The Piranha Brothers, the Unwritten Grammatical Law, and the Phenomenon of Nerdview

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Presented to the UA Conference (Europe) 2008, in Edinburgh.

Piranha Brothers grammar

What I'm going to talk about has to do with professional writers, amateur grammar experts, unkillable linguistic myths, and the strange business of language addressed to the public by native speakers who put things in a way guaranteeing that it could not possibly be understood by the people who read it or hear it.

In one of the classic early sketches on Monty Python's Flying Circus, a man named Stig O'Tracey is being interviewed about his knowledge of a vicious London gang called the Piranha Brothers.

Interviewer	Stig, I've been told Dinsdale Piranha nailed your head to the floor.
Stig	No, no. Never, never. He was a smashing bloke. He used to give his mother flowers and that. He was like a brother to me.
Interviewer	But the police have film of Dinsdale actually nailing your head to the floor.
Stig	Oh yeah, well — he did that, yeah.
Interviewer	Why?
Stig	Well he had to, didn't he? I mean, be fair, there was nothing else he could do. I mean, I had transgressed the unwritten law.
Interviewer	What had you done?
Stig	Er... Well he never told me that. But he gave me his word that it was the case, and that's good enough for me with old Dinsy.

Stig is totally convinced that he had done wrong. He can't give an account of what the unwritten law says, but he is fully prepared to believe that he has violated it, and that his his head should be nailed to the floor as punishment.

That is the view so many people have of grammar. It's a body of cryptic doctrine, the content and purpose of which is unclear to most people but presumably known to experts; and the thing about it is that if you ever transgress, then wham, you can be hauled in front of some grammar-teaching Dinsdale Piranha for a horrible punishment.

Most educated native speakers of English can cite maybe a dozen rules of English grammar. In my experience it is quite probable that every single one will be mythical. Even in the case of professional writers and professors of English, often just about everything they know about English grammar is wrong, and easily shown to be so.

This is a very strange fact, it seems to me. It would be an interesting task to explore how and why this has happened to grammatical education – how the 18th century tradition of informed critical discussion of grammar was whittled down to the hastily taught list of inaccurate warnings and stipulations that passes for grammar teaching today. The list of false maxims that are taught is not very long, and the associated phenomena are quite interesting. Whether or not one chooses to obey some phoney precept to please a boss or an editor, it provides a writer — even an experience writer — with a certain sense of additional confidence to know what the grammatical facts really are.

UA Conference Europe 2008 is for professional writers. My thesis is that professional writers are likely to be better judges of good syntax than copy editors specially trained to pick out alleged errors. Let me explain why.

Much that copy editors do is useful. It includes consistency checking, correlation between text and illustrations or references, finding spelling mistakes, and correcting mistaken punctuation marks (where the writer really did hit the comma key by mistake when aiming for the period). But they also do some trained-monkey grammar fixups that are derived from topics old-fashioned usage advice manuals tended to obsess about: stranding prepositions; beginning sentences with 'conjunctions'; splitting infinitives; genitives with gerund-participles; *which* and *that*; singular antecedents with ***they***; genitives as antecedents; the use of actives and passives; genitives as antecentents; issues about the use of particular bugbear words such as *since*, *however*, *hopefully*, and *like*; and various puzzles with pronoun morphology (*I* v. *me*, *he* v. *him*, *who* v. *whom*, etc.).

The chief warning I offer will be this: again and again, modern usage advice presents formulaic prohibitions that have the virtue of being easy to apply but the cardinal failing of being hopelessly mistargeted. Very often they are wrong in three ways at once:

(i) they overshoot and ban way more than they intended to;
(ii) they misidentify what they are trying to ban and thus miss some instances of it; and

(iii) what they ban is not ungrammatical anyway, and never was.

My aim, in my university teaching as well as talks for writers and the general public, is to provide at least the rudiments of how to think about grammar in a reasonably modern way that makes sense, avoiding the worst confusions of traditional grammar.

This means stressing the distinction between Standard English and the various non-standard dialects of English that live happily alongside it.

It means drawing a distinction between making grammatical errors — which is bad — and simply using an informal-style Standard English construction — which is usually just fine, and often exactly what you want.

