

— chapter one —

*Random monkeys
& mendacious
pontificating
old windbags*



[some (mostly false) claims about language]

*The disappearing modal:
for those who'll believe anything*

Happy Easter from *Language Log* to all our readers. And a quick Q&A reality check for those who could not believe their ears as they listened to NPR's *Weekend Edition Sunday* program this morning.

Q: Was there (perhaps I dreamed it) an interview with a retired Penguin Books editor called James Cochrane about a book called something like *Between You and I*?

listen to it here
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4562900>

A: Yes, there was. You can listen to it here. Cochrane was talking about his book *Between You and I: A Little Book of Bad English*.

Q: Did he really say (possibly my ears hadn't quite woken up) that the modal verb form *might* was being eliminated in favor of *may* and "has practically disappeared from the language"?

A: Yes, he really did say that.

Q: Presumably the word is almost gone from the World Wide Web, then. How many residual web pages are there on which this disappearing verb still appears?

A: According to Google's rough estimate, about 140,000,000. (Perhaps a few of those use the noun *might* meaning "power" but not the modal verb, but the noun isn't very common, so most of those will be uses of the modal.) Cochrane is alluding to a small change that has been creeping into some varieties of English for some time: *may* is being used in certain contexts where the preterite form of other verbs would occur: there is a well-established minority dialect that has "They feared they may get lost" for "They feared they might get lost" and so on. The topic is treated in pages 202–203 of *The Cambridge Grammar*. But those dialects still have

The Cambridge Grammar
Huddleston, Rodney and
Geoffrey K. Pullum. *The
Cambridge Grammar of the
English Language*. Cam-
bridge University Press,
2002.

might in numerous other contexts (like “I might be able to, if we’re lucky”). The word *might* isn’t dying out.

Q: Oh. Still there on a hundred and forty million web pages? That is quite a lot for a word that has “practically disappeared”. Is James Cochrane, then, nothing but a mendacious pontificating old windbag?

A: Yes, it would appear that he is an utter fraud.

Q: Why do people say these completely indefensible things about language that can be checked up on so easily?

A: Possibly because they know that with hardly anyone ever taking even one college course in linguistics, public awareness of the facts about language and languages ranges from the minimal to the derisory.

But for the most part it is a mystery why linguistic subject matter is treated so differently from other material in which science has been interested; it baffles all of us here at Language Log Plaza. Imagine if an amateur wrote a book on ecology (*How Now Brown Cow: A Little Book of Threatened Animals*) and said that mice have “practically become extinct” in America. Would the interviewer listen credulously and politely as the nutball pothered on, not even alluding to any evidence for the absurd claim?

Yet people can get away with saying just about anything about language. Only a week or two ago NPR had somebody on who declared that the Irish language has no word for sex, and he too was listened to politely and not challenged. Keep your hand on your wallet when people tell you things about language; they’re convinced you’ll believe absolutely anything, so they have little motive to stick to even a vague semblance of truth.

the Irish language has no word for sex
On March 12, 2005, NPR’s *Weekend Edition* broadcast a Scott Simon interview with novelist Frank Delaney, who claimed the Irish language has no word for sex. Irish language expert Jim McCloskey, when asked about it, was able to quickly name 11 different words in the Irish language for various kinds of sex and sexual activity, as chronicled on *Language Log* in “No word for sex” (<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/001979.html>).

posted by: 

They are a prophet

My student **Nick Reynolds** reports on a beautiful example of singular *they* found in an exchange of graffiti. Someone had scrawled this on the wall:

Vote Arnold 4 prez

—recommending a vote for Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger as President of the United States. Someone else, mindful perhaps of Schwarzenegger’s ineligibility for that post, had scrawled something obscene below it about the first writer’s ignorance. But a third person, mindful of how the future may resemble the world of the Terminator movies in which our governor had his greatest movie successes, added this response:

This person is not ignorant.

They are a prophet.

The machines will rule us.

There are a couple of beautiful things about this particular use of the form *they*.

The pronoun form *they* is anaphorically linked in the discourse to this person. Such use of forms of *they* with singular antecedents is attested in English over hundreds of years, in writers as significant as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Austen, and Wilde. The people (like the perennially clueless Strunk and White) who assert that such usage is “wrong” simply haven’t done their literary homework and don’t deserve our attention.

