Adventures in the Advice Trade
Dangling modifiers
Arnold M. Zwicky – SHC – 11/2/05

0. A rogues' gallery of examples:

Einstein's discoveries made him famous.
Only twenty people came to the rally.
She called last night to considerately check up on me.
Under no circumstances would I consider accepting this position.
Which parent does Kim take after?
I'm smarter than them.
Once you've signed your name, stop writing.
... a date which will live in infamy.
As a parent, my concern is for the children.
Growing up, she was a real hero of mine.

[If you object to EVERY example on this list, see me about getting help.]

1. Advice literature on English grammar and usage: flourishing from 18th century on, modern period beginning with H. W. Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) (prefigured by H. W. Fowler & F. G. Fowler, *The King's English* (1st ed. 1906)); intended to be comprehensive, organized in dictionary format (and so "fixing" usage in much the same way that pronunciation and the lexicon had been "fixed" by earlier authorities)

2.   The high-end advice literature, from Fowler through Garner
        Manuals for college students (like Lunsford & Collins) and professionals (like the
                Microsoft Manual and the *Chicago Manual of Style*)
        Manuals for the less practiced (elementary and secondary school texts, test
                preparation materials)
        The complaint literature (Milroy & Milroy's term -- e.g. Cochrane, Fiske)

(Parallels to other types of advice literature – on diet, exercise, child-rearing, sex and relationships, etc.)

3. Authors: classicists (Fowler), lawyers (Garner), journalists and editors (lots of them), literary scholars and critics, writers (of essays, fiction, poetry), English teachers (at all levels), technical writers, lexicographers, translators,...

4. Candidates for advice:

4.1. Threats ("from below") to established general formal standard written English: innovative features (or those perceived to be innovative), features from non-standard vernaculars, geographically restricted features, features from informal varieties, and features from the spoken language. Strategy: proscribe them all, in favor of corresponding egfswE alternatives! (The strategy increases uniformity at the expense of variety.)

4.2. Choosing among alternative expressions, on the basis of values like grace, logic, clarity, and brevity. Strategy: either proscribe one alternative entirely –

> Do not use the preposition *under* with the object noun *circumstances*; use *in* instead.
> Do not use *once* as a subordinator; use *after*, *when*, or *as soon as* instead.
> Do not use a possessive as an antecedent for a personal pronoun; use the alternative with *of* instead of the possessive (*The discoveries of Einstein made him famous*), or use cataphora (*His discoveries made Einstein famous*), or repeat the noun instead of using a pronoun (*Einstein's discoveries made Einstein famous*). Or, of course, reword completely (e.g., *Einstein was made famous by his discoveries*)

or stipulate a rule that will dictate the choice of alternative by context –

> Do not use *which* as a marker in restrictive relative clauses; use *that* instead (*a date that will live in infamy*), and reserve *which* for non-restrictive relatives (*this date, which will live in infamy*).
> Do not use *people* as the plural of *person*, with quantity modifiers; use *persons* instead (*only twenty persons*, *several persons*) and reserve *people* for collective uses (*People are funny*).

(Again, these strategies increase uniformity at the expense of variety, by eliminating stylistic choices.)

4.3. Expressions that are likely to induce difficulties in comprehension by hearers/readers. Strategy: supply a fix for each class of problem. For example, for a "dangling modifier":

> Do not separate modifiers from the expressions they modify (*Served with the most marvelous risotto of velvety smooth rice and artichokes, I savored every bite* – restaurant reviewer Josie Cowden, Santa Cruz *Good Times*, 9/28/02); reword so as to make the two expressions adjacent (e.g., *Served with the most marvelous risotto of velvety smooth rice and artichokes, the dish was savory in its every bite*) or reword completely (e.g., *I savored every bite of the dish, which was served with the most....*)

5. Sources of proscriptions: carry-over from grammar of Latin and/or Greek; sheer invention (e.g. Dryden on "preposition at end"); attempts to repair clunky prose; fashions in proscription (e.g. over speaker-oriented *hopefully*, *literally* 'very much, really'); diffusion from one manual to another (resulting in "zombie rules" that never really die, even when they are explicitly disavowed by the high-end advice writers). In any case, each proscription has its own history (which is sometimes different in the U.K. and the U.S.), and the choice of targets for proscriptions is often baffling (why pick on *hopefully*, but not *frankly* or *clearly*? why pick on *literally* and not *really*? why start picking on *under... circumstances* in the early 20th century, when it had been frequent for centuries?).