The central point: educated people who know English perfectly well, and use it all the time, they frequently live in needless terror of committing grammatical sins. The sins they imagine they are committing can often be clearly shown to be an integral part of Standard English, correct by any imaginable criterion.

I'm a co-author of a huge reference work that is aimed in part at making these views more widely known (*The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*; more about it below). Its goal is to set the field of English grammar on a more sensible footing — to exorcise some the centuries-old ghosts from the haunted mansion of English grammar, and to re-describe familiar syntactic facts in a consistent way that makes sense.

Among the errors of old-fashioned traditional grammars are some that are purely about the analysis — the facts are clear and uncontroversial, but the analysis they have been given is one that should be abandoned

To take another example, *The Cambridge Grammar* claims that words like *in* and *down* do NOT have 'adverb' occurrences; they are always prepositions. Although prepositions OFTEN have following noun phrases, but they don't HAVE to. So *Bring the paper in* contains the same preposition as *Bring the paper in the house*.

However, it is not cases of this sort that are the big problem with grammar education today. The big problem is that the subject has been perverted by the spreading of myths and the popularizing of zombie rules. A zombie rule has no life of its own: it does not describe a regular feature of Standard English usage. In some cases it never did. It shambles about, devoid of consciousness or purpose, in a state between life and death, frightening people and making them more susceptible to those who would nail their heads to the floor. I'll discuss just a few examples.

Prepositions ending clauses

There is simply NO basis for the quaint superstition that prepositions shouldn't end clauses. The silly notion that 'you mustn't end a sentence with a preposition' – i.e., STRAND a preposition by shifting its complement NP – is now widely recognized as a piece of stupidness invented in the 17th century — but ordinary users often don't know that. The last time I met someone who seriously believe it was bad grammar to strand a preposition was three days ago, in this fair city, at an international meeting of the English Speaking Union. People really should know better. The fact is that English has had phrases like these for a millennium:

(1) a. *That's not the one I was thinking of.*
b. *Where did that come from?*
c. *Who are you looking at?*
d. *You should dance with the person you came to the ball with.*

In quite a few contexts, stranding of prepositions is actually REQUIRED, not just permissible:

(2) a. *He's the man that I took it from.*
b. **He's the man from that I took it.*

(3) a. *That's the one I'm counting on.*
b. **That's the one on I'm counting.*

(4) a. *They're the firm to buy it from.*
b. **They're the firm from to buy it.*

(5) a. *It's unclear what he's getting at.*
b. **It's unclear at what he's getting.*

(6) a. *Who to give it to was unclear.*
b. **To whom to give it was unclear.*

(7) a. *Whoever I stared at blushed.*
b. **At whoever I stared blushed.*

Every writer of English strands prepositions. You'll find evidence in the work of Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare, John Bunyan, Jonathan Swift, Jane Austen, Lord Byron, Henry Fielding, Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, Lewis Carroll, Robert Frost, James Thurber, Stephen Leacock, James Joyce, E. L. Doctorow, John Simon, Lionel Trilling, Russell Baker . . . These are not just moderately O.K. writers; as any writer will surely agree, these are definitive examples of what it means to be a well-qualified writer of Standard English.

Perhaps the killer fact is that Oscar Wilde's character Lady Bracknell, the terrifyingly confident, status-conscious, and pedantic grande dame of London society in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, strands prepositions.

Of the French revolution she says, "I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?"

When the demise of the imaginary Bunbury is reported to her she asks suspiciously, "What did he die of?"

When she learns the age of her proposed son-in-law she calls it "A very good age to be married at."

I think we can be sure of this if nothing else: if Lady Bracknell uses a construction, it is surely fully grammatical, even for the uppermost of the upper classes.