The sequence *they are* exhibits, of course, the syntactically correct plural verb agreement. The following phrase *a prophet* is a singular predicative NP complement. This is again quite correct; we see the same thing in *Anyone who claims they are a prophet should make sure they have some actual predictions to their credit*. In that case we use singular *they* because the antecedent is a quantified NP, and neither *he* nor *she* is appropriate: we intend to refer to anyone of either sex who claims to be a prophet. And to use *he* or *she* would be desperately clumsy (*Anyone who claims he or*

NP
noun phrase

she is a prophet should make sure he or she has some actual predictions to his or her credit—gack!).

A minor point of interest about Nick's example is that the antecedent ("This person") is a definite NP; singular *they* more commonly has quantified or indefinite NP antecedents, not definite ones.

But as Nick observes, the most interesting thing about his example is that the motivation for the use of singular *they* does not come from either indeterminacy of sex (as with antecedents like *anyone*) or ignorance about the sex of the referent (as in *If you have a partner, you can bring them too*), because *the inscription was on the wall of a men's bathroom*. Given the user population of such establishments, one can be entirely confident that the first writer was a male. That means the third writer could have put *He is a prophet*. But the fact is that singular *they* is becoming completely standard, at least among younger Americans, whenever the antecedent is of a sort that could in some contexts refer to either sex. I heard a radio piece about pregnant high-schoolers in which a girl said something like *I think if someone in my class was pregnant I would be sympathetic to them*. In such cases it's not the inability to assign sex to the referent that drives the selection of singular *they*, it's the mere fact of the antecedent being quantified or headed by a noun like *person* that can in other contexts be used of either sex. Mere inferred sex of the referent is not sufficient to force a choice of either *he* or *she*.



posted by: gkp

The blowing of Strunk and White's rules off

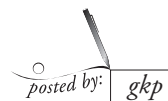
One additional word on Mark's bedtime reading ruminations, which are on their own a magnificent brief for the prosecution concerning the charges against E. B. White of being a linguistic hypocrite. One of

bedtime reading ruminations

In a *Language Log* post titled "The blowing of each other up" (<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/001904.html>), Mark Liberman writes about how E.B. White's own writing style departs from advice given in Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*.

the sternest strictures delivered in Strunk & White’s stupid little book is the prohibition on the use of adjectives and adverbs. Simply do not use them, they say: “Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs” (*The Elements of Style*, p. 71). Now, Mark happens to quote exactly 406 words from the book of White’s essays that he fell asleep over. I have been over those 406 words and carefully identified the adjectives and adverbs. To be scrupulously fair to White, I omitted the *New* that occurs in every occurrence of *The New Yorker*, and I did not count items that would traditionally be classified as adjectives or adverbs where *The Cambridge Grammar* provides evidence that those classifications are wrong. Despite this lowering of the count (full details on request), there are 52 adjective and adverb tokens in White’s 406 words. That’s almost 13 percent of the total word count (the adjectives alone make up about 8 percent of the word tokens). As I have said before (and it has made many people quite edgy), it is not just that Strunk & White offer crappy usage advice; it’s that they demonstrate that their advice is crappy whenever they write, because they are utterly unable to follow their own rules, even on a bet. And as Mark says, nor should they. White isn’t at all a bad writer. But the dimwitted ukases that his book with Strunk promulgates have nothing to do with good writing or elegant style.

—
prohibition on the
use of adjectives and adverbs
See “Those who take the adjectives
from the table”, page 67.
—


posted by: gkp

The Chicago Manual of Style—and grammar

In the 1890s a proofreader working for the University of Chicago Press prepared a single sheet of guidance on typographic fundamentals and house style. It was augmented over time, and grew into a full style manual. The latest version was published in 2003 as the 15th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. From the first sheet with printing on it

to the last it has xviii + 958 = 976 pages, an increase in bulk of almost three orders of magnitude from that original information sheet. I finally ordered the 15th edition at the LSA book exhibit in January, when I saw that it included a new 93-page chapter on “Grammar and Usage”. My copy just arrived. Unfortunately, I now see, the new chapter does not represent an improvement.