Our case in point, dangling modifiers: around at least since Chaucer, reasonably common in 18th and 19th centuries, become a target for proscription in the late 19th century.

6.1. Hardening of proscriptions, stage 1: the offending examples are not merely infelicitous, but UNGRAMMATICAL, not English. Hardening of proscriptions, stage 2: the offending configuration is NECESSARILY ungrammatical, not available in any language, because it violates fundamental (and universal) principles of grammar or logic. For example, the risotto sentence violates the following rule:

> Subject Rule: In English, a modifier of type X [still to be specified] must modify the nearest noun expression, which in fact immediately follows it and is the subject of the main clause.

(In stage 2, the Subject Rule is taken to be a constraint on all languages. It's God's Truth.)

6.2. First stab at delineating a modifier of type X: a sentence-initial sentence adverbial (that is, an expression that modifies a whole sentence) that is loosely associated prosodically with the main clause that follows it, and that provides a semantic predicate but no semantic subject for that predicate and so must be interpreted with respect to some referent in the discourse context. The Subject Rule says that this discourse referent is always supplied by the subject of the following main clause.

Prepositional examples:
> **At** the age of 10, <u>Uma</u> took up softball.
> **As** a parent, <u>Kim</u> is concerned about education.
> **Like** most children, <u>Opal</u> loves ice cream.
> **With** no other option, <u>the boys</u> jumped off the cliff.

Participial examples:
> **Seeing** <u>no other option</u>, <u>the boys</u> jumped off the cliff. **ING**
> **Pursued** <u>by wolves</u>, <u>my friend Terry</u> became desperate. **EN**
> While **shaving** <u>himself</u>, <u>Tom</u> gashed his chin badly. **ING**
> If **confronted** <u>by a mountain lion</u>, <u>you</u> should make a lot of noise. **EN**

6.3. Classic danglers do in fact violate this rule:

> Jennifer Lopez stars as Marisa, a maid in a fancy New York City Hotel. <u>While trying on a wealthy woman's dress</u>, a handsome and rich politican mistakes <u>her</u> for a society woman.
> [The writer is describing his bad-boy time on the streets, in jails, etc. Here, it's the Visalia County (CA) Jail] <u>After more than a month in jail</u>, <u>my</u> mother posted bond, bless her soul. ["Speaker-oriented" interpretation of the missing subject.]
> The jailing of Pauline Hanson and David Etridge for dishonesty represents a double standard. <u>While inexcusable</u>, other politicians lie and cheat on a daily basis. ["Summative" interpretation of the missing subject: 'the daily lying and cheating of other politicians']

[A child abduction report, beginning with a description of the car involved and its license plate number, followed by:] <u>If seen</u>, contact Richmond police at... [Discourse referent supplied in preceding context.]

[News story about three-month-old twins found mysteriously dead in their cribs, after a paragraph about the grieving parents] <u>After speaking to police for several hours</u>, the boys' deaths are still a mystery. [Discourse referent in preceding context.]

7. Problems with concepts and terminology: largely from "traditional grammar" (descended from concepts and terminology for Latin and Greek grammar, and taken to have been fixed for all time long ago), and by no means adequate for English – and, in addition, not always correctly deployed by writers on usage.

8.1. AZ, 8/5/05: Tossing technical terms around:
 http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002380.html

Rachel Carson in *Under the Sea Wind*: "As long as the tide ebbed, eels were leaving the marshes and running out to sea..."

William Howarth's critique, in his "Turning the Tide: How Rachel Carson became a woman of letters" (*The American Scholar*, Summer 2005, p. 46), begins:

The flaws that a copy editor might challenge here--**passive gerund** ("were leaving ... and running"),...

8.2. Mark Liberman, 8/6/05: A field guide to grammar:
 http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/002381.html

I swear, I'm not one of those people who thinks that Western Civilization is entering its Last Days. At least, not in general. I've defended modern students, writers and others from Camille Paglia's charge that "interest in and patience with long, complex books and poems have alarmingly diminished not only among college students but college faculty in the U.S.". I've defended email and cellphone usage against shoddy pseudoscientific indictments. But there are a few areas where I'll agree that civilization has indeed been overwhelmed. In particular, when it comes to elementary usage of linguistic terminology, intellectuals have joined the general population in untroubled ignorance, and even the sacred groves of academe have been clear cut, strip mined and used as a landfill.

Here at Language Log, we've noted example after example of this. Arnold Zwicky documented another one yesterday, and it's a doozy. William Howarth, writing about Rachel Carson in *The American Scholar*, mis-identified progressive verbs ("eels were leaving the marshes") as "passive gerunds". The walls of the city have fallen, and some Visigothic looter, swilling cognac, complains to his companions that the scotch tastes funny. But this is not a kid sounding off on his blog, or even a journalist mis-using terminology that he doesn't care to check: William Howarth is a professor of English at Princeton University, and *The American Scholar* is the "literary and intellectual quarterly" of the Phi Beta Kappa society...

8.3. Richard Lederer on "dangling participles" [appendix to this handout]: only five of the fifteen examples even involve participles, and only one of those is in violation of the Subject Rule. On the other hand, it's a genuinely infelicitous example:

(10) <u>Aided by a thousand eyes</u>, the author explains how <u>ants</u> navigate and how they use their dead reckoning.

[From NPR: "Richard Lederer from NPR member station KPBS, is a critically acclaimed author, speaker and journalist who specializes in grammar and the English language." From KPBS: "Richard Lederer is the author of more than 3000 books and articles about language and humor, including his best-selling Anguished English series." From Lederer's own Verbivore site, a reference to "a position at St. Paul's School, in Concord, NH, where I taught English and media for 27 wonderful years."]

8.4. Lederer's examples mostly involve "attachment problems", where in a sequence
        Phrase1 Phrase2,
Phrase2 is supposed to be understood as modifying some element E preceding Phrase1, but can instead be understood as modifying Phrase1 or some part of it; that is, Phrase2 "attaches to" an element that's nearer to it than E:

(13) Hunting can also be dangerous, as in the case of
        pygmies hunting elephants armed only with spears.

Both Phrase1 (*hunting elephants*) and Phrase2 (*armed only with spears*) are supposed to modify the noun expression *pygmies* (E), but Phrase2 tends to attach itself to the nearer noun expression *elephants*. Note that the advice to move things close to what they modify is not at all helpful here.

In any case, a very different phenomenon from classic danglers.

And there are still other types of examples, for example sentence-final summative participles (where some writers would use summative non-restrictive relatives), which are often very hard to process:

> For instance, the courthouse in Orleans Parish is flooded, destroying thousands of files...
>   [...., which (has) destroyed thousands of files...]
> Science plays an increasingly significant role in people's lives, making the faithful communication of scientific developments more important than ever.
>   [..., which makes the faithful communication...]
> PG&E's business and agricultural customers aren't facing as severe a price shock [as its residential customers], leaving their electricity rates slightly below the peaks reached in mid-2001. [..., which leaves their electricity rates...]

8.5. One consequence of the manuals' unclarity on concepts and terminology is that "rules" are typically stated in a concise and abstract fashion, in a form few users can even understand. The burden of communicating the content of the "rules" then falls on the examples that illustrate them; the user has to try to extrapolate from these few examples.

8.6. The advisers are generally unclear about the scope of their proscriptions, falling back (unhelpfully) on the *Sprachgefühl* of their readers: Texas Law Review (2005, p. 49): "Avoid splitting infinitives except when necessary to improve clarity or preserve the rhythm of the sentence." (Just above this, the TLR manual advises: "Be careful to properly place adverbs to achieve the desired effect.")

9. What's the relationship between the modifier, the missing subject (the TARGET), and the expression, if any, that supplies the target's interpretation (THE CONTROLLER)? The advice literature assumes that the modifier modifies the controller, but the modern literature on syntax and semantics (Stump 1985, Kortmann 1991) pretty much uniformly assumes that the modifier modifies the whole main clause and that the relationship between target and controller is a kind of anaphora (a species of "zero anaphora"). Modifiers of type X are then quite parallel to similar modifiers with overt subjects in them, and in fact they have very similar semantics (having to do with accompanying circumstances of various types):

> The champagne having been opened, the party began in earnest.
> Sweat pouring down his face, the agent contemplated the bomb.
> With Kim in charge, we're bound to succeed.
> If you are pursued by a mountain lion, you should make a lot of noise.

10.1. First complication. There are prepositions that look like participles, but have no understood subject. From Huddleston & Pullum (2002:610):

> **Barring** accidents, they should be back today.
> There are five of them, **counting**/**including** the driver.
> **Pertaining** to the contract negotiations, there is nothing to report.
> **Given** his age, a shorter prison sentence is appropriate.

10.2. Second complication. There are participial modifiers that would appear to violate the Subject Rule but seem to have become idioms, and are generally regarded as acceptable, even by sticklers. Their understood subject is "roughly recoverable from context as the speaker or the speaker and addressees together" (H&P, 611); they serve as devices for managing the thread of discourse. From H&P:

> Turning now to sales, there are very optimistic signs.
> Bearing in mind the competitive environment, this is a creditable result.
> Having said that, it must be admitted that the new plan also has advantages.

The line between these and the next set is none too clear.

10.3. Third complication. The world is full of examples that violate the Subject Rule but would be objected to only by people who have been taught the rule and have taken it utterly to heart:

> As a linguist, what struck me especially about his work on meaning in natural language
>   was his belief that...
> As a mathematician, people often ask me...
> As first assistant, the company was placed in my charge, a heavy responsibility I
>   would like to have had placed on someone else.
> As a screenwriter, I guess you know why I have to ask.
> By inserting just one gene, our food can grow bigger. [Generic control.]
> When addressing invitations to a husband and wife whose name is supposed to go first?
>   [Generic control.]

Having decided on the Turing machine as the basic computing device for the theory, the idea is to measure the efficiency of an algorithm by the number of steps (i.e., Turing-machine steps) taken to complete the calculation. [Inclusive 1st plural.]

By choosing to smoothe out her style, we find that Kim is also...

Like other Californians who died during the year, Chuck Jones's accomplishments will be... [Query: is *Chuck Jones* the nearest noun expression, or is *Chuck Jones's accomplishments*?]

This text is part of the internal format of your mail folder, and is not a real message. It is created automatically by the mail system software. If deleted, important folder data will be lost, and it will be re-created with the data reset to initial values. [Control from preceding context.]

The woman reached up and brushed back her hair again. With her sandy blond hair and old ivory skin, Blanche had thought the woman was white...

11. Gray-area cases:

In a series of experiments, chimpanzees, gorillas, and monkeys were set up to see if they had a concept of self. A mirror was placed in their cages and they were allowed to get used to the figure in the mirror. Then while asleep, researchers painted a bright red spot on the forehead of each animal... [Really, control from preceding context.]

I was at a university lecturer's hall, signing books at the back of an auditorium. He came up to me at the very end: the end of a glorious night, a crowd of five hundred readers, and about the same number of autographs on both breasts and books. While on my ninth glass of iced tea, he walked up to the table. [Speaker control.]

[Footnote from a draft of a qualifying paper (on the acquisition of English polar interrogatives). The footnote is attached to a display of RPIs (reduced polar interrogatives) from the child Sarah in Roger Brown's data.] Although unrelated, I also included in this excerpt the previous adult RPI[s] to caution readers against judging the child's performance too harshly.

12. What's going on? Control is by some referent that is highly topical, salient, or foregrounded in the discourse – what the discourse is "about" at this point. [Dwight Bolinger, writing contra Jacques Barzun, got this right 25 years ago.] The speaker is usually a salient discourse referent, and the addressee often is too (so the combination of the two – inclusive 1st person -- is likely to be as well). Generalizations are "about" people in general, so in generalizing discourses, a generic controller is going to be ok. If there's enough support in the context, other participants may be highly salient as well.

Rather than a Subject Rule, a Topic Rule.

Connection to subjects: high degree of association between subjecthood and topicality in English. So the Subject Rule often picks out the right controller, but for the wrong reason.

Still, there are irredeemable cases – the risotto sentence, the Jennifer Lopez sentence, Lederer's ant sentence, the crib death sentence, and some even worse than these – that the Danglers Group (Huddleston, Pullum, Chris Potts at UMass-Amherst, and me) still don't understand. There may yet be some life in a version of the Subject Rule, properly understood.

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