whether we really should say "It is I" rather than "It is me." You will have the chance to work through the conundrum of making a possessive out of a noun that ends in *–s* and decide on the proper plural of *emoji*. The course never settles for easy answers, such as "Don't use the passive voice." One entire lecture is devoted to when passive sentences are useful and when they are ineffective, with detailed clarification of when a sentence that might look passive is not passive.

At every turn, the course tells the stories behind the rules. You will never look at a grammar checker's correction of a *which* into a *that* once you know how H.W. Fowler viewed this "rule" when he first introduced it. The rule about not splitting infinitives does not seem to go back to Latin, despite the folklore along those lines, and you'll be surprised by the power of a letter to the editor.

The pronoun *they* has been singular since before Shakespeare could use it (which he did), and it was an 18th-century woman grammarian who introduced the rule that *he* could function generically. Why did the American Dialect Society then vote singular *they* the Word of the Year for 2015? These historical facts bring usage rules to life and give you context to make informed decisions about current usage questions.

To help you make these decisions, the course pulls back the curtain on language authority and provides you an insider's view on judgments by the *American Heritage Dictionary* Usage Panel. It introduces language databases where you can explore your own questions, such as whether *based off* is replacing *based on* (the answer is not yet) and whether published academic writing starts sentences with *And* (the answer is a resounding yes).

By the end of this course, you will be able to use this knowledge of grammar to your advantage as a speaker and writer. You will have a new understanding of what makes writing "choppy"—and how to fix it. And you will see why writing a speech needs to be different from writing an essay to help your audience follow what you're saying.

Have you wondered why the Oxford comma is called the Oxford comma? Or is your concern whether you should enforce the rule about using the Oxford comma? Answers to all such questions await, framed in a way that allows you to approach grammar with meticulous care and a fun sense of exploration. ■

Lecture 1 Why Do We Care about Grammar?

"Aptitude is essential; but equally as important is the desire to learn." That sentence was on the usage ballot for the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (AHD) in fall 2015. All the members of the Usage Panel were asked to vote on the sentence, using these categories: acceptable, somewhat acceptable, somewhat unacceptable, or completely unacceptable. At issue: Is the phrase *equally as* redundant? Fifty-three percent of the panel deemed the sentence unacceptable. The panel tipped toward rejecting the sentence—but was still split. Blurry lines like that are what we'll discuss throughout this course.

About Usage

- The Usage Panel was created by AHD in the late 1960s to give dictionary users guidance about formal writing. The panel surveys a group of highly educated people invested in language. Today, there are about 200 members, including academics, journalists, creative writers, radio personalities, and linguists.

- Members vote on whatever grounds they choose: personal preference, favorite usage guides, data about actual usage, and so on.

- There isn't some objective measure of whether a grammatical construction is acceptable. And judgments about acceptability change over time—as we'll see in this course. This is one of the things that make studying grammar endlessly interesting.

- If you can accept and even embrace the complexity and subtlety of what “acceptable” means when it comes to usage, you can write and edit with even more nuance. It allows you to be *careful* in the best sense of that word: to care about the language and how to use it best in any given situation.

- We can master the usage rules that help us write appropriate and even beautiful prose—and we can recognize where usage guides don’t agree because the language is changing or because our sensibilities are changing.

- There are bits of grammar that grammarians have paid a lot of attention to over the decades and made pronouncements about. Two examples are split infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions.

- There are also bits of grammar people haven’t noticed as much. An example: Is it “have showed” or “have shown”? No one seems

to care right now. Both are acceptable in formal prose. However, that is not the case for everyone with "proved" versus "proven."

An Open Mind

- This course will ask you to keep an open mind—to think about grammar in what may be a new way. That's not to say we should throw out all usage rules we've learned. The conventions of formal, edited English can be very valuable.

- Advice in usage guides, which we'll be covering in this course, helps you to write clearer, more aesthetically pleasing prose. Some rules about formal grammar can help you avoid ambiguity and capture tone and prosody on the page.

- But it's valuable to distinguish "preferable" from "correct" or "the only acceptable thing." It's worth asking questions about a usage rule that has been handed down for generations. Asking those questions and making those distinctions makes us even savvier writers and speakers: We can make deliberate, informed decisions about language we want to use in context.

- Linguists are sometimes accused of being hypocrites because they point out the very humanness of the rules that govern formal, edited English and sometimes their faulty logic, and then often follow those rules when they write books and articles.

- One way to deal with this conundrum is to avoid your pet peeves in your own writing, but resist inappropriately correcting them in the writing of others; for example, you might avoid writing the word *impactful*, but since its use is now widespread, correcting it in the work of others is harder to justify.

Some Terms

- The term *usage* means how words and phrases are used in speech and writing. This is understood broadly to cover pronunciation, word meaning, morphology, syntax, and punctuation.

- *Grammar* is typically used more narrowly in linguistics to cover morphology and syntax (not pronunciation and punctuation). However, some "grammar books" out there cover pronunciation and punctuation

- Both *grammar* and *usage* can be used descriptively to refer to what speakers and writers actually do with the language and to refer to what they should do to demonstrate "good usage" or "good grammar."

Your Inner Grammando and This Course

- The term *grammando* is a great word introduced by Lizzie Skurnick in *The New York Times Magazine*. *Grammando* means "one who constantly corrects others' linguistic mistakes." The example Skurnick gives is, "Cowed by his grammando wife, Arthur finally ceased saying 'irregardless.'"

- If you are someone with an opinionated, fairly outspoken inner grammando, this course will ask you to get in touch with that inner grammando. You can start a dialogue where the two of you can revisit usage questions your inner grammando might think are already settled.

- Why? What are the benefits of this dialogue? It will make you even more careful, with an increased sensitivity to role of context and effects of language change. It will also make you more confident that you aren't getting it wrong when you are helping others with usage

- More importantly, it allows us to understand language difference as difference, not deficit. Language is a key part of culture, and understanding the diversity in our language is an important part of understanding the diversity among speakers. We can help others master the conventions of standard, formal usage without making others feel bad about themselves or their language.

- If you are someone who feels some insecurity about your mastery of grammar, this course asks you to believe that you know more than you think you do. You "know grammar" because you are able to communicate. You may not know all the terminology or all the formal usage rules for written English, but you know a whole lot about how English grammar works.

  - The fun thing about this course is that we will unpack, analyze, and put labels on all of this knowledge that you carry around with you—and talk about the usage rules that may distinguish written English from spoken English.

  - With all of this knowledge, we can be ever more skilled speakers and writers. We'll also learn a lot of great facts about the elaborate system and kooky idiosyncrasies in English grammar.

- The next two lectures address prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar. Then, after a quick review of some fundamental terminology about words, phrases, and clauses, we're going to dive into the details of parts of speech and related usage rules.

- The course is loosely organized around the major parts of speech like nouns, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and the like. As we talk about how each part of speech works, we'll address the tricky usage issues that come up with that part of speech.

Suggested Reading

Curzan, *Fixing English*.

Gove, ed., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*.

Hartwell, "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar."

Questions to Consider

1. How would you define *grammar*?

2. What are three of your biggest pet peeves about usage? As a mental exercise, try making the case for the acceptance of one of your peeves (e.g., using *less* for *fewer* could be seen as a streamlining of the grammar, eradicating an optional distinction without causing confusion).

Prescriptivism: Grammar Shoulds and Shouldn'ts

Lecture 2

This course has a certain viewpoint: If you speak English fluently, you know English grammar. What you may not have full control of is (1) all the terminology to describe what you know, and (2) the full set of rules that govern formal, standard English. Throughout the course, we'll be covering relevant prescriptive rules as we talk about nouns, adverbs, prepositions, and the like. In this lecture, we'll talk about the authority and history of this approach to grammar

What Grammar Means to Me

- Some writing instructors use an assignment called "What Grammar Means to Me" to learn about the baggage students may be bringing with them. One instructor got this memorable and telling response:

> When someone says the word "grammar" to me, my mind immediately flashes back to my sixth grade English teacher. She was teaching us about prepositions and our class was having trouble grasping it. The following day she brought in a Mickey Mouse figurine and a Barbie playhouse. She proceeded to place Mickey all around the house. "Mickey is BY the house, Mickey is IN the house." She has since scarred me forever by telling us that if we ever placed a preposition at the end of a sentence, Mickey would die. Grammar has terrified me ever since.

- For many people, connotations of grammar include red pens, fear, ignorance, drills, correction, and Mickey Mouse and his imminent

demise. They may also think of rules like: Don't end a sentence with a preposition, don't dangle a modifier, and don't split an infinitive. These can build a sense that "I don't know English grammar."

- This lecture will focus generally on what we will call *prescriptive grammar*: the set of rules that tell us what we should and shouldn't do in formal standard English. *Prescriptive* here means prescribing the do's and don'ts of speaking and writing formal standard English.

Split Infinitives

- The example of split infinitives will help here. The split infinitive rule is basically: Don't put an adverb between *to* and a verb (i.e., to boldly go, to better understand). The idea is that the infinitive is a single unit and should not be split up.

- This is one of the strongest prescriptive rules in popular understanding of grammar. However, Oxford lifted the ban in 1998, with its *New Oxford Dictionary of English*. Many style guides have also relaxed—but many editors and teachers have not.

- Where does this rule come from? One common idea that it comes from Latin, but there is no evidence for that. Some people cite Bishop Lowth's 1762 work on grammar, but it doesn't actually address it.

- It wasn't possible to split an infinitive until Middle English. There is evidence of split infinitives in the 14th century. For instance, the Wycliffite translation of the Bible includes: "It is good to not eat flesh and to not drink wine." By the 17th century, some writers were trying to avoid it, but there was no explicit rule.

- Do we split infinitives today? Yes, and some sound idiomatic: to better serve; to better understand. It may also be about a weak-strong rhythm: to boldly go. Some uses are less ideal, such as when we get a lot of material between *to* and the verb: to quickly and effectively but not always consistently grade.

- So here's better advice: It is fine to split infinitives with an adverb; for clarity, one might want to avoid splitting an infinitive with a long adverbial phrase.

- Any idea about "right" and "wrong" when it comes to grammar gets complicated when we learn about the history of prescriptive rules and compare rules to the way that real speakers and writers use the language in real time. Not splitting an infinitive may be the right call for a specific piece of writing, but that doesn't make it universally "right" or how English is "supposed to" work.

The Value of Prescriptive Rules

- It is inaccurate to suggest there is no value to prescriptive rules. Contrary to what some people believe, linguists aren't saying prescriptive rules are bad and everyone should speak and write however they want all the time. However, some linguists can be overly strident in their attempt to challenge the perceived authority of prescriptive rules.

- Prescriptive rules can promote a standard, which has a real value; they can promote aesthetically pleasing kinds of prose, like parallelism; and they can promote clarity. Let's just keep perspective on their value: Be open-minded about the rules' benefits and weaknesses—and be open-minded about other ways to speak and write English, depending on audience and context.

The Scope of Prescriptive Rules

- Prescriptive grammar covers a lot of ground, much more than just syntax. Take as an example Ellie Grossman's book *The Grammatically Correct Handbook*, which touches on pronunciation, spelling as it relates to pronunciation, punctuation, lexical issues, regional differences, morphological issues, Latin plurals, past participles, syntactic issues, and stylistic issues.

- This course will cover that full range, and will usually refer to those as "usage" issues. Relevant questions are: How do we use the language? Is there guidance about how we are supposed to do

something? To what extent does something affect spoken and written usage?

- The rules governing these questions are found in a loose network. Many of us were asked to purchase an academic usage guide or dictionary for an English course; examples include:
  - Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*
  - Joseph Williams's *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*
  - H. W. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*
  - Bryan Garner's *Dictionary of American Usage*.
- Some guides hail from as far back as almost 250 years. The second half of 18th century saw a proliferation of these guides. The guides tend to focus on usage issues where there is variation in usage.
- How do they justify which usage is incorrect? We'll cover this more in future lectures, but there is a range of reasons:
  - Etymology (a word should mean what it used to mean)
  - Logic (language should work like math, even though it is not math)
  - Analogy (English should work like Latin or German)
  - Purity (English should remain true to its roots, even though it has always been influenced by other languages)
  - Authority (great writers used the language this way)
  - Personal taste.

- One grammarian's personal preference can get picked up as a rule in future guides. We'll see this may be the case with the rule about ending a sentence with a preposition.

- We can identify by name some of the earliest grammarians whose opinions about good usage still echo in today's guides. Some examples of influential works:

  - Joseph Priestley's *Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761). Priestley was the chemist who isolated oxygen—and a clergyman and political theorist, who also wrote a grammar. He tried to move away from Latin models, and was interested in actual usage but still concerned with correctness.

  - Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762). Lowth's image is often framed as the "arch prescriptivist," but has been rehabilitated by Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade.

  - American lawyer Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* (1795). Murray was more prescriptive than his predecessors. This book went through 65 official editions in about 75 years. His grammar spread the idea that singular they was wrong, and one should use he instead.

  - Richard Grant White's *Words and Their Uses: Past and Present* (1870). Many point to this as the pinnacle of prescriptivism. The author was a Shakespearean with very strong opinions about usage; for instance, he called the word donate "utterly abominable."

- These examples give us a useful perspective on guidance about usage. Things that may sound terrible to our ears may become unremarkable within a generation or two.

- This doesn't mean that we don't want to avoid usage that others strongly dislike or see as overly informal or low in some contexts.

But we can have the perspective that the judgment is not inherent to the construction—it is something that has been put on it and may change.

Fowler and Roberts

- Compared with White, we can view H. W. Fowler and his *Dictionary of Modern Usage* (1926) as a good-natured prescriptivist. The book is filled with opinions (e.g., *alright* is "not a word").

- He says it is a mistake to assume *none* can only be singular, and he categorizes the prescription against split infinitives under "fetishes" and "superstitions," mocking those who follow the prescription doggedly.

- What would Fowler have thought of Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts changing the oath of office when he swore in President Obama in 2008? The original oath includes the words, "I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of

the President of the United States" Notice that *faithfully* comes between *will* and *execute*. This is not a split infinitive, but a split verb—and people who feel strongly about one often feel strongly about the other.

- Roberts's version went: "I do solemnly swear that I will execute the office of the President of the United States faithfully." That *faithfully* moved pretty far from where President Obama expected it to be. Both versions are clear and unambiguous—the concern about the verb is not a concern about clarity or even euphony (*faithfully execute* is very colloquial).

- They redid the oath and all was fine. This incident shows the power of rules to shape our sense of what is good and appropriate. It's a good reason to know and understand them—and to have enough information to make informed decisions about when we want to follow them and when we don't.

Suggested Reading

Bailey, "Talking about words: Split Infinitives."
Chapman, "The Eighteenth-Century Grammarians as Language Experts."
Crystal, *The Fight for English*.
Curzan, *Fixing English*.
Finegan, "Usage."
Grossman, *The Grammatically Correct Handbook*.
Nunberg, "The Decline of Grammar."
Ostade, *The Bishop's Grammar*.

Questions to Consider

1. When would you allow a split infinitive, and why?

2. What needs to happen for a usage rule to become inapplicable, irrelevant, or defunct? Who declares a usage rule "over"?

Lecture 3 Descriptivism: How Grammar Really Works

This lecture starts with a look at contractions in English, not in terms of whether or not we should use them in formal writing but in terms of where contractions can and cannot happen. Then we'll move on to discuss historical underpinnings of certain rules, and how concepts like the rightness or wrongness of double negatives are somewhat fungible. We'll close with a look at other descriptive rules. The overall theme of the lecture is: If you speak and write English competently, then you actually know quite a lot about grammar, even if you don't think you do. Another theme: Nonstandard grammars aren't necessarily wrong.

Contractions

- We'll start with a straightforward and very common contraction: did + not, which can help make, "I didn't swim." Now let's coordinate that sentence to see what can happen:
  - He swam but I didn't swim.
  - He swam but I didn't. (This omits the main verb "swim" and leaves *didn't* stranded at end of sentence. This is not always possible.)
- Let's now look at another common contraction: I + am, as in, "I'm driving." Now let's coordinate (imagine we're talking about carpools):
  - She's driving and I'm driving.

- She's driving and I'm. (This doesn't work: You can't omit the main verb and leave *I'm* stranded at the end of the sentence.)

- We couldn't strand other pronouns contracted with auxiliary verbs to end a sentence or clause:

  - Who has been to South Africa? She has. (Again, we have omitted main verb and the rest of the sentence.)

  - Who has been to South Africa? She's. (This is a no-go.)

- This is true in a comparative sentence too, where *to be* is the main verb and not an auxiliary or helping verb: "She's taller than I'm" doesn't work.

- No one ever taught you this; it is intuitive grammatical knowledge, learned when you were a child. You just have a sense that "She's taller than I'm" is ungrammatical, in a more fundamental way than a split infinitive. This is fundamental to your linguistic competence as a speaker of English.

Descriptive Grammar

- Descriptive grammar is made up of this complex set of rules that allow us to make grammatical utterances. Grammatical in the descriptive sense means rule-governed, systematically constructed language delivered in a way that can be parsed by others. A rule is an established pattern of usage that speakers recognize. Descriptive grammars must be huge to capture all this knowledge compared with style guides, which capture a small percentage.

- The most remarkable feature of grammar of human languages is that we can create an infinite number of utterances from a finite set of resources. Think about what you're doing right now: You're reading sentences you've never read before.

- Conventions are fundamental: Think of linguistic signs and grammatical rules and patterns. Those rules allow us to combine the signs in new ways.

Multiple Negations

- Ungrammatical sentences don't follow the patterns of a variety of English. Here's an example with word order. We know this is fine: A dog chased me down the street.

- We know these are not fine:

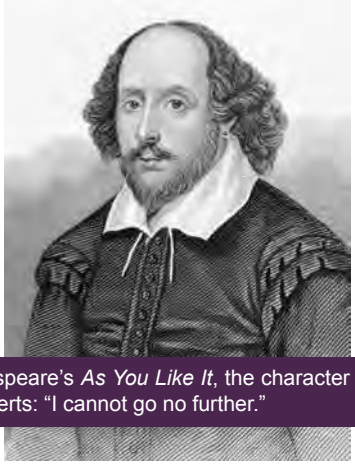
  - Dog a chased me down street the. (Determiners must come before nouns.)

  - A dog chased me the street down. (The preposition needs to come before the noun phrase.)

  - Dog me street down chased a the. (This is just a general mess.)

- What about, "We don't have nothing to hide." Is this grammatical in the descriptive sense? To answer that, let's think historically. Double negation is now considered nonstandard, but there is a long history of multiple negation in English.

- Chaucer described a knight in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*: "He *nevere* yet *no* vileynye *ne* sayde." (Translation: He never no evil thing not said à He never ever said anything vile.) Note that there are three negatives.



In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the character Celia asserts: "I cannot go no further."

- The system for marking negation in English was different: Some writing used *ne* rather than *not*, and it was inserted before the verb (*ne sayde*). Now we use *not* and it is inserted after the auxiliary (*cannot*, *has not*, *did not say*). Varieties of English that continue to use double negation carry on a long tradition.

- It's a myth that two negatives cancel each other out. Take, for example, the meaning of "not unhappy." We must also note that intonation matters: "We don't have none." All in all, we must consider double negation grammatical for many varieties of English. It is not formal or standard, but completely systematic and well understood by speakers of all varieties.

Multiple Grammars

- This is a good moment to make a key point about how "English grammar" works: There isn't just one. All varieties of English spoken in speech communities have systematic grammars.

- We need to talk about English grammars, as there are many varieties of English—Standard American English is just one of them. Standard American English will be the focus of much of this course, but we will often point out differences in other varieties and talk about how the standard variety has changed over time.

- Now let's return to negation, focusing on the kind with just one negative. If we step back from a negative sentence to examine what is at work, it can give you a taste of how much you know. Let's take the sentence, "It did not rain."

    - The *not* goes after the auxiliary verb.

    - Contraction is possible ("didn't rain").

    - The auxiliary verb(s) come before the main verb.

- What if there is more than one auxiliary? Take as an example, "The cake has been eaten." You know that you the negative version

would go as, “The cake has not been eaten,” rather than, “The cake has been not eaten.” A contraction is also possible, with *hasn’t*.

- That’s a lot of knowledge about how to make a negative sentence that you may never have had spelled out that way before. You just learned it as a kid.

Other Descriptive Rules

- Here are some other examples of descriptive rules:
  - Determiners come before nouns: “All her many friends” instead of, “Her all many friends.”
  - An adjective will come between the determiner and the noun: “a silly song.”
  - To make most nouns plural, add -s: “silly songs.”
  - Prepositions precede the noun phrase: “in my head.”
- These may seem very basic and not worth spending time on, but it’s powerful to remember how much we know when we know English grammar. The usage rules that we worry about are just a fraction of the universe of English grammar.
- Being able to compare how the language works descriptively with the rules we’re told to follow in formal speech and writing can help you make even more informed decisions about usage. You’ll gain a new perspective on some of the rules you may have learned in school or elsewhere.
- As an example, let’s return to double negation. We’ve determined that historically it has been rule-governed and continues to be rule-governed and grammatical in many varieties of English.
- But in 18th century, Bishop Lowth, in his very popular grammar, introduced the idea that negatives could cancel each other. This

got extended to sentences like, “We don’t have nothing to hide.” They were declared illogical.

- Double negatives are now avoided in Standard American English, and in fact are often condemned as wrong or bad English. But there is nothing inherently wrong or uneducated about the construction—in fact, it used to be used in high writing.

- In fact, some people thought that the move to single negation wasn’t necessarily a good thing. Here’s a quote from the *London Review* (October 1, 1864) found in Fitzedward Hall’s *Modern English* (1873): “The double negative has been abandoned, to the great injury of strength of expression.”

- To be clear, this isn’t to advocate that we all suddenly start using double negation in formal prose, or stop teaching students about the issue. We should teach students the standard use, but we shouldn’t condemn the other, as this isn’t well founded. This is what it means to be careful about our grammar: to be sure what we’re saying is accurate and fair about how both prescriptive and descriptive grammar work.

- It is helpful for us to understand social judgment and be able to navigate it as speakers and writers; it is also intellectually interesting to see how those judgments can change over time. This perspective and background knowledge actually makes us better editors and teachers because we understand the formal written variety in the context of all the varieties of English out there. It it is a more engaging and empowering way to think about and teach grammar.

- It gives us credit for all that we already know and acknowledges all the variation that we know is out there—and that we know can function really well in context. Part of mastering the game of the formal standards is to understand how these usage rules may ask us to switch up our language from informal to formal contexts, and from speech to writing.

- All of this can make grammar playful again, as opposed to a world of absolute rights and wrongs.

Suggested Reading

Greenbaum, *Oxford English Grammar.*
Huddleston and Pullum, *A Student Introduction to English Grammar*.
Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*.
McWhorter, *Word on the Street*.
Ostade, "Double Negation and Eighteenth-Century English Grammars."
Pinker, *The Sense of Style*.

Questions to Consider

1. Try listing out all the things you needed to learn to create the grammatical English sentence "Jordan did not eat breakfast this morning," as opposed to the ungrammatical sentence "Jordan ate not breakfast morning this."

2. When do two negatives in a clause contradict each other—or perhaps "cancel" each other—and when do they reinforce each other?

