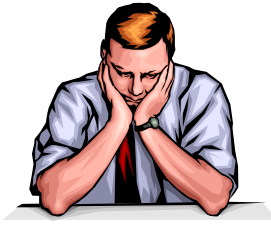


Language: a total scunner?



When I first moved to Scotland about twelve years ago, I didn't have a scoobie what a scunner was. I didn't have a scoobie what a scoobie was either, but I managed to work that one out. But scunner I just couldn't get. I knew it was something bad: everybody who used it only used it when they looked angry. So I looked it up in the Concise Scots Dictionary, and there it was. What a great word, and what a great history it has: in the past you would simply scunner ('flinch, hesitate'); now you can be scunnered ('feel sick'), or scunner someone else ('make them feel sick'), or be a scunner ('a pest'), or even find something scunnersome ('objectionable'). What's more, no-one's really sure where the word comes from: but it has survived in Scots and Scottish English, still being used today.

It's not unusual to be fascinated by a new word that you don't recognise. People love language, and people are very creative language users. In fact, research has shown that the most creative language users are adolescents - they are usually the driving force behind language change. This is usually more visible in the spoken language than the written language, though the evolution of text messages (e.g. c u l8r for 'see you later') shows that the written language can also vary and change. Some of the practices in texting, such as missing out some of the vowels (txt yr m8 nxt wknd for 'text your mate next weekend'), are well established in other written languages, such as Hebrew and Arabic, though practices vary in different languages.



But it's often the spoken language that really intrigues people. Some people are interested in words - how their meanings change over time (for instance, why bad came to mean 'good' for some people), or how new words are created (a labradoodle is a cross between a Labrador retriever and a poodle, a dog which can help blind people who are allergic to certain kinds of compounds in Labrador hair). Others are interested in accents - why do some people pronounce the word thin like fin (but never fin like thin)? Why do some English people say it's wrong to 'drop your hs' in words like house and health, and wrong to 'drop your gs' in words like running and talking, but they never

say it's wrong to 'drop your rs' in words like cart and car? And how come Aberdonians seem to talk about a furry boot when they want to know where you're from?

And then there's grammar. A lot of people think grammar is dull, but they couldn't be more wrong. Grammar is great. It's only through thinking about grammar that you can figure out the following:

1. *Go off*. Most of you reading this will agree that the following are perfectly normal constructions of English: the train went off, the bomb went off and the cheese went off. But now look at these: Off went the train (grammatical for all of you); Off went the bomb (grammatical for most of you); Off went the cheese (not grammatical for any of you). Why is that? And how come I have a good idea of what you'll consider to be grammatical and ungrammatical, even though we've never met or even spoken together?
2. *Names*. Most people don't realise that names have grammatical properties. In English, we typically have an order of elements for names, and names combined with titles, and much of grammar is concerned with how we combine words to make larger constituents. Our given names (like Graeme or Homer) occur before our family names (like Trousdale or Simpson) - this is the reverse of what happens in Japanese, for instance. Titles usually combine with family names (Dr Trousdale), though in recent times, and in particular circumstances, they have begun to combine with first names: in the 1980s, celebrity medical authorities on chat shows began to be addressed in this way (for instance, Dr Ruth). Addressing someone using only their surname would now be considered rather unfriendly - notice, for instance, that in *Eastenders*, characters who don't like each other tend to call each other by surname only, so that the Mitchell brothers regularly refer to Ian Beal as Beal. In the Victorian period it was considered perfectly acceptable as a form of address between friends (as in *Holmes and Watson*, in the novels by Conan-Doyle). You can see this if you look at recent TV listings - in the modern soaps, most of the characters are referred to by their first name only (Jack and Vera, Peggy and Sam), but if you watch the recent adaptation of *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens on BBC 1, you'll see some of the characters are usually referred to or addressed by first name (Esther, Ada), some by title and last name (Lady Dedlock)

and some by last name only (Tulkinghorn, Smallweed). So these combinations (and possible and impossible combinations are what grammarians are often concerned about) are associated with various issues concerning social relationships, and these naming practices have changed over time.

3. Ambiguities. Ambiguous sentences are always interesting for grammarians. Here are a few to get you thinking, all taken from the following website (http://www.fun-with-words.com/ambiguous_headlines.html) which claims that they all come from real newspapers:

- (a) KIDS MAKE NUTRITIOUS SNACKS
- (b) GRANDMOTHER OF EIGHT MAKES HOLE IN ONE
- (c) STOLEN PAINTING FOUND BY TREE
- (d) 2 SISTERS REUNITED AFTER 18 YEARS AT CHECKOUT COUNTER

Some of these ambiguities are created by different word senses (so in example (a), make can mean either something like 'serve as' or even just 'are' or it can mean something like 'create'), but even this has a consequence for the grammar of the sentence - if the meaning of make is 'are', then kids and nutritious snacks refer to one and the same thing; but if it means 'create' then kids and nutritious snacks refer to completely different entities. And notice if you move the sentence around a bit - creating what's called a passive version of the active sentence - then only one of the readings is possible: in nutritious snacks are made by kids, made can only mean 'created'. So knowing about how grammar works can make things clearer to you when you're writing. It's not the only thing that matters, of course. You need to have fun and be experimental with your creative writing. But finding out about grammar can help you sharpen your mind to the possibilities and constraints of English and Scots, figuring out what works and what doesn't, and more importantly, why it works or why it doesn't.

I'll be updating this site on a regular basis: one of the things I'll be doing is creating an interactive page with some language games on it, so you can start to work things out for yourself. Check back at the end of January for the first set of games. In the meantime, if you have any questions about language, feel free to send me an e-mail: my address is

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