

Prescriptivism and Usage – Spring 2004 – The Possessive Antecedent Proscription, Take 1

1. *Einstein's discoveries made him famous.* What's the problem (if any)?

From the 10/15/02 PSAT exam:

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

A. Mistake within the words *her to create*. B... E. No error.

*New York Times* story of 5/15/03, "College Board Corrects Itself On Test Score"

2. The Instructional Paradox: The only people who report a problem with such sentences are those who've been taught a "rule" about antecedents for pronouns.

3. How is the proscription formulated?

A pronoun cannot have a possessive as its antecedent.

Lunsford, Andrea & Robert Connors. 2001. *The new St. Martin's handbook*. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's.

p. 216: "Though an adjective or possessive may clearly imply a noun antecedent, it does not serve as a clear antecedent."

4. Conceptual and terminological issues: *pronoun, possessive, antecedent, adjective*; plus *anaphor(ic)* and others to come

5. Who sez? Not the great scholarly grammars of English, in the Jespersen tradition:

from

Jespersen, Otto. 1909-49. *A modern English grammar on historical principles*. [In 7 volumes.] London: Allen & Unwin.

to

Quirk, Randolph; Sidney Greenbaum; Geoffrey Leech; & Jan Svartvik. 1985. *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.

Huddleston, Rodney & Geoffrey K. Pullum. 2002. *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Not the great prescriptivist dictionaries, in the Fowler tradition:

from

Fowler, H.W. 1926. *A dictionary of modern English usage*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

to

Garner, Bryan A. 1998. *A dictionary of modern American usage*. NY: Oxford Univ. Press.

- 2003. *Garner's modern American usage*. [2nd ed. of Garner 1998] NY: Oxford Univ. Press.

The PAP appears in (a minority) of usage manuals and handbooks and test preparation booklets.

The first discussion I've been able to find is (ultimately) from 1941, in:

Opdycke. John B. 1965. Harper's English grammar. 2nd ed., rev. by Stewart H. Benedict. [1st ed. 1941] NY: Harper & Row. [NY: Warner Books, 1983]

6. *Why* are possessive antecedents a problem? The usual problem is social or stylistic, but that's not relevant here. People tell you that possessive antecedents are "unclear".

7. The Say/Do Paradox: Everybody who advocates the PAP violates it in their own writing.

Lunsford & Collins. p. 29: "...all create sensations of speed and urgency in readers' minds, making them expect to be able to process and respond to messages quickly."

8. Sentences judged out of context. Why, when we're talking about effective writing?

9. Appeal to a theoretical principle: Possessives are adjectives, and adjectives aren't referring expressions.

Two issues: (a) possessives as adjectives; (b) the nature of anaphora.

10. Apparent original motivation was to improve student writing, by avoiding awkwardness:

*In Morrison's book, she claims that...*

or ambiguity:

*Mary's mother thinks that she is a genius.*

Just Say No: If it's sometimes inappropriate, it's always unacceptable.

Good intentions gone awry.

11. Passion surrounding these issues.

Louis Menand, Books column ("The End Matter: The nightmare of citation") reviewing the 15th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, in *The New Yorker* of 10/6/03, pp. 120-6. On p. 124:

... common sources of solecism receive less attention than they might. The College Board would still not have avoided the mistake it made on a recent P.S.A.T. exam, where it replaced the phrase "Toni Morrison's genius" with "her," if it had consulted the Chicago discussion of pronouns and antecedents.