

# English Grammar and English Literature

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## Abstract

In the English-speaking countries you can earn a degree in English literature despite knowing almost nothing about the language as such. You scarcely need to know what nouns or verbs are. Worse, although some educated people have a degree of familiarity with English grammar, their acquaintance with it reflects what was understood more than 200 years ago. Hardly anything about the way English grammar is presented to the general public has changed since Lindley Murray's million-selling grammar of English in 1795.

The problem with this is not simply that modes of presentation and terminology are old-fashioned: they are, but that hardly matters. Nor is it crucial that English has changed a little since 1795: the minor changes that have taken place are relatively unimportant. The problem I address is that the content of the descriptions presented is empirically mistaken, in numerous ways and on fundamental points.

Over the last two centuries, while biology experienced a complete revolution in its methods and conception of its subject matter, the study of grammatical structure has simply stagnated: it has remained the way it was before Darwin was even born, and its mistaken analyses are still taught all over the world. I select (out of many) just four areas in which traditional presentations of English grammar are hopelessly mistaken: (i) The basic definitions of the lexical ("part-of-speech") categories like noun, verb, etc., are naive and confused nonsense. (ii) The syntax of infinitival complements has been misunderstood and the form to that marks infinitivals misanalysed. (iii) The traditional conception of prepositions is utterly misguided, and has contributed to a situation where every published dictionary gives the wrong categorization for most prepositions. (iv) A common prejudice leads most usage authorities to make false claims about what sort of antecedent is suitable for the pronoun *they*.

I use literary examples as well as linguistic arguments to support my claims about these matters. I then briefly consider how and why the study of English grammar suffered this fate, and conclude with a few remarks about why and how the situation might be remedied.

**Keywords:** English Grammar, Descriptive mistakes, Methodological stagnation, Grammatical structures

## 1. Introduction

It is worrying (at least, it worries me) that many people who hold degrees in English literature from universities in the English-speaking world, or even hold professorships in English departments, know essentially nothing about the grammar of the language.

Naturally, they imagine that they are well versed in grammar: they believe they know about commas and semicolons, and how to avoid dangling participles and split infinitives; they may be able to tell an adverb from an adjective, and spot whether a verb agrees with its subject; and they typically think sort of thing is all there is. They consequently feel empowered to critique the usage of others, whether in correcting student work or in commenting on a colleague's prose or in writing letters of conservative outrage to *The Daily Telegraph*.

But grammar education in the anglophone countries fell into a deep trough a long time ago. Not even the most basic concepts are being understood or taught in a form that is anywhere close to the truth.

The linguistics profession might be charged with at least some responsibility for the state of things. Theoretical linguistics over the last century has been increasingly concerned to emphasize its scientific character and sever its ties to the humanities. Its over-hyped scientific aspirations seem almost deliberately designed to hold humanities academics at arm's length. I see little point in such distancing, especially when no real scientific gains seem to be emerging from work in the kind of theoretical syntax produced by generative grammarians. And combined with an internalist conception of grammatical knowledge that explicitly affirms that the notion of sharing a grammar is incoherent, it seems to be almost wilfully cutting itself off from relevance or even intelligibility to the concerns of most people interested in language. I will not explore this matter further here, but merely note my disagreement with the scientific isolationism of some modern linguistics.

### 1.1 Three clarifications

I should make three things clear before I go on. The first is that the language I am referring to as English is one dialect in a large cluster of dialects and varieties, a dialect with a rather special status: Standard English. What makes it special is that through a complex of accidents on a global scale it happens to be in use for all sorts of serious purposes (governmental, journalistic, literary, commercial, etc.) all over the world. This is not because it is better than other dialects or easier to understand; it is just well connected sociologically. It actually comes close to being a global lingua franca.

Standard English is the language described in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston and Pullum et al. 2002, henceforth *CGEL*). Other dialects can be referred to as nonstandard, but keep in mind that for me that is not a derogatory term. Other dialects are not *substandard*, but they are not Standard English, and they are different, sometimes interestingly so. They will generally be irrelevant to what I say here.

Some of my examples will come from the American variety of Standard English, partly because the majority of my career as a grammarian was spent in the USA and partly because the prevalence of false beliefs about grammar seems to be much deeper and more serious there—though things are almost as bad in the UK, and in other UK-influenced parts of the anglophone world such as Australia.

The second thing I need to make clear is that when I talk about ignorance of grammar I am not talking about accidental errors by native speakers. I am not interested (at least here) in critiquing the speaking or writing of literature professors, literary critics, usage advisors, or anyone else. Native speakers mostly write grammatical sentences, and when a distinguished professor uses a construction, that is *prima facie* evidence that the construction is grammatical.