Lecture 4
Re Phrasing

This lecture is the last of our background lectures before we dive into the usage rules related to different parts of speech. We'll address questions like: How many parts of speech are there? How do we define them? What is the difference between a phrase and a clause? The standard parts of speech fall in this hierarchy: Words make phrases, which make clauses, which make sentences. This kind of terminology is critical for the remaining 20 lectures. Much of this will be review for many readers, but it will provide some new ways of thinking about how we define and categorize words into parts of speech, or *lexical categories*.

Distinctions and Morphs

- Let's start by clarifying a key distinction that builds on the material from the previous two lectures: what lexical category a word belongs to versus what lexical category we think a word should belong to.

    - A good case study is the word *impact*, which is accepted as a noun and a verb. Some people, including many who write usage guides, think it should not be a verb that means "to have an impact on."

    - In 2001, 80 percent of the AHD Usage Panel rejected the sentence, "The court ruling will impact the education of minority students" as somewhat or completely unacceptable.

    - Bryan Garner, in his influential *Garner's Modern American Usage*, admits that this use of *impact* as a verb has become

widespread, but he also concludes that it should be avoided because we already have *affect* and *influence*.

- The word impact captures a phenomenon in Modern English that is very relevant to a discussion of lexical categories: Words can change categories—or more often, expand into new categories. Some examples:
  - Nouns get verbed (to google)
  - Verbs get nouned (a hire)
  - Adjectives get verbed (to clean).
- Sometimes, people aren't happy about this when it happens. Ben Franklin wrote to Noah Webster in 1789 about several new verbs, newly created from nouns, that he didn't like: *advocate*, *notice*, and *progress*.
- In Modern English, we have very few inflectional endings; for example, regular verbs just take *–ed* to become past tense. Therefore, it's not too hard to take a noun and make it a verb (*googled*). Nouns just take *–s* to become plural and possessive. Additionally, we don't have grammatical gender. So you can take a verb like *invite* and make it a noun—and you don't have to give it a gender. If you have more than one, you have *invites*.

Lexical Categories

- This is a good moment to step back for a quick review of what lexical categories (also known as parts of speech) are available in English. While there is some basic agreement on this, not everyone agrees on the terminology or how many categories there are.
- Lexical categories can be divided into two big categories:
  - Open class: nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. This class can take new members.

- Closed class: pronouns, determiners, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions (or coordinators and subordinators), and prepositions. This class rarely adds new members

- Some words defy these lexical categories. Examples are discourse markers, interjections, and the word *not*. Some people call *not* an adverb; some let it be its own category.

- In this lecture, we'll talk about how we define what makes a noun or a preposition or an auxiliary verb (and then we'll talk about phrases and clauses).

- In the 1970s educational show *Schoolhouse Rock*, one song advises that, "A noun is a person, place, or thing." But does this hold up? The answer is no, not entirely. Relying on what a word means (or purely "semantic" criteria) to define parts of speech is often difficult and inadequate. For instance, nouns can also be abstract concepts (love, confusion), states of being (limbo), and actions (running).

- Linguists come at defining parts of speech from at least two other angles: how a word behaves in terms of the inflectional endings it takes and in terms of how it works in phrase or sentence.

  - Morphology covers what kinds of inflectional endings a word takes. Nouns tend to make plural with *–s*. Verbs tend to make past tense with *–ed* and present participles with *–ing* (walk/walked/walking). Adjectives can make comparatives with *–er* or more (happy/happier, beautiful/more beautiful), and so on.

  - There are some derivational endings that tend to signal what lexical category a word is in: If you see a word ending in *–ize*, odds are it is a verb (colonize, problematize); if you see a word ending in *–ion* or *–ment*, odds are it is a noun (realization, retirement).

- Syntax covers what slot in a phrase or clause a word can fill. This is intuitive:
  - Nouns: the _____ (cat, love, running)
  - Verbs: will _____ (swim, walk, go)
  - Adjectives: the _____ thing (happy, ridiculous)
  - Auxiliary verbs: She ____ go (will, may, might)
  - Prepositions: ____ the tree (in, up, down, around, on, to)
- We have not yet mentioned adverbs. They are tricky. There is one morphological signal: *–ly* (slowly, extremely, frankly). However, that can also signal an adjective (lovely, homely). Syntactically, adverbs appear all over the sentence and they modify all kinds of things (verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs).

Phrases, Clauses, and Sentences

- What's the difference between a phrase and a clause? Simply put: a clause is composed of a subject and a predicate. A predicate is the verb and all its accouterments. Here are two clauses, with brackets separating the subject and predicate:
  - [My sister] [took all four kids to the aquarium].
  - [I] [am tired].
- A phrase is a group of words that works together within a clause. To clarify, it can help to think intuitively about the "chunks" within a clause (or what linguists would call *constituents*). An example: My sister took all four kids to the aquarium.
  - *All* is more related to *four kids* than to *took*.

- Sentences work in chunks that are nested within each other, not like train cars that are just all hooked up sequentially.

- Let's unpack this straightforward sentence in terms of phrases:

  - The whole sentence is one clause, with a subject ("My sister") and a predicate ("took all four kids to the aquarium").

  - "My sister" is a noun phrase (the two words together function like a noun).

  - "All four kids" is also a noun phrase; here it is the direct object.

  - "The aquarium" is also a noun phrase, and it is nested inside another kind of phrase: a prepositional phrase ("to the aquarium"). Prepositional phrases are interesting

In the sentence, "My niece loved the fish at the aquarium," the prepositional phrase "at the aquarium" functions adjectivally to modify "fish."

because they function like adverbs and adjectives. Here the prepositional is functioning adverbially: It describes where my sister took the four kids.

- What is the difference between a clause and a sentence?
  - They can be the same thing when a sentence has only one clause.
  - However, a sentence can have more than one clause: "My sister took all four kids to the aquarium, but it was inexplicably closed." These are compound or complex sentences.

Sentences and Contractions

- Let's end this lecture with the question of what a sentence is. It seems so easy, but actually there isn't a clear answer.
  - One definition: A sentence is a written string of words that is "complete in and of itself" that ends with a period.
  - Typically a sentence has one or more clauses, but we can also get fragments: "Not true."
  - In speech, how do we know where a sentence ends? Intonation is a clue, but an imperfect one. In real-time speech, we often do not speak in full sentences and we can have long run-ons.
  - We need to accept that sentences are written products. It's not that they don't have counterparts in the spoken word, but the period is a written imposition.
  - This highlights the difference between speech and writing, which will be a theme throughout this course. Often we are asked to follow conventions in written language that put it at odds with the way we speak. This is not a bad thing, necessarily, but it is worth noting.

- One study in the *Longman Grammar* shows that in speech we contract "do not" almost 100 percent of the time, and we contract modals like "will not" 95 percent of the time. Yet we are told that in formal writing we shouldn't do that, except perhaps for emphasis.

- That convention is changing a bit, as contractions sneak their way into more formal prose.

- Bryan Garner counters the concern that contractions make writing seem too breezy and argues that with contractions, we can gain "relaxed sincerity." But, he warns, don't contract recklessly and avoid contractions in solemn contexts.

- These are rhetorical choices: What we are trying to achieve as writers, in terms of tone and formality, matters. Again, this is a more interesting way to look at a usage rule than whether we should or shouldn't use contractions, as if there was something inherently wrong with them.

Questions to Consider

1. What is a sentence? How do we know where sentences end in spoken language?

2. If the nouns *notice* and *progress* historically got to become verbs, why shouldn't the noun *impact* also get to become a verb?

3. What part of speech or lexical category is *not*? What about *yes*?

Lecture 5

Fewer Octopuses or Less Octopi?

The issue of countable versus uncountable nouns is a tricky one. Many speakers and writers don't observe the distinction, and sometimes it sounds wrong to do what is technically right. This is one of several usage issues around nouns that we're going to look at in this lecture. We'll also cover irregular plurals (like the plurals of *octopus* and *emoji*); collective nouns like *jury*; and other agreement issues, such as "*There are* a few reasons" versus "*There's* a few reasons."

Less/Fewer and Countability

- A prototypical countable noun is *pencil*, and a prototypical uncountable noun is *water*. You can count uncountable nouns with measure words, such as *drops*, *cups*, or *buckets* of water. These measure words can refer to a part (a *grain* of sand) or a container (a *bottle* of beer) or a quantity (a lot of grass). With many uncountable nouns, we can also make them countable with a shift in meaning: "A lot of beer" can become "12 beers."

- Opinions differ on when to use *less* versus *fewer*. Some use the rule of thumb that *less* can be used with both countable and uncountable nouns. This doesn't cause any issues in expressions that are unremarkable, such as, "500 words or less." However, it can be jarring in uses like, "90 percent less germs."

- Strunk's *Elements of Style* (1918) sets out the rule: "Less. Should not be misused for fewer." Less means quantity; fewer means number.

The lexicographer Bryan Garner praises supermarkets that use *fewer* instead of *less* in their express-line signs.

- But it's not that clear-cut in usage. As AHD recognizes, if you look at what feels idiomatic in American English and other varieties, you see *less* used with things we can count:
  - Measures of time: "less than three days"
  - Measures of amount: "less than $200"
  - Measures of distance: "less than 100 miles"
  - Approximations: "100 bottles, more or less"
- As writers, should we just go with what sounds right? The answer is split. With measures, time, and distance, yes—go with what sounds right. But proceed with caution in other instances.
- In 2006, only 28 percent of the AHD Usage Panel accepted the sentence, "The region needs more jobs, not less jobs." This sentence is not ambiguous or confusing, but there is still some gatekeeping with this construction.

Singular/Plural Issues

- Irregular plurals are a mixture of native English ones and borrowed ones. It can seem like a chaotic mess, but there are actually patterns that are worth sorting out. The three main categories of

irregular plurals spawned from English are the *–en* plurals, the zero plurals, and the vowel changes.

- *–en* plurals have been dying out for some time, and are limited today to words like children, oxen, and brethren

- Another regular way of making plurals was a zero ending, and we still see that with *sheep* and *deer*. Interestingly, this class has expanded over time, encompassing *fish* (which used to be *fishes*). *Emoji* could be a new member of this category, and that is the plural version in Japanese.

- The vowel change plurals reflect a very old stage of Germanic, when there was a plural ending that caused the vowel to change. That ending has long since fallen by the wayside, but its effects remain in *goose/geese*, *man/men*, and *mouse/mice*.

- Now let's look at irregularities that have come through borrowing from other languages.

  - One very common set of irregular plurals stems from Latin borrowings that end in *–us*, such as *syllabus*, *focus*, and *status*. Not all of these Latin *–us* words come from the same declension in Latin, so they have different plural formations in Latin, which further confuses the issue in English. And then there are a few *–us* borrowings, like *hippopotamus*, which aren't from Latin at all.

  - Most borrowings from Latin that end in *–us* take an *–i* plural in Latin: *focus/foci*, *stimulus/stimuli*, and *alumnus/alumni*. For all of these words, the *–i* plural is still the most common in English, but some of them are starting to get Englishified. Additionally, something like *foci* may sound too formal or even forced, even though right now it is more common in formal writing.

- Some have already become Englishified: *crocuses* not *croci*.

- *Syllabus* is a complicated case when it comes to words that take *–i* to become plural. It is borrowed from modern Latin, and it seems to stem from a scribal error that misread the Greek (it was a different word). So the Latinate plural *syllabi* is not etymologically founded, but it has taken hold. Right now, we can safely use either *syllabi* or *syllabuses*.

- Then there are *–us* borrowings from Latin that keep the *–us* in Latin. The plural of *apparatus* is *apparatus* and of *status* is *status* if we stay true to the Latin, but we haven't. Speakers for the most part use *apparatuses* and *statuses*.

- There is a third, pretty small set of *–us* words that take what looks to us like an irregular plural. Examples are *corpus/corpora* and *genus/genera*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* already includes *genuses*, but not yet *corpuses* (though it can be found in usage).

- There are two common words people often mistake for Latin borrowings. *Hippopotamus* is Greek, not Latin. It means "river horse." Many dictionaries recommend the *–es* ending (hippopotamuses), but recognize that some folks use *–i* (hippopotami). Saying or writing *hippos* is a way around this choice.

- What about *octopus*? This word is Greek. *Octopus* showed up in English in the mid-18th century; before that it was a polypus. In the late 19th century, the plural was usually *octopi*, but by the 1930s and 40s, *octopuses* became the major form.

- The takeaway here about irregular plurals is that they are idiosyncratic. Some are moving toward regular English plurals and some are not. There is not better advice than to look in standard dictionaries and usage guides when in doubt—and realize that there will be some differences of opinion. Also, Latin plurals may be read as more correct or pretentious.

- Before leaving borrowed words, let's address one big usage issue: *data*. Technically, *data* is plural, as it is plural in Latin; the singular is *datum*. But in English it has been reinterpreted as a singular mass noun. This leads to, "the data shows," as opposed to, "the data show." Both are now in common usage, with a preference for the plural in academic writing and a preference for the singular in the spoken. Regardless of which you choose, just be consistent.

Questions of Agreement

- Agreement can be a sticky issue. First, let's cover collective nouns, like *jury*, *group*, *family*, and *couple*. There are two ways to think about this: meaning and geography.

    - When it comes to meaning, ask: Are you thinking about the group as a unit or as separate individuals? Examples are "Her family is highly educated" versus "His family is all doctors."

    - Regarding geography: If you're from the US, you're likely to use the singular ("The jury is deadlocked"). If you're from U.K., you're likely to use the plural ("Arsenal are losing").

- Things can get muddy when the collective is followed by a prepositional phrase such as, "A jury of my peers is/are debating" or "A group of my friends is/are going." American grammar guides often allow some variation here based on meaning, depending on whether something like "a group" refers more to the individuals than to a unit.

- What if the noun comes after the verb? It happens in *there is/are* constructions (e.g., "There is a spider on your head.")

- At issue is the grammatical subject (the existential *there*) versus the notional subject (*a spider*). The prescriptive rule is that the notional subject governs agreement, so there's no problem in, "There is a spider on your head."

- Let's add two spiders. Could you say, "There's three spiders on your head"? We often contract to *there's*. This has become formulaic enough that the number of the following noun doesn't matter: "There's a reason for that" works, as does "There's three reasons for that."

- In formal writing, we're less likely to contract and more likely to let the following noun govern the agreement. This course's recommendation is to be careful and let the notional subject govern in formal writing. But it is fair to note that it is quite idiomatic to use "there's" with plural nouns in speech and informal writing.

Suggested Reading

Crawford, "Verb Agreement and Disagreement."
Yagoda, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is lost and gained when *less* replaces *fewer* in a phrase like "50 percent less calories?"

2. At what point, if ever, should the word *data* be accepted as a singular mass noun (much like the noun *information*)? If lots of educated writers are using *data* as a singular noun, are they all wrong?

3. Should the plural of *computer mouse* be *computer mouses* or *computer mice*? Why?

Lecture 6

Between You and Your Pronouns

This lectures addresses several prominent usage issues related to pronouns. It's not accurate to say a pronoun is just a word that stands in for a noun, because pronouns can stand in for entire noun phrases. Pronouns are some of the most common words in our language. This lecture starts with a definition of our terms, then moves on to describe several categories of pronouns. Throughout, the lecture provides examples of how to use pronouns properly—and where there's wiggle room.

Personal Pronouns

- There are several categories of pronouns. We'll start with the personal pronouns, several of which are among the most common words. Examples include *I*, *you*, *it*, *he*, and *they*.

- With personal pronouns, we often hear reference to the first, second, and third person. This is about where people (or things) are relative to the discourse or text. Pronouns can stand in for the people in the discourse (with first or second person) or people or things being discussed (with third person).

Between You and I

- The first usage issue with personal pronouns we need to discuss is "between you and I" (a pet peeve for many). We need this background to understand what is happening with "between you and I," so we need to discuss the case system from Old English.

- Case is a grammatical system that distinguishes the function of a noun or pronoun in a clause. If we look at the personal pronouns,

we see that most of them distinguish three cases: subject, object (direct and indirect), and possessive.

- First person: I/me/mine, we/us/ours
- Second person: you/you/yours
- Third person: he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/theirs, it/it/its

- In Old English, all nouns made these kinds of distinctions: subject, object, and possessive. Today, everything but possessive distinctions has dropped away. But pronouns still prop up the full historical case system.

- Given that we don't have to make this distinction anywhere else in the grammar, we can interchange pronouns when the syntax gets complicated—and it gets complicated in conjoined constructions.
  - In American English and British English, if the personal pronoun occurs by itself, you tend to consistently get *I* in subject position and *me* in object position: "I went to the store" or "My mother called me."
  - But if you create an "X-and-Y" situation with I/me, you will hear: "Me and my mom went to the store," and "My mother called my sister and I." Compare these to the standard constructions: "My mom and I went to the store," and "My mother called my sister and me."

- Conjoined constructions may not follow the same rules as single nouns. For example, while you would get accusative "me" alone, the conjoined "my sister and I" may not have to take the object case after a preposition, as in "between my sister and I". In other words, "X and I" and "me and Y" could be routinized (though not standardized) expressions.

- Interestingly, polite usage for many speakers, including highly educated ones, is "between you and I." In the long run, the distinction may well collapse. Who knows which pronoun will win?

Distinction Problems

- A collapse of singular/plural distinction in the can happen in the second person as well. We used to have *thou*/*thee*. This became the familiar form, but is now mostly dead (other than Quakers and old plays and novels). There are many newer plural forms: *y'all*, *you guys*, *yous*, *yous guys*, *yinz*.

- In standard English, *you* can be both singular and plural. This fact is relevant to what is known as the generic pronoun problem, which happens when we need to refer back to a noun phrase (the *antecedent*) that refers to a person whose gender is unspecified, unknown, or irrelevant. For instance: "A person at that level should not have to keep track of the hours ____ put in." (This was the sentence on the AHD usage ballot for a generic person.)

- There is also the situation where we don't know a person's gender: "We would like to think the anonymous reviewer for _____ comments."

- There is an idea out there that we don't have a singular generic pronoun for these situations, and since the late 18th century, people have been coming up with artificial ones. Some examples: *heshe*, *thon*, *e*, *hiser*, *ze*. But we do have a singular generic pronoun: *they*.

- The question is whether we're going to allow writers to use singular generic *they* in formal writing. We already use it in informal, less monitored writing.

- The push against *they* originated in the 18th century, first recorded in Anne Fisher's grammar and then picked up in Lindley Murray's wildly popular grammar at the end of 18th century.

- In the 1970s, second-wave feminism pushed against the use of *he* as the dominant pronoun. Four options arose:
  - *He or she*
  - Alternate *he* and *she*
  - Make it plural
  - Omit the pronoun.
- These are fine solutions, but why can't we also use *they*? It works well in the spoken language, and is no more ambiguous than other spoken pronouns. Luckily, if you are a writer who would like to use singular *they*, we are entering an era where this is close to becoming standard usage. We're not quite there, but we're getting close.
- There have been some artificial pronouns suggested along the way. *Ze* now has some traction as a transgender pronoun, along with *they*. These are also for those who identify outside the male/female binary.
- There is debate on college campuses about these pronouns. Overall, the pronouns are about respecting what people ask to be called and thereby creating a more inclusive, respectful space.

Interrogative Pronouns

- The collapse of case is relevant to another class of pronouns: interrogative. These are pronouns that create questions. You often see a list of five: *what*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, and *whose*. But you could argue there are three: *what*, *which*, and *who*, the last of which then has two additional mutations (*whom* and *whose*) for the object and possessive form.
- *Who*/*whom* is the biggest usage issue. *Who* is the subject form of the pronoun; *whom* is the object form, and it is in decline. But it has been in decline for several hundred years, so one interesting

Whom might sound appropriate in an academic context but stuffy in a social context.

question is why it hasn't died yet. It is healthiest when it comes after a preposition (examples: "to whom," "by whom"). Alone, it can look like a subject form because it appears first: "Who(m) are you calling?"

- *Whom* can sound fussy in many contexts. If you wish to avoid it in e-mails or texts, you can either rework the sentence or just use *who*: "Who did you call about getting the washing machine fixed?" Know your audience.

Indefinite Pronouns

- Indefinite pronouns pose other agreement issues, especially the pronoun *none*. An example: Should it be, "None of the books is _____" or "None of the books are _____?"

- Indefinite pronouns do not refer to a specific person or thing. They stand in for a vague or undetermined person or thing, or amount of things. Typical examples: *anyone*/*anybody*, *everyone*/*everybody*, and *someone/somebody*.

- Most are straightforward in terms of agreement with verbs: *anyone* is singular ("anyone is") and *few* is plural ("few are"). *None* is trickier, perhaps especially in a phrase where it is referring to none of a plural group of things: "None of my friends is/are."

- So, can *none* be both singular and plural? In short, yes. Over the years, sources, have varied, but now certain reputable usage guides recognize the singular or plural can be standard. Bryan Garner distinguishes between meaning of "not one" (singular) versus "not any" (plural).

This What?

- We haven't covered another category of very common pronouns, namely *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those.* These are demonstrative pronouns, which point at things inside and outside the text or discourse.

- Did you learn that you should never leave the word *this* by itself at the beginning of a sentence in formal writing? Such instruction can lead students to add nouns: "This idea means _____." This setup can in turn become clunky if it's hard to find a noun that captures exactly what *this* is referring back to.

- The good news: You can relax that stricture (if you learned it). Sometimes it is OK to leave your *this* without a noun. The key is that it needs to be clear what you're referring back to. And it is OK if, as Bryan Garner puts it, sometimes the *this* summarizes what you just wrote.

- Here's an example from Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, where he's making a connection between agriculture and growing seasons, and educational reform:

> Unless a wheat- or cornfield is left fallow every few years, the soil becomes exhausted. Every winter, fields are empty. The hard labor of spring planting and fall harvesting is followed, like clockwork, by the slower pace of summer and winter. This is the logic the reformers applied to the cultivation of young minds.

- Garner's advice is worth following here: Make sure you can answer, "This what?"

Suggested Reading

Balhorn, "The Epicene Pronoun in Contemporary Newspaper Prose."
Baron, *Grammar and Gender*.
Bodine, "Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar."
Curzan, *Gender Shifts in the History of English*.
Newman, *Epicene Pronouns*.
Swales, "Attended and Unattended 'This' in Academic Writing."
Vuolo, "Between You and I" (*Lexicon Valley Podcast*).
Yagoda, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It*.

Questions to Consider

1. The second-person pronoun *you* has already lost the distinction between subject and object so that we now use *you* for both. If—and this is a big if—English were to lose the subject-object distinction in the first-person singular pronoun, do you think *I* or *me* would win? Why?

2. Studies show that many speakers use *they* as a singular generic pronoun in a sentence like "Someone left their towel on the deck chair." What are reasons for and against allowing singular generic *they* in formal writing?

Lecture 7 *Which* Hunting

The Microsoft Word grammar checker has strong feelings about the difference between *that* and *which* as relative pronouns—and it expresses those feelings in green squiggly lines under our words. Informal polling suggests that a good number of writers aren't sure what the problem is but change the *that* into a *which* or the *which* into a *that* until the grammar checker has been appeased. This lecture's aim is to give a better sense of what is going on with those words.

Relative Clauses

- Let's look at an example that the grammar checker in Microsoft Word 2010 would flag: "I have a great dress which you can borrow." The checker wants *that* here because it is a restrictive relative clause. The checker would allow *which* in a sentence with a nonrestrictive relative clause, such as: "I bought a great dress, which happened to be on sale."

- A relative clause modifies a noun or noun phrase: "the dress that I just bought" or "the man who wouldn't stop talking to me on the airplane." The relative clause is introduced by a relative pronoun that stands in for the noun being modified. Relative pronouns include *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whoever*, *whomever*, and *whose*.

- Two more examples:

  - "I had lunch with a friend who just returned from China." *Who* stands in for *friend*.

- “Alex recently ran into our old roommate, who now lives in Hong Kong.” *Who* subs in for *our old roommate*.

- These examples captured the restrictive/nonrestrictive distinction. In restrictive clauses, the clause narrows the set to specify who/what you’re referring to. In nonrestrictive clauses, the clause adds information about the noun but does not restrict the set.

  - “… who just returned from China” restricts from a large set of friends to one friend.

  - “… our old roommate, who now lives in Hong Kong” simply adds information about the roommate’s whereabouts. We already understood who the old roommate was. Also note that the clause occurred after a comma.

- Clearly, *who* can be both restrictive and nonrestrictive. The distinction becomes relevant with *that* and *which*. There’s a rule that says we should use *that* for restrictives and *which* for nonrestrictives, as well as a comma for the latter, which captures the pause typical of speech.

That/Which

- Let’s look at two examples with *that*/*which*:

  - “I have the keys to the car that is in the driveway.” (There are multiple cars and I’m specifying which one I have keys for—as opposed to one in the garage and one in the street.)

  - “I have the keys to the car, which is in the driveway.” (There is only one car, and I’m just letting you know where it’s parked)

- This rule is an attempt to create complementary distribution where it may never have existed. For most speakers, *that* applies only to restrictive clauses. They tend not to use it after a comma for nonrestrictives. But a good number of us can use *which* for both: “I have the keys to the car which is in the driveway.”

- If we use *which* only for nonrestrictives, then there is no overlap. The prescription goes back to H.W. Fowler's *The King's English* (1908):

> This confusion is to be regretted; for although no distinction can be authoritatively drawn between the two relatives, an obvious one presents itself.

- He goes on to say that *that* should be the defining/restrictive relative and *who*/*which* the nondefining/nonrestrictive. He then adds: "'Who' or 'which' should not be used in defining clauses except when custom, euphony, or convenience is decidedly against the use of 'that.'"

- In other words, Fowler is presenting an idealized distinction between *that* and *which*—and allowing exceptions only for euphony or convenience. Fowler is also recommending *that* as the restrictive pronoun with animate and inanimate nouns, and then *who* and *which* for nonrestrictive uses.

- Most guides now allow *who* to be restrictive and nonrestrictive. (Fowler wasn't letting *who* be restrictive—just *that*.)

The Debate Continues

- Fowler returned to that/which in his influential *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (2nd edition). He clarifies his preference for complementary distribution and yet shows his awareness that actual usage and his preferred order do not necessarily align. He starts by acknowledging that grammarians have less influence on usage than they may realize, but that it's hard to resist having preferences about what would be best usage.

- He then notes:

> The relations between *that*, *who*, and *which* have come to us from our forefathers as an odd jumble, and plainly show that the language has not been neatly constructed by a master

builder who could create each part to do the exact work required of it, neither overlapped nor overlapping.

- So he accepts the jumble, but he goes on to say it doesn't mean we couldn't, at least theoretically, do better. The jumble that Fowler describes gets lost in Strunk and White's version of "the rule" in *Elements of Style*. They make a clear distinction: *That* is restrictive; *which* is nonrestrictive.

- But they then note there are exceptions, such as this sentence from the Bible: "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass." However, the exception for euphony or convenience doesn't seem to be an option for most of us. In the end, they tell us to go *which*-hunting to improve our work.

- The *Associated Press Stylebook* makes no exceptions to the restrictive/nonrestrictive rule. Bryan Garner's *A Dictionary of English Usage* (1998) has strong words on the subject, seeming to say that if you follow this rule, you are detailed-oriented as a writer and care about niceties.

- AHD usage guidelines take a more tempered tone: *Which* with restrictive relative clauses is common and may be preferable if there is a *that* in the antecedent noun phrase: "We want to assign only that material which will be most helpful."

Zero Relatives

- Let's now talk about a couple of other features of relative clauses: clauses introduced by a *zero relative*, and pied-piping, which involves moving the preposition that is connected to the relative pronoun up to the front of the relative clause. Both zero relatives and pied-piping involve relative clauses with a relative pronoun in an object position.

- In zero relative clauses, the relative pronoun doesn't appear at all. An example: "I can't remember the name of the person whom I met last night" versus "I can't remember the name of the

person I met last night." The latter contains a zero relative clause, missing *whom*.

- This can only happen when the relative pronoun functions as the object in the relative clause. For example, take, "the book that I just finished," where the relative clause is "that I just finished."

  - If we put the relative pronoun where it would be as the object in the clause, we would get: "I just finished that [book]." But it doesn't get to stay in the object position.

  - The object relative pronoun gets fronted to the beginning of the relative clause, up next to the noun it modifiers: "the book [I just finished that]" turns into "the book that I just finished." Then you can delete the *that*: "the book I just finished."

- When the relative pronoun is the subject of the relative clause, it is already up in the front. Let's take the sentence, "I saw my friend who lives in Beijing." *Who* is in subject position, already at the head of the relative clause. We cannot omit the relative pronoun when it is the subject: "I saw my friend ~~who~~ lives in Beijing" doesn't work.

- But when it is an object relative pronoun, we can omit: "I can't remember the name of the person ~~whom~~ I met last night" works because it is still easy to parse. The noun *person* is followed by another noun, *I*, so we know that we have hit a relative clause.

Pied-Piping

- Pied-piping sometimes happens when the relative pronoun is the object of a preposition in the relative clause. An example: "I am wondering whom I should send the RSVP to." The *whom* gets fronted; the question is what happens to that preposition at the end.

- Grammatically, it can stay there at the end of the sentence (we'll come back to the rule about that in Lecture 18). Or we can front it:

"I'm wondering to whom I should send the RSVP." This is called pied-piping because it is following the relative pronoun just like the children following the Pied Piper.

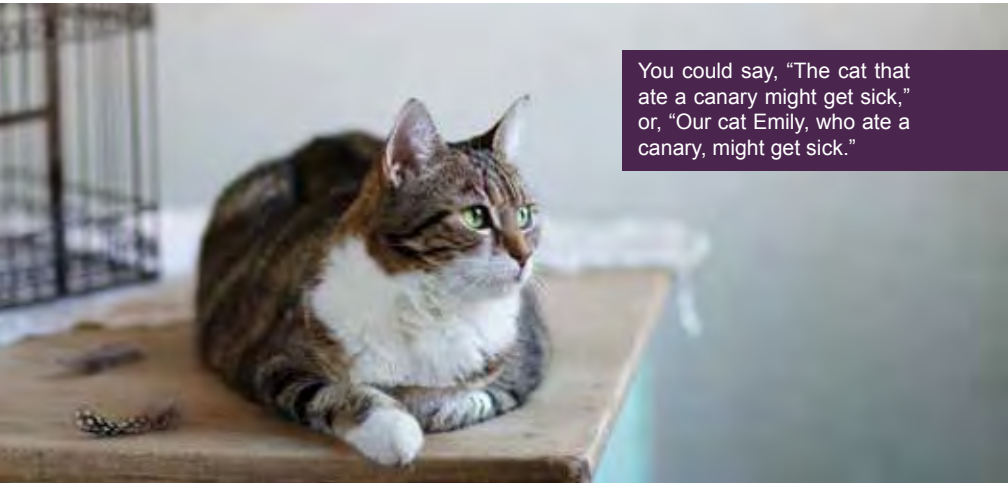
- What happens when we're not using a *whom* but a *that* as the object of the preposition? Consider this sentence: "She read the book that I referred to." If we decide to pied-pipe the preposition, the *that* must turn into a *which*: "She read the book to which I referred." Why? Because. Because English syntax is full of little idiosyncrasies made to seem normal through usage.

Animate Beings

- Here's another oddity with relative pronouns: As a general rule, we restrict *who* and *whom* to animate beings. But there is an exception. We have an odd gap in the language for how to handle possessive relative pronouns for inanimate objects.

- An example will help here: "I returned the computer whose hard drive is broken." Another example: "The car whose horn is blaring is driving me crazy." We can use *that's* there—"The car that's horn is blaring"—but *whose* is also accepted as standard.

- Where do animals fall in terms of the animate/inanimate line? A general rule can be to use *that* when we're talking about animals in general, but *who* when talking about a specific animal.



You could say, "The cat that ate a canary might get sick," or, "Our cat Emily, who ate a canary, might get sick."

Suggested Reading

Fowler and Fowler, *The King's English*.

Questions to Consider

1. Have you ever wondered where the rules in the grammar checker in your word processing program come from? If you haven't, why haven't you asked that question?

2. When you refer to animals, do you use *which/that* or *who*? What do you make of that?

Lecture 8

A(n) Historical Issue

It grates on some people when others say “an historical novel” or “an historic event.” *A* and *an* are indefinite articles used with countable nouns (like historical novels or historic events). This lecture aims to unravel the rules surrounding those articles, answering questions like: Which one goes best before words like *historical*? Then the lecture moves on to cover determiners more generally as a lexical class. We’ll close with a look at some capitalization issues.

A versus *An*

- When it comes to *a* and *an*, the general rule is *a* before consonants and *an* before vowels. Examples are “a cat” and “an elephant.” Exceptions exist, though: Take “a unicorn,” where the *u* is pronounced like a *y*, which is a consonant.

- What happens with the words *history* and *historical*? Over time, the /h/ sound has become more likely to be pronounced at the beginning (moving the word from *’istoric* to *historic* in practice). Today, the *Associated Press Stylebook* and *Chicago Manual of Style* both recommend *a historic(al)*.

- The site *Grammarist* calls *an historic* “an unnecessary affectation.” Maeve Maddox, on dailywritingtips.com, quotes comment sections on this. There is much vitriol, including: “When people use ‘an historical’ on NPR, it’s because [they’re] snooty.”

- It is useful to step back and remember that we’re just talking about the presence or absence of one consonant: *a* versus *an*. This shows how loaded even the smallest language choices can

become. They can get you judged as snooty in some cases and illiterate in others.

Determiners

- *A*/*an*, as indefinite articles, both fall in the broader category of determiners. Determiners are the little words that introduce nouns to create noun phrases. We'll focus on three things: the highly intuitive rules that govern their ordering, the agreement issues with the word *either*, and some regional differences in usage.

- The category of determiners is bigger than many people realize, and there isn't a lot of agreement about how to categorize them. Let's look at just one way we can subdivide the set. Here's one version with seven major categories, forming the acronym Pi and IQ.

  - Possessives (my, her, their, our)
  - Interrogatives (which, what, whatever)
  - Articles (a, an, the)
  - Numbers (cardinal and ordinal: one/two and first/second)
  - Demonstratives (this, that, these, those)
  - Indefinites (any, each, other, another)
  - Quantifiers (many, some, several, most)

- We can also subdivide this set into three categories based on the order in which they occur in a noun phrase: predeterminers, central determiners, and postdeterminers. Those terms are just about order.

- Two examples are, "The first several pages" or "all my many quirks." We wouldn't say, "the several first pages" or "my all

many quirks." How do we know this? This is the kind of intuitive knowledge that makes up a lot of "descriptive grammar."

- Let's go through how the determiners sort into these three categories based on the order in which they appear in the noun phrase.
  - Predeterminers include terms like *all*/*both*, multiplying expressions, and fractions.
  - Central determiners include definite and indefinite articles, possessives, and demonstratives.
  - Postdeterminers include cardinal and ordinal numbers; general ordinals (like *next* and last); and quantifiers (like *many* and *some*).

Adjectives and Pronouns versus Determiners

- How are determiners different from adjectives and pronouns? We'll start with adjectives. Adjectives are an open class (we can add new ones) and determiners are a closed class (we don't get new ones very often at all).
- Adjectives can occur before a noun and then out in the predicate (e.g., "the friendly cat" and "the cat is friendly"). Determiners only appear before the noun: "the cat" and not "cat is the."
- Adjectives will consistently fall between the determiners and the noun: "All our friendly cats, not "all friendly our cats." Additionally, adjectives can be modified by an intensifier like *very*: "very friendly." And adjectives usually make comparatives: "more friendly."
- Let's now look at determiners compared with pronouns. Many of the words that function as determiners can also function as pronouns. The key is whether the word is standing alone in the place of a noun, as opposed to modifying a noun.

- Take the example of *many*. Consider the difference between "Many clichés have some wisdom in them," and in a conversation about clichés, "Many have some wisdom in them." In the latter sentence, *Many* stands in for *clichés*, but in the former, it modifies *clichés*.

- *The*, *a*, and *an* cannot be pronouns.

Regional Variation

- Now that we have defined determiners and how they work within the noun phrase, let's look at some regional variation.

- If we're speaking generically, in British English someone is "in hospital," but in American English they're "in the hospital."

- Note that Americans "go to prison" and "go to college"—which is different from going to "the prison" or "the school" to visit.

Capitalization

- To close this lecture, let's look at a capitalization issue that can come up when we think about determiners: capitalization of nouns like *president*.

  - If we're talking about a president in general, clearly it's not capitalized. And when we refer to the current president—so if it were 1978, we'd say President Carter—it is clearly capitalized.

  - But what about when you refer to "the president/President" of the U.S.? In this case, you mean the current president, but you don't say President [Name].

- Note that capitalization has been a moving target in the history of English; our current rules are relatively recent and still to some extent in flux.

- In the Renaissance, there was a good amount of variation in terms of nouns that might get capitalized in the middle of a sentence, sometimes for emphasis.

- By the 17th century, it was settling down: A word would be capitalized at the beginning of a sentence, in proper names, the word *I*, and in important nouns like titles and personified nouns (such as Virtue).

- The 18th century witnessed increased use of capitalization for nouns deemed important and for things like fields (such as Rhetoric). Ben Franklin was quite fond of this practice, and it appears in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence.

- In the second half of the 18th century, grammarians clamped down on this use of capital letters for nouns of special note. Grammarians started to claim that it "disfigures" one's writing to use capitals for all nouns. Capitalizing for emphasis started to be proscribed in 19th century.

18th-Century Capitalization

"No Person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President" —the U.S. Constitution

"…we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." —the Declaration of Independence

- Today, capitalization is mostly restricted to the start of a sentence, proper names, and titles when they occur with the person's name.

  - According to the *Chicago Manual of Style*, we are not to capitalize titles even when the referent is specific (so we'd say "Dean Munson," but "the dean"). The exception is in cases of

directly addressing someone, in which case it would be “Mr. President,” or “Senator.”

- But you will certainly see capitalization of “the Dean” or “the President,” which can be read as an attempt to be formal and polite. This drives some people crazy, but there isn’t an intuitive logic to using “President Roosevelt” and “the president” when we’re talking about the same person.

- Bryan Garner points out the contradiction of “Stone Age” (capitalized) versus “space age.” He does provide leeway for capitalizing for “some rhetorical purpose,” although he asks us to minimize capitalization

- Another capitalization issues that might trip you up: You have to figure out whether *the* is part of a newspaper title: *The New York Times* versus the *Los Angeles Times*.

- In 2016, the Associated Press decided to stop capitalizing *Internet* and *Web*, saying most viewed them as generic. But there has been some criticism of the *Associated Press Stylebook* for *internet*. As one *Slate* writer put it, “It’s one place as proper and unique as Saturn. And it’s utterly reasonable to capitalize this realm’s name.” In the end, a style manual will be key.

- Now for a historical note on why we capitalize *I*. It used to be *ic*, but lost the *c* by the 12th century. By the late 1300s, the letter/pronoun was becoming taller. It has been pretty consistently capitalized in written standard English ever since

- Why *I* is now capitalized is one of those mysteries of the language, and can strike non-English speakers as odd. They may also find it odd that *English* is capitalized in English, as not all languages consider the names of languages to be proper nouns.

Suggested Reading

Maddox, "A Historic vs. An Historic."

Questions to Consider

1. Rules about capitalization in English have fluctuated over the past few centuries. If we're referring to the current elected leader of the United States, would you advocate writing "the president" or "the President?"

Lecture 9 Funnest Lecture Ever

This lecture covers adjectives, starting with the fuss around the terms *fun*, *funner*, and *funnest*. Next the lecture turns to a general discussion of comparatives and superlatives. We'll talk about those, along with double comparatives, and then turn to an odd set of adjectives that mean different things depending on where they appear in the sentence. At the end of the lecture, we'll talk about how to handle noun phrases where the adjective, oddly, shows up after the noun.

A Fun Question

- Let's start with a recent question from the ballot for the AHD Usage Panel. It is about the word *fun*. Panelists received five sentences and had to rate each one on a four-point scale: completely acceptable, somewhat acceptable, somewhat unacceptable, or completely unacceptable. Here are the first three, innocuous-seeming sentences:
  - That party was really fun.
  - That party was so fun.
  - We went to a fun party.
- What's the point of asking about those sentences? Why would anyone be concerned about them? The answer lies in the history of the word *fun*. The word is only relatively recently an adjective. It showed up as a noun in the early 1700s.

- It's hard to know exactly when it started being used as an adjective. It isn't until the 1950s that it showed up with any regularity. Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* has not yet recorded *fun* as an adjective. The dictionary has it as a noun.

- Younger speakers at this point see the adjective *fun* as standard; there are some lingering concerns but they are dwindling. Bryan Garner, however, argues that *fun* as an adjective "remains casual at best."

- Back to the usage ballot. The last two sentences in the *fun* entry were:

  - That party was funner than I expected.

  - That was the funnest party I've been to this year.

- If you're cringing right now, you're not alone. But let's take a closer look to see if *funner* and *funnest* are really wrong. This look takes us back to the newness of the adjective.

- As a noun, *fun* takes *more*: "more fun." This is why, right now, *fun* often still takes *more* even when it is an adjective. But lots of other one-syllable adjectives make the comparative and superlative in

a different way: tall/taller/tallest, wide/wider/widest, smart/smarter/smartest, blue/bluer/bluest.

- Kids, when they learn the word *fun*, make it behave like other one-syllable adjectives until corrected. But a shift is underway: Students have a much stronger negative reaction to *funner* than to *funnest*. This course's prediction is that kids will win out in the long term. Some advice for now: Beware of *funner*.

Comparatives and Superlatives

- The usage question about *fun*/*funner*/*funnest* makes for a good introduction to a lecture on adjectives because one of the characteristic features of adjectives is that they create comparatives and superlatives.

- One-syllable adjectives typically take *–er* and *–est* to form comparatives and superlatives. These inflectional endings are the oldest way to create comparatives and superlatives. English used to rely much more heavily on inflectional endings than it does now. The historical antecedents of *–er* and *–est* were the default in Old English. The use of *more* and *most* is newer; it spread slowly through 14th century and peaked in the late medieval period.

- Then an unpredictable thing happened: By the Renaissance, inflected forms with *–er* and *–est* began reasserting themselves. The history of English generally involves the loss of inflections, but speakers are unpredictable.

- Now we have had something of a division of function. Generally, *–er* and *–est* are used for shorter (and more frequent) adjectives made up of one or two syllables. *More* and *most* are used for longer (and less frequent) adjectives. Those are typically three syllables or more, but it can occur with two-syllable adjectives as well. Two-syllable adjectives can go either way.

- What is going on with those two-syllable adjectives? It's not a total free-for-all. One study suggests that when the adjective precedes

the noun, it favors the *–er*/*–est* ending; for example, "the coolest school ever." When the adjective is out in the predicate, it favors *more* or *most*: "Sam was a little more cool."

- We also know that the sound of the final syllable in an adjective or the suffix at the end of an adjective can have an impact.
  - The ending *–y* prefers *–er*/*–est*: Happy becomes happiest; easy becomes easiest.
  - The ending *–ful* tends to take *more* or *most*: more hopeful; most cheerful.
- Studies of comparatives and superlatives in contemporary spoken English will turn up a not insignificant number of double forms, usually with two-syllable adjectives, such as *more wealthier* and *most deadliest*. These are now severely criticized.

Historical Uses

- Let's look at historical figures that we deem to be very literate who used double comparatives and superlatives. Here are some examples from Shakespeare:
  - In *Measure for Measure*: "To some more fitter place"
  - In *King Lear*: "To take the basest, and most poorest shape"
  - In *King Lear*: "Harbour more craft, and more corrupter ends"
- Interestingly, these have all sorted out in different ways. *Fit* usually takes *–er* or *–est*, but *more*/*most fit* is not uncommon. *Corrupt* now almost categorically takes *more* or *most*. *Poor* overwhelming uses *–er* or *–est*.
- Of course, there are some adjectives that at least theoretically can't take comparative and superlative forms because their meanings do not allow for comparison: *unique*, *equal*, *perfect*, and

pregnant, for example. In reality, all four of these do show up with comparatives sometimes

- *More perfect* is perhaps the most famous in the U.S. The phrase "a more perfect Union" appears in the Preamble to the Constitution. Is this wrong? Patricia O'Conner and Stewart Kellerman provide a useful defense on their blog *Grammarphobia*. They argue that *more perfect* is capturing the process of striving toward perfection rather than surpassing it.

- The issue with *unique* is different; here, we are getting a change in meaning. The word spawned from the Latin *unicus*, meaning "single, sole, alone of its kind."

  - It came into English via French, appearing in the early 17th century and meaning "one of a kind."

  - But by the mid-18th century there were already examples where it meant "remarkable" or "unusual." Lots of people still don't like this, but it's not new.

  - Nevertheless, we probably want to be careful with *more unique* in formal writing: When the AHD Usage Panel was surveyed in 2004, 66 percent of the panelists disapproved of "Her designs are quite unique." But this was down from 80 percent in 1988.

  - Editors of the AHD point out some very rhetorically effective uses of comparative *unique*, such as this sentence from Martin Luther King Jr.: "I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of preachers."

Two-Syllable Adjectives

- Let's now return to two-syllable adjectives, and whether they appear in attributive or predicative positions. An attributive adjective appears right before the noun: "coolest school." A

predicative one appears after a linking verb like *was*: “Sam was more cool.”

- There are a few adjectives that typically if not exclusively appear only in the attributive or predicative position. The adjectives *former* and *latter* appear only attributively: “the former point.” The adjectives *awake* and *asleep* typically appear only predicatively: “The student is asleep.”

- But we can imagine contexts, especially where we are setting up a contrast, where adjectives like *awake* and *asleep* could be used attributively: “Look at that student over there. No, not the awake one, the asleep one.”

- Another set of adjectives mean different things when they are used attributively and predicatively. Let’s take the adjective *late* as an example: “His wife is late” has a much different meaning from “his late wife.”

- The adjective *sheer* also changes: “The curtains are sheer” contrasts sharply with “That is sheer stupidity.” In “sheer stupidity,” *sheer* is doing a kind of intensifying work.

Post-Noun Adjectives

- We have a few phrases where the adjective appears after the noun, usually because they have been borrowed from French. *Attorney general* may be the most common, but we also have the *solicitor general*, *postmaster general*, *surgeon general*, and the like. Other examples include *poet laureate* and *professor emeritus*/*emerita*.

- These are often official titles and part of government or law (e.g., *heir apparent*, *court martial*). They are mostly left over from post–Norman Conquest England, when French and Latin were the languages of court, law, and nobility.