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) is an unparalleled resource for those engaged in publishing, particularly of academic material. But the Press decided to farm out the topic of grammar and usage, and the writer they selected was Bryan A. Garner, a former associate editor of the *Texas Law Review* who now teaches at Southern Methodist University School of Law and has written several popular books on usage and style. His chapter is unfortunately full of repetitions of stupidities of the past tradition in English grammar—more of them than you could shake a stick at.

Presenting a representative sample would take a long time. Suffice it to say that on page 177 he appears to claim that progressive clauses are always active (making clauses like *Our premises are being renovated* impossible); on page 179 he states that English verbs have seven inflected forms, including a present subjunctive, a past subjunctive, and an imperative (utter nonsense); on page 187 he reveals that (although he agrees with every other grammarian that the misnamed “split infinitive” is grammatical) he thinks that the adverb is “splitting the verb” in this construction (it isn’t; it’s between two separate words); on page 188 he describes word sequences like *with reference to* as “phrasal prepositions” (they aren’t); and so it goes on and on. (I’m not asking you to just accept my word that these are analytical mistakes. Full argumentation on these points, and alternative analyses that make sense, can be found in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, a work that was available in published form a full year before the preface was added to the 15th edition of *CMS*. A few days of revision would have sufficed to remove the blunders from Garner’s chapter.)

When the University of Chicago Press started on the revisions that led to *CMS* 15, they could have lifted the phone and made an on-campus call to the late, great James McCawley, a professor in the Department of Linguistics there throughout his long career, and an author of many books with the Press. They could have asked him for

advice. They did not, clearly. McCawley knew the field of English syntax as well as anyone alive, and would perhaps have offered to do the chapter himself, or to read and critique the chapter when it was submitted, or to advise them on who might be chosen to do write it. But once again, people who had ample opportunity to get expert help in dealing with a quintessentially linguistic question of great importance made their decisions without (it seems) consulting anyone in the one field focused on matters linguistic. (I say “once again” because I’m thinking of Mark’s recent masterful critique of the College Board and its ignorant policies in designing putative tests of grammar knowledge.)

—
Mark’s recent masterful
critique of the College Board
See “The SAT fails a grammar
test”, page 199.
—

They commissioned a tired rehash of traditional grammar repeating centuries-old errors of analysis instead of trying to obtain a more up-to-date presentation. A real lost opportunity that has lessened the authority of a wonderful reference book, one that on topics from punctuation to citation to indexing to editing can really be trusted. Just avert your eyes from the grammar chapter; while not completely without merit (it moves on from Strunk and White), it just isn’t trustworthy in the way the rest of the book is.


posted by: gkp

You say Nevada, I say Nevahda

President George W. Bush has a language problem. At least, people who don’t like him see this as a point where he’s vulnerable, and they keep the journalistic spotlight focused on it, just as people who didn’t like President William J. Clinton kept the spotlight on what they saw as his vulnerabilities.

In both cases, I find that the intense scrutiny makes it hard to evaluate the issues. The focus on Clinton’s “Whitewater” transactions seemed so wildly out of proportion to the facts, and so clearly motivated by political animus, that at a certain point I simply started ignoring the

whole sordid business. Throw in a few tens of millions of dollars worth of high-powered investigators with subpoena powers, and you can cast a few financial shadows on anybody—or so I reckoned.

I've started to feel the same way about Bush's linguistic miscues. You can make any public figure sound like a boob, if you record everything he says and set hundreds of hostile observers to combing the transcripts for disfluencies, malapropisms, word formation errors and examples of non-standard pronunciation or usage. It's even easier if the critics use anecdotes based on the perceptions and verbal memories of equally hostile listeners. And the whole thing has crossed some kind of line when you can make the AP wire by citing him for using a widely accepted pronunciation, like *Nevada* with the stressed vowel of *cod* instead of *cad*.

It's interesting to read through *Slate* magazine's list of Bushisms, which Jacob Weisberg has turned into a small industry over the past four years. Some of the citations are from broadcasts or other recordings that are subject to checking: "Kosovians can move back in."—CNN's *Inside Politics*, April 9, 1999. Others appear to be journalistic anecdotes of uncertain authority: "Keep good relations with the Grecians."—Quoted in *The Economist*, June 12, 1999; "If the East Timorians decide to revolt, I'm sure I'll have a statement."—Quoted by Maureen Dowd in the *New York Times*, June 16, 1999.

It's possible that W. applied a culpable consistency in the derivation of ethnonyms. It's also possible that he made one mistake of that kind, replacing *Kosovars* with *Kosovians*, and some journalists started kicking it around over drinks—"wow, I wonder if he thinks the *Greeks* are the *Grecians*"—"I bet he says *Grecians*"—"I heard that he said 'we need to keep good relations with the Grecians'" . . . Anyone who thinks this couldn't happen needs to pay some attention to what journalists do to quotes even in friendly contexts, or how completely false stories—like the notion that Bush was pictured holding a plastic turkey in Iraq last Thanksgiving—get created, picked up and discussed even in the case of fully recorded events.

what journalists do to quotes
See "Twang scholar on 'the constraints of journalism'", page 269.

In many of the other cases, the cited examples seem well within the range of expected human error. Which of us could stand up to a similar level of linguistic scrutiny? Robert Beard, the CEO of *yourDictionary.com*, is a highly educated man and a trained linguist. He writes clearly and forcefully, and he's won many teaching awards, so I'm confident that he speaks well, though I've never met him. Given his training and his career choices, I'm sure that his English word knowledge and spelling abilities are far above the norm. Still, his four-paragraph note to me about presidential pronunciation problems contained three potentially embarrassing typographical errors. The first error was a switch of *their* and *there*, which he caught and corrected when I asked him for permission to post the note on this site. The other two errors were missed in his no doubt cursory proofreading, and I didn't notice them either before I posted what he wrote. He has "spectrogram" for *spectrogram*, and he cited the president's "agregious solecisms" when he meant to write *egregious solecisms*. I'm absolutely certain that Bob knows how to spell *spectrogram* and *egregious*. These were slips of the fingers, though perhaps slips guided by sound patterns, as such things often are. In another context—in a note from George Bush, for example—a hostile observer might take such slips as evidence of linguistic ineptness.

Bonus dormitat Homerus. Let's accept that W is no Homer, and move on.

Since that's not likely to happen, I have another idea. I'll buy dinner for Jacob Weisberg, if he'll let me record a couple of hours of convivial conversation about speech and language, and then examine the transcripts carefully for *Weisbergisms* . . .

note to me

The note is reprinted
on pages 127–128.

Bonus dormitat Homerus
Meaning, approximately:
"Even good Homer nods
sometimes".

posted by: myl

*“Too much of a coincidence
to be a coincidence”*

John Street is the mayor of Philadelphia, in the middle of a hotly contested election campaign, and the past few days have been difficult for him. First a bug was found in his office, and it turned out to have been planted by the FBI. Then the FBI confiscated his Blackberry. Then the feds raided the homes and offices of several of his supporters and associates.

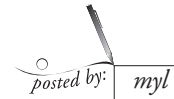
Today’s *Philadelphia Inquirer* quotes him as saying

In the true spirit of candor, there are some people, particularly in the African American community, who believe that this is too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence.

This sentence makes perfect sense (though I suspect that it would have made *Slate’s* “Bushism of the day” if George Bush had said it).

At first I thought that the mayor’s phrase trades on two different senses of “coincidence”. But (our local on-line version of) the American Heritage dictionary defines “coincidence” as *a sequence of events that although accidental seems to have been planned or arranged*. On this meaning, as something becomes more and more of a coincidence (because it seems more and more planned and arranged), it paradoxically become less and less of a coincidence (because it is less and less likely to be accidental). More simply, the mayor is saying that the timing of his troubles seems too planned to be an accident.

Thus the two uses of “coincidence” in Street’s sentence seem not to have different senses, but rather to emphasize different aspects of the same sense.



Vintage Effle

Margaret Marks at Transblawg points us to *The Effle page*, which introduces a useful word for the pseudo-language of many phrase books (and some linguistics examples), and claims that Ionesco's *Bald Soprano* was written (in French) as an imitation of Effle sentences in the books from which he learned English.

My favorite source of Effle used to be a thin Vietnamese-English phrase booklet that I bought at a Pleiku roadside stand in 1970. It was written by someone who was not a native speaker of English, printed very cheaply, and was apparently intended for the bar girl market, since the English side ran to things like

I am grateful for you to buy
another bottle of champagne.
You have mistaken me, sir, I am
a girl of good born.