So it is not about bad English, this issue; it is about one of the most basic and characteristic structures in good English — well-formed, educated, written, Standard English. Yet there are people — particularly Americans and Australians, not so much British writers — who are so fearful about violating some imagined prohibition that they will write patently ungrammatical sentences rather than commit this infraction. I read this, for example, in an email from a staff member in an American university:

(8) **Experiment a little to understand of what I am speaking.*

The origin of the prejudice against prepositions ending clauses is definitely known: it was initiated by an essay by John Dryden in 1672, criticizing Ben Jonson. Dryden had no support for his view; he just announced that writing clauses ending in prepositions was bad. But some grammars of the late 18th century (a century after Dryden!) took it up and popularized it among English teachers. After Dryden issued his edict, he noticed that HIS OWN PROSE DID NOT COMPORT WITH IT; so he went back over many of his works and CHANGED them to make later editions agree with his rule! Thus Dryden himself is on the long list of distinguished writers who permitted prepositions at ends of clauses in their written English. His critique of them was unmotivated, and his hypocritical later covering up was positively disgraceful.

Splitting infinitives

There is absolutely NO foundation for worries about 'splitting infinitives' — putting an adverb between *to* and the verb as in *to boldly go where no man has gone before*.

- English has no infinitive form, so there is nothing to split.
- Suitable adjuncts can always be prefixed to a verb phrase (VP).
- Infinitival *to* combines with plain-form VPs whether they begin with adjuncts or not.
- Sentences where this occurs have occurred for 700 years.

The awful little compendium of outmoded nonsense *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E. B. White (4th edition, 2000), a kind of holy text for American college students, has all the old-fashioned attitudes: it continues the casting of aspersions on preposition-stranding (see especially pp. 77–78), and calls the split infinitive a "violation", only grudgingly allowing that it might sometimes be permissible if you know what you're doing. But the fact is that virtually all American copy editors and plenty of British ones try to 'correct' split infinitives even when it wrecks the sense.

I remember writing a sentence saying something like *It was surely sensible to at least consider adopting such a policy* and having a Macmillan copy editor (for the science journal *Nature*) "correct" it by moving *at least*. But if you move it left you get *was surely right at least*, which sounds as if I meant "sensible at least, and possibly more than sensible". If you move it one word to the right you get *to consider at least adopting such a policy*, which sounds as if I meant "at least adopting it, possibly more than just adopting it". One word further to the right and you get something that doesn't even sound grammatical (*to consider adopting at least such a policy*), and it certainly isn't a clearer phrasing of what I was trying to say. The effort to correct what I wrote was simply unconscionable: grammatically unmotivated, stylistically ill-advised, just plain stupid. Why do we writers put up with such copy-editing abuse?

Subjects of gerund-participles

It is NOT true that the subject of a gerund-participial clause has to be in the genitive case. Insisting otherwise (as many people do) is especially strange in view of the fact that genitive subjects (*his having won the race*) are A RECENT INNOVATION. Accusative subjects (*him having won the race*) are older, and still very well established. Usually both genitive and accusative subjects are possible — though sometimes the genitive is not, e.g. with demonstratives:

(9) a. **What I don't want is this's becoming public.*
b. *What I don't want is this becoming public.*

Introducing integrated relatives

The word *which* is NOT incorrect when introducing 'defining' or 'restricting' relative clauses, though every educated American seems to believe that it is. (The superstition about *which* is vastly less prevalent in Britain.)

Two types of relative clause are described in *The Cambridge Grammar* as INTEGRATED relatives and SUPPLEMENTARY relatives:

(10) a. INTEGRATED RELATIVE CLAUSE:
Anyone who comes from Texas gets my vote.
b. SUPPLEMENTARY RELATIVE CLAUSE:
Bush, who comes from Texas, gets my vote.

Many grammar books insist that one of the following is grammatically correct and the other is not:

(11) a. INTEGRATED RELATIVE CLAUSE:
Anything which is in the way of the new road will be moved.
b. SUPPLEMENTARY RELATIVE CLAUSE:
Mount Shasta, which is in the way of the new road, will be moved.

Does either really look ungrammatical to you? Traditional grammars since 1926, when Henry Fowler proposed a sort of tidying-up would be nice, have taken to claiming that one is incorrect and the other one not. This is not true, and was never true.

Strunk & White repeat this nonsense, of course. But in fact it was added by White in the 1950s. Jan Freeman of the *Boston Sunday Globe*, in a column called 'Frankenstrunk' (http://www.boston.com/news/

globe/ideas/articles/2005/10/23/frankenstrunk/), discovered that Strunk's original 1918 version of the book did not have this rule (it couldn't, of course: it was written eight years before the publication in England of *Modern English Usage*, where Fowler's tentative recommendation for reform of relative clause syntax was first suggested). She also found out two other things: first, Strunk did not obey the rule when he wrote; and second, White revised Strunk's wording in the 1957 revision so he could pretend otherwise!

What is more, when writing his own prose, White violated the supposed rule that he had augmented *The Elements of Style* to include! To have this non-rule that grammarians themselves do not obey treated as an important principle of syntax is really extraordinary, even in the strange field that is the modern perverted form of English grammar.

The singular *they* ban

The ban on *they* with antecedents governing singular agreement on verbs, firmly maintained by uninformed nitpickers (some of them employed as copy-editors, unfortunately), similarly has no basis. The sentences in question are fully grammatical, and very common:

(12) *I don't have any power at all: One word from me and everyone does what they want.*

Truly old-fashioned works like Harvey's *English Grammar* (1878, but still being reprinted without revision by Mott Media in the USA, and marketed to home-schooling parents, well over 100 years later!) insist on the purportedly sex-neutral masculine:

(13) Since the English language has no pronoun of the third person singular and common gender, usage has sanctioned the employment of the masculine forms *he*, *his*, *him*, for that purpose; as, in speaking of scholars generally, we say, "A thorough scholar studies *his* (never their) lesson carefully."

Well, a truly thorough scholar will question authority, and do their best to look for evidence. Forms of ***they*** have been used with singular antecedents (e.g., *everyone* or *nobody*) since the Middle English period: by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Austen, Fielding... Four examples are shown in (14):

(14) a. *And every one to rest themselves betake . . .*
b. *Nobody here seems to look into an author, ancient or modern, if they can avoid it.*
c. *. . . especially at the end of the season, when everyone has practically said what they had to say . . .*
d. *When anybody occupies the room, they won't want all the wardrobe.*

Can you identify them? They are famous enough that dismissing them as ignorant of how to write grammatically would be totally absurd. (I leave it as an exercise to try to identify the four prestigious authors just quoted. The answer is at the end.)

Harvey's grammar actually warns against using the modern clumsy but sexism-avoiding *he or she* substitute, and plumps firmly for the supposed sex-neutral ***he***:

(15) Do not say, "Each pupil should learn *his* or *her* lesson." Use *his* alone. Say, "Should anyone desire to consult me, let him call at my office," even though the invitation be intended for both sexes. [Harvey's *English Grammar* (1878)]

But if the masculine pronoun could really refer to females, we could say this:

(16) # *Was it your father or your mother who broke his leg while he was skiing?*

Bottom line: ***he*** can never refer to females.

Other grammarians have recommended *he or she*, or the typographically cumbersome and unpronounceable (*s*)*he*, or rewording to put everything into the plural. Dreamers (many of them) have tried to invent new pronouns. But the one obvious device to use is staring everyone in the face. Anyone who thinks ***they*** can't have singular antecedents in Standard English just doesn't know their English literature.

The genitive antecedent proscription

For a final, truly crazy example, ask yourself whether you can truly see anything in (17) that does not seem like natural use of English.

(17) *The President's problem is that in the absence of weapons of mass destruction he doesn't have a really convincing story to tell about why we went to war.*

You shouldn't; it's perfect. Yet in 2003 the scores of most of the students who took the PSAT test in the USA (a preliminary test of scholastic aptitude, important for getting admitted to university) had to be revised because of a complaint to the College Board about a sentence of exactly this sort. The sentence was:

(18) *Tony Morrison's genius enables her to create novels that arise from and express the injustices African Americans have endured.*

Various questions were posed about what might be incorrect in this sentence. The intended answer was that this sentence has no grammatical error. But a journalism teacher in Maryland wrote in to cry foul. He alleged that a genitive noun phrase is not allowed to be the antecedent of a pronoun. And indeed, there actually are usage books that say this. So eventually the Educational Testing Service backed down and gave credit to those students who had fingered it as wrong.

They shouldn't have. The truth is that (18), like (17), is fully grammatical. Finding such examples in excellent

prose by the best writers is particularly easy. Some usage books give a mistaken rationale for the prohibition. Genitive noun phrases like *Toni Morrison's* in (18) function as adjectives, not as nouns, they say; and pronouns refer back to nouns, not adjectives.

This is nonsense through and through. Genitive noun phrases are NOT adjectives, they are **determiners**. Pronouns do NOT refer back to nouns, they refer back to **noun phrases**. But noun phrases can function as determiners. They do not cease to be noun phrases because of their genitive ('s) marking, and EVERY writer allows pronouns to refer back to them.

The logical use of *since*

The word *since* does NOT have to be restricted to temporal meanings. The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA; 5th edn.) insists that phrases like *since that happened* must only mean 'in the period between when that happened and now', never 'because that happened'. They claim to be preserving clarity. This is nonsense, like most of the grammar advice in the APA Publication Manual. Sentences that are truly ambiguous between the two meanings are quite rare; tense or other aspects of the context nearly always disambiguate.

I did one little experiment on this: I searched through David Hume's philosophical classic *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* looking for instances of *since*. The book contains 20 occurrences of the word, and only one of them has the time-reference sense.

The backing for this sort of don't-use-it prescription is very often an allegation that it will lead to ambiguity. It is worth taking a close look at whether these allegations are true. Take the example of *since*. Try to construct a case where it is simply impossible to tell whether the writer of meant *since* to mean 'in the time intervening between T and the present moment' for some indicated time T, or whether the intent was for *since* to mean 'in view of the fact that'. You might be able to do it after some considerable struggle, but it is devilishly hard. Almost all the time, the sentence structure on its own disambiguates. And natural cases where even in context there is a worrying ambiguity are essentially never found at all. The claim that ambiguity threatens is just false. (It is also false for the case of using *which* to introduce an integrated relative clause.)

Getting good grammar information

Let me sum up what I want to say about grammar per se. English grammar is still being taught almost entirely from books that are a full century out of date — and were inaccurate even in Victorian times. Imagine medicine still being practiced in a context of pre-Darwin biology from inaccurate 19th-century books: it is unthinkable. Linguistics is to copy-editing as biology is to medicine, except that no one pays any attention to what linguists say.

I think grammar is far too important to be left to long-dead pre-Victorians, and their closed-minded modern defenders, and the mythical generalizations and zombie rules those defenders promulgate. Everyone should know something about how to describe grammar accurately — rather than simply wait in fear for someone to nail their head to the floor for infringing some unwritten law. What is vital is that decent sources should be available in which the rules of English grammar are coherently and accurately described. It's not easy work producing such coherent and accurate descriptions. Believe me, I've tried many times. But I'm not sure there's an ideal reference work for professional writers to use.

Here's what I'd say about the reference tools available for the writing professional on grammar and usage — I'm often asked about this, so I might as well pull together here the things I usually say. I'll be candid, even brutal, and I'll declare an interest when I'm associated with works mentioned.

Dictionaries There are many excellent dictionaries available, the recent new edition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* being a fine example, but it is an interesting fact that all of them, without exception, are wedded to a scheme of grammatical analysis that is way over a hundred years out of date, and simply doesn't assign words to the right grammatical part of speech in many cases. Use dictionaries to check word sense and usage advice, but don't trust them blindly on syntactic points.

Strunk & White The small primer beloved of educated Americans and purchased by almost every American college student, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, is a piece of junk that has done much harm. Almost every clear rule it gives concerning grammar is hopelessly wrong, and many of its precepts are idiotic. Where it isn't wrong it's mostly vapid. I think it has no value at all.

Usage manuals and style handbooks Nearly all the usage manuals and style handbooks or style guides that I have seen have vitiating flaws. They believe ancient grammatical misanalyses, or they overgeneralise their advice, or they prescribe inappropriately, or they just don't get the facts right concerning current educated usage. The American Psychological Association's style handbooks are among the worst, and are famous for blighting the lives of those writing within the giant field of psychology and its related disciplines. In many of the commercially successful handbooks I think we see the effects of the depressing economic fact that they more they find to forbid, the more entries there can be, and the more money can be made. The genre guarantees the perpetuation of an excess of silly prohibitions or admonitions.

Merriam-Webster The one great exception among usage manuals is *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, available at astonishingly low prices in the original hardbound edition (revised edition edition 27 April

1995), a paperback edition called *Merriam-Webster's Concise Dictionary of English Usage* (June 2002) which is in fact just as complete, and also a pocket edition (published in Europe by Langenscheidt, November 2002). This work, in any of its three versions, represents an astonishing achievement. One or another of the three versions should be on every writer's desk (and I say that despite having no stock in Merriam-Webster or any other financial interest). The reason is that this guide treats you like a grownup. In any given usage controversy it provides a sketch of the history and a selection of literary usage examples for you to assess. It makes judicious recommendations, but much more importantly it offers you all the material you need to decide on your own policy and have authoritative backing for it.

The Chicago Manual *The Chicago Manual of Style* is a masterful reference work on most aspects of publishing, but the grammar chapter that was added in the 15th edition, by Bryan Garner, is not trustworthy. It is by no means barmy, and might answer some questions helpfully, but its view of the subject is basically a 19th-century one and it makes slips of real importance (I wrote about this on Language Log at http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001869.html).

Quirk and followers Nearly all published grammars of English suffer to some extent from the same faults as Garner's synopsis. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (Longman, 1985) is theoretically muddled and inconsistent. The *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* is unfortunately worse — despite useful charts of statistics concerning frequency of syntactic devices in different genres, its theoretical framework is just a weak and confused ersatz version of the Quirk grammar. Carter and McCarthy's recent *Cambridge Grammar of English* (2006) is worse still; it is actually one of the most confusing and contradictory presentations ever, and not an advance at all (see Rodney Huddleston's devastating review in the journal *English Language and Linguistics*, **12**.1 [2007]: 169–187).

Huddleston & Pullum The most consistent, principled, and accurate reference grammar of English is *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum et al. (Cambridge University Press 2002; do not confuse with the Carter and McCarthy book, put out later and independently by CUP's English Language Teaching division!). Sorry for the lack of modesty: it is true that I am a named co-author. But I give the vast preponderance of the credit for the book's quality to my senior colleague Rodney Huddleston, the finest grammarian of English now living. He worked on the book for a full five years before I joined as a secondary member of the team. The final result, which bears the stamp of Huddleston's brilliance everywhere, really is an advance on the earlier tradition. But it is a huge work (1860 pages), and although it doesn't presuppose a linguistics background, it is intended mainly for scholarly use. It probably is not ideal as an office reference aid for a technical writer.

There is a shorter book based on *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, called *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar*, by by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum (Cambridge University Press, 2005). It is a textbook for undergraduates, based on the larger work, often simplifying it considerably. There are exercises at the ends of the chapters. It might be of some value, but it is not organised the way a reference aid for technical writers would be. I have to admit that an ideal reference work of that sort may not exist.

The Huddleston/Pullum text is at least sensitive to the style differences in Standard English. A sentence like *It doesn't matter a bit if that's not what you're looking at* is not bad English or nonstandard English, it's merely informal Standard English. There is not necessarily any gain at all in translating it to formal Standard English. (How would it come out? I suppose it might be rewritten as *It is of no importance matter a bit if that is not the thing at which you are looking*; but if that's an improvement, I'm a Dutchman.)

And it does have the right analysis in cases of traditional confusion concerning which are the prepositions of English, which the adjectives, which the adverbs, and which the subordinating conjunctions. The fact is that if you take a list of words like

(19) *after*, *around*, *away*, *because*, *before*, *if*, *out*, *since*, *though*, *through*, *up*, *whether*, *while*, ...

and try to identify the part of speech they belong to by looking in current dictionaries and grammars, you get chaotic mess. *Since*, to take one example, is generally given three different parts of speech or word categories:

(20) *Since* is supposed to be
- a subordinating conjunction because of *I've been interested in her ever since we first met*,
- a preposition because of *I've been interested in her ever since our first meeting*, and
- an adverb because of *I've been interested in her ever since*.

Yet it has exactly the same meaning in each case. This is just a ludicrous analysis. Huddleston and Pullum will convince you that the right treatment is to say that *since* is a preposition that takes either a clause complement or a noun phrase complement or no complement. (Compare the verb *know*, which takes a clause complement in *I know he's reliable*, a noun phrase complement in *I know him*, and no complement in *I know.*) There is not a single dictionary that follows this policy.

That's all I'll say on grammar, because I have another topic to touch on before I close, one that is closer to the trade in which UA writing professionals engage.

Nerdview

Summing up what I've been saying so far, I think that for the most part we would do better to trust professional writers than amateur grammar experts. Professional writers generally have their syntax just about right. Their errors of grammar are vastly exaggerated, and the erudition of the amateur grammarians who serve as their copy editors has been vastly overestimated. But I now want to point to an example of a domain where user assistance professionals could benefit from advice on something much more likely to afflict their prose than ungrammaticality, and even more likely than ambiguity.

In a recent Language Log post (http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=276) I called the phenomenon **nerdview**. (I don't mean to put down expert computer professionals, by the way; I am proud to be a fanatical Unix enthusiast. But I want a short word for a closed-in expert who sees things differently, and the word *nerd* serves the purpose very neatly. *Nerdview* will do, I think, as a one-word shorthand.)

The case I discussed there involved an error message on a poorly designed and unfriendly car rental reservation web page. It required the date to be typed by the user in a text box, but only one very strict format was accepted. If any kind of erroneous date string were typed, such as 091908 (no separators), or 09/19/08 (American month-day syntax), or 19/09/08 (two-digit year), or yesterday's date (not a possible pickup date), it said this:

(21) Please select a valid pick up date (DD/MM/YYYY) greater than today.

Greater than today? That might make sense if you were thinking in Unix, where the present time is an integer denoting the number of seconds that have elapsed in the current time zone since midnight on January 1, 1970. But surely we don't normally think of one date as being greater than another. That's a programmer's nerdview. So on top of the unfriendliness of insisting on a certain date syntax without saying what the rules are up front, the page used a bafflingly abstract and technical arithmetical relation on dates that hardly any end user would find natural.

A commenter on Language Log suggested to me that there was a connection to the principle called 'the Curse of Knowledge' in the book by Chip and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. They introduce the Curse of Knowledge thus:

(22) People tend to think that having a great idea is enough, and they think the communication part will come naturally. We are in deep denial about the difficulty of getting a thought out of our own heads and into the heads of others. It's just not true that, "If you think it, it will stick."
And that brings us to the villain of our book: The Curse of Knowledge. Lots of research in economics and psychology shows that when we know something, it becomes hard for us to imagine not knowing it. As a result, we become lousy communicators. Think of a lawyer who can't give you a straight, comprehensible answer to a legal question. His vast knowledge and experience renders him unable to fathom how little you know. So when he talks to you, he talks in abstractions that you can't follow. And we're all like the lawyer in our own domain of expertise.
Here's the great cruelty of the Curse of Knowledge: The better we get at generating great ideas—new insights and novel solutions—in our field of expertise, the more unnatural it becomes for us to communicate those ideas clearly. That's why knowledge is a curse. But notice we said "unnatural," not "impossible." Experts just need to devote a little time to applying the basic principles of stickiness.
JFK dodged the Curse [by using the phrase "put a man on the moon in a decade"]. If he'd been a modern-day politician or CEO, he'd probably have said, "Our mission is to become the international leader in the space industry, using our capacity for technological innovation to build a bridge towards humanity's future." That might have set a moon walk back fifteen years.

There's some insight here regarding the simple observation that a simple and memorable phrase works better than a convoluted and obscure sentence full of abstractions. But it doesn't quite make the point that I'm after. When Noam Chomsky writes a sentence like this

(23) The rise of supranational corporations poses new dangers for human freedom.

(it's just a remark he makes in passing in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* as an arbitrary example of an utterance one might make), he's certainly speaking in abstractions; and one could imagine that if one were writing a speech for Sarah Palin to deliver one might rephrase it entirely in words of one syllable. Doing that is quite a nice little exercise, incidentally, if you interpret "words of one syllable" strictly. I tried it, and it took a few minutes, but eventually I came up with this:

(24) We must make sure these big firms that sell things all round the world don't tie our hands and take our cash.

But there's no nerdview here. Nerdview isn't just a matter of adopting not just abstract or technical vocabulary. It's about taking a baffling, internal, technical-perspective viewpoint that the hearer or reader does not and could not have.