- The usage issue is how to make them plural. Let’s take *attorney general*, which means “the attorney with the most general jurisdiction.”

The plural should be *attorneys general*. The same system applies for *poets laureate*, *surgeons general*, and *heirs apparent*.

- What about *court martial*? *Courts martial* appears in writing, but you can find *court martials* in speech. There is probably some confusion here with the completely different but similar-sounding *court marshal*, which refers to a judicial officer who provides security and handles other processes in a court.

- In sum, if you find yourself writing about attorneys general or poets laureate or courts martial, remember that they are quirky in their Frenchness, check your intuitions about where the adjective is in the compound, and put that *–s* on the first word—not the second.

Suggested Reading

D'Arcy, "Functional Partitioning and Possible Limits on Variability."
O'Conner and Kellerman, *Grammarphobia: Grammar, Etymology, Usage, and More*, http://www.grammarphobia.com/.
Yagoda, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It*.

Questions to Consider

1. Try spelling out your objections to *funner* and *funnest*, and don't settle for "It doesn't sound right." What is actually wrong with these words?

2. Can the word *unique* mean "one of a kind" and "very unusual" at the same time? Why or why not? Could any potential confusion be resolved?

Lecture 10: Going, Going, Went

This lecture is about the simple past tense form and past participles, as well as about some idiosyncrasies in English verbs. We'll start by clarifying the past tense versus past participles. We'll look at questions like: Why is *went* the past tense of *go*? What's happening with the phrase *have went*? The lecture also looks at the process of regularization of verbs, as well as what happens when irregularities come up. We'll close with a look at usage issues like *proved* versus *proven*.

Past Tense and Past Participles

- How do you create the past tense of a verb? It can seem like such a straightforward question with a simple answer: Add an *–ed*. Except for all the verbs where you don't do that.
  - The simple answer is true for the majority of verbs: *talked*, *walked*, *played*, *dined*, *stayed*, etc.
  - But consider verbs with vowel changes: *sing*/*sang*, *drink*/*drank*, *swing*/*swung*, *hold*/*held*, *run*/*ran*, and so on.
- Old English had two classes of regular verbs: weak (which take *–ed*) and strong (which take a vowel change). Over time, many strong became weak. For example, *swell*'s past-tense version went from *swoll* to *swelled*. The verb *shine* is still undergoing the change now, from *shone* to *shined*. Now, strong verbs are considered "irregular." But they still have a pattern: *sing* becomes *sang*, *swim* becomes *swam*, and *drink* becomes *drank*.

- The past participle is formed differently for the two different classes of verbs. The past participle is the form used in perfect aspect (e.g., *have talked*) and the passive voice (e.g., *was written*).

  - To form a past participle with regular verbs, add *–ed*. This means the past tense and the past participle are the same.

  - With irregular verbs, often a vowel changes. *Sung*, the past participle of *sing*/*sang*, is an example. And sometimes *–en* is added: *Written* is the past participle of *write*/*wrote*.

Have Went

- So, what's going on with *have went*? Why do people say, "It seems to have *went* well" instead of "It seems to have *gone* well?" Think about all those regular verbs where past tense is the same as the past participle.

- With irregular verbs, the past tense and past participle are typically different: we *drank*/we *have drunk*. But there can be an understandable tendency to regularize the verbs to make past tense and past participle identical, like regular verbs: we *have went* or we *have drank*.

- Will *have went* and *have drank* win because they are more regular? It's hard to know: They could, but language can maintain irregularities for a long time, especially with common words like *go*, *drink*, and *run*.

Irregularities

- While regularization can be a powerful force, sometimes we create new irregularities: Consider *dive*/*dove* and *sneak*/*snuck*. *Snuck* is an Americanism. Bryan Garner still describes *snuck* as nonstandard—even though he notes that it appears almost as often as *sneaked* in modern print materials.

- To show the kinds of irregularities we can maintain without even noticing it, let's consider the verb *to be*.

- Present: am, is, are
- Past: was, were
- Past participle: been
- Present participle: being
- Infinitive: be

- What a mess! Three different stems came together over time: *b–*, *w–*, and vowels. The present tense also has more forms than any other verb: First-person singular (*am*), third-person singular (*is*), and plural (*are*).

- Other verbs just have two present-tense forms: the base form and the third-person singular. But in some dialects, there is only the base form: *she walk* and *he go*. This is nonstandard but totally logical and the completion of a longstanding change in the language of losing verb inflections. We used to have *–est* as in *thou sayest* and *–en* as in *they sayen*.

Present Participles and Lie/Lay

- At this point in the lecture, we have covered four of the five forms of every verb: the base form (example: *talk*), the third-person singular (*talks*), the past tense (*talked*), and the past participle (*talked*). The fifth is the present participle, which takes the base word plus *–ing*; for example, *talking* or *writing*.

- Even the most confusing verbs are regular in the present participle, like *lie/lay*. But what is going on with those verbs? They're frequently misused. Garner says they spawn "one of the most widely known of all usage errors." When should we use *lie*/*lay*/*have lain* versus *lay*/*laid*/*have laid*?

- In Old English, there were some intransitive strong verbs, like *lie,* that had related *–ed* verbs that could be used transitively (or

causatively). In other words, a verb like *lie* had a related verb that meant to cause something to lie down—i.e., to lay it down.

- This is why the past tense *lay* (which is intransitive) looks identical to the base for the transitive verb *lay* (whose past tense is then *laid*). Speakers and writers have been confusing them for over 500 years.

- "Lay myself down to sleep" works because *myself* is the object: People lay objects down. But someone can also *lie down* on a bed to sleep.

- Do you *lie low* or *lay low* when you are hiding out? The answer is both. Garner describes *lay low* as "loose," but he recognizes it as common—and quotes William Safire, among others, using the past-tense "I laid low."

Grammatical Information

- Now that we have all these forms, we can talk about all the grammatical information they carry within a sentence, such as tense and aspect.

- The three tenses are typically present, past, and future. But some linguists will say the tenses are actually past and non-past. "The plane lands at 5:00 pm" would be non-past. Of course, we do express the future, but not with an inflectional ending. Take, for example, *will* and *gonna*. We'll come back to auxiliary verbs in the next lecture.

- *Aspect* refers to how we view an event with respect to time (versus when it occurred in time). Progressive and perfect are the two most well-known aspects.

    - Progressive describes actions in progress at the moment we are talking about them. An example: "Her husband is cooking right now."

- Perfect describes an action in the past and its relation to another moment in time.
  - Present perfect covers an action that began in the past and is still happening or relevant now: "I have run five miles." Present perfect can also suggest that something happened recently: "I have started running."
  - Past perfect covers an action that began in the past and ended before another moment in the past: "I had run five miles when my shoe fell off."

- For fun, we can combine the perfect and the progressive, as in, "I have been running for two hours." This started in the past and in progress now.

- Standard English does not have a way to express habitual aspect through the verb form, but African American English (one of the systematic dialects of American English) does. *Be* serves as a habitual verb: "She be running these days." Standard English does this primarily with adverbials, like *usually* or *all the time*.

- Habitual *be* is seen as nonstandard variation, but there is a system there—it's just different from Standard American English. Note that Standard American English has variations of its own, like *swelled*/*swollen*.

Proved versus Proven

- When it comes to *proved* versus *proven*, the latter has been criticized in the past. The verb was borrowed from French and was regular, but then developed *proven*, which originates in past participle of Scottish English *preve*.

- When *proven* was newer, it met with resistance, to say the least. Richard Grant White, in *Words and Their Uses, Past and Present*, wrote in 1876:

> [*Proven*], which is frequently used now by lawyers and journalists, should, perhaps, be ranked among words that are not words. … *Proved* is the past participle of the verb *to prove*, and should be used by all who wish to speak English.

- Garner weighed in: "*Proved* has long been the preferred past participle of *prove*. But *proven* often ill-advisedly appears."

- But many of us use *proven* as a past participle, as in this sentence from the *Journal of International Affairs*: "The above mentioned measures have been implemented half-heartedly and for the most part have proven to be ineffective." This is a useful reminder that views on what is good and bad usage change over time. *Proven* is now unremarkable for many if not most of us.

Suggested Reading

Green, *African American English*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why might speakers introduce new irregular past tense forms into the language, such as *dove* and *snuck*?

2. Would you say/write "have proved" or "have proven"? Would you consider both of them standard usage? If so, why is this variation in standard usage OK?

Lecture 11
Object Lessons

We'll spend this lecture thinking about how we categorize verbs based on how they function in the sentence. Specifically, we'll ask: Do they take an object, or two, or none? There are a surprising number of usage issues linked to this categorization of verbs, including the "It is me" versus "It is I" conundrum. We'll start with linking verbs, and then we'll move on to the transitive versus intransitive distinction, including some usage questions. The lecture closes with some less known types of verbs.

It Is Me?

- A common conundrum is the question: Do we say "It is me" or "It is I"? The traditional rule for this construction sets out "It is I" as the correct form. The basis for the correction is that *to be* is a linking verb, which equates the subject with the predicate noun phrase or adjective phrase that follows it, for example, "Anne is a grammar geek."

- Semantically, the linking verb equates the subject noun phrase and the noun or adjective phrase in the predicate. But what happens grammatically? The subject is in the nominative case, which means that if it is a pronoun it will be *I*, *we*, *he*, *she*, *they*, or *you*.

- Does the predicate noun also need to be in the nominative? Some prescription on this question says yes, so we'd get "It is I" and "It is she speaking." But it sounds very odd to most of us to say, "It is we" instead of "It's us." Here's another awkward sentence: "I asked who called yesterday, and it was he."

- The good news: Many usage guides now say that both "It is me" and "It is I" are acceptable. It is, rather than an issue of grammaticality, an issue of formality.

Good or Well?

- *To be* is far and away the most common linking verb—because it is the most common verb. There is a well-known usage issue around its linking status: When someone asks, "How are you?" are you *good* or are you *well*?

- Some people learn to say, "I am well" but not "I am good." But this prescription does not hold up under scrutiny. Given that *to be* is a linking verb, in the clause "I am _____," we should expect an adjective (like *terrible* or *tired*).

- *Well* is both an adjective and an adverb, and this is part of where things get confused. *Well* is the adverb form of *good*: "I'm a good cook" can also be stated as "I cook well." But *well* is also an adjective in reference to health.

- *Good* is generally an adjective: "the good food." But in some nonstandard varieties of English, it is also an adverb: "He runs good." This is a fairly stigmatized construction.

- One theory is that concerns about *good* as an adverb have bled over to encourage a sense that there is something wrong with "I am good," but there, *good* is serving as an adjective, just as it is in "I feel good." So in reality, we can say either, depending on what we mean. Also consider formality.

Bad or Badly?

- *Feel* is another linking verb, and it raises a usage question of its own: When something unfortunate happens and you are feeling sympathy for someone, are you feeling *bad* or *badly*?

- The confusion stems from this: *Feel* can be a transitive verb ("I felt the cold tile under my feet"); an intransitive verb ("I can feel!"); and a linking verb ("I feel ducky").

- *Bad* is an adjective and *badly* is an adverb. We would use *bad* after any other linking verb: "That seems bad." And we would use *badly* after an intransitive verb: "I failed badly." At least in theory, one can feel bad or feel badly, but it seems the latter doesn't come up often.

- There is, technically, a meaning difference between *I feel badly* and *I feel bad*. If you feel badly, the idea is that you have a bad sense of feel; if you feel bad, you have a bad feeling. Technically, then, you feel bad for someone else's misfortune—although that sounds overly informal or even wrong to many speakers.

- It looks like confusion has led to anxiety about what is correct. That has led to some hypercorrection. In the end we may need to rethink what is technically correct (*feel badly* may become standard).

Objects

- With all other verbs in English (sometimes referred to as *action verbs*), we talk about their relationship to objects. Can they take an object or not? If so, can they take one object or two?

- It's actually a mistake to think of these as categories of verbs. It's more accurate to think about it as how a verb behaves in a sentence, as many verbs can appear both with and without objects. For example, take the verb *read*: It can take no object, one object, or two objects.

    - No object: "I read" or "I read every day." Here, *read* is intransitive.

    - One object: "I read the newspaper." Here, *read* is monotransitive, or just transitive.

    - Two objects: "I read my grandmother the newspaper." Here, *read* is ditransitive.

- Intransitive verbs don't take objects and transitive ones take at least one. Even verbs we typically think of as intransitive can often be made transitive. For example: "I walk" can become "I walk the dog."

- Sometimes this is controversial, as in the case of whether *grow* can be transitive outside of agriculture. Take, for example, this sentence: "One of our key strategies is to grow our business by increasing the number of clients." In 1992, 80 percent of the AHD Usage Panel rejected it; in 2014, 60 percent accepted it.

Word Order

- To talk in more detail about transitivity, let's step back and talk briefly about word order in English. The subject/object relationship is determined pretty much entirely by word order at this point.

- With ditransitive verbs, the direct and indirect object always appear in the same order. Here's an example: "I sent her my tennis racket." There, the subject (*I*) occurs before the verb (*sent*), which occurs before the indirect object (*her*), which occurs before the direct object (*tennis racket*). The indirect object covers to or for whom the action was done. The direct object is the recipient of the action.

- In Modern English, the order will always be (1) subject, (2) verb, (3) indirect object, and (4) direct object: "(1) My friend (2) made (3) me a (4) birthday cake." Note that the indirect object can always be bumped to the end with *to*/*for*: "I sent my tennis racket to her."

Other Subsets

- Complex transitive verbs look like they have two objects, but they function differently from ditransitive verbs. Take this example: "We elected Morgan president of the class." *Morgan* is the object and then *president of the class* is being equated with Morgan.

- *President of the class* here would be called an object complement. It completes the predicate and refers to the object. It could also be called an object predicative. There can also be an adjective there: "My brother called me crazy."

- Another subset of verbs always appear with a prepositional phrase as their complement. Let's take the verb *depend*. It can be intransitive ("It depends"), but if we want to specify what it depends on, we have to use *on*: "It depends on the weather," not, "It depends the weather."

- The verb *listen* works much the same way. We can listen intransitively. If we want to specify the object, we have to add *to*: "We listened to music." Technically, these verbs don't take a direct object; they take a prepositional phrase.

- A final subset of verbs look like verbs that require prepositional phrases, but they work differently. These are phrasal verbs; they're composed of a main verb and a particle (or sometimes two). A particle is a word that fulfills a grammatical function but doesn't fall into a traditional lexical category. Examples of particles include *call up*, *ask out*, *look up*, and *come down with*.

- One might think it was a verb plus a preposition, but you can test and tell the difference. Let's look at the difference between these two sentences:

  - "Mary looked up the hill."

  - "Mary looked up my phone number."

- In "Mary looked up the hill," *up the hill* is a prepositional phrase expressing where Mary looked. It functions as a unit.

- In "Mary looked up my phone number," *looked up* is a unit. You can move the object to create, "Mary looked my phone number up" or "Mary looked it up." But you can't do "Up my phone number is where Mary looked," because *up my phone number* is not a prepositional phrase.

- In these cases, you have a phrasal verb with a direct object. And these verbs will come back when we talk about the well-known rule about whether you can end a sentence with a preposition—because sometimes it is not a preposition.

Question to Consider

1. At this point English follows fairly strict subject-verb-object word order. Can you come up with examples where the object comes first?

Lecture 12
Shall We?

Perhaps the best-known usage rule involving auxiliary (or helping) verbs is the distinction between—or the lack of distinction—between *can* and *may*. This lecture covers that issue, as well as many other sticking points that we run into when using auxiliary verbs. We'll spend a deal of time on the verb *will*. The issue of combining auxiliary verbs will also get attention, and we'll close with a look at the word *ain't*.

Can and May

- There is a traditional rule that *may* is about permission and *can* is about ability. So, for example, a student *can* leave a class whenever they want to; the issue is whether they *may* leave (with permission from the instructor).

- Historically, *can* has been used to express permission for almost 200 years—so these two auxiliary verbs overlap in the realm of permission. Note that we don't use *may* for ability.

- There are times when all of us want to use *can* for permission. Specifically in a contracted negative construction, we prefer *can't* to *mayn't* when we're talking about permission: "Can't I come?" works much better than "Mayn't I come?"

- For some speakers, *can* versus *may* is a formality distinction regarding permission. However, as of 2009, 37 percent of the AHD Usage Panel rejects *can* when used for permission, specifically in the question, "Can I take another week to submit the application?" Rejection is falling, but that is still over a third of the Usage Panel.

At a play, you might hear the formal instruction, "Audience members *may* take photographs," or the more informal, "Yes, you *can* take a photo."

- A side note: Both *can* and *may* express possibility for the future: "It may get crazy in here!" or "It can snow in Michigan in May." The usage issue we've been talking about here is not about possibility, but about permission versus ability.

Auxiliary Verbs

- *Can* and *may* are two of nine modal auxiliary verbs, or modals, in English. The other seven are *may*, *might*, *must*, *could*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, and *would*. Modal auxiliaries express ability, necessity, obligation, or permission. This is referred to as deontic modality. They can also express assessment of reality or likelihood, which is called epistemic modality.

- For example, deontic *must* is about obligation or necessity: "I must finish this essay." Epistemic *must* is an evaluation of reality: "It must have fallen below freezing last night."

- In addition to the nine modal auxiliaries, there are three auxiliary verbs, known as primary auxiliaries, that are not modals: *be*, *have*,

and *do*. All auxiliaries appear before the main verb and require a main verb, except in cases of elision.

Modals

- Modals work differently from other verbs in that they do not inflect: There is no *–s* or past tense *–ed*. "She *mights*" or "They *musted*" don't happen. There is also no *–ing* ("*Coulding*" never occurs) and no past participle ("He has *shalled*" doesn't happen either).

- Modals have no infinitive form, and the main verb after them appears in the base or infinitive form: It's "can go," not "can goes." We can see the effect of inserting a modal on our understanding of whether something is possible or likely or allowed. Take these examples:

  - I play ping-pong.

  - I can play ping-pong. (Someone has asked if I know how or permission.)

  - I might play ping-pong. (This is a possibility in the future.)

  - I would play ping-pong. (This is a possibility, perhaps if something else happens.)

  - I must play ping-pong. (Two interpretations: I need to do this for whatever reason, or this must be true—e.g., you found photos of me playing last week.)

- The auxiliary modal *will* also has two meanings, the most common of which is future tense. It can also express epistemic modality of something we think is likely to happen or want to happen. Think about the two different interpretations of this sentence:

  - I will play ping-pong. (This is a simple statement of future action.)

- I will play ping-pong! (This expresses determination to learn this sport.)

- In standard varieties of English, you get only one modal per verb phrase, but in some varieties of Southern American English, you can get double modals or multiple modals.

  - Examples include *might could*, *might should*, *may can*, and *useta could*. In a sentence, someone might say, "I might should send a contribution."

  - It's not impossible to put two modals next to each other in English. It doesn't typically occur in standard English, but it occurs in other varieties.

Primaries

- The three primary auxiliary verbs do much heavy lifting. Two of them (*be* and *have*) express aspect and voice for verbs, and auxiliary *do* has become all wrapped up in how we ask questions and express negation.

- The three primary auxiliaries do inflect within the verb phrase; for example: "I am talking," "she has listened," and "he does exercise." In talking about these three auxiliaries, let's start with *be*, *have*, and aspect.

  - The progressive aspect takes *be*: "I am playing ping-pong" and "I was playing ping-pong."

  - The perfect aspect takes *have*: "I have played ping-pong" and "I had played ping-pong."

- The auxiliary *be* also plays a role in creating passive voice. This takes *be* plus a past participle: "The ping-pong paddle was stolen."

- Then there is auxiliary *do*, which has dramatically increased its functions in English grammar since the Renaissance. *Do* has long

been used in declarative sentences: “He does exercise.” At this point it typically expresses emphasis: “I do care about the fate of porcupines, I do!”

- Since the Renaissance, *do* has become a standard part of how we make negative statements and questions: “I like dark chocolate” becomes “I do not like dark chocolate.” But we don’t need *do* if there is another auxiliary there, modal or primary: “Ashley was not playing video games earlier.”

- We also don’t need *do* if the main verb is *to be*: “Video games are not a good distraction.”

- The auxiliary *do* is now a key part of how we make yes/no questions. During the Renaissance and earlier, you could flip the main verb and subject to make a question: “Know you the address?”

- Now, if there is no other auxiliary present and the main verb is anything other than to be, we insert *do* and move it to the front: “Do you know the address?” Again, if there is another auxiliary verb there, we don’t need *do*: “Was Ashley playing video games earlier?”

Changes

- Two modals are in serious decline. The first, which won’t surprise you, is *shall*. While we’re talking about *shall*, let’s address a usage issue.

    - There is a rule out there about *shall* and *will*. For those who know it, the idea is that one expresses future and one obligation, and it varies by person. In first person, *shall* expresses the future and *will* expresses obligation.

    - The supposed rule continues: In the second and third person, *will* expresses future and *shall* expresses obligation. Has this ever been true? Not as far as we know. It was imposed by prescriptivists trying to create a logical system where there has never been one. But you can find it in Strunk and White’s

work. (For Americans, *shall* is more formal, sometimes used to express official, legal obligation. Lawyers can care a lot about this.)

- The other modal in decline may surprise you: It's *must*. *Must* has been in decline for much of the 20th century. But this is only the deontic *must*—the one that expresses obligation or necessity.

- On reflection, *must* often sounds too strong: "I must run errands tonight after work" comes off as an overstatement. We'd usually say something more like, "I hafta run errands tonight after work."

- This example points to the rise of a new set of auxiliary verbs that are emerging, sometimes called semi-modals or emerging modals. They include *hafta* and *gonna*. Those aren't standardized spellings, but they are how we say them. In fact, *gonna* and *going to* now mean different things: "I'm gonna run errands" versus "I am going to run errands."

- We still recognize these are informal and don't write them in formal prose, but their rise in American English is dramatic. These significant changes in the modal system are happening without a lot of fanfare or stigmatization (other than informality).

Ain't

- Before we finish this lecture on auxiliary verbs, we need to talk about *ain't*. This must be the most notorious auxiliary verb out there. Dictionaries tend to treat it as nonstandard, and some people claim it isn't a word.

- What is wrong with *ain't*? Mostly it is that style guides tell us there is something wrong with it. In the 18th century, a whole set of contractions were condemned: *shouldn't*, *can't*, *won't*, and *ain't*. All of these have redeemed themselves—they're seen as informal, but not ignorant—except *ain't*.

- One key point: Almost all speakers of English use *ain't* sometimes. Some speakers use it routinely as part of their grammar. Some use it for emphasis or in stock expressions— "Ain't gonna happen"—to create an unpretentious or folksy tone.

- But the stigma is pretty strong when it is used as part of daily speech. An example: When he was at the University of Michigan, football coach Rich Rodriguez caught heat from a university regent for using *ain't* in a speech in front of fans.

- If think about it, "ain't I?" seems more systematic than "aren't I?" Why do we accept "aren't I?" as standard when we do not accept "I aren't?" This is one of the many examples of the ways in which what is considered standard is not necessarily more logical than other possibilities.

- Defending the logic of *ain't* this way is not an assertion that *ain't* is standard usage—it clearly isn't. The linguistic defense is meant instead to ask us to think critically about the arguments we make about standard and nonstandard usage, especially if we find ourselves making claims that one thing is more logical than another.