Indeed, with some stage directions and a bit of good will, the whole thing could easily have been passed off as a one-acter from some second-rank absurdist playwright. My copy wandered off at some point, so someone else will have to arrange the premiere.

Some similarly evocative dramatic fragments can be found in the brief (about 100 lines) English/Harari “dialogues and sentences” in appendix II (“Grammatical Outline and Vocabulary of the Harari Language”) of Richard Burton's *First Footsteps in East Africa*, which I re-

Margaret Marks at Transblawg

Margaret Marks' “Weblog on German-English legal translation from Fürth” is online at <http://www.margaret-marks.com/Transblawg>.

The Effle page

“Effle” is derived from the acronym EFL, English as a Foreign Language. According to the Effle page, “*Effle* is grammatical English which could never be uttered because it has little meaning and could never be put into a sensible context”. An example of an Effle sentence is “Is this my finger or your finger?” The Effle page is online at <http://www.marlodge.supanet.com/museum/effle.html>.

Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*

The Bald Soprano (1950) is one of absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco's best-known plays. One representative line from the play is spoken by Mary, the maid: “I am the maid. I have just spent a very pleasant afternoon. I went to the pictures with a man and saw a film with some women. When we came out of the cinema we went and drank some brandy and some milk, and afterwards we read the newspaper.”

Richard Burton's

First Footsteps in East Africa

Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890) was a British consul, explorer, translator, writer and Orientalist. His classic translation of *The Arabian Nights* is his most celebrated work.

cently re-read. I'm not sure this counts as Effle, sentence by sentence, but the overall impression created by the sequence is similar. Here's an illustrative sample:

Come in and sit down.
 What is thy name?
 Come here (to woman).
 Dost thou drink coffee?
 I want milk.
 Where goest thou?
 I go to Harar.
 Send away the people.
 I love you.
 What is thine age?
 Don't laugh.
 Raise your legs.
 Don't go there.
 This man is good.
 He is a great rascal.
 I don't want you (woman).
 Leave my house.

Depending on the staging, this phrase list/dialogue might accompany several different stories, all more or less piggish. Whatever events one might imagine, they seem likely to be Burton's fantasies rather than facts, since he spent his ten days in Harar "so closely watched that it was found impossible to put pen to paper", and compiled his Harari grammatical sketch, after fleeing the city, during a few days spent in the Galla country to the east of Harar while equipping a caravan for the journey to Berbera on the coast.

The literati who assisted in my studies were a banished citizen of Harar; Sa'id Wal, an old Badawi; and Ali Sha'ir, "the Poet", a Girhi Somal celebrated for his wit, his poetry and his eloquence . . . Our hours were spent in unremitting toil: we began at sunrise, the hut was crowded with Badawi critics, and it was late at night before the manuscript was laid by. On the evening of the third day, my three literati started upon their feet, and shook my hand, declaring that I knew as much as they themselves did.


[Update: some excellent Effle is now available at *Desbladet*.]

On reflection, I'm not satisfied with the cited definition (from *The Effle page*):

Effle is grammatical English which could never be uttered because it has little meaning and could never be put into a sensible context.

The examples are mostly meaningful enough, it seems to me. But they have a sort of artificial feeling, like not-quite-real computer-generated movie scenes. As in the case of such scenes, it can sometimes be difficult to put your finger on exactly what's wrong—though of course sometimes it's pretty obvious. Anyhow, it's interesting that this sense of unnaturalness can arise in a purely textual environment, since in the case of CG scenes, it's likely that the problems are mostly due to the lack of real physics and physiology in the causal chain leading to the signals.

available at *Desbladet*
The page referred to is
<http://piginawig.diaryland.com/031215.html#d>

posted by: 

A Churchill story up with which I will no longer put

An old, old story about Winston Churchill (almost certainly mis-attributed) is retold one more time by Joe Carter at *The Evangelical Outpost*:

After an overzealous editor attempted to rearrange one of Winston Churchill's sentences to avoid ending it in a preposition, the Prime Minister scribbled a single sentence in reply: "This is the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put."

misattributed
Guest writer Ben Zimmer traces the story back to London's *The Strand*, 1942, where it was not attributed to Churchill. See the next post, "A misattribution no longer to be put up with".

