

Little difference in trends moving 'to' or 'toward'

Trend toward trivia. An article said that a big coffee-serving outfit "reports no trend to tea." Molly Fitzgerald of Wyncote, Pa., is curious about the validity of the use of *to* rather than *toward* after the word *trend*. Either word is acceptable since both mean in the direction of. *Toward* might be the better because it is less explicit, less definite. If you look *toward* the left you might be looking 40 degrees in that direction whereas if you are looking *to* the left you would be looking the full 45 degrees that way. If that makes a difference to you, you'd better say *Trend toward*.

But, not except. "Happily browsing" through my *The Careful Writer*, says Benjamin Roth of St. Louis, he came on the entry "But, meaning only," which he believes reinforces his contention that one of our national monuments contains an odd statement. The Tomb of the Unknown

bernstein on words

Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery has the inscription "Here lies a soldier known but to God." This clearly means, he says, that the soldier is known to everyone except God. How he reaches this conclusion is a puzzle to me.

My book quotes the grammarian George O. Curme as writing that *but* "is now often felt as an adverb with the force of *only* and thus can now as an adverb be used where it was once not used in older English." If you substitute *only* for *but* in the Arlington inscription, you have "a soldier known *only* to God." Mr. Roth apparently was substituting *except* for *but*.

As a conjunction *but* can mean *except*, but as an adverb it can mean, and here clearly means, *only*. Of course some of the *only*-ists might argue that the *only* belongs after *God*, but would they put the *but* in that position and make it read "a soldier known to God *but*?"

How to treat a couple. Whether to regard *couple* as singular or plural is a question that returns again and again. This time it comes from Judy Floy of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who cites the sentence, "The couple (has/have) three children," and asks, "Has this usage changed during recent Americanization of the English language?" Just what usage she is referring to I don't know any more than you do.

However, most writers prefer to treat the word as a plural most of the time. It is quite all right to say, "The Jones couple was the youngest at the party." But if you think the word must always be singular, you are likely to get into trouble with some sentence requiring a pronoun referring to your singular couple; for example: "The couple was uninjured when *its* car skidded off the road." The advice here is to favor the plural in nine cases out of ten.

Dangler. A clipping sent in by another Iowan, Elizabeth G. Nelson of Mason City, contains one of the most surprising dangling participles I have ever seen — surprising because of its clumsiness and surprising because it must have been written by an editor of the paper in which it appeared. The passage begins by saying that the paper welcomes letters stating the opinions of its readers, then goes on: "Only signed letters are printed, knowing that responsible opinions come from responsible people willing to be identified."

What is the subject of that participle *knowing*? The grammatical problem could be solved by beginning the sentence "We print only signed letters . . ." but how would the editor know the opinions or the people were "responsible" merely because the letter was signed? Try again, Mr. Editor.

Master near-disaster. The distinction between *masterful* and *masterly* has not been taken up here in so long a time that I thought I would discuss it again just to calm down Raymond Caporetti of Philadelphia. Declaring that he is "irritated," he writes, "Is it anything short of disgraceful that so many book reviewers — people of whom one might expect a good knowledge of the English language — now use *masterful* to describe every novel that comes across the desk?"

What the reviewers usually mean, of course, is *masterly*. *Masterful* means imperious or domineering. *Masterly* means showing the skill and competence of a master. One reason that the *masterful* word is the one more often misused probably lies in the fact that it lends itself more gracefully to an adverbial form. "He writes

masterfully" sounds natural even though it is usually improper. "He writes *masterly*" sounds a little odd despite the fact that *masterly* is an adverb as well as an adjective.

Another close pair. A wine ad sent this way by Henry Spector of Philadelphia contained this headline (trade name omitted here): "We left Nature alone. She gave us this wine." As Mr. Spector says, those words are an example of the prevalent ignorance of the difference between *let alone* and *leave alone*. The words used in the ad — *left alone*, past tense of *leave alone* — should exclusively mean to cause to be in solitude.

Let alone should exclusively mean to allow to be undisturbed, to be not bothered. Those are the meanings that should prevail, but unfortunately in popular speech they are regarded as just about interchangeable and have even won some degree of acceptance under the label "informal."

Word oddities. The word *laser* is acronym for Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation. It has been in use only since about 1960, yet it has already produced by back-formation the completely accepted intransitive verb *lase*. A *laser* is a device that produces a coherent, highly concentrated beam of light waves and the verb *lase* means to emit such a beam. Obviously the word-people weren't *lase-y* about approving those words.

The Panama Canal, which has been figuring in the news, added a few terms to our language, according to Stuart Flexner's lovely book *I Hear America Talking*. The *Big Ditch* at one time was a way of referring to the canal. Then there was *electric mule*, a locomotive used to tow ships through the locks. And let's not forget the term *Panama hat*.

You probably wouldn't think that the word *Cider* originated in the Middle East, but it did — and among its originators was the Hebrew word *shekhar*, meaning strong drink. Arabs, Ethiopians, Greeks and others had similar words meaning related things such as drink heavily or he was drunk. Of course in this country in colonial days *cider* was as American as apple pie.

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