Suggested Reading

Skinner, *The Story of Ain't*.

Questions to Consider

1. Consider these two sentences: "I must run errands after work" and "I have to run errands after work." What differences in connotation do you see between the two sentences?

2. What is actually wrong with the auxiliary verb *ain't*? The word is in standard dictionaries, so the answer cannot be "*Ain't* ain't in the dictionary."

Lecture 13 Passive Voice Was Corrected

In 2009, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an essay called "50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice," written by Geoff Pullum, a linguist at the University of Edinburgh. Pullum is not known for pulling his punches, especially when it comes to Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. The essay was published a day after the 50th anniversary of that book. As the title makes clear, it was far from celebratory. Central to Pullum's case is the treatment of the passive voice in Strunk and White. This entire lecture focuses on the passive voice, starting with Strunk and White.

Active Voice

- In *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White give us the following advice:

  > The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive. … This rule does not, of course, mean that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice, which is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary. … The habitual use of the active voice, however, makes for forcible writing.

- The leeway in this advice is important: The passive is sometimes convenient or necessary. As we'll talk about, the passive is also highly conventionalized in scientific writing and other kinds of academic prose.

- Where Strunk and White run into trouble is that their examples potentially could confuse people about what is passive and what is not. They provide four example sentences, and only one of

them is actually passive. They introduce the sentences by saying they show "how a transitive verb in the active voice can improve a sentence." Therefore, they have two topics in this advice: transitive verbs and active voice. But given that the whole section is about active voice, the transitive verb part can get lost.

- Here are the sentences:

    1. There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

    2. At dawn the crowing of a rooster could be heard.

    3. The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired.

    4. It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had.

- Only number 2 is passive: "At dawn the crowing of the rooster could be heard." We can see one of the ways the passive voice can create stylistic stumbles: We don't know who is doing the hearing. The passive here has inserted an unknown agent who is hearing the rooster, as opposed to just letting the rooster crow at dawn.

Defining Passivity

- The active voice has a subject (the agent) acting upon an object. In the passive voice, the object gets fronted; the verb takes an auxiliary *be* and a past participle; and the subject can gain the word *by* (and becomes optional).

    - Active voice: "Big Bird tickled Cookie Monster."

    - Passive voice: "Cookie Monster was tickled by Big Bird."

- The point is that the recipient of the action becomes the subject, and the agent moves to end and becomes optional. The optionality

of agent is very helpful when we don't want to take responsibility: "Mistakes were made."

- It's also helpful when we don't know who was responsible: "My car was side-swiped in the parking lot."

To Be

- What is happening in the other Strunk and White sentences if it is not the passive? What we're seeing in all of these is the unnecessary insertion of *to be*, which weakens the clout of the verb and often adds extra words to the sentence. Let's review each sentence in turn.

1. There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

- This is just a *to be* sentence, and the *be* became necessary when we added the introductory *there*. One cleaner version of the same sentence would be, "Dead leaves covered the ground."

- Next up:

3. The reason that he left college was that his health became impaired.

- This raises much of the same issue as number 1."The reason that X is Y" introduces a *to be* verb. It is worth looking at whether, in context, we can just use a *because* construction instead: "He left college because his health became impaired." This causes a shift in emphasis, from why he left college to the fact that he left.

- Finally:

4. It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had.

- "It was not long" could be become "soon" or "quickly," but it is going to depend on what the writer wants to emphasize. "It was

not long before she did X" is not exactly the same rhetorically as "She quickly did X."

- "She was very sorry" could become "She regretted." This is really a word choice issue that involves verbs.

- "… she had said what she had" could probably become "she said what she did" or "she regretted her words." We need a little more context.

- Putting all four of these sentences under pro-active-voice advice becomes potentially confusing, particularly in terms of equating all uses of *to be* as a main verb with the passive voice. That is Geoff Pullum's concern.

Better Advice

- Better advice about the passive voice is to consider whether a passive construction is the most rhetorically effective choice. There are several reasons why it might be the best choice rhetorically.

- The passive voice sometimes helps us maintain continuity between sentences. Consider these examples against each other:

  - "I have a new favorite mug. It was given to me by graduate students in the English and Education program."

  - "I have a new favorite mug. Graduate students gave it to me."

- The passive voice is gone in the second example, but there is a rough jump between the sentences.

- Sometimes we don't know the agent, as mentioned earlier, and the passive is really helpful here. Think about some of the terrible news we hear, where reporters need to be careful not to assume agents before we know: "Two people were shot last night."

- Then there is scientific writing. The passive voice has become more conventionalized in this register than in many others. Think about the description of an experiment. Researchers are doing all the actions: taking the sample, putting it in a petri dish, adding whatever they're adding, and so on.

    - If we told it like a story, there would be people involved: "We took the sample and put it in the petri dish." But that no longer sounds all that scientific.

    - Let's try instead: "The sample was placed in the petri dish and water was added." Now the human agents are invisible or at least very marginalized. The specimens take center stage and its sounds more objective.

- There are a few other passive phrases common in academic writing beyond scientific writing that don't typically get edited out as ineffective passives. Examples include "It could be argued" and "Other relevant factors must be considered."

    - "It could be argued" is a way we introduce counterarguments as part of defending our own claims. Others may have argued these or they may be hypothetical, but it doesn't actually matter who has argued them.

    - "[X] must be considered" can be a solution to the abstract *we* in academic writing. Take the sentence, "We must consider other relevant factors." Who is we? The author(s)? The author and the readers? All researchers in the field?

- Pick your poison with the passive or the abstract *we*: Both of them present stylistic issues.

She Got Cheated

- Let's talk about a passive variant that doesn't use *be* but instead uses *get*: "My car got side-swiped in the parking lot." This setup

feels much more colloquial. It's not something we are going to do in formal writing.

- In addition to being more colloquial, *get* passives may also carry two other differences in connotation.

  1. They can reflect the responsibility of the grammatical subject: "Mario got fired" blames Mario more than "Mario was fired."

  2. They can reflect the attitude of the speaker toward the event, expressing adversity or sympathy: "My car got hit" expresses adversity. "She got cheated" expresses sympathy.

- *Get* passives are older than you might guess. They first popped up in the mid- to late 17th century, although they were only sporadic until the late 18th century.

Passive Progressives

- The 19th century witnessed the rise of the passive progressive in English. A passive progressive is a passive that is in progress, for example, "The house is being built." This is now totally unremarkable, but people hated it when it came into the language. Here is George P. Marsh in *Lectures on the English Language* (1863):

  > … the clumsy and unidiomatic continuing present of the passive voice, which, originating not in the sound common sense of the people, but in the brain of some grammatical pretender, has widely spread, and threatens to establish itself as another solecism in addition to the many which our syntax already presents. The phrase 'the house *is being built*,' for 'the house *is building*,' is an awkward neologism, … an attempt at the artificial improvement of the language in a point which needed no amendment.

- David Booth's 1830 work, *An Analytical Dictionary of the English Language*, argued, "For some time past, 'the bridge is *being built*,'

'the tunnel is *being excavated*,' and other expressions of a like kind, have pained the eye and stunned the ear." (This was not in the 1805 edition.)

- Before this construction arose, did people really say things like, "The house is building?" The answer is yes.
  - Jane Austen wrote in the novel *Northanger Abbey*: "The clock struck ten while the trunks were carrying down."
  - Samuel Richardson wrote in the 1753 novel *Sir Charles Grandison*: "Tea was preparing. Sir Charles took his own seat next Lord L—, whom he set in to talk of Scotland."

"The tea was preparing" now sounds funny to us, while "the tea is being prepared" sounded funny to people in the 19th century.

Suggested Reading

Collins, "*Get*-passives in English."
Fleisher, "The Origin of Passive *Get*."
Pullum, "50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice."

Questions to Consider

1. When do you find passive constructions helpful in your writing? When do you find them ineffective in your own writing or in other people's writing?

2. Consider these two sentences: "My cousin was fired" and "My cousin got fired." Is there a subtle difference in meaning for you? If so, what is the difference?

Lecture 14 Only Adverbs

Two well-known company slogans have raised some grammatical hackles based on their use, or non-use, of adverbs. Subway has long used the slogan “Eat Fresh,” and in 1997 Apple rolled out “Think different.” Do we have grammatical problems here? This question is where we’ll start our lecture on adverbs. Then we’ll move on to consider other adverb topics, including intensifiers, tricky adverbs like *hopefully*, and flat adverbs.

Eat Fresh

- “Eat Fresh” sounds like “eat right,” but “right” can clearly be an adverb as well as an adjective. This leaves us with the question of whether *fresh* can be an adverb. It’s usually an adjective: “The fish are fresh.”

- But *fresh* can be an adverb: “The bread is baked fresh every day.” However, “Eat Fresh” works differently from “Baked Fresh” would. In the latter, *fresh* means recently.

- Is “Eat Fresh” a shortening of “eat fresh food?” Is this a nonstandard meaning of the adverb? In the end, we know what it means, and it has done its work: We notice the language.

Think Different

- Apple’s “Think different” is another case. With standard grammar, the phrase would be “think differently”—but this could have a different meaning, too. It boils down to thinking in different ways versus think about different things.

- *Different* can be an adverb: "Carol didn't know different until Eleanor told her." So, in Apple's slogan, is *different* an adjective or adverb? Are we to think about different kinds of computers or think differently about computers? This ad didn't win an Emmy for nothing—the ambiguity works.

- The ambiguity is possible because English has words that can be both adjectives and adverbs without changing form. We'll come back to those "flat" adverbs.

Defining Adverbs

- Adverbs are difficult to pin down and define. Merriam-Webster's stab at it is this: "a word that describes a verb, an adjective, another adverb, or a sentence and that is often used to show time, manner, place, or degree."

- Unlike adjectives, which modify nouns, adverbs modify a whole range of things.

  - Modifying verbs: go *quickly*, protest *peacefully*.

  - Modifying adjectives: *incredibly* nice, *very* happy.

  - Modifying adverbs: *really* stupidly, *ridiculously* slowly.

  - Modifying a clause/sentence: *Frankly*, this situation with adverbs is a mess.

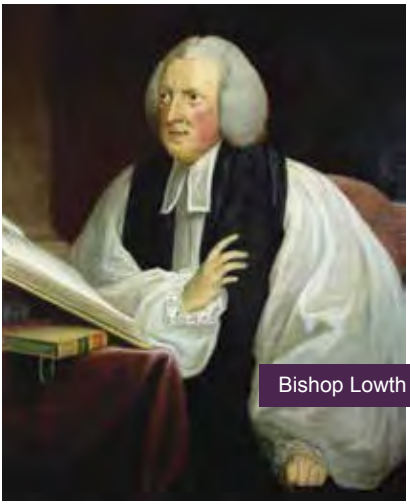
Only Some Confusion

- The adverb *only* sometimes causes confusion. For example, some would nitpick "Anne only gave me two dollars" as having a different meaning from "Anne gave me only two dollars." Bryan Garner called *only* "perhaps the most frequently misplaced word in English." But if it happens so frequently, is it really misplaced?

- Garner is echoing a long-standing concern. Concern about *only* goes way back, as early as Bishop Lowth in 1763, who went after

"I only spoke three words" instead of "I spoke only three words."

- Why the objection? If the focus is that it was just three words, then *only* should come before *three words*.
- If the focus is what you spoke (instead of wrote), then *only* should come before *spoke*.



Bishop Lowth

- If the focus is on you speaking (instead of others), then *only* can also come before *spoke*.

- In speech, intonation would address much of this. Some later grammarians called Lowth hypercritical on this. English likes the *only* before the verb.

- Do you have a problem with the following two sentences, the first written by James Thurber and the second by Samuel Johnson?
  - "We feel very badly about your only having one turkey."
  - "Every other author may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach."

- They really aren't confusing, so are we quibbling over too fine a point? *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, which provides those two sentences, points out that in edited prose, the *only* does tend to appear before the phrase it modifies (something writers and editors are paying attention to).

- Here's Thurber again: "Indeed, we spent so little time in bed most of us had only one child." Is it worth editing for this? Maybe, at least some of the time. Here's an example from editors of the AHD: "Dictators respect only force; they are not moved by words" versus "Dictators only respect force; they do not worship it."

- Let's be clear that this is about disambiguating sentences that require it. In sum, the issue with *only* stems from the flexibility many adverbs show in terms of sentence placement—but not all of them show it.

Intensifiers

- Intensifiers (a subset of adverbs) are less flexible: They appear before adjectives and adverbs. Examples include *very* happy, *really* fast, and *truly* superb.

- Some attention recently came to the rise of *super* as an intensifier. The *Corpus of Contemporary American English* showed it was five times more frequent in 2010–2012 than in 1990–1994. "Super fast" is faster than "really fast," but as *super* does this work more frequently, it will weaken.

- New, slangier forms in American English include *hella* cool, *uber* cool, and *wicked* cool. British English has its own slangy intensifiers: *flipping*, *chuffing*, *dead*, *blooming*, and the mildly expletive *bloody*.

- In formal writing, it is worth looking at all intensifiers and seeing if you need them:

  - "This finding is quite remarkable" can just be "This finding is remarkable."

  - "The very dramatic decrease" can be "The dramatic decrease."

- But this does not make the case that one should omit all adverbs. Some work to boost our claims, such as *clearly*, *surely*, and *obviously*. Equally importantly, adverbs can hedge our claims: Take *perhaps*, *possibly*, and *arguably* as examples.

Hopefully

- Let's discuss one other controversial adverb: *hopefully* as a sentence adverb. In the first couple of decades of the 20th century, the adverb *hopefully* started to be used to mean "I hope/we hope/it is hoped that …." Speakers could say, "She smiled hopefully" and "Hopefully it won't snow tomorrow."

- The sentence adverb use of *hopefully* gained in popularity. But in the 1960s, prescriptive commentators noticed this new use and condemned it, calling it overly ambiguous. Speakers have continued to use it prolifically as a sentence adverb, but starting in the 1960s, the sentence adverb use dropped precipitously in edited prose.

- The AHD Usage Panel has been asked about this regularly. For a time, the panel was getting more prescriptive about it: In the 1969 survey, 44 percent of the panel accepted the new usage of *hopefully* in "Hopefully, the treaty will be ratified." But in 1999, only 34 percent accepted it.

- Now the tide has turned: In 2012, 63 percent accepted that sentence. Furthermore, 89 percent accepted *mercifully* as a sentence adverb: "Mercifully, the play was brief."

- Given how common the sentence adverb use of *hopefully* is in speech, it seems that whatever ambiguity there is, it is an ambiguity that speakers can tolerate. Human language is often ambiguous.

Flat Adverbs

- To end this lecture, let's come back full circle to flat adverbs. These are adverbs that have the same form as their adjective counterparts (examples: *fast*, *up*, *down*, and *soon*). For instance, take "I am a fast eater" and "I eat fast."

- One of the common markers of adverbs is the suffix *–ly*, which we can add to an adjective to make an adverb: *quick* becomes *quickly*.

- There are also a few adjectives that have that *–ly* ending, such as *homely* and *comely*. The suffix *–ly* has come to be used to form adverbs, which leaves an adjective like *friendly* in an awkward position: What is the adverb form? *Friendlily*? In a *friendly* way?

- There are, though, many adverbs with no distinctive *–ly* marking, such as *soon*, *up*, *down*, *fast*, *hard*, *tight*, and *slow.*

    - You might question whether *slow* is an adverb, since we have *slowly*. There is some controversy over "drive slow," but historically there is no problem here.

    - There used to be a lot of flat adverbs in English because we used to mark adverbs with final *–e*. When that dropped off, *slow* was an adjective and an adverb. Shakespeare, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, wrote: "But oh, me thinks, how slow / This old Moone wanes."

- What about "drive safe?" Historically, the adverb here has been *safely*. But why not let *safe* be a flat adverb? Merriam-Webster recognizes this, but the AHD and OED do not.

- What about "play nice?" *Nice* historically has been an adverb, although now it would be considered nonstandard in sentences like "He sings really nice." Again, Merriam-Webster recognizes *nice* as an adverb; the AHD does not.

- Some flat adverbs mean something different from the *–ly* form; for example, take "work hard" versus "hardly work."

- In some cases, the flat adverb will feel more informal or more playful, but that doesn't make it ungrammatical. Remember: Flat adverbs have been around for centuries. They can make us think when they are used in creatively ambiguous ways, as in "Think different."

Suggested Reading

Tagliamonte and Roberts, "So Weird; So Cool; So Innovative."
Yagoda, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It*.

Questions to Consider

1. Would you be willing to consider both *drive slowly* and *drive slow* standard usage? Why or why not?

2. In what way is the sentence "Hopefully it won't rain tomorrow" ambiguous? Is it an ambiguity that you can manage as a listener or reader?

Lecture 15

No Ifs, Ands, or Buts

The Microsoft Word grammar checker is arguably the most powerful prescriptive force in the world. It is on roughly 90 percent of word processing programs and it is on by default. Writers are much more likely to encounter the rules in that grammar checker than any usage guide. And when it puts a green squiggly line under something, it makes you wonder: What's wrong with that? Frequently, it targets words such as *and*, *like*, and *but*—the subject of this lecture. We'll review coordinating conjunctions and coordinators; subordinating conjunctions/subordinators; and then talk about the dramatic differences between speech and writing.

And

- The grammar checker underlines *And* at the beginning of a sentence. This is a tipoff that there might be some problems with the rules in the grammar checker, because this rule simply isn't a rule. It is a myth. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* summarizes:

> Everybody agrees that it's all right to begin a sentence with *and*, and nearly everybody admits to having been taught at some past time that the practice was wrong. Most of us think the prohibition goes back to our early school days. … [T]he prohibition is probably meant to correct the tendency of children to string together independent clauses or simple declarative sentences with *and*s.

- There's a reason kids have a tendency to use a lot of *and*'s (it's the way we talk). As writers, they need to learn in less colloquial ways. But first, let's think about the power of the MS Word grammar checker putting green squiggly lines under sentence-initial *And* and *But*. It sure makes it seem like there is something wrong with them.

- The software's explanation is that it is informal to start a sentence that way: "Although sentences beginning with 'and,' 'but,' 'or,' or 'plus' may be used informally, use the suggested replacement for a more formal or traditional tone." But not everyone makes a distinction between informal and wrong, and these aren't even strictly informal: You can find sentence-initial *And* and *But* all over academic writing, in literature, and in the Bible: "And God said, 'Let there be light.'"

- In informal polls, a good number of people revise their prose until the green squiggly line goes away, so this myth suddenly takes on new power.

Coordinators and Subordinators

- This lecture will typically use the terminology *coordinator* and *subordinator*, but there is not unanimity in the linguistics community about terminology. Geoff Pullum and his co-author Rodney Huddleston have argued that we are getting the terminology wrong in their book the *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*.

- They argue that we should think about many words that are typically called *subordinating conjunctions* as prepositions. But you will continue to encounter the terms *coordinator* and *subordinator*, as well as *coordinating* and *subordinating conjunction*, in most usage guides, grammar books, and dictionaries, so this lecture will use that categorization.

Coordinators

- Coordinators (or coordinating conjunctions) like *and* and *but* join two units of equal status, for instance, two nouns or noun phrases. *And* is a prototypical coordinator and can coordinate words, phrases, and clauses. Examples are below.

    - Words: “apples and oranges”; “cease and desist”; “safe and sound.”

    - Phrases: “the young and the restless”; “reading books and writing essays.”

    - Clauses: “My phone rang, and I jumped.”

- Some coordinators can also take more than two. The key point overall is that the coordinator occurs between the coordinates: “My phone rang and I jumped,” not “And I jumped, my phone rang.”

- The coordinator *or* can do all the things *and* can do: It can connect words, phrases, and clauses, and coordinate more than two items. In contrast, *but* can’t do all of that. It does less well with words and phrases: “I bought apples but oranges” doesn’t work, although we can say, “I bought apples but not oranges.”

- These more prototypical coordinators also can't co-occur: "He loves chocolate and but it keeps him up at night" doesn't work. However, you can make *and* and *or* co-occur with a slash: "He should eat chocolate earlier in the day and/or eat less chocolate."

- *So* and *yet* are sometimes called marginal coordinators. *So* can't typically connect words or phrases—only clauses. We can say, "They were late, so they parked illegally right in front," but not "They were late so frantic." That said, *so* can connect verb phrases: "They were late, so drove fast." *So* and *yet* can also combine with *and*: "They were late, and yet they stopped to get coffee on the way."

The Word *Plus*

- Some controversy surrounds the word *plus*. Let's start with the well-known mathematical expression "two plus two equals four." The *–s* in *equals* suggests that "two plus two" is singular. Some interpret this to mean *plus* is a preposition, so "plus two" is a prepositional phrase, which allows "two plus two" to be singular.

- This is different from how *and* works in identical constructions: "Two and two are four." *Plus* can also feel like a preposition in a sentence like this: "All school-aged children, plus an accompanying adult, can get in for free."

- The editors of the AHD reject the idea that *plus* is a preposition. They call *plus* here a conjunction and simply state that convention means that "two plus two" is treated as a singular.

- Another controversy: Can you use *plus* to coordinate clauses or even to begin a sentence?

    - Using it to coordinate clauses is out there, but sounds informal, as in this example from *Esquire*: "The next woman, the forty-three-year-old, already has two kids, plus she's recovering from thyroid cancer."

- *Plus* can also start a sentence, but not all critics like it. Its use is on the rise, though. In 2009, 67 percent of the AHD Usage Panel accepted the example, “He has a lot of personal charm. Plus, he knows what he’s doing.”

Subordinating Conjunctions

- Subordinating conjunctions connect clauses. In the process, they subordinate one to the other such that it can no longer stand alone but depends on the main clause. The prototypical example is *if*: “If it snows tomorrow, we probably won’t run.” We can reverse the clauses: “We probably won’t run if it snows tomorrow.” But “If it snows tomorrow” can’t stand on its own.

- Note that fragments that begin with a subordinator are possible for rhetorical effect. For instance: “Researchers say we might be able to stave off climate change with a 40 percent reduction in global emissions. Unless the unexpected happens.” This short fragment can add emphasis.

- Common subordinating conjunctions include *although*, *because*, *while*, *when*, *after*, *before*, *since*, *unless*, *as if*, *in order that*, and *as soon as*.

- Most subordinating conjunctions are not controversial, but *because* and *like* have raised some hackles.

  - The first concern: Can you begin a sentence with *because*? Yes, but if you start with *because*, you need to remember to add the independent clause.

  - The second concern about *because* regards the use of “the reason is because” rather than “the reason is that.” It is redundant, and is largely edited out of more formal writing, but you can still find it.

Like a Cigarette Should

- The word *like* as a subordinating conjunction or subordinator has also caused controversy. The best example is this text from a Winston cigarette ad in the 1950s and 1960s: "Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should."

- Newspapers, magazines, and usage guides wanted *like* only to be a preposition. But *like* as a conjunction seems to go back to the 14th century. It shows up in Shakespeare and later Charles Dickens, George Eliot, John Keats, and Emily Bronte.

- Criticism started as early as the 18th century. Noah Webster called the sentence "He thinks like you do" an "improper and vulgar" expression. By the 20th century, the consensus position was that it was wrong to use *like* to mean "as if" or "as."

- In the end, what do we make of the Winston cigarette ad? It did its job. It had people talking. If you want to use *like* as a subordinator, it's your decision. You're in good company if you decide to do so.

- Is it OK to use *like* as a preposition? Yes, but some people seem to be scared of it because of the criticism of *like* as a subordinating conjunction. *Like* as a preposition expresses similarity: "Dave, like many other Ann Arborites, owns a Prius." It also can be used synonymously with *such as*: "Our friend's daughter wants to go to a smaller school like Oberlin."

Slash

- The word *slash* has begun to emerge as a new coordinator between clauses. Here's an example in oral communication: "I really love that hot dog place on Liberty Street slash can we go there tomorrow?"

- It can express what one should do versus what one is going to do: "I'm going to go home and work on my paper slash take a nap."

- It can also mean "following up on that." Here's an example from Twitter: "When is your next tour slash will you be making any pitstops in Dallas and/or OKC?"

- Why write it out instead of using the symbol? As one teenager explained in a comment on a blog post regarding *slash*, the main reason for *slash* over / is "for it to be seen clearly and read as 'slash' instead of 'or.' The two words now have a completely different meaning and function, even though they are both expressed using the same symbol."

- This is linguistic innovation under our very noses, and it's innovation of the most interesting kind: It involves a function word.

Suggested Reading

Curzan, *Fixing English*.
Yagoda, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It*.

Questions to Consider

1. Did you learn not to start a sentence with *And* or *But*? What reasons were you given, and how well do you think those reasons hold up?

2. Should *like* be able to function like a subordinator in a sentence such as "She ate like she hadn't seen food in days?" Why or why not?

Lecture 16

However to Use *However*

When a writer is struggling to get an idea onto the page, sometimes people will recommend, "Just say it out loud and write that down" or "Just write it like you would say it." That advice might help you get the idea out of your head initially, but in any formal register of writing, we should not write the way we speak. We are expected to use different vocabulary and different syntactic structures. One key example: Certain conjunctive adverbs are used much more heavily writing, especially in formal writing. Those are the focus of this lecture.

Therefore, Thus, and So On

- According to the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, *therefore* is far and away most common in academic writing. It occurs five times more often in academic writing than magazines and speech, and ten times more than it appears in newspapers or fiction.

- *Thus* is an even more extreme case. It's more than 30 times more common in academic writing than speech. In speech, we're more likely to say something like *so* than we are to say *thus* or *therefore*. We might even just use *and* to show a consequence: "Rosie didn't get enough sleep the night before and she didn't do well on the final exam."

- We show more reliance on coordinators in speech than many conjunctive adverbs. *Consequently* is 25 times more common in academic writing than speech. Newspapers don't like it as much. There, it's only twice as common as it is in speech.

- *Moreover* is 40 times more frequent in academic writing than speech. Even less academic-sounding conjunctive adverbs (or adverbials—phrases that function as adverbs) are more written than spoken. *In addition* is more than twice as common in newspapers and magazines than in speech. In academic writing, we seem to love it: It's more than seven times more common in academic writing than in speech.

- Some conjunctive adverbs pattern the other way. Two examples are *anyway* and *then*. So we do have some colloquial conjunctive adverbs.

Defining Conjunctive Adverbs

- The most basic definition of conjunctive adverbs is that they are adverbs that conjoin two clauses. The clauses remain independent. They may be separate sentences or joined by a semi-colon. Take this example from *The Atlantic* (2015): "I feel depressed; therefore, my marriage is not working out" could instead be "I feel depressed. Therefore, my marriage is not working out."

- But a conjunctive adverb is different from a coordinator because it can move. A coordinator has to appear exactly between the two clauses, joining them from that medial position: "I feel depressed; and my marriage is not working out."

- The conjunctive adverb can appear in the same place as *and*, but it can also move in the second clause:

  - "I feel depressed; therefore, my marriage is not working out."

  - "I feel depressed; my marriage, therefore, is not working out."

  - "I feel depressed. My marriage is, therefore, not working out."

Uses of Conjunctive Adverbs

- Why do we get such a range of conjunctive adverbs in writing? They have many uses:
  - They can show with some specificity how two clauses are connected (versus the informal *and* and *but*).
  - They can add to previous information (*furthermore*, *in addition*, *moreover*).
  - They can contrast (*notwithstanding*, *nonetheless*, *nevertheless*, *in contrast*).
  - They can illustrate (*for example*, *for instance*).
  - They can summarize (*in short*, *in sum*).
  - They can show sequence in time or logic (*consequently*, *therefore*, *thus*).
  - They can emphasize (*certainly*, *indeed*).

Usage Issues

- Let's now turn to some usage issues with conjunctive adverbs. We'll start with *however* given how many problems this causes writers. However is one of the most common conjunctive adverbs in writing. Interestingly, it is on the decline overall in writing.

- Students often want *however* to behave like *but* and just put a comma before it rather than a semicolon. This doesn't happen to only students, either. The *Harvard Review*, for instance, announced the following on its submissions webpage: "Writers at

all stages of their careers are invited to apply, however, we can only publish a very small fraction of the material we receive."

- Usage guides would tell you that you need a semicolon before *however*, because *however* is a conjunctive adverb, not a coordinator. That would make the *Harvard Review* example: "Writers at all stages of their careers are invited to apply; however, we can only publish a very small fraction of the material we receive."

- The question is: Can *however* be a coordinator? If enough people think it is, and treat it like it is, can it become one? Fundamentally, *however* continues to act like a conjunctive adverb because it can move around within the clause. For example: "We can publish, however, only a very small fraction of the material we receive."

- Another consideration: Does *however* tend to occur more often initially, which would make it look and act more like a coordinator? Research using the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* and *Corpus of Historical American English* shows that clause-initial *however* has risen dramatically over the past 150 years. In other words, it has become more and more common to start a sentence with *however*.

- As *however* becomes more and more common at the beginning of a sentence, it looks more like a coordinator. That could help explain why so many people treat *however* as a coordinator. We are left with the question of whether we can accept that *however* might be working as both a conjunctive adverb and a coordinator.

- There is a history of prescription against using however at the beginning of the sentence. But this restriction is fading: Editors aren't editing *however* from the starts of sentences.

- As the restriction on clause-initial *however* fades, usage guides strictly police the use of semicolons before *however* when used to connect two clauses within one sentence.

Introducing Importance

- Let's now turn to how you should introduce a sentence that you want to signal is more important than what precedes it. Should you begin, "More important," or "More importantly?"

- "Even more important" and "Even more importantly" both express the writer's stance toward the assertion. The writer believes it is more important.

- *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* traces debate over *more important* vs. *more importantly* back to 1968 with some commentators condemning the adverbial phrase and others, including William Safire, concluding that both were acceptable.

- *More importantly* rose dramatically from 1960. In 2000, it passed *more important* in Google Books. We're seeing exactly the same thing happen with *more notable* versus *more notably* (the latter is now more common). *More strikingly* is on the rise, although *more striking* remains more common.

Firstly and Thusly

- There is one conjunctive adverb that some argue shouldn't even be a word: *firstly*. It has long been subject of debate. In the 19th century, it was getting criticized openly. H.W. Fowler, in the early 20th century, as part of his defense of *firstly*, quoted Thomas De Quincey, who wrote, "I detest your ridiculous and most pedantic neologism of firstly."

- Thomas Lounsbury wrote about the debate about *firstly* in *Harper's* in 1905. He quoted the English poet and writer Walter Savage Landor as saying, "Firstly is not English." However, he also pointed out that letter writers such as Lady Mary Mortley Montagu and Lord Byron both used *firstly*.

- Let's be clear that *firstly* is a word. H.W. Fowler decisively dismissed the whole controversy about it, calling it "one of the harmless pedantries." But there may be reasons not to use it.

- With respect to *firstly*, Strunk and White prefer the numbers without the *–ly*: *first, second*, *third*. These are shorter. A more persuasive reason is that while *firstly*, *secondly*, and *thirdly* may sound OK, it starts to get awkward around *fifthly* and *sixthly*.

- Interestingly, a Google Books search shows *firstly* on the rise, but it is dwarfed by comparison with sentence-initial *First*. When in doubt, stick with *first*, but know that *firstly* is a word.

- The word *thusly* is another controversial case. This word was created in the 1800s, seemingly by humorists as a signal of uneducated usage. It has gotten picked up in more educated usage, with the meaning "in such a way." Here is an example from *Newsweek* (2009): "President Martin Van Buren described the economic crisis of 1837 in Britain and America thusly …."

- But in 2002 usage survey, the AHD Usage Panel was given this sentence: "His letter to the editor ended thusly: 'It is time to stop fooling ourselves.'" Eighty-six percent of the panel rejected it, so *thusly* is an adverb to be wary of.

Questions to Consider

1. What kinds of words do you identify more with formal writing than with speech?

2. In your opinion, why do so many writers get confused about how to punctuate *however* when it occurs between clauses?

Lecture 17

Squirrels and Prepositions

This lecture is all about prepositions. We'll start by unpacking the concern about *different than* versus *different from*, touching on the idiomatic nature of prepositions in English. Then we'll take a step back to nail down just what prepositions are. From there, we'll cover issues like *between* versus *among* and *toward* versus *towards*. Then we'll end by looking at a fascinating change with the word *because*, along with why new prepositions are rare.

Different From or Than?

- One question on prepositions is: Is *different than* or *different from* correct? A common sentiment is that the adjective *different* does not set up a comparison on a scale the way that *more than* or *less than* do, so *than* is inappropriate. With *different*, we are distinguishing one thing *from* another thing.

- But the argument that because "X differs from Y," it should be *different from* isn't completely persuasive either: Prepositions don't hold across parts of speech. We sympathize *with* others but express sympathy *for* them.

- One fundamental issue at play here is that prepositions in English are not a totally rational bunch of words; instead, they are highly idiomatic. Why is it *due to* instead of *due by*? Why is it *in addition* instead of *on addition*?

- *Different than* initially came under criticism long ago. Robert Baker in *Reflections on the English Language* (1770) called *different*

The advice that prepositions cover “everything a squirrel can do with respect to a tree” runs into trouble with sentences like, “The squirrel was until the tree.”

than "not English." This didn't pick up steam until the end of the 19th century, when *different than* came to be widely critiqued.

- It remains a construction many editors in the U.S. will correct toward *different from*, but not all the time: Since the mid-20th century, people have been opting for *different than* when it is followed by a clause, not a noun phrase.

- For example, take this sentence: "Social norms for Generation Xers are different than they were for Millennials." We can't use *from* here, because it would create: "Social norms for Generation Xers are different from they were for Millennials."

- *Different from* is still often seen as the most formal and standard in written American English, but there is nothing wrong with *different than*, and it is the standard alternative when there is a clause following the adjective *different*.

Changing Attitudes

- The way we deal with the word *sympathy* shows that attitudes about which preposition is the correct one change over time. We now say "sympathize with" but "feel sympathy for."

- But in the 19th century, essayist Thomas De Quincy called *sympathy for* a "monstrous barbarism." Prepositions may be little words, but people care about them.

Defining Prepositions

- Prepositions are notoriously hard to define and yet English grammar is highly dependent on them. A very common definition from Margaret Shertzer in *The Elements of Grammar* is this: "A preposition is a connecting word that shows the relation of a noun or pronoun to some other word in a sentence."

- Strunk and White define a preposition as "A word that relates its object (a noun, pronoun, or *–ing* verb form) to another word in the sentence."

- *The Riverside Handbook* puts it this way: "Prepositions show relationships between words, often relationships over time and space." They're always followed by a noun phrase (noun, pronoun, or gerund) and show relationships.

- One grammar guide tells us that a preposition isn't a preposition unless it has that related noun or pronoun as its object. This is the standard way of looking at prepositions, and you'll find it in pretty much every dictionary and every grammar book except one: Rodney Huddleston and Geoff Pullum's *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*.

- As noted, prepositions often show relationships in terms of time (examples: *before*, *after*) and location (examples: *over*, *through*, *inside*). They can also show comparison and other distinctions, for example, *unlike*, *except*, and *excluding*. And they can focus our attention (example: *regarding*) or set up opposition (example: *versus*).

- Prepositions can also do grammatical work similar to the work that inflectional endings carry; for example, we have the possessive *of*: "The name of the ship." This brings up an interesting usage issue: double possessives.

    - Is it "a friend of Kate's" or "a friend of Kate"? It seems much more colloquial to say "a friend of Kate's," but it is doubly marked, so is it wrong?

    - Some would relegate it to informal contexts, but you can find it in more formal ones. And there are a few double possessives that are mandatory, for example, "a friend of mine" instead of a "friend of me."

- Interestingly, some single possessive alternatives are problematic and not all double possessives are idiomatic. As an example of the former, we can't say, "a bicycle of Kate" to indicate possession. As an example of the latter, we have double possessives that don't

sound right: We can say “the name of the ship” but not “the name of the ship’s.”

Between, Among, Toward, and Towards

- Let’s now turn to two other usage issues: *between* vs. *among*, and *toward* vs. *towards*. The rule about when to use *between* and when to use *among* can seem straightforward: Use *between* for two things and *among* for three or more things.

- But here’s another way to think about it: Use *between* when talking about two things, and *between* or *among* when talking about three or more things depending on whether you’re talking about them individually, or in terms of relationships in pairs (*between*), or whether you are talking about all the things and their relationship collectively.

- According to this principle, you could say, “I am choosing between the salmon, tuna, and swordfish for dinner.” That works if you’re looking at each fish individually. You need to know that style guides don’t consistently disagree with this.

- Although etymologically, *between* goes back to mean “by two,” it has been used for more than two things since Old English. According to the blog of the Oxford dictionaries, it should be, “A treaty was drawn up between France, Germany, Italy, and Greece,” but, “There was agreement among members of NATO.”

- Strunk and White are on the same page: Usually when there are more than two, we should use *among*, but when it is about individual relationships, we should use *between*.

- Several commentators on this question point out the difference between “Anne ran among the cars” and “Anne ran between the cars.” The first suggests Anne weaving in and out; the second has Anne running with lines of cars on both sides.

- Regarding *toward* and *towards*: The bottom line here is that both are standard. *Towards* is more British and *toward* more American.

Because Prepositions

- Throughout this lecture, we've covered changes in preposition usage, but we haven't covered making new prepositions—and that's because it almost never happens. Historically, occasionally a borrowing such as *during* came in from Old French. Every once in a while, a participle will become a preposition (e.g., *considering*).

- In this context, linguists are very interested in what is happening with *because*, and they have been debating how to describe this new or expanded usage. Here's an example: "I can't diet because chocolate." It can also occur with adjective and interjections: "because tired" and "because argh."

- Can a preposition do that? Geoff Pullum says yes, but the linguist blogger Gretchen McCulloch says no. Pullum says that *because* has always been a preposition, rather than a subordinating conjunction. He argues that we need to recognize that prepositions can be followed by nouns, clauses, prepositional phrases, or nothing.

- *Because* has traditionally taken a clause or a prepositional phrase with *of*: "because of the cold." It is now expanding to take nouns and pronouns, and possibly adjectives as well.

Suggested Reading

Curzan, *Fixing English*.
Fogarty, *Grammar Girl: Quick and Dirty Tips*, http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl.
Yagoda, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It*.

Questions to Consider

1. Prepositions are notoriously idiomatic (e.g., *due to* not *due by*; *in addition* not *on addition*). Come up with two examples of expressions with prepositions where it is difficult to explain the logic.

2. Did you learn that *between* should be used for two items and *among* for three or more items? If so, try to imagine instances where you would want to use *between* for three or more items.

Stranded Prepositions

Lecture 18

An old joke about prepositions goes like this: A freshman on Harvard campus asks a senior, “Excuse me, can you tell me where the library is at?” The senior replies haughtily, “At Harvard, we do not end a sentence with a preposition.” The first-year student tries again: “Can you tell me where the library is at, jerk?” The rule about not ending a sentence with a preposition is widely known. We’re going to spend this entire lecture on it because it is so well known and widely enforced, and yet there is confusion about when it should apply and whether it is a worthwhile rule to follow at all.

The Joke

- Let’s start with what is going on in the joke. The question “Where is the library at?” ends in a preposition, but concern about this construction is not really about the preposition. It’s more about the redundancy of “Where … at.” The *at* is not stranded.

- This sentence, however, has a stranded preposition: “Which library are we meeting at?” The preposition gets stranded when the noun moves up to the front of the clause. There are two times when that fronting happens: wh-questions and relative clauses.

- Wh-questions involve interrogative pronouns: *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*. That interrogative pronoun gets put at the front of the question, no matter what function it plays in the sentence: “What did you eat for dinner?”

- If the interrogative pronoun is the object of a preposition, it can still front, with or without the preposition. Let’s look at an example, first with the question in a form where the interrogative pronoun is still

positioned as the object of the preposition: “You cooked dinner for whom?” can become “Whom did you cook dinner for?”

- Both of these are completely grammatical in English in the descriptive sense; the question is whether we find it more pleasing to front the preposition too. The term in linguistics for this is pied-piping, which we covered in Lecture 7.

- The same kind of fronting happens in relative clauses with *which*. For example: “That is the house that I was telling you about” can also be “That is the house about which I was telling you.” Both of these sentences are fully grammatical, although the second one sounds very formal.

The Rule’s Origins

- We know that there is a rule that we shouldn’t strand a preposition at the end of a sentence. Where does that rule come from? John Dryden (who also proposed a language academy in the 1660s) is usually cited as the first to notice and disparage the stranded preposition.

  - In 1672 he picked out for critique the writing of Ben Jonson. Here’s the line from Jonson: “The bodies that those souls were frighted from.”

  - Dryden commented: “The Preposition in the end of the sentence; a common fault with him, and which I have but lately observ’d in my own writings.” He subsequently not only avoided stranded prepositions in his own prose but went back and revised earlier work that contained stranded prepositions.

- Interestingly, if we go back to Ben Jonson’s 1640 grammar, we see that he very descriptively notes that prepositions “follow sometimes the Nounes they are coupled with.” Joseph Priestley says very much the same thing in 1761, in his important grammar *Rudiments of English Grammar*.

> Prepositions generally precede their substantives; as *He went to London*: but sometimes a verb more elegantly parts them; as *This is the thing* with which *I am pleased*; or *This is the thing* which *I am pleased* with.

- So in 1761, Priestly is allowing for stylistic variation, saying that sometimes it is more elegant to strand the preposition. But Priestley's view lost to Bishop Lowth's opinion on the construction, written down and disseminated in *English Grammar* of 1762:

> The Preposition is often separated from the Relative which it governs, and joined to the Verb at the end of the Sentence, or of some member of it: as, "Horace is an author, *whom* I am much delighted *with*." "The world is too well bred to shock authors with a truth, *which* generally their booksellers are the first that inform them *of*." [Pope, Preface to his Poems] This is an Idiom, which our language is strongly inclined to; it prevails in common conversation, and suits very well with the familiar style in writing; but the placing of a Preposition before the Relative is more graceful, as well as more perspicuous, and agrees much better with the solemn and elevated Style.

- Notice that it is not yet a rule per se. Lowth first playfully strands a preposition in the sentence "This is an Idiom, which our language is strongly inclined to." He then opines that it is more graceful, solemn, and elevated to pied-pipe the preposition.

- From what we can tell, this opinion started to influence the usage of authors, even as some grammarians argued that sometimes the language was better served by stranding the preposition at the end of the sentence. The final nail that secured this rule is probably that it got picked up in Lindley Murray's best-selling grammar of 1795.

- Over time, the prescription became less about what was elegant and more about what was "bad usage." But in the 1920s, H.W. Fowler, in *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, tried to make the

conversation again about elegance rather than about hard-and-fast rules:

> If it were not presumptuous, after that, to offer advice, the advice would be this: Follow no arbitrary rule, but remember that there are often two or more possible arrangements between which a choice should be consciously made.

- You'll notice that Fowler actually chooses to pied-pipe a preposition in that last sentence ("two or more possible arrangements between which a choice should be consciously made"). That was a good choice over "two or more possible arrangements which a choice should be consciously made between."

- Fowler is giving us very good advice: Make stylistic choices and enjoy the freedom in English grammar that allows us to do so.

- The third and fourth editions of Strunk and White's guide advise that it's about having a good ear:

> Years ago, students were warned not to end a sentence with a preposition; time, of course, has softened that rigid decree. Not only is the preposition acceptable at the end, sometimes it is more effective in that spot than anywhere else. "A clawhammer, not an ax, was the tool he murdered her with." This is preferable to "A claw hammer, not an ax, was the tool with which he murdered her." Why? Because it sounds more violent, more like murder. A matter of ear.

- But Microsoft Word's grammar checker can't be that flexible. When the box pops up, it advises: "Although a preposition at the end of a sentence may be used informally, consider deleting or repositioning the preposition for a more formal or traditional tone." This gives some flexibility, but it suggests that it is somehow wrong in formal writing.

Churchill

- There is a story out there that Winston Churchill rejected the "do not end a sentence with a preposition" rule. The story goes that Churchill said something like, "That is a silly rule up with which I will no put."

- Ben Zimmer, executive editor of *Vocabulary.com* and columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, has done some digging, though, and we don't have evidence that Churchill said this. The first instance of the quote is in *The Strand Magazine* in 1942. Churchill contributed to the magazine, but here's the quote, per the *Wall Street Journal*:

  > When a memorandum passed round a certain Government department, one young pedant scribbled a postscript drawing attention to the fact that the sentence ended with a preposition, which caused the original writer to circulate another memorandum complaining that the anonymous postscript was "offensive impertinence, up with which I will not put."

After recapping a situation, a newsperson might utter the informal-sounding sentence, "That's where we're at."

- In 1948, Sir Ernest Gowers wrote in *Plain Words*: “It is said that Mr. Winston Churchill once made this marginal comment against a sentence that clumsily avoided a prepositional ending: ‘This is the sort of English up with which I will not put.’” Zimmer has found it in multiple newspapers.

- What makes the supposed Churchill quote funny is that he is playing with a phrasal verb, not a prepositional phrase. A phrasal verb is a two- or three-part verb with a main verb and one or two participles; *call up* and *put up with* are examples.

- These verbs don’t like to have the particle fronted because it doesn’t work like a preposition: “With that I will not put up” and “Up with that I will not put” are clunky. “That is something I will not put up with” works.

- Remember that some of the words that look like prepositions at the end of sentences are not functioning as prepositions. Follow your judgment about when it works well—even elegantly—to strand a preposition.

Suggested Reading

Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*.
Yáñez-Bouza, “To End or Not to End a Sentence with a Preposition.”
Zimmer, “A Misattribution No Longer To Be Put Up With.”

Questions to Consider

1. In what contexts might it sound better to strand the preposition (e.g., “That was the decision for which we were waiting” versus “That was the decision we were waiting for”)?

2. Imagine you are listening to live radio coverage of a hurricane. The reporter has some information about the damage but is awaiting more information. She says, “That’s where we’re at right now.” Would you consider that standard usage? Why or why not?

The Dangers of Danglers

Lecture 19

If we heard the sentence, “Clinging to the side of the aquarium, Mary saw a starfish,” we would probably assume it was the starfish clinging to the side of the aquarium. But if we look closely at the structure of the sentence, the participial phrase “Clinging to the side of the aquarium” modifies Mary. This falls under the assumption that participles and other modifiers sit next to what they modify. To correct it, we’d switch to, “Clinging to the side of the aquarium, the starfish stared at Mary,” or “Mary saw the starfish clinging to the side of the aquarium.” This issue seems straightforward enough, but there are some twists, so this lecture explores “danglers” (as Bryan Garner calls them) in depth.

Terminology

- Many of us have learned terms like *dangling modifiers* or *dangling participles*. Participles are subcategory of modifiers and often the issue. Here's a dangler with a past participle: "Parked behind a row of tall bushes, the speeding teenagers didn't see the cop until it was too late."

- We're interested in the participles that are acting adjectivally. In addition to present and past participles, the modifier could also be a prepositional phrase: "As a teacher of writing, my students often tell me about traumatic experiences they have had with grammar in high school."

- When it comes to danglers, there can be a useful distinction between dangling modifiers versus misplaced/wrongly attached modifiers.

    - Misplaced/wrongly attached modifiers happen when the noun that the participle is supposed to modify is there in the sentence, just not next to the modifier: "Plummeting from the sky, Cindy watched the punted football drop right in between her outstretched hands."

    - Dangling modifiers are dangling because there is no noun in the sentence for them to modify: "Glancing through the document, the typos jumped off the page."

- There are some danglers that have become accepted in more formal writing. With these, the participle has come to be accepted as a preposition or disguised conjunction. An example: "Considering the danger, she is lucky to have gotten out alive." (She's not considering the danger—we are.) Such participial phrases are now understood to function adverbially, modifying the whole sentence.

Ends of Sentences

- All our examples have had the participial phrase at the beginning of the sentence. Garner points out that editors are often more lenient about these phrases at the end of sentences. His example: "Sarah stepped to the door, looking for her friend."

- It is hard to call this unacceptable—it's very clear Sarah is doing both actions. Garner calls it a *coordinating participle*, as it implies that this verb happened next: "Sarah stepped to the door and looked for her friend."

- Another example: "My colleague wrote me an email after our meeting, asking if he had unintentionally insulted me by joking about marathon runners." As you can see, danglers are not a totally cut and dried issue.

- Does our grammar, in the descriptive sense, allow participial phrases (and other modifiers) to be separated from the noun? Clearly, the answer is yes. As Garner notes, we are more forgiving when the participial phrase is at the end of the sentence.

- We remain stricter when it is at the beginning, and there are good reasons to avoid ambiguity in writing—but it's not certain that these sentences with danglers are mostly ungrammatical. There's a key difference between speech and writing here. These sentences are usually easy to parse in speech—we go with logic. In writing, we need to be more careful because we cannot clarify ambiguity caused by a dangler.

Present but Ambiguous

- A modifier can technically be in the right place and still be ambiguous in a way that merits rewriting. Here's an example from the New Jersey Administrative Code:

  > Property owners and occupants of dwellings suffering damage from squirrel, raccoon, opossum, skunk, weasel, woodchuck, gray fox, red fox and coyote, or their agents designated in

writing, may control these animals by lawful procedures at any time subject to State law and local ordinances.

- The ambiguity: Are we talking about all these animals or their agents designated in writing? When you look closely at this sentence, though, the phrase "or their agents designated in writing" is not dangling or misplaced. There is a legitimate reading of the sentence where it stands as an alternative to "property owners and occupants of dwellings suffering damage." Yet this sentence desperately needs an editor.

- The length of the prepositional phrase "from squirrel, raccoon, …. and coyote" stretches readers' working memory capacity, loading a lot of information in between the subject noun phrase ("property owners and occupants of dwellings") and the appositive phrase ("or their agents designated in writing").

- There are some other potential issues. For example, the *and* between the red fox and the coyote, along with the omission of an Oxford comma after *red fox*, potentially raise the question of whether all these critters need to be working in cahoots for the regulation to apply, whether it is only the red fox and coyote who are working together, or whether all of the animals can be independent, free-agent damage doers. Lawyers think about these kinds of things. In addition, the *their* in "or their agents" is ambiguous, even if grammatically unproblematic.

- Here we see why written language, and especially legal language, can require a high level of attention to modifiers and commas.

Absolute Constructions

- One construction can look like a dangling participle, but it is instead something called an *absolute construction*. One of the very common ones is, "*Weather permitting*, the race will start at 8:00 am." The whole phrase functions adverbially to say, "If the weather permits."

- These will often have a noun and participle. It could be a present participle, as in “this being the case” or “the sun having risen.” Or it could be a past participle: “all things considered.”

- *Being that* has been controversial among grammarians: When is it OK because it is in an absolute construction, and when it is not OK because it means *because* or *since*? Here it is as an absolute construction: “The review criticized the book for taking a more philosophical than empirical approach, the implication being that the author strayed too far from the data.”

- Now take the example, “Being that it’s a holiday, I let the kids sleep late.” Seventy-one percent of the AHD Usage Panel rejected it as unacceptable. And a full 83 percent rejected this one: “Being that he has never attended law school, it’s strange that he’s giving legal advice.” Clearly, *being that* meaning *because* or *since* is not held in high regard right now, at least in more formal contexts.

- Let’s return for a moment to absolute constructions with *being that*. One emerging pattern in student writing is the *being that* absolute construction becoming its own sentence.

- Ryan McCarty has been looking into this and has found it in published writing too, although it is criticized. Here’s an example from a 2009 issue of the *Journal of Instructional Psychology*:

  > There are a plethora of reasons to be given for the importance of the social studies. A major reason being that threats to humanity exist if nations continually spend excessive amounts of money on the military as well as plan attacks against each other.

- Clearly we have a fragment here. We could replace *being* with *is* and correct the issue. In speech it’s not an issue: We wouldn’t be able to hear whether this was a new sentence or an em-dash, and in the latter case it would be completely fine.

- In writing, absolute constructions (when they are not fragments) have their benefits. They can be a nice way to vary one's sentence structure: "The sun having risen, we jumped into the lake" versus "The sun rose and we jumped into the lake." Just beware of making them their own sentence in formal writing.

Questions to Consider

1. Consider this sentence: "Reviewing the grades at the end of the term, it became clear that the curve needed to be adjusted." Would you correct this sentence if you had your editor hat on? Why or why not?

2. Consider this sentence: "Being that it's a holiday, I let the kids sleep late." Do you have any concerns about the grammar?

Navigating the Choppy Paragraph

Lecture 20

It's time to put together a lot of the grammatical pieces we've been talking about into the bigger picture of how we present information in our writing. This lecture will provide a few fundamental pieces of advice about how to help your readers follow your ideas by helping your readers follow you from sentence to sentence. You're going to see some real payoff for understanding how sentences work in terms of subjects and predicates, conjunctive adverbs and relative clauses, and the like. There are some wonderfully concrete ways that you can help make your prose clearer.

Flow versus Choppiness

- *Flow* is not a very useful word to describe writing, although we use it all the time. The opposite is *choppy*. But what are we saying with *choppy*? Somehow we're having trouble seeing connections between sentences. Somehow our expectations as readers are not being met. We're reading along and expecting one thing and we get something else, and so our head metaphorically jerks up.

- This raises the key questions: How can you know what your readers are expecting? And how can you help them navigate your prose?

- One answer is using conjunctive adverbs or adverb phrases. Conjunctive adverbs are words like *therefore*, *nonetheless*, and *consequently*; and adverb phrases include *in addition* and *in sum*. These help us understand how one sentence is connected to the next.

- That said, there is a more fundamental principle at work in terms of how we can present information sentence to sentence in a way that makes sense to readers. It is often called the *known-new contract* or *given-new contract*.

- Here's the fundamental idea: As readers, we expect information we know to precede new information. Grammatically, known information will be in the subject position and new information in the predicate. Or, known information will be an introductory phrase, perhaps an adverbial like *given that*.

- Examples from real writing will help here. Here's a very straightforward one from *Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown: "Since early in the eighteenth century, the London watermen had also made a sport of racing their dories in impromptu competitions. They were rough-and-tumble events." The first sentence introduces the impromptu competitions in the predicate. The second sentence then tells us about the competitions.

- Now let's look at a longer passage, this one from *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot. Here we're going to look at five consecutive sentences as context: HeLa cells are the cells that were derived from cervical cancer cells extracted from Henrietta Lacks in 1951—they were the first human cells grown in a lab that were "immortal".

> Researchers had long believed that human cells contained forty-eight chromosomes, the threads of DNA inside cells that contain all of our genetic information. But chromosomes clumped together, making it impossible to get an accurate count. Then, in 1953, a geneticist in Texas accidentally mixed the wrong liquid with HeLa and a few other cells, and it turned out to be a fortunate mistake. The chromosomes inside the cells swelled and spread out, and for the first time, scientists could see each of them clearly. The accidental discovery was the first of several developments that would allow two

researchers from Spain and Sweden to discover that normal human cells have forty-six chromosomes.

- Let's now unpack how the information is presented in these five sentences:

  - First sentence: Researchers believed there were 48 chromosomes in human cells; the chromosomes contain genetic information.

  - Second sentence: But the chromosomes clumped together, so they were hard to count. (Chromosomes have been introduced and explained in the first sentence, and now we learn something new.)

  - Third sentence: "Then, in 1953," prepares us to meet a geneticist, who accidentally mixes the wrong liquid in with some cells.

  - Fourth sentence: We were just talking about the cells and their chromosomes, so we're prepared to learn something new about them: They swelled and spread out.

  - Fifth sentence: This sentence sums up what we've just been talking about and then tells us the implications of that accidental discovery: Two researchers from Spain and Sweden discovered that normal human cells have only 46 chromosomes.

- The passage is easy to follow, in part because our expectations are met as we go in terms of how information will be presented to us. We don't have to work too hard as readers in terms of how the information is structured, so we can focus on the story the sentences are telling.

A Detailed Example

- As an example of choppiness, let's take these sentences, modified from an article in *The Atlantic* called "To Remember a Lecture Better, Take Notes by Hand."

> A new study—conducted by Mueller and Oppenheimer—finds that people remember lectures better when they've taken handwritten notes, rather than typed ones. Adolescents these days suffer from short attention spans. The educational system must respond to new technologies. Perhaps it is time to bring back the pencil.

- This passage is choppy because it's been rewritten to make it choppy. It jumps from a study to adolescents to educational reform. Here's what the real article does:

> A new study—conducted by Mueller and Oppenheimer—finds that people remember lectures better when they've taken handwritten notes, rather than typed ones. What's more,

knowing how and why typed notes can be bad doesn't seem to improve their quality. Even if you warn laptop-notetakers ahead of time, it doesn't make a difference. For some tasks, it seems, handwriting's just better.

- The first sentence introduces the study and overall topic. The second sentence picks up the idea of typed notes (which was introduced in the predicate of the first sentence). The third sentence is still on this topic, introducing laptop-notetakers.

- The next paragraph in the article then brings in the question of education. It starts by referring back to the study (known information) and then introduces the new idea that this is relevant to education: "The study comes at a ripe time for questions about laptop use in class. Educators still debate whether to allow students to bring their laptops into the classroom."

- The second sentence here can then go from class to educators and use that to introduce the question of whether students should be allowed to use laptops in class.

Three Basic Patterns

- Three templates exist for helping readers along. These will seem very basic, but that is because they are boiled-down maps; these three templates sometimes underlie very long, complex, and beautiful sentences.

- The first template is the constant template (i.e., we're keeping the subject constant). An example: "The study shows that taking notes by hand helps students retain more information. The study further suggests that even when you tell laptop notetakers not to take notes verbatim, they still struggle to take effective notes." The subject is literally repeated.

- The second template is the derived template. The subject leads to one thing, and then a derivation of the subject leads to another. An

example: “The time demands on student-athletes can be intense. For example, voluntary practices may not always feel voluntary.”

- The third template is the chained template. One thing leads to another, which leads to another, which leads to another. Here’s an invented sentence to go with the earlier *Boys in the Boat* example:

  > Since early in the eighteenth century, the London watermen had also made a sport of racing their dories in impromptu competitions. They were rough-and-tumble events. This informal exuberance could lead to heated debates about cheating and who had actually won.

- That example moves progressively: Competitions gets picked up in the second sentence and we learn they were rough-and-tumble events. Then, the third sentence captures that rough-and-tumbleness in the subject and tells us more about that.

- Chaining can work well, but be careful because it means your paragraph can end fairly far away from where it started.

Scientific Writing

- With this information about the known-new contract in our pocket, let’s turn to a few principles proposed by George Gopen and Judith Swan in a wonderful article called “The Science of Scientific Writing.”

- Their premise is that scientific writing doesn’t need to be as hard to understand as it often is—it is as much or more about the prose than about the complexity of the concepts themselves. As they write, “complexity of thought need not lead to impenetrability of expression.”

- Gopen and Swan reiterate fundamental principles about known/new information: Put in stress position the new information, which is usually in the predicate. Place the person/thing whose “story” the sentence is telling in topic position. (This can be a reason to

use the passive.) Place old information in the topic position to link back and contextualize forward. In general, provide context for the reader before asking the reader to consider new things.

- It is a very humanizing article as it takes apart scientific writing. For example, they quote this passage:

> Large earthquakes along a given fault segment do not occur at random intervals because it takes time to accumulate the strain energy for the rupture. The rates at which tectonic plates move and accumulate strain at their boundaries are approximately uniform. Therefore, in first approximation, one may expect that large ruptures of the same fault segment will occur at approximately constant time intervals. If subsequent mainshocks have different amounts of slip across fault, then the recurrence time may vary, and the basic idea of periodic mainshocks must be modified. For great plate boundary ruptures the length and slip often vary by a factor of 2. Along the southern segment of the San Andreas fault the recurrence interval is 145 years with variation of several decades.

- They conclude: "This is the kind of passage that in subtle ways can make readers feel badly about themselves." Each sentence in isolation is fine. But look at how the topics jump around: large earthquakes, rates at which tectonic plates move, one ("one may expect"), subsequent mainshocks, great plate boundary ruptures, and the southern segment of the San Andreas fault.

- The theme—recurrence intervals—is there but not usefully in the topic position. There is lots of great information here, but the reader has to work very hard to follow along. Technical material can be presented more clearly, and that should be our goal as writers.

Closing Advice

- One other good piece of advice: Beware of putting too much information in between the subject and the verb. This happens

with modifiers on the subject's noun phrase. An example: "The study, which looked at what happens when people take notes with laptops (with or without access to the Internet) versus when they take notes by hand, found that people with pencils retained more of the information." Our brains have trouble holding the sentence open waiting for the verb.

- Finally, when is a sentence too long? When there are too many pieces of information that need stress or emphasis. In other words, look at whether you're trying to introduce a lot of new information in one sentence. If you are, revise. Readers will find new information more easily if it is in its own sentence, in the "new information" position.

Suggested Reading

Atkinson, *Scientific Discourse in Sociohistorical Context*.
Gopen and Swan, "The Science of Scientific Writing."

Questions to Consider

1. How would you explain what it means that a piece of writing is choppy?

2. How can the complexity of our ideas interfere with the clarity of our prose?

What Part of Speech is *Um*?

Lecture 21

The grammar of conversation can be quite different from the grammar of formal writing. And when we study grammar, we often pull our sentences from literature or academic writing or newspapers in order to understand their structure. But the rules we learn from examples like that often don't translate to how conversations work. In this lecture, we'll talk about some fundamental differences between speech and writing, and then how discourse markers function.

Speech Patterns

- It's surprising how often we speak in incomplete sentences and run-ons, and how many other little words there are in there: *um*, *well*, *like*, *you know*, *I mean*, and *yeah*. Obviously this is less true of very formal speech—especially if it is scripted.

- Below is an example of classroom talk, from a teacher in a high school English classroom, talking about Hero and Claudio from Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*:

  > Right I mean she—OK so she's still dead but she didn't betray him, and if he didn't feel so bad, he didn't feel so bad about her being dead when she betrayed him but now, now when the h— like, when it's his honor, right, i— when he's at fault now he's like oh I feel really bad about her being dead, actually, thought about it a little bit more. Right?

- We see here false starts: "she—OK so she's still dead" and "now when the h— like, when it's his honor." There are effects of real-time processing: The speaker often starts with one grammatical

structure and then needs to do something different. We also can see how hard it is to find sentence breaks sometimes in spoken language. The above example is potentially all one sentence.

- When the teacher quotes speech, she puts in a speech discourse marker. Quoting Claudio, she says, "now he's like oh I feel really bad about her being dead." The *oh* is like an opening quotation mark (because we don't get quotation marks when we speak).

- This bit of real speech, because it is a monologue, is actually pretty orderly compared with conversation where people are interrupting each other, taking over the conversational floor, or even just back-channeling. People might also be simultaneously watching TV or texting, or having more than one conversation at once.

The Grammar of Conversation

- Genuine conversation can look chaotic, but it has a grammar of its own. Of course, spoken utterances are filled with nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, as well as prepositions, pronouns, determiners, and the like. And we obey all the rules we have talked about for creating descriptively grammatical utterances (except when we make false starts or get tangled up in our syntax because we change course in the middle of an utterance).

- We might not, though, follow some of the rules that govern stylistic niceties such as distinguishing *who*/*whom*, avoiding "equally as important," or catching a "There's three reasons for this." Speech is also filled with words like *um* and *well*—and for younger speakers, lots and lots of *like*.

Involved and Informational Discourse

- To talk about some differences in the grammar of conversation and writing, it is useful to focus on the distinction between involved discourse and informational discourse, as described by linguistics expert Doug Biber.

- The purpose of involved discourse is to build relationships. This is the type of discourse most associated with classroom settings. It involves lots of first- and second-person pronouns. Discourse markers (like *well* and *um*) are frequent. There is a heavy reliance on *to be*. Contractions are also frequent.

- Informational discourse is used to deliver information. This type of discourse packs a lot of information into nouns rather than letting full clauses carry the weight (e.g., "when the company started" becomes "at the company's founding"). Information discourse is also characterized by longer words and attributive adjectives.

- The notion of a *high type/token ratio* captures the much higher rate of variation in word choice in more formal writing. Each word is a type, and each token is a time it appears in the discourse. In writing, we often use a word only once or twice because we've learned to avoid repetition. But in speech, we repeat a lot because this is actually helpful for the people processing in real time.

- The differences captured by the distinction between involved and informational discourse align to some extent with the different processing demands of speaking and writing.

  - In speech, we benefit from repetition and coordination when processing in real time. In writing, we can go back and look again at a more complex syntactic structure.

  - This is part of why listening to someone read a speech, especially, if it wasn't written to be read aloud, can be hard to follow. Speech can also tolerate more ambiguity, which is part of what makes writing hard.

Discourse Markers

- Discourse markers are the little words at the margins (the beginning and end) that help organize discourse and manage listeners' expectations. People sometimes want to talk about

them as meaningless, but in fact they do a lot of work for us in conversation. They don't carry meaning the way a noun does, but they are meaningful for us as speakers and listeners.

- Discourse markers include words such as *so*, *now*, *well*, *uh*, *um*, *oh*, *and*, *but*, and *like*, and lexicalized phrases such as *you know* and *I mean*. They are optional, but can be very helpful as long as we don't overuse them.

- Discourse markers are not just the disfluencies that people often think they are. Certainly they are sometimes fillers (like *um*), but even that serves a purpose: holding the floor. Discourse markers also do two other important things:

  - They can be like signposts in a conversation. They can signal to listeners how to understand an utterance in relation to the utterances that precede and follow it.

  - They can help the listener understand the utterance in the context of the relationship being negotiated between the speaker and the listener.

- Think about the grammatical choices we make in terms of how to phrase a request, depending on who we're talking to: "Save that seat for me" versus "Could you please save that seat for me?" versus "I'm sorry to bother you, but is there any way you could save that seat for me?" Discourse markers help with this; for example, we can signal ending a turn: "I'm not sure what I think about that, so …."

- Let's look at five specific discourse markers to see how they work.

  1. *So* shows effects or logical consequences. It can also introduce summaries or rephrasings: "So, the main point here is…." And in an extended narrative, it can introduce different parts of the story: "So I get to the building …."

2. *Now* can signal a topic shift (like a paragraph marker): “Now, let’s talk about how determiners differ from adjectives.” Like *so*, it can also flag that something important is coming: “Now, this raises a fundamental question ….”

3. *Well*, according to work by Andreas Jucker at the University of Zurich, can also introduce a new topic, but one of its most interesting functions is prefacing a dispreferred response: “Well, I can see what you’re saying, but ….”

4. *Um* functions in much the same way as *well*.

5. *Oh* does a surprising amount of work. One function is indicating surprise; for example, consider: “Thank you” versus “Oh, thank you.” *Oh* can also preface a suddenly remembered question: “Oh, did you ask about when the road will reopen?” It can also help if we need to repair: “Oh, it is on Liberty Street, not Washington.”

When someone wants to signal the end of their turn, they might end a sentence with “I mean…” and trail off.

- Look at two more phrases that help us navigate relationships with our listeners.

    1. *You know* (or *y'know*): This can conclude an argument or trail off at the end of a turn. It can also introduce a story. Importantly, the phrase can establish solidarity with an audience. Here's an example from an interview of Ken Wheaton (editor of *Advertising Age*) on CBS This Morning in 2015: "We'll pretend to like PBS but we really want to go, you know, go home and watch junk on TV."

    2. *I mean* can signal an upcoming adjustment: "I would never do that. I mean, I'm not saying that I wouldn't think about it." It can also help minimize the authority of the speaker, which speakers often choose to do to make their audience feel more equal. Compare "I think that would work" with "I mean, I think that would work."

And, Like

- *And* is both a conjunction and a discourse marker depending on what it is doing. Here is *and* as a discourse marker in a conversation between two people:

    - Person 1: "I started watching the new season of *Frankie and Grace* last night."

    - Person 2: "And is it good?"

- *And* is building from one utterance to the next, to suggest a connection.

- *Like*, too, can be a discourse marker. It can be a filler, or it can be a focuser: "It was, like, awesome."

- Some younger speakers use it a lot, which can be distracting. That's true of any discourse marker. If you're concerned that

you're overusing *like* or any other discourse marker, awareness is the first step. A countermeasure: Record yourself.

Suggested Reading

Biber, Conrad, Reppen, and Byrd, "Speaking and Writing in the University."
Dailey-O'Cain, "The Sociolinguistic Distribution of and Attitudes toward Focuser 'Like' and Quotative 'Like.'"
D'Arcy, "*Like* and Language Ideology."
Schiffrin, *Discourse Markers*.
Vuolo, "So…."

Questions to Consider

1. What are some of the problems with the advice "Just write it like you would say it?"

2. You may have noticed that when people are being interviewed on television or radio, they may sometimes (or often) start their answers with *So*. What work do you think *So* might be doing in this context?

Lecture 22 Duck, Duck, Comma, and Duck

In both American English and British English, according to a study in 1987 by linguist Charles Meyer, the comma and the period are neck-in-neck for the most common punctuation mark (40–45 percent each), with comma winning by a nose. In terms of which punctuation marks people are most confused about, the comma, the semicolon, and apostrophe are at the top of the list, with the dash not far behind. We'll focus on the comma, semicolon, colon, and dash in this lecture: the punctuation marks that structure the sentence.

Early Punctuation

- Punctuation is a key part of how we organize language on the page. Sentences end with periods, question marks, or exclamation points. They do not end with commas, colons, semicolons, or dashes. Slashes now have a very little role to play other than in things like *and/or*, but that has not always been the case.

- The earliest manuscripts in Roman antiquity typically did not have punctuation; readers often were familiar with the texts, and this way scribes did not prejudice the reading. The earliest punctuation marks that were added to texts were guides to phrasing.

