Toni Morrison's genius puts her in the grammar/usage spotlight
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1. ***Toni Morrison****'s genius enables **he**r to create novels that arise from and express the injustice African Americans have endured.*   [from a PSAT exam, 10/15/02]

2. *****Mary****'s father admires **her**.*

2.1. Most native speakers of English, presented with this sentence, don't see any problem. Yet a few of them immediately label it as "bad grammar", explaining that a possessive can't serve as the antecedent for a pronoun.

2.2. A purported constraint on English sentences: the Possessive Antecedent Proscription (PAP) (Bernstein (1971), Bolinger (1980), MWDEU (1989)).

2.3. It turns out that the people who reject the example were all explicitly taught this proscription, and the people who accept it have no recollection of any such instruction. It further turns out that, in my experience so far, *everyone* who cites the "rule" violates it, repeatedly, in their own writing. This is an odd state of affairs. Which gets even odder when we search through handbooks of English, usage dictionaries, and the like, only to discover that most of them (from Fowler to the recent Garner dictionaries) mention nothing like this proscription – but the ones that do mention it are often quite stern about their advice. Even more puzzlingly, different advisers formulate the proscription differently,* and not always very clearly. Meanwhile, the great reference grammars of English composed by linguists, from Jespersen (1909-49) to Huddleston & Pullum (2002), don't mention the topic at all.

How could this come to be?

3. Manuals of English grammar and usage try to do two things at once: describe (and enforce) the conventions of egfswe (established general formal standard written English) and give advice about how to write effective prose – how to choose from the alternatives available in egfswe, taking into account the audience and the writer's purposes. (In recent years, manuals also present the conventions of English grammar for speakers of other languages.)

These goals do not sit easily together. The effective-writing goal easily morphs into the egfswe-describing goal: pieces of practical advice are elevated into claims about egfswe, a process that is encouraged by a bottom-up view of writing that begins with isolated well-formed clauses and sentences.

4. PAP: the early years.

4.1. Proscriptive, rather than prescriptive, grammar. You start with the unacceptable –
ungrammatical or inept – and formulate principles that exclude it, and recommend
substitutes.

4.2. Advice about avoiding ambiguity:
> *Mary's mother thinks **she** is admirable.*
and hard-to-find antecedents:
> *In **Mary's** book, **she** celebrates penguins.*
in isolated sentences.   (Opdycke (1941), so far the earliest known citation of the PAP)

5. First observation. Many PAP sentences:
> *Mary's father admires **her**.*
present neither difficulty, and the difficulties vanish when discourse or real-world context
is supplied:
> *Mary's father is hypercritical of all his children, but **Mary's** mother thinks **she** is*
> *admirable.*
> *Bush's guest **Berlusconi** said **he** was pleased to be taken to the Texas ranch.*
Nevertheless, possessive-antecedent examples are labeled "ungrammatical".

5.1. As Bolinger (1980) observed in his critique of Barzun on the PAP, what's going on
in the hard-to-process examples has to do with the information structure of discourses.
Pronouns have to have discourse references that are sufficiently foregrounded (or
"topical"). Possessives are subordinate, that is, syntactically backgrounded. If they're in
modifiers (as in *in Mary's book*), they're further subordinated. And, ceteris paribus,
discourse foregrounding/backgrounding tends to follow syntactic
foregrounding/backgrounding. It's a subtle effect, but real.

6. Second observation: Elevating effective-writing advice (having to do with discourse
organization and information structure) to an absolute prohibition on sentence structure is
grammatical overkill. Violations of the PAP are frequent, even in the work of careful
practiced writers (including the authors of manuals that insist on the PAP), and they go
unnoticed.

6.1. Barron's test preparation manual (Ehrenhaft (1998)) really really means this
proscription. It cares about the PAP so much that of the 30 "Identifying Sentence Errors"
questions in each sample example, an average of one per exam is a PAP error.

But once Barron's gets into extended analysis of particular essays, in the section on "how
to write an essay in 20 minutes", the occasional possessive antecedent for a pronoun
appears:
> *Each of **Pat's** false starts consumed less than a minute of her prewriting time.*
> ***She** then realized that much of her knowledge of democracy was acquired in*
> *history courses. So, she decided...*   (p. 69)

*Sometimes a better thesis suddenly swims into **the writers**' view half way through the test. Should **they** change course or stick with what they have?* (p. 71)

6.2. Lunsford & Connors (1999:216), in their excellent handbook, refer to a "convention" for "maintaining clear pronoun references":

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

But back on p. 29, when they're giving advice, they write:

*...all create sensations of speed and urgency in **reader**s' minds, making **them** expect to be able to process and respond to messages quickly.*

6.3. Menand (2003) criticizes CMS15 for failing to mention the PAP. But Menand (2001) is jam-packed with violations like:

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

Other violations appear in the very first sentences of short stories by excellent writers:

*The question of whether old **Mrs. Ames**'s picture was really a Géricault or not didn't come up—or at least **she** hadn't realized that it had come up—until she had owned it for many years: until, in fact, she tried to sell it.* ("The *Griffe* of the Master", p. 90, in Steegmuller (1972))

7. In an auxiliary process, the conventions of egfswe are claimed to be *necessarily* true, on the basis of some generalization about logic or grammar. This view is encouraged by the assumption that grammar is *exterior* to individual speakers and social groups (Preston's *exteriority*), deriving instead from authorities (like laws) or by reasoning from first principles (like moral principles).

Some manuals claim that the PAP is necessarily true, reasoning that (a) possessives are not nouns, but adjectives or at least adjectivals, and (b) adjectivals cannot, by definition serve as antecedents for pronouns.

8. Third observation: Such appeals to external justification cannot stand in the face of countervailing practice by the best writers of egfswe, and, in any case, this particular appeal rests on a misunderstanding about the nature of syntactic categories and functions. Possessives are neither adjectives nor adjectivals, but NPs (a syntactic category) serving as determiners (a syntactic function). As NPs, they are perfectly good antecedents for pronouns. (In any case, pronouns *can* pick up their referents from "within" adjectives and adjectivals; the Anaphoric Island Constraint – *I have **Norwegian** friends, but I've never been **there*** – is no more a *syntactic* constraint than the PAP is; see Sproat & Ward (1987), Sproat (1988), Ward (1997).)

9. I am not attacking "prescriptivism" here; those who provide good advice about the facts of egfswe and about effective writing are performing an important public service. I am, however, attacking a particular mode of prescriptivism, which proceeds by (1) searching for errors and infelicities in sentences isolated from discourse or real-world

context; (2) formulating *rules of grammar* that proscribe the offending configurations; (3) disregarding the practice of the best writers of egfswe when it conflicts with these rules; and (4) providing external justifications for the rules.

[* PAP, core version (fitting everybody but Barzun): A (1) non-pronominal (2) prenominal possessive cannot serve as an antecedent for a (3) following (4) non-possessive (5) definite (6) third-person (7) non-reflexive (8) overt (9) pronoun.]

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