The Evangelical Outpost
Joe Carter blogs at www.evangelicaloutpost.com.

Joe notes correctly that in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (see page 627, footnote 11) it is mentioned that “The ‘rule’ was apparently created ex nihilo in 1672 by the essayist John Dryden.” (See the article “Preposition at end” in *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* for more discussion). However, there is one thing he doesn’t point out, and hardly anybody ever has, except in footnote 12 on page 629 of *The Cambridge Grammar*, and briefly on *Language Log* in a post that Mark did a while back: Churchill (or whoever it may have been) was cheating, in two separate ways. I think perhaps the point may bear repeating and elaborating a bit (you don’t have to read on if you’ve already know this stuff).

post that Mark did

Mark Liberman mentioned this in his post, “Criticizing Pinker the right way”, <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001082.html>.

The strategy was to construct a case in which leaving a preposition at the end of the clause would be decisively the preferred style (for other such cases, see *The Cambridge Grammar*, pp. 628–630), and then to front the preposition to show the ignorant editor what a stupid rule he was trying to enforce. But the example involves cheating. Twice.

First, the example is one in which the preferred form of the sentence ended in two prepositions, the second with an object and the first without, and he fronted both of them. That’s never allowed. So no wonder it sounds ungrammatical. The ungrammaticality shows nothing about whether or not preposition stranding ordinarily sounds ungrammatical.

To see clearly that it is illicit, it is useful to steer round the second point (which I’ll come to later), and start with a different case of a sentence ending in a preposition sequence, one that does not involve an idiom or fixed phrase (my invented examples in what follows will be underlined):

The restaurant got a complaint from the people that the woman was staring in at.

To make this not end in a preposition, should you feel for some reason you want to avoid the normal construction, you would simply do this:

The restaurant got a complaint from the people at which the woman was staring in.

That's much more formal, and not at all an improvement (one is almost inclined to put a "?" in front of it to signal lowered acceptability), but it is English. However, you might ask, doesn't it still end with a preposition? Well, yes and no. It ends in a word that is classed as a preposition by *The Cambridge Grammar*, which takes what I consider the right view. But it's a preposition that does not take an object. For that reason it is irrelevant. In fact the traditional view (which has a somewhat fetishistic attachment to the Latin meaning of *pre-*) refuses to call it a preposition because it is not before a noun phrase.

All current dictionaries follow the traditional view: they would call *in* an adverb in a case like *She stared in*. And in cases of that sort, everyone has always agreed that such words can end a sentence. Otherwise you'd be saying that sentences like *I'm afraid Mr Threadcroft is not in*, or *It's cold, so we should go in*, are ungrammatical. That would be even more crazy than banning the cases where a preposition is stranded. (By calling a preposition stranded I mean roughly that it's not followed by its complement because it's in a clause like a relative or an interrogative that permits the complement to be at the beginning of the clause, as in *the people that the woman was staring at*, or to be understood as having an earlier noun phrase as its antecedent, as in *the people the woman was staring at*. That isn't a totally watertight definition of stranding, but it will perhaps do for present purposes).

Now, the key thing, which is independent of the terminological conflict, is this: you certainly can't front one of these prepositions that traditional grammar would call an adverb, in addition to fronting a preposition that has an object:

The restaurant got a complaint from the people in at which the woman was staring.

Yet that's what Churchill (if it was he) did in the famous *up with which I will not put*.

But there's another dishonesty in the example. It uses an idiom that doesn't like to be broken up at all by any kind of reordering. When you use the idiomatic verb phrase *put up with X*, you have to keep the sequence *put up with* as is. Almost nobody, however formal, thinks that

it would be a style improvement to take this interrogative sentence

How many interruptions am I supposed to put up with?

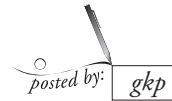
and rephrase it this way:

With how many interruptions am I supposed to put up?

It's decidedly awkward, possibly even ungrammatical.

So in the first place, *up with which I will not put* illicitly preposes not one but two prepositions (the second one being a preposition that under traditional analyses of his time would have been called an adverb), and that's never permissible. And in the second place, it does it to an idiom which resists preposition fronting anyway, so even fronting just the *with* would have sounded bad.

