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GRAMMAR WITH GRACE

Louis Foley

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In a charming story of travel and adventure in the wilds of Africa, "A Safari Back to Innocence," Anne Morrow Lindbergh speaks of visiting the African wilderness as a "return to reality." She adds that, "like all truth, it illumines areas beyond the one on which it is focused."¹

Her remark interested me because this truth, as I see it in matters of language, has become ever more evident to me over a period of many years. Thoughtful investigation of any particular question of correct usage, trying to see how and why the phenomenon operates as it does, will seldom fail to bring a deeper insight into other details not obviously related. This principle will be found to apply, I believe, whenever one takes the trouble to look carefully into "how the thing works." It comes into play in the study of well-nigh any "moot point" as to what is or is not good English in speech or writing. "Controversial" matters have a way of ceasing to be controversial when one learns enough about them.

This idea might be clearly illustrated in even such "mechanical" aspects of writing as spelling or punctuation, which are very likely to turn out to be something more than merely mechanical when their function is better understood. To bring out the point, however, I choose deliberately an example which probably most people would dismiss off-hand as an unlikely one: the question of the "split infinitive." It is a subject which has been endlessly discussed, but nearly always viewed very superficially with no perception of its true inwardness.

By "splitting" an infinitive we mean, of course, inserting a word or words between the *to* and the body of the verb. English enjoys the dubious distinction of being the only language in which an infinitive *can* be "split," for in any other language it is naturally complete in a single word. If one thinks of it objectively, it seems curious that we should conceive it otherwise. As a mere grammatical appendage, the *to* is logically as much an integral part of the verb-form as the *-d* or *-ed* which marks the past tense. To be sure, any student of Old English knows that the true Anglo-Saxon infinitive was one word, and that the "to" was used with a gerund or verbal-noun object, as in expressing

1. *Life* magazine, October 21, 1966, p. 97.

purpose, a quite different construction. The confusion, however, came about so long ago and so irrevocably that it is irrelevant to modern usage.

It has left us with an anomalous situation. While actually the apparently separate words of an infinitive form a unified idea, yet for practical reasons we can not write them solidly together. All definitions of verbs in any dictionary are inevitably in infinitive form, as the verb being defined is by implication. Yet if the *to* which is an organic part of it were not omitted in the alphabetical listing, all the verbs would have to be listed under *T!*

Before the nineteenth century, examples of split infinitives were exceedingly rare, not because of subservience to any "rule" but simply because the idea of doing such a thing did not occur to people accustomed to writing in English. Yet it is not difficult to see how the practice of splitting began to creep in. It must have come about through a desire to get away from a certain kind of awkwardness in word-order which seems to have contributed as definitely as anything to the air of stiffness that we feel in much of the older writing, particularly in formal statements. So "splitting" happened because a writer would sense something wrong about a traditional pattern, but not recognize what the trouble really was. Not quite grasping the true principles of sentence-structure, he tried to get rid of a symptom instead of attacking the underlying malady.

As a familiar example of the kind of stiff formality in question, we may notice the call to confession in *The Book of Common Prayer*: "And although we ought at all times *humbly to acknowledge* our sins before God, yet ought we *chiefly so to do* when we assemble and meet together . . ." For another we may observe the wording of the First Amendment of the Constitution, "the right of the people *peaceably to assemble* . . ."

It is amazing how long this sort of strained word-order was pedantically inculcated as "correct." Surely that is exactly what led to the splitting of infinitives as a would-be escape from what was rightly felt to be artificial language. Typical of the way the matter was treated in handbooks is this example from a college text which was widely used a generation ago:

- Wrong: In order *to adequately present* my claim, I ask
for the privilege of an interview.
- Right: In order *adequately to present* my claim, I ask

for the privilege of an interview.²

Thus, with no hint of explanation, the splitting of infinitives was ruled out. Offered no alternative but the “right” form given here, it is easy to understand why many people (including some teachers of English) were aroused to rebellion against what naturally struck them as an arbitrary rule. Quite as completely as the “wrong” form, the proposed correction missed the point.

This is a good case to show the limitations of the conventional pigeon-holