

LanguageLog

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An internet pilgrim's guide to stranded prepositions

In linking to Eddie V. O.'s discussion of Spanglish at Romanika, I **wondered** whether there is any Spanish parallel to Ruth King's finding of preposition-stranding in (some varieties of) Canadian French, and also told a story about a "traditional folk remedy" called *bibaparú*, which turned out to be Vicks Vapor-Rub. Eddie has **responded** with some additional information on both points.

I was going to comment further on Eddie's examples of clause-final prepositions in Mexican Spanish, which are not instances of preposition stranding (as he points out), but might be a related phenomenon. However, I realized that many readers may not be clear about what this terminology really means. And never mind interesting innovations in North American French and Spanish -- everyone who writes English needs to understand what "preposition stranding" is, if only for self-defense against misguided copy editors. So here goes.

"Preposition stranding" refers to cases where the object of a preposition has apparently "moved" to some other location in the sentence, leaving the preposition "stranded". It's easy to google up some examples:

1. I am grateful to **the women** I have spoken **to** [] since the operation
2. Her father had **a similar problem** that he simply lived **with** [].
3. My great-grandfather was a collector of **comics and baseball cards**, which we used to fight **over** [].
4. **Where** does bacon come **from** []?
5. **Which analysts** is he talking **about** []?

These examples are relative clauses or questions where a questioned word or the head of a relative clause is implicitly related to a sort of "silent pronoun" (indicated by open square brackets in the examples above) following a preposition that has been "stranded" in its expected place in the clause.

[Note that preposition stranding occurs in other constructions as well, such as passives: "**The region** was fought **over** [] by Sweden and Russia for centuries"; and "hollow clauses": "**The customer service department** was difficult to deal **with** []".]

In the relative clauses and questions, an alternative would be to "move" the preposition to be adjacent to the fronted question word or relative pronoun. Here are the same five examples with fronted prepositions -- note that the relative pronoun (here *whom* or *which*) might have to be added, since it may otherwise be omitted:

- 1a. I am grateful to the women to whom I have spoken [] since the operation
- 2a. ?Her father had a similar problem with which he simply lived [].
- 3a. ?My great-grandfather was a collector of comics and baseball cards, over which we used to fight [].
- 4a. From where does bacon come []?
- 5a. About which analysts is he talking []?

Haj Ross named this process "pied piping", conjuring an image of the wh-word luring the preposition out of its original position, just as the Pied Piper lured the rats and children out of Hamelin. Preposition-stranding is scorned by **some prescriptivists**, even though it has been used by well-respected writers for centuries.

In fact, in random examples like those above, pied piping is often awkward and pretentious-sounding. In cases like (2a) and (3a), where the preposition is closely associated with the verb, pied piping is particularly inappropriate. The [Cambridge Grammar of the English Language](#) (CGEL) goes as far as to suggest that preposition-fronting is ungrammatical when the preposition is specified by the verb (p. 275), as in *"*the letters across which I came"*. However, fronted examples sometimes occur in apparently competent writing:

([link](#)) *The Battle over Citizen Kane* also sheds light on the masterpiece over which they fought...
([link](#)) That the tribunal censored only a tiny percentage of publications, for example, may not have mitigated the fear of reprisal with which authors had to live.

These sentences may have been created by misguided [copy-editors](#), some of whom go after stranded prepositions like kittens after cockroaches. It seems to me that preposition-stranded alternatives would have been better in the cited cases:

The Battle over Citizen Kane also sheds light on the masterpiece that they fought over...
That the tribunal censored only a tiny percentage of publications, for example, may not have mitigated the fear of reprisal that authors had to live with.

Of course, there are plenty of examples, both traditional and recent, where a stranded variant would be a step down:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow. (*from a hymn by Thomas Ken*)
A Closer Look At The Case From Which Justice Scalia Has Refused To Recuse Himself. (*title of a FindLaw column*)
Often plagued by mediocre scripts, over which she fought some spectacular legal battles with Warner Brothers studio, Davis nonetheless turned in performances of the highest caliber... (*from a Britannica article on Bette Davis*)

According to CGEL (p. 627), "this 'rule' was apparently created *ex nihilo* in 1672 by the essayist John Dryden, who took exception to Ben Jonson's phrase *the bodies that those souls were frightened from* (1611). Dryden was in effect suggesting that Jonson should have written *the bodies from which those souls were frightened*, but he offers no reason for preferring this to the original."

It's a shame that [Jonson](#) had been dead for 35 years at the time, since he would otherwise have challenged [Dryden](#) to a duel, and saved subsequent generations a lot of grief. As CGEL explains (footnotes omitted):

There has been a long prescriptive tradition of condemning preposition stranding as grammatically incorrect. Stranded prepositions often, but by no means always, occur at the end of a sentence, and the prescriptive rule is best known in the formulation: 'It is incorrect to end a sentence with a preposition.' The rule is so familiar as to be the butt of jokes, and is widely recognised as completely at variance with actual usage. The construction has been used for centuries by the finest writers. Everyone who listens to Standard English hears examples of it every day.

Instead of being dismissed as unsupported foolishness, the unwarranted rule against stranding was repeated in prestigious grammars towards the end of the eighteenth century, and the from the nineteenth century on it was widely taught in schools. The result is that older people with traditional educations and outlooks still tend to believe that stranding is always some kind of mistake. It is not. All modern usage manuals, even the sternest and stuffiest, agree with descriptive and theoretical linguists on this: it would be an absurdity to hold that someone who says *What are you looking at?* or *What are you talking about?* or *Put this back where you got it from* is not using English in a correct and normal way.

In this case, the artificial strictures of prescriptivists have apparently had a significant effect on the history of the language, partially reversing the historical loss of pied-piping in written English:

"In the course of their history, English *wh*-relatives are known to have undergone a syntactic change in their prepositional usage: having originally occurred only with pied-piped prepositions, they came to admit preposition stranding as an alternative pattern. The present article presents an overview of this process, showing a modest beginning of stranding in Late Middle English, an increase in Early Modern English, and then a clear decrease in the written language of today, against a more liberal use in spoken English, standard as well as nonstandard. The drop in the incidence of stranding is thus not an expression of a genuine grammatical change but due to notions of correctness derived from the grammar of Latin and affecting written usage. [Gunnar Bergh, Aimo Seppänen. "Preposition Stranding With *Wh*-Relatives: A Historical Survey". *English Language and Linguistics*, v. 4 no. 2 (2000).]"

By the way, here's the passage from Ben Jonson that is said to have started the whole silly thing off. It's from *Catiline his conspiracy: A Tragoedie*, which LION dates at 1616. The passage is part of a hyperbolic description of the slaughter that took place at the end of the Roman civil war in 82 B.C., when the forces of Sulla (aka Sylla) captured Rome.

Cethegvs:

The rugged Charon fainted,
And ask'd a nauy, rather then a boate,
To ferry ouer the sad world that came:
The mawes, and dens of beasts could not receiue
The bodies, that those soules were frighted from;
And e'en the graues were filld with men, yet liuing,
Whose flight, and feare had mix'd them, with the dead.

I haven't been able to locate Dryden's critique yet.

In his 1668 essay *Of Dramatick Poesy*, Dryden discusses Jonson many times, including this somewhat left-handed compliment in the course of a recommendation of classical literature

In the mean time I must desire you to take notice, that the greatest man of the last age (Ben. Johnson) was willing to give place to them in all things: He was not onely a professed Imitator of Horace, but a learned Plagiary of all the others, you track him every where in their Snow: If Horace, Lucan, Petronius, Arbiter, Seneca, and Juvenal, had their own from him, there are few serious thoughts which are new in him; you will pardon me therefore if I presume he lov'd their fashion when he wore their cloaths. But since I have otherwise a great veneration for him, and you, Eugenius, prefer him above all other Poets, I will use no farther argument to you then his example: I will produce Father Ben, to you, dress'd in all the ornaments and colours of the Ancients, you will need no other guide to our Party if you follow him; and whether you consider the bad Plays of our Age, or regard the good ones of the last, both the best and worst of the Modern Poets will equally instruct you to esteem the Ancients.

As for those phrase-final prepositions in Canadian French and Mexican Spanish, I'll try to get back to them in a later post.

Posted by Mark Liberman at April 11, 2004 11:40 AM

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