Of course, a distinguished professor can (like anybody else) make unintentional slips in either writing or speech, so the evidence of usage must be regarded as defeasible, and analytical inferences based on it will be tentative; but that is the position that any scientific hypothesis is in. The fact remains that, *ceteris paribus*, we have to take the facts of how native English speakers use their language as evidence bearing on what that language is like.

Although I am not interested in fingering alleged errors of usage made by distinguished professors, it may sometimes appear otherwise when I apparently use *ad hominem* arguments. I sometimes draw evidence from a person's own writing to show that what they say about usage should not be taken seriously. But this will typically be because I am paying the person the compliment of presupposing that their usage is **correct**. If you are a competent native speaker then your own writing should be counted as a source of evidence about your language, and if it shows features that you criticize others for, then that undercuts your criticism.

The third thing I want to note before I go on is that I draw a distinction between two kinds of ignorance about grammar. One involves acceptance of poor descriptions of genuine facts; the other involves a belief in fictional rules suggesting a misconception of what the facts are.

## 2. Bad analyses

There has been a 200-year tradition of uncritical acceptance of bad analyses of English: descriptions of the facts that are clearly inadequate by any sensible standard. Most of these bad analyses have been presupposed and widely taught since the 18th century—English grammar has been an extraordinarily conservative field. In these cases the atheoretical view of the subject matter is broadly correct but false beliefs are held about how that subject matter should be described. The remedy is to replace the bad descriptions with better ones.

But the other kind of ignorance is more like a belief in ghosts. It is extremely common for educated people to exhibit a naive faith in the validity and importance of rules that not only fail to hold for the language but never did hold. They are not so much wrong descriptions of English; they are more like descriptions of a language that never existed. I will speak of **ghost rules** in this case. Ghost rules need to be debunked as irrational nonsense: linguists have to try to convince people, on the basis of evidence, that some of the rules they believe in are fictions, and belief in them should be completely abandoned.

In what follows I will briefly review three areas in which traditional analyses treat the subject matter wrongly and should long ago have been abandoned. The first concerns the elementary definitions traditionally given for classes of words like noun or verb; the second involves the analysis of the infinitival marker *to*; and the third concerns the misclassification of prepositions. After that I shall turn to a brief consideration of some notable ghost rules.

### 2.1 Defining lexical categories

The “parts of speech”—the classes into which words have to be divided for purposes of grammatical analysis—have traditionally been defined in terms of fuzzy meaning-based notions: almost everyone with an education in English has had some contact with the idea that nouns are naming words, verbs are action words, adjectives are describing words, and so on. These

definitions, though universally trusted, have simply no hope of success. It is really quite surprising that anyone ever thought they did.

Let's begin with nouns and verbs. Nouns are claimed to be names of **things**; verbs are said to be words for something that happens or an action that someone performs. Now, what is the nature of fire? Unquestionably, fire **happens**: it is a process of rapid oxidation producing radiant heat. Things burn up and are destroyed in the fire process. Yet *fire* is a noun, not a verb: we can talk about one fire or two fires, or about a fire's cause.

Next, consider adjectives, which are commonly held to be "describing words." When we say that something stinks, we are certainly using the word *stinks* to give a description, but of course *stinks* is a verb, not an adjective. When we describe someone as an idiot, the word *idiot* is clearly used as a description. But of course *idiot* is a noun, not an adjective.

The lesson is that we cannot first catalogue the world's contents to identify the things that exist, the events or processes that take place, and the qualities possessed by the things, and then put the label "noun" on the words that name things, and "verb" on the words that pick out processes, and "adjective" on the words that identify qualities. Definitions of grammatical notions have to rest on grammar, not on vague aspects of naive metaphysics.

The alternative to defining nouns as thing-naming words is to define them in terms of grammatical notions. They are (to summarize very briefly) the words that have plain and genitive case forms, and singular and plural number forms, which are found as heads of the phrases that function as subjects and objects in transitive clauses.

Likewise, verbs are words that have present and past tense forms, and past participles and gerund-participles, and are heads of the phrases that function as predicates in clauses.

The situation with adjectives is worse. The traditional descriptions say that an adjective is a word that modifies or qualifies or describes a noun. Nothing about these vague semantic relationships is made very clear, but what is supposed to be entailed is that the underlined words in [1] are all "adjectives":

- [1] a. the *archbishop*  
 b. an *elephant*  
 c. my *bicycle*  
 d. this *book*  
 e. that *idiot*  
 f. all *migrants*  
 g. some *girls*  
 h. every *indication*  
 i. staff *members*  
 j. several *miles*  
 k. Edinburgh *weather*  
 l. plutonium *bomb*

The most basic confusion here is the idea that a class of words like the adjectives should be defined in terms of some kind of modification function, so that (i) if something modifies a noun (in almost any sense) it counts as an adjective and (ii) if something is an adjective it modifies a noun. But neither (i) nor (ii) makes any descriptive sense. To believe (i) is to believe that *Edinburgh*, *plutonium*, and every other noun in the language is also an adjective (or can be).

And (ii) entails that [2] contains no adjectives:

[2] *It is unfair that the idle rich are so much happier than the humble poor.*

Yet every dictionary agrees that *unfair*, *idle*, *rich*, *happy*, *humble*, and *poor* are typical adjectives. In [2] there are no nouns at all for any of these adjectives to modify. The definition makes no sense.

Much more could be said; but for now, suffice it to say that the traditional definitions of the “parts of speech” (now known as lexical categories) make no descriptive sense, and the fact that they have been repeated in so many books for so long is an indication that neither the writers nor the readers of these books have been paying any serious attention to what they say.

## 2.2 Infinitival *to*

Traditional grammar has adopted the practice of saying that *to be* is the infinitive of the copular verb, and *to do* is the infinitive of the verb *do*, and so on. This is incompatible with the way the language works. The sequence *to do* clearly consists of two words that function independently. In a sentence like *I was asked to do it* they appear together, but in *They made me do it* we see only *do*, and in *I didn't want to* we see only *to*. *To be* and *to do* are not words; they are word sequences, and not at all analogous to the one-word infinitive forms of Latin or Spanish.

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

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

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

To what category does infinitival *to* belong? Most dictionaries call it a preposition, but they are wrong. There is a preposition spelled *to*, of course; but where preposition phrases with *to* are encountered, infinitival clauses with *to* often cannot be substituted, and vice versa (in the following examples I use the asterisk to mark an ungrammatical string of words):

- [3] a. *We persuaded him to reconsider the proposal.*  
 b. *\*We persuaded him to the basement.*

- [4] a. *I tried to be magnanimous.*  
 b. *\*I tried to large sums of money.*
- [5] a. *\*Harold wanted to a larger city.*  
 b. *Harold wanted to live in a larger city.*
- [6] a. *\*The actors didn't always stick to be audible.*  
 b. *The actors didn't always stick to the script.*

About 700 years ago, infinitivals may have been correctly analysed as preposition phrases; but not anymore.

So if infinitival *to* is not a preposition, what is it? One view is that it is a peculiar kind of subordinator, marking certain tenseless clauses as subordinate to an item in the immediately containing clause. But it is an odd subordinator, because it occurs after the subject instead of before:

- [7] *I have arranged for you to be picked up at the airport.*

Infinitival *to* actually has just the properties one would expect of the plain form of a defective auxiliary verb with no other forms. That's a rather odd idea, but it fits the facts. For example, the construction known as Post-Auxiliary Ellipsis demands an auxiliary verb, not a lexical verb, before the ellipsis site; and infinitival *to* satisfies the requirement:

- [8] a. *\*You told me to keep working on it, so I kept \_\_\_.*  
 b. *You told me to keep working on it, so I did \_\_\_.*  
 c. *You told me to keep working on it, so I will \_\_\_.*  
 d. *You told me to keep working on it, so I have \_\_\_.*  
 e. *You told me to keep working on it, so I am \_\_\_.*  
 f. *You told me to keep working on it, so I'm going to \_\_\_.*

English grammar is still giving us surprises!

### 2.3 Misclassifying prepositions

Traditional grammar has maintained a definition of “preposition” that might be appropriate for Latin but is indefensible for English: prepositions are defined as words prefixed to nouns. The first inaccuracy in this is that the reference to nouns should be a reference to noun phrases. The tradition neglects that point, treating the other elements of a noun phrase as if they were transparent satellite words that can be ignored and only the noun matters. But the second inaccuracy is that the definition (as reinterpreted) leads to a word like *after* being assigned to three different categories. This is absurd, but unfortunately it is exactly what all published English dictionaries do.

In *soon after our quarrel* the word *after* is treated as a preposition. But in *soon after we quarrelled* the following material is not a noun phrase but a clause, and “conjunction” is the term used for words that introduce clauses, so *after* has to be assigned to the “conjunction” class as well. And sometimes *after* is not followed by any closely associated constituent: in *We quarrelled soon after* the word *after* (modified by *ever*) modifies the verb by specifying that the

happy life followed a certain contextually-designated time point in the narrative, so it has to be called an adverb.

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

It should be completely obvious that this is a mistake: the meaning of the word is the same in each case; so is the spelling; so is the pronunciation; so is the syntactic distribution of the phrase that *after* forms. Otto Jespersen (1924) cogently questioned the wisdom of any such analysis, and saw clearly what should replace the traditional analysis. And he was only elaborating views that emerged nearly two centuries before. Kirkby (1746) complains: “we have several instances of the same word being used at one time as a conjunction and at another time as a preposition.” John Hunter (1784) argued in much more detail, in a paper presented to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in its first year, that neither conjunctions nor adverbs were in all cases usefully distinguished from prepositions in English (or in Latin and Greek). He stressed that classifications were being based on the “merely *accidental*” differences in what constituent (if any) happened to follow the word. The rational analysis is to treat *after* as simply a preposition governing (optionally) a complement that can be either a noun phrase or a clause.

*After we quarrelled* is treated by traditional grammar as an “adverbial clause” that is introduced by the “subordinating conjunction” *after*. But it is not a clause at all. It is a preposition-phrase, just like *after our quarrel*.

There are many prepositions in English that accept either clauses or preposition-phrases as complements, rather than just noun phrases: *after, before, except, given, since,* etc. Others take only clause complements, never noun phrase complements: *although, because, lest, though,* etc. And with some of them (*after, before, and since*) the complement is optional, so they can appear alone.

It should not take 250 years for observations as simple and convincing as those of Kirkby and Hunter to gain currency. Yet that is what happened. The first systematic descriptive grammar of English to adopt a reanalysis of English prepositions that recognized the possibility of non-NP complements came more than two centuries later, in *CGEL* (published in 2002)

### 3. Prescriptivist poppycock

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

Calling a rule a ghost rule means that although some people may be in fear of it, it doesn't really exist: it is not a genuine constraint on grammatical structure in the language, and it never was at any earlier stage in history. The alleged rule is a fiction, with no credentials that should lead us to respect it.

And to call a rule prescriptive is to say that it is not meant as what the philosopher John Searle would call a **constitutive** rule, one that aims to provide part of the definition of the

language system (like saying that the verb in English precedes its object or other complement—a statement that no one disputes). Instead it is explicitly **regulative**: it aims to settle a dispute on some thorny point by ruling one way or the other, or to convey a stipulation about how you ought to use the language.

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

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

### 3.1 Splitting infinitives

People still, after more than a century of silliness, regularly write letters to UK newspapers lamenting the placement of a verb phrase modifier between the infinitival complement-marking word *to* and the plain-form verb that is the head of the infinitival VP. People who have done hardly any study of English grammar usually think that such modifier placement is an error. Yet none of them ever seem to have looked at either the evidence of literature or the actual statements in serious books on usage and grammar.

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

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

Yet we find clumsy, desperate attempts to avoid splitting infinitives in many magazines and



books. This is from *The Economist*:

... a bill that would force any NGO receiving cash from abroad publicly to label itself a “foreign agent.”

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

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

Living, as she had since she was fifteen, on the edges of so many other people’s lives, she had become used not to talking much herself, as if to talk was to thrust herself into the limelight, into the centre of attention in lives that she depended upon for sustenance and thus could not afford to alienate by the wrong sort of behaviour. (Joanna Trollope, *Next of Kin*, p. 26)

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

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

### 3.2 Restrictive *which*

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

- [9] a. *The city which I visited was attractive.* [restrictive]  
 b. *Bilbao, which is in the Basque Country, is attractive.* [nonrestrictive]

- [10] a. *The city that I visited was attractive.* [restrictive]  
 b. *??Bilbao, that is in the Basque Country, is attractive.* [nonrestrictive]

Grammarians who perhaps had too much time on their hands and were too keen on tidiness began to wonder whether it might be a good idea to ordain that *which* should always and only be used in nonrestrictives while *that* should always and only be used in restrictives. It makes little sense to regulate a natural language in this sort of way: it is like suggesting that perhaps rivers with an even number of letters in their names should always and only flow east, and rivers with an odd number of letters in their names should always and only flow west. But it appealed to some, and at the end of the 19th century Henry and Frank Fowler, building on a few

suggestions in earlier works, made an explicit case for reforming English relative clauses (Fowler and Fowler 1906).