- It is a modern notion that punctuation should align with grammatical structure as opposed to spoken phrasing (and not everyone agrees on this). For English, the printing press started to stabilize punctuation after it was introduced in 1476, but there was lots of variation in the Renaissance.

- The following example shows a few of the differences in punctuation. It's a couple of lines from a story, "How the Witch Served a Fellow in an Alehouse," which was published in 1606 in a pamphlet called *The Most Cruell and Bloody Murder*. Here is the passage: "At last the witch got so much time to cal to him, Doest thou heare good friend (quoth she?) What sayst thou ill face (quoth he?)"

- The dialogue is framed by "quoth she/he" in parentheses. You'll notice that the question mark is in the "wrong place": in the parenthetical as opposed to at the end of the question. Then there is no period after "(quoth she?)" or "(quote he?)" to end the sentence.

- The rise of prescriptive grammars in the 18th century started to set down stricter standards for how punctuation should and shouldn't be used—but if you read 18th and 19th century texts, you'll still see punctuation used in ways we wouldn't see as standard now.

- Often that is because there is more punctuation than we're now accustomed to. Let's consider the first sentence of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." We now wouldn't have either of those commas, especially the second one.

Modern Rules: Commas

- The 20th century witnessed some reigning in of punctuation. We'll focus on the modern rules for the rest of this lecture. Let's start with rules about commas.

- Commas are designed to mark or set off phrases or groups of words shorter than a sentence. There are a few set rules for how to use commas and then some variation.

- Here are five times when commas are now recommended if not required:

1. Between two full clauses coordinated by a coordinator like *or*, *and*, or *but*: “He played tennis for four hours yesterday, and his back and arm muscles are letting him know about that today.”

2. Commas around a non-restrictive clause. This is how we show it is nonrestrictive and it does correspond to a pause in speech. As an example: “Paul’s sister, who is an attorney in NYC, paid him a surprise visit.” Here Paul has just one sister. But let’s imagine Paul has more than one. Then we’d have: “Paul’s sister who is an attorney in NYC paid him a surprise visit.”

3. Commas around any kind of parenthetical phrase: “The U.S. Constitution, as discussed earlier, outlines ….”

4. Commas after introductory subordinate clauses: “After the mayor met with citizens from the neighborhood, she approved a zoning change that would allow a high-rise hotel.”

5. Commas in a list between items: “nouns, verbs, and adverbs” or “nouns, verbs and adverbs.”

- That last category raises the question of the Oxford comma, which occurs after the penultimate item. With attempts to streamline or minimize punctuation in the 20th century, the Oxford comma was taken out in some style guides. Today, it’s typically a question of “house style” or personal style.

- People can have strikingly strong feelings about the Oxford comma. Some argue it should be required because otherwise there can be ambiguity.

Commas, Consistency, and Aesthetics

- The question of consistency comes up with constructions where a comma is variable, in particular with introductory adverbials. Most everyone wants a comma if the adverbial gets long: “In addition

to higher pay for all employees, ….” The word *however* always requires commas around it.

- Part of each of our decisions about commas is going to depend on whether we prefer lightly or more heavily punctuated text. The difference between “Hi Eileen” and “Hi, Eileen” is really about aesthetics, not correctness.

- But for all this, there is one thing a comma cannot do: connect two clauses without a coordinator—at least according to most style guides for formal English. This is the comma splice. An example: “Erica was the queen of the prom, she dazzled everyone.”

Modern Rules: Semicolons

- Many people have strong feelings about the semicolon. Some, like Kurt Vonnegut and George Orwell, think it should never be used. Others, like Charles Dickens and David Crystal, find it nuanced and sophisticated.

- The 18th century witnessed the explosion of the semicolon. Lindley Murray described it as the punctuation mark that divided a compound sentence into two or more parts, “not so closely connected as those which are separated by a comma, nor yet so little depend on each other, as those which are distinguished by a colon.”

- There was some heavy use of semi-colons in 20th century. For instance, take these lines from Evelyn Waugh’s 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited*:

> “I have been here before,” I said; I had been there before; first with Sebastian more than twenty years ago on a cloudless day in June, when the ditches were white with fool’s parsley and meadowsweet and the air heavy with all the scents of summer; it was a day of peculiar splendour such as our climate affords once or twice a year, when leaf and flower and bird and sun-lit stone and shadow seem all to proclaim

the glory of God; and though I had been there so often, in so many moods, it was to that first visit that my heart returned on this, my latest.

- Today, semicolons have two main uses:

1. Joining two independent clauses that have a close semantic relationship. There could be no conjunctive adverb or something like *nevertheless*, or *thus*, or *put differently*. The semicolon shows readers these ideas are tightly linked.

2. In a list where items are long and have punctuation within them. For example: "I went to Vegas with my friend Auden, who had never been to Vegas; my sister, who loves Vegas in a way I don't understand; and my mom, who just wanted to spend time with us."

Modern Rules: Colons

- The colon, when introduced at the end of the 16th century, was used to mark a pause longer than a comma or semicolon but shorter than a period.

- One apt description of the colon is that it urges the reader forward, foreshadowing that what is to come is going to explain or exemplify what you have just read. Colons are now used before lists, examples, definitions, or other explanatory material.

- The colon and semicolon barely figure in the written English of texting: Their formality makes them a bad choice rhetorically and aesthetically. But they do serve an important role in the non-emoji smiley and winking faces: :) and ;).

Modern Rules: Dashes

- Now we turn to the dash. Can one misuse the dash? Yes, but it's hard. Overuse is more common. The dash can serve the same function as a comma, semi-colon, or colon, but with a different,

less formal connotation. It often suggests an interruption or a new thought/afterthought.

- Here's a nice example of dash usage from an article by Marko Dragojevic and Howard Giles published in *Human Communication Research* in 2016: "Two experiments examined the effects of processing fluency—that is, the ease with which speech is processed—on language attitudes toward native- and foreign-accented speech."

- Sometimes no other punctuation mark will quite do the trick. One instance is with an introductory list followed by a clause to explain: "X, Y, Z—all these help explain …."

- Another instance is with an added phrase (not a clause) that wouldn't do well with a comma. Here's an example from George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: "He had done nothing exceptional in marrying—nothing but what society sanctions, and considers an occasion for wreaths and bouquets."

Formal and Informal Writing

- As we think about punctuation in formal writing, remember Bishop Lowth in the 18th century: "The doctrine of punctuation must needs be very imperfect: few precise rules can be given, which will hold without exception in all cases; but much must be left to the judgement and taste of the writer"

- There are guidelines, but the very creativity of human language and of good prose will require some flexibility and some application of good sense to punctuation. Also recognize that punctuation in different registers will function differently.

- There is a sense out there that texting is ruining our sense of punctuation. But that isn't necessarily the case—it's more that the rules of punctuation in texting need to do something different.

- Think about early punctuation, which tried to capture oral delivery. In texting, punctuation is used to try to capture tone, facial expression, and other parts of context.

- Emoticons and emoji do this work, as do shorthands like *jk*, and *lol*. And punctuation marks have been repurposed: The exclamation mark shows agreement but not necessarily lots of enthusiasm unless there are several. The period is serious if not angry. The ellipsis is skeptical or invites a response. And the unmarked/generic punctuation choice is no punctuation at all.

Suggested Reading

Crystal, *Txting*.
———, *Making A Point*.
Parkes, *Pause and Effect*.
Truss, 2003. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you see as the relationship between punctuation marks like commas, periods, semicolons, colons, and dashes and the spoken language?

2. Do you like the Oxford comma or find it unnecessary? Make your case.

Lecture 23

Its/It's Confusing

The apostrophe is perhaps the most unstable punctuation mark in English. Yet we will sometimes judge others severely based on how they use the apostrophe: poking fun at grocers' apostrophes in *apple's* or deciding not to go on a date with someone because their online profile misuses *its*/*it's*. Many of the rules for apostrophes are extremely idiosyncratic, as we'll see in this lecture. We'll also learn about how contractions work, the deal with plurals, and what the future holds for apostrophes.

The Apostrophe's History

- The word *apostrophe* is a French borrowing, coming into English in the 16th century. It has historically been used for contractions, and eventually it expanded to possessives (both nouns and pronouns) and plurals.

- It was then reigned in as part of standardization. Now the apostrophe is used for possessives of nouns and contractions (and a few plurals, just to make things confusing). It is this double use of the apostrophe for possessive and contractions that makes *its*/*it's* tricky, as we'll discuss.

Contractions and Possessives

- Contractions are largely straightforward: When two words are smashed together, letters and/or sounds get left out, and the apostrophe represents that. *Cannot* becomes *can't*; *do not* becomes *don't*; *I am* becomes *I'm*.

- We can also use the apostrophe to show that we have left off a letter or sound at the beginning or end of words: *'tis*, *runnin'*.

- Possessives in English are now marked with a final *s*, both in the singular and plural, and the only thing that distinguishes them is where the apostrophe goes. In the singular to make the possessive, take the noun and add –'*s*. For instance, *cat* becomes *cat's*.

- It is understandable that we want to extend the pattern to pronouns, but pronouns work differently. The first-person singular doesn't use –'*s* at all: The possessive is *my* or *mine*. For all others, there's a change of form in possessive, and then we add –*s* for pronouns: *you* becomes *yours*; *we* becomes *ours*.

- *It* is the only pronoun that stays the same in the possessive and adds –*s* (becoming *its*), so it is no wonder that speakers are more inclined to want to use an apostrophe. *It* acts more like a noun than a pronoun in how it makes the possessive. Before you judge someone's *its*/*it's* error, pause and consider what judgment you're about to make.

- Now let's deal with the nouns where the possessive gets tricky: nouns that end in –*s*. Do you add another –*s* with an apostrophe or just an apostrophe?

- Some style guides say to let pronunciation guide your choice: If there is an added syllable in the possessive, add another –s to represent the new syllable; if not, just add an apostrophe.

- But other style guides, including Strunk and White's, advise that we should always make the possessive of singular nouns by adding –'*s*. That is, always except for a selection of ancient proper names ending in –*us*, –*es* or –*is*. They cite Jesus, Moses, and Isis (the goddess.) According to them, it is always Moses' and Jesus'—or you can take the escape hatch and go with "the laws of Moses."

- Other guides only mention Moses and Jesus, but not always other ancient figures. Bryan Garner also defers to this tradition, making an exception (to use just the final apostrophe) for classical names

like Jesus and Aristophanes, along with names of companies and countries like General Motors and the United States. Most people would prefer the look of “General Motors’ reputation” over “General Motors’s reputation.”

- We often get out of the possessive issue with the United States because we use it as a noun modifier; for instance, we might say “The United States economy” or “the U.S. military.” Or we can rephrase with an *of*-construction: “the president of the U.S.” But in the end, most people prefer the aesthetics of *United States’* over *United States’s*.

- Then we have plural nouns that end in *–s*. Let’s imagine that there is a family with the last name Jones. This family has one car, and we want to refer to that car. Is it the *Jones’ car* or the *Joneses’ car?* Most guides say *Joneses’*. An escape hatch would be the *Jones family’s car*.

- Two other issues come up with the possessive. One we already talked about in the lecture on prepositions: the double possessive in “a friend of Kate’s.”

- The other issue: How does the apostrophe distribute when there are two owners? Let’s imagine two people, Kate and Dean. Together, Kate and Dean own two cars. Should we talk about “Kate and Dean’s cars” or “Kate’s and Dean’s cars?” In other words, does the apostrophe distribute through the conjoined phrase that describes the owners (“Kate and Dean”) or can you have just one apostrophe that encompasses the whole thing?

- Arguably, there is a distinction in meaning. If “Kate and Dean” is a unit (for instance, they’re married) and together they own the car, then let’s use just one apostrophe: “Kate and Dean’s car.” Then we can use two apostrophes to show that there are two cars, which Kate and Dean own independently: “Kate’s and Dean’s cars.”

Plurals

- We're sometimes allowed to use the apostrophe to mark plurals, specifically with numbers and letters. As an example regarding decades, *1960s* and *1960's* both appear, depending on the source. It's more common to omit the apostrophe, but *The New York Times* still uses it.

- If we're talking about plural individual letters, we can say "three As" or "three A's." But lowercase letters require an apostrophe; this creates "three a's" rather than "three as."

- We use the apostrophe to create a plural when we are referring to multiple instances of a word. An example: "There are four *the*'s in the passage."

The Future of the Apostrophe

- What is the future of the apostrophe? It's hard to say, but we can speculate.

    - John Richards, a retired copy editor and reporter, in Boston, England has founded the Apostrophe Protection Society.

    - There is also the *Kill the Apostrophe* website, which calls them redundant, wasteful, and snobbish.

- The apostrophe probably will not die entirely (although a couple of linguists have suggested this). It is likely that its use will diminish.

- One factor is the increasing use of noun modifiers in English such that nouns appearing before other nouns are assumed to modify the noun afterwards, often through possession. Take, for example, "the book's cover" versus "the book cover." This leads to an overall reduction in the possessive marker *–s*.

- Some nonstandard dialects of English already do zero possession with expressions. For example, the lyrics of Beyonce's 2016 song "Formation" include features of African American English

throughout, including the zero possessive “I like my baby hair” (a defense of her daughter wearing her hair in an afro).

- The history of English is the history of the loss of inflectional endings, and it is not surprising to see the possessive *–s* drop in varieties of English.

- We’re also seeing the loss of the apostrophe, while the *–s* remains, in some street signs and names of well-known geographical spots. In the U.K., the Birmingham City Council banned apostrophes from street signs in 2009. Cambridge did the same for any new street names in 2014, but then quickly reversed the decision after a public uproar.

- The U.S. Board on Geographic Names has a policy of removing apostrophes from titles proposed for towns, mountains, caves, and so on. Examples include Pikes Peak (which lost its apostrophe in 1891) and Harpers Ferry. Exceptions include Martha’s Vineyard (which got it back in 1933), Clark’s Mountain (apostrophe granted in 2002), and Ike’s Point (apostrophe granted in 1944).

- People have experimented with apostrophes before. George Bernard Shaw used apostrophes in contractions only when there would be ambiguity without them (for instance, *I'll* versus *Ill*). He explained, "There is not the faintest reason for persisting in the ugly and silly trick of peppering pages with these uncouth bacilli."

- We probably overestimate the ambiguity that would happen without apostrophes. People say *she'll* will be *shell* and *he'll* will become *hell*. In context, though, sentences like "Shell be here at 9:00" probably would not be ambiguous if we were used to seeing *Shell* this way.

- But there is concern that if we aren't careful, chaos will reign in the written language. John Richards posed the sentence: "Residents' refuse to be placed in bins." If you remove the apostrophe, it becomes: "Residents refuse to be placed in bins." The lack of apostrophe creates ambiguity. But such sentences are hard to find or construct. This isn't to say we should get rid of apostrophes; rather, we should just keep our concerns about ambiguity in check.

- It's good to know the rules about when and where to use apostrophes, and adhere to them in formal and many informal contexts. Judgment is rampant. But in terms of how we judge others, we should exercise some caution. Many brilliant writers are not great proofers, and almost everyone gets mixed up at least sometimes on *its*/*it's*.

- We still read and celebrate historical texts that used the apostrophe very differently, with less consistency than we insist on today. And even in that consistency, as we have talked about in this lecture, there are lots of exceptions and idiosyncrasies regarding "standard" use of the apostrophe.

Suggested Reading

Crystal, *Making A Point*.
Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*.

Questions to Consider

1. Should the possessive form be *Bill Gates'* or *Bill Gates's*? What about *boss'* or *boss's*? Should we be consistent in how we handle the possessive for all nouns that end in *–s*?

2. Why shouldn't we use an apostrophe in possessive pronouns and write *your's*, *our's*, *her's*, *their's*, and *it's*?

Lecture 24
Trending Language

In this final lecture, we'll start by covering two tricky issues: the use of "based off of" and "advocate for," two evolutions that are currently controversial but may end up sticking. Then we'll move on to discuss what makes a rule a rule—as we've seen throughout this course, it's a murky issue. We'll close with some general advice on when you should and shouldn't correct someone, as well as a look at how you can make deliberate, effective choices as a writer.

Based Off What?

- In student writing, "based off of" has become very widely used (rather than "based on"). The Google Books Ngram Viewer reports that "based off of" has risen dramatically since 1980, including tripling in use between 2000 and 2008. But "based on" still outnumbered it 10,000 to 1 in 2008.

- It's not surprising that we're seeing "based off of" in students' writing. They are the movers and shakers of change, and it is a fairly colloquial feature that they may not know to edit out of their academic prose.

- Changes in grammar typically happen first in the spoken language, which can make new forms feel more informal. Why might speakers be shifting to "based off of?" There is no definite answer, but we can point to two factors:

- Prepositions are notoriously idiomatic. You just have to learn them, and they don't always make sense. For example, why is it "as a result" and not "in a result" or "for a result"?

- While "based on" makes sense as we build *on* the base that is there, we also can build *off* things (when we extend them). We also have "jumping-off points," so one could argue there is a logic to "based off of" as well.

- Some folks don't like "off of" because they think it is redundant, which is a fair point. Interestingly, it's not a new redundancy. Being old doesn't make a construction good per se, but it does suggest that this is a redundancy that doesn't grate on speakers too much in the general scheme of things.

- Here's an example from Shakespeare's *Henry VI*. Simpcox, when asked why he is lame, responds, "A fall off of a tree." This construction tends to be colloquial, but it will sometimes appear in more formal writing.

- The bottom-line question: Is it OK to use "based off of" in formal/professional writing? There is some informal censure of "based off of" out there. But there isn't a lot of formal prescription on "based off of" yet. In other words, the writers of style guides and usage manuals have not started paying attention to this new construction on the rise.

- In sum, change is afoot. If usage guide writers continue to let it fly generally under the radar and don't clamp down on it as "wrong," then the change may happen fairly rapidly and "based off" will become more and more standard in formal contexts. But right now, writers use it with some risk of judgment.

Advocacy

- Let's look at another tricky prepositional issue. Here are two sentences from a question on the AHD usage ballot:

- Sentence 1: The teacher advocated a new educational technique.

- Sentence 2: The teacher advocated for a new educational technique.

- Sentence 2 makes some people grimace. But forty-five percent of the panel voted it as acceptable, so clearly opinions are split. The AHD editors as a result stayed conservative in their summary: "A careful writer" will use *advocate* transitively without *for*. A writer should only use *for* in a sentence like, "She advocates for former foster children" (where the beneficiary is present).

- Notice that the AHD editors do not say "advocate for" is wrong. Rather, the goal is to make choices that are careful about context, audience, and expectations. And as part of our care, we should recognize that opinions as voiced by usage guide writers and entities like the Usage Panel will change over time.

Rules

- Given all this, let's think again about what makes a grammar/usage rule a rule. As we've done throughout this course, we first need to distinguish the descriptive from the prescriptive.

  - Descriptive rules are patterns that govern how we use the language to create grammatical utterances that others will understand; an example is the order in which determiners must occur.

  - Prescriptive rules are created by real people, at specific moments in time, to try to manage the language, especially the written language. An example is consistency in the use of commas, which has the goal of minimizing distraction for readers.

- In the end, we make choices based on the grammatical information we have at hand. This is empowering. It also reminds us that

English usage is a living thing, changing along as generations of speakers roll over.

Changes to Watch

- What changes should you be watching? Predictions are dangerous, but here are some guesses as to what the future might hold:

1. New modals could emerge (in addition to *hafta* and *gonna*, we might also see *sposta*).

2. The demise of *whom* might be underway.

3. We could see growing acceptance of singular *they*.

4. An expansion of the perfect and the progressive could occur.

5. We might see the death of the subjunctive. But this is hard to know—the most remarkable thing is that it hasn't died yet. The subjunctive mood captures belief, intention, desire; and it states information contrary to the facts. It appears in sentences such as, "If I were grammar queen for a day." Many people don't know what it is, and yet some studies indicate that in American English its use is increasing in sentences like, "I demand that he study grammar joyfully."

6. Noun modifiers could increase. An example: "Great Courses lecture material."

7. *Slash* as a conjunction and because as a preposition might grow.

8. The use of *on accident* could increase; the same goes for *impactful*.

9. The quotative *like* will grow in frequency.

10. *Hone in* will fully replace *home in*.

- Regarding the last example: *Home in* showed up in the 1920s and took on the metaphorical meaning of *focus on* by 1950s. By the 1960s, *hone in on* also took on this meaning.

- Today, is *home in on* losing its status as the standard form? Research with Google Books shows *home in on* is still more common, but the gap has narrowed significantly.

Should We Correct?

- We should be very careful about how and when we alert other people to a usage issue. It can be a very powerful move, to stop and correct someone. It shows you're listening to how they are talking as much or more than what they are saying.

- Correction is one thing if you're a teacher reading a piece of formal writing. It's quite another if you're in a conversation. Correcting someone in a conversation can be very silencing. You can see this online when people correct other people's grammar as the ultimate weapon in an argument.

- Hopefully, we can embrace how much we care about language and use that caring for good. We can create beautiful prose—or clever prose or efficient prose or funny prose—in a variety of genres, being careful about how we use the language and being deliberate in our grammatical choices, without being unnecessarily overly fussy.

- Of course, we are going to notice things in language. We'll notice typos, and then we can decide what we want to make of them. We'll notice new grammatical developments and differences across regions and social groups—we can't control that.

- What we can control is what we think we know about that person based on that bit of grammar—or based on their accent, or a word choice that reflects what region they're from, or what social group they identify with. We can control what judgments we want to make.

- We can control any impulse we might have to go “grammando” when we hear something. Ask: Does that thought stay in our head or do we say it out loud? What is the goal? What is the context? Are we being helpful or hurtful? Are we sure we’re right?

- Let’s think of ourselves as caretakers of the language, tending it to allow it to do its work in powerful, effective ways. To be effective, language (both written and spoken) must respond to its audience and context, which requires some flexibility in what kind of grammar is preferred. And as we’ve talked about, there are many English grammars; the formal written standard is just one of them. To be effective, formal written language also benefits from consistency (so as not to distract readers) and from minimizing ambiguity.

- Language also needs to be creative; it needs to be allowed to surprise us and to adapt to the needs and desires of the speakers and writers who are both older and younger than we are. The next time you find yourself contemplating a grammatical construction

that strikes your ear as not quite right if not downright wrong, imagine yourself being asked to judge its acceptability as if you were a member of the AHD Usage Panel.

- This course has hopefully given you new tools and perspectives to approach that question, to think about what acceptability means in what context and how that may change over time. Key tools you can use include usage guides, the Google Books Ngram Viewer, the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, and the *Corpus of Historical American English*.

- With this knowledge and these tools, you can effectively be an advocate for what you see as the most effective language choices. Remember that whatever you choose—whether to embrace tradition or embrace change—you are following in the footsteps of many eloquent speakers and writers who precede us. To make those kinds of decisions about grammar more consciously and deliberately is what it means to harness the power of language.

Suggested Reading

Cassidy, Hall, et al., eds., *Dictionary of American Regional English*.
Leech, Hundt, Mair, and Smith, *Change in Contemporary English*.
Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an Accent.*
McWhorter, "A Matter of Fashion."

Questions to Consider

1. Now, at the end of this course, if you needed to decide if the phrasing *advocate for a proposal* is acceptable in formal writing, how would you go about answering the question?

2. What grammatical changes are you noticing in the English language you see and hear every day?

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