A commenter called 'brad' writing on the blog **37 Signals**, where the above passage from *Made to Stick* was quoted (http://www.37signals.com/svn/posts/213-the-curse-of-knowledge), got a bit closer to what I'm thinking of:

(25) I think it boils down to this: some people can put themselves in the shoes of a beginner or non-expert, and some people can't. I don't think there's any generic "curse of knowledge" but rather an inability

> among many people to communicate their knowledge effectively to a range of audiences. The best communicators and educators know how to do this instinctively, and don't assume any previous knowledge on the part of their audiences or students.

That gets near the heart of the matter. The nerdview problem relates to being able to see, in some sense, the epistemic state of the typical hearer or reader, who I'll call the interlocutor. But the illustrations that follow are about people trying to teach poker to a complete beginner at cards and using terms like 'three of a kind' or 'full house' without realising that those terms live entirely inside the poker world. That's just a failure to appreciate the interlocutor's limitations of vocabulary.

The case of nerdview that I was discussing when I originally coined the term isn't much better. It really only involved an inappropriate intrusion of mathematical or programming vocabulary into what was presented to the user.

I described another case in a Language Log post called 'Per bus per journey' (see http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/005438.html), but it's a bit subtle. It involves a sign on a bus saying that the limit on pushchairs was one per bus per journey; but that's from the perspective of a driver or inspector, who considers the whole sequence of bus/trip pairs that makes up a day's drive. From the passenger's perspective, it's just one pushchair per bus.

Another probable case was the one that involved a shuttle bus that did a loop round the campus of the University of California, Santa Cruz. The route was even called 'The Loop', and the buses bore a sign saying that. Some of the buses did the loop one way round and some went in the other direction. And on the buses was a sign warning cyclists that the crucial bike racks on the fronts of the buses are found "only on westbound Loop shuttles." But which shuttle is westbound when both directions involve complete circular routes around the campus, and thus each direction must be going northward at some point, westward at some point, eastward at some point, and southward at some point? The campus transportation office clearly had an in-house perspective that made one direction or the other appropriate to call westward — say, the one that had the buses going westward on the part of the route that was most central, or most travelled, or closest to the bus terminus. But the passengers couldn't tell. For them, the sign was strictly meaningless. That's nerdview.

The best case I know of so far is one that really does involve user assistance literature, so it is up your alley. It involved the documentation regarding the error message that showed on the LED screen on the Combi boiler in my Edinburgh flat at certain times when it shut down and refused to function. The error message was '`E02`'. And here is what the owner's reference manual said to document this error code:

(26)

E02	Pump protect (display after 40s)

That was it. That was all we had to go on to figure out why the hell we had no hot water and no central heating for the night. We had emergency plumbers come out three different evenings to fiddle with the boiler and try to make it go, and amazingly they couldn't make out anything from the documentation either; they just worked by trial and error.

What it meant, we figured out after some weeks and several plumbers' visits, was this. If the pressure of the water in the system as a whole falls to below a certain safe level, the pump that sends it around the heating system could race and perhaps damage itself, so in order to protect it the system will shut itself off when the pressure falls to something below about 0.8 bar, and after the pump has been shut down for 40 seconds the error code 'E02' will be displayed.

'Pump protect' was (I'm guessing, but surely I'm right) an engineer's shorthand way of talking about the signal that needed to be issued in the race-preventing shutdown situation to make clear what had happened; and 'display after 40s' was apparently a memo from the engineer to other engineers regarding how the system was designed, and when this message would be displayed. Simply turning a tiny tap to put extra water in the system, something we could easily do, was all that was needed to put things right, but the documentation didn't even hint at that.

The engineers and their technical user-assistance writers let us down. They forgot to write anything that would explain to Barbara and me what the trouble was. Their explanation was for their own private notes. It took their perspective.

That's nerdview. It's a particularly clear and disastrous case of it. You probably write fairly good English. But have you ever written nerdview? Barbara and I spent some cold evenings because of it. Don't do that.

Answer to the exercise

The answer to the exercise that I promised above is that the writers using singular *they* in (14) were: (a) William Shakespeare; (b) Lord Byron; (c) Oscar Wilde; (d) Anthony Trollope. Not exactly a bunch of slouches, grammatically speaking.