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

### 3.3 Genitive antecedents

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

[11] *in a phrase that became the city’s name for itself* (Menard 7)

*Dr. Holmes’s views on political issues therefore tended to be reflexive: he took his cues from his own instincts* (7)

*Emerson’s reaction, when Holmes showed him the essay, is choice* (25)

*Brown’s apotheosis marked the final stage in the radicalization of Northern opinion. He became, for many Americans, ...* (28)

*Wendell Holmes’s riot control skills were not tested. Still he had, at the highest point of prewar contention...* (31)

*Holmes’s account of his first wound was written, probably two years after the battle in which it occurred, in a diary he kept during the war.* (Menard 38)

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

### 3.4 Preposition stranding

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

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

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

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

- [13] Lady Bracknell's preposition stranding:  
 a. *A very good age to be married at.*  
 b. *What did he die of?*  
 c. *I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?*

Interestingly, the first strands the preposition of an adjunct rather than a complement (often this is characteristic of more informal style, as in *Which days of the week can you visit on?*).

The pompous and pedantic Standard English that Wilde puts into the mouth of Lady Bracknell in perhaps the most ingenious and delightful of English stage comedies should be recognized for what it is: clear and convincing evidence that preposition stranding was and is fully grammatical.

### 3.5 Singular *they*

According to William Strunk, who was a professor of English at Cornell in 1918 when he self-published a booklet called *The Elements of Style* containing guidelines for student writers:

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

But again, as we seek evidence that this holds for English as spoken and written by its expert users, problems emerge. In this case we can turn again to Oscar Wilde's character Lady Bracknell:

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

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

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

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

He is following a long tradition. The use of *they/their/them* with syntactically singular antecedents goes back as far as Shakespeare and even Chaucer. It is commonplace in the work of Jane Austen. She puts singular *they* into the mouths of people from all walks of life. I suppose someone could try to maintain that this shows only that the novelist knew some people engaged in this practice conversationally; so let me just exhibit a few examples in the narrator's voice in novels by Austen. The examples (in which I keep spelling features of Austen's time like spelling *everybody* as *every body*) are taken, and much abbreviated, from the far fuller listing that Henry Churchyard has painstakingly compiled at <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/austhlis.html>.

[16] Examples from *Emma*:

*was still unwilling to admit ...that there would be the smallest difficulty in **every body's** returning into their proper place the next morning.*

*ready to advise **every body** to come and sit down, and not to heat themselves.*

*...it would be quite a pity that **any one** who so well knew how to teach, should not have their powers in exercise again*

[17] Examples from *Mansfield Park*:

*Nobody meant to be unkind, but **nobody** put themselves out of their way to secure her comfort.*

***every one** concerned in the going was forward in expressing their ready concurrence*

***the only one out of the nine** not tolerably satisfied with their lot*

*that favouring something which **every body** who shuts their eyes while they look, or their understandings while they reason, feels the comfort of.*

*Every body around [Fanny Price] was gay and busy, prosperous and important; **each** had their object of interest, their part, their dress, their favourite scene, their friends and confederates*

***Every body** began to have their vexation.*

*she found **everybody** requiring something they had not ...Everybody had a part either too long or too short; **nobody** would attend as they ought; **nobody** would remember on which side they were to come in...*

***everybody** being as perfectly complying and without a choice as on such occasions they always are*

*Nobody* was in their right place, nothing was done as it ought to be.

*every body* had their due importance

*nobody* could command attention when they spoke.

It had been a miserable party, **each of the three** believing themselves most miserable.

I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore **every body**, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.

*every one* may be at liberty to fix their own

*nobody* minds having what is too good for them

[18] Examples from *Persuasion*:

she felt that were **any young person**, in similar circumstances, to apply to her for counsel, they would never receive any of such certain immediate wretchedness, such uncertain future good.

Elizabeth ... indignantly answered for **each party**'s perfectly knowing their situation.

**Every body** has their taste in noises

[19] Examples from *Pride and Prejudice*:

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

**Every body** began to find out that they had always distrusted the appearance of his goodness.

**Each** felt for the other, and of course for themselves

[20] Examples from *Sense and Sensibility*:

**each of them** was busy in arranging their particular concerns, and endeavouring, by placing around them books and other possessions, to form themselves a home.

she was a great wonderer, as **every one** must be who takes a very lively interest in all the comings and goings of all their acquaintance.

**every body** had a right to be equally positive in their opinion, and to repeat it over and over again as often as they liked.

**each** found their reward

**each** felt their own error

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

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

#### 4. Conclusions

What I have tried to do here is to exhibit, very briefly, a few ways in which the educated general public's grasp of even elementary parts of English grammar (I'm not concerned here with more technical syntactic analysis) is in a terrible state. Myths are given widespread credence; readily available evidence is ignored; long-discredited edicts are treated as gospel truths. This is not a happy situation.

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

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

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

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

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