The mythical rule about preposition stranding being a grammatical fault is indeed nonsense, and it's not something you should put up with. But the tricky little piece of cheating attributed to Churchill does not show that.



A misattribution no longer to be put up with [Guest post by Benjamin G. Zimmer]

Introduction: Ben Zimmer writes to me to point out that the old Churchill story about an editorial correction being dismissed as “nonsense up with which I will not put” is almost certainly a case of fake attribution. Famous people (especially famous men) tend to get notable sayings retrospectively misattributed to them. He makes a strong case that this is one such case. (I always thought the lack of documentation for this story in any serious works about Sir Winston was suspicious.) I decided to quote Ben's very interesting research (originally seen on alt.usage.english) in full for *Language Log* readers, as a guest post. Notice, as he goes on, the changing wording of the purported quotation.

—Geoff Pullum

The earliest citation of the story that I've found so far in newspaper databases is from 1942, without any reference to Churchill:

The Wall Street Journal, 30 Sep 1942 ("Pepper and Salt"): When a memorandum passed round a certain Government department, one young pedant scribbled a postscript drawing attention to the fact that the sentence ended with a preposition, which caused the original writer to circulate another memorandum complaining that the anonymous postscript was "offensive impertinence, up with which I will not put." —*The Strand Magazine*.

Churchill often contributed to London's *Strand Magazine*, so it seems unlikely that the magazine would fail to identify the unnamed writer as Churchill if he were indeed the source of the story. Attributions to Churchill only began to surface well after the war's end. The usual source of the Churchill attribution is Sir Ernest Gowers' *Plain Words* (1948):

It is said that Mr. Winston Churchill once made this marginal comment against a sentence that clumsily avoided a prepositional ending: "This is the sort of English up with which I will not put".

Though Gowers is typically the only source cited for the attribution (as in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* and *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*), the Churchill story was circulating in 1948 in various forms. Here is the earliest reference I've found:

"Up With Which I Will Not Put" Is Latest Winston Churchillism
Portland (Maine) Press Herald, 20 Mar 1948 London March 19
(UP)—Another Churchillism has been read into the record—"up with which I will not put." Thursday night in the House of Commons, Glenvil Hall, financial secretary to the treasury, made a plea for clearer English. He cited as an example of Winston Churchill's "forceful if not always grammatical English" this marginal notation that the wartime Prime Minister scribbled on a document: "This is nonsense up with which I will not put."

This same wire story appeared later in March '48 in another newspaper—the *Daily Gleaner* of Kingston, Jamaica—so clearly the anecdote was traveling far and wide. By December of that year, a more embellished version was circulating:

The Wall Street Journal, 9 Dec 1948 (“Pepper and Salt”) The carping critic who can criticize the inartistic angle of the firemen’s hose while they are attempting to put out the fire, has his counterpart in a nameless individual in the British Foreign Office who once found fault with a projected speech by Winston Churchill. It was in the most tragic days of World War II, when the life of Britain, nay, of all Europe, hung in the balance. Churchill prepared a highly important speech to deliver in Parliament, and, as a matter of custom, submitted an advanced draft to the Foreign Office for comment. Back came the speech with no word save a notation that one of the sentences ended with a preposition, and an indication where the error should be eliminated. To this suggestion, the Prime Minister replied with the following note: “This is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I will not put.”

Over the following years, other variations circulated in the newspapers, all featuring Churchill. (By the time a reader inquired after the Churchill anecdote in *The New York Times*’s “Queries and Answers” section in 1951, “countless readers” sent in versions of the story, but none had an authoritative citation.) Some later versions feature an officious book editor rather than a Foreign Office clerk. (A review of the variations can be found at: <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/churchill.html>.)

<http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/churchill.html>

The link is to a page from Paul Brians’ *Common Errors in English* web site. The page discusses the origins of and variations on the quote.

Further research into the Churchill attribution would require searching the House of Commons archives to track down exactly what Glenvil Hall said in March 1948. I’m guessing he embellished the story along the lines of later attested versions. It appears, however, that the anecdote emerged during WWII featuring a generic memorandum writer, and only after the war did the story get attached to Churchill (as so many other anecdotes have).

—Ben Zimmer

posted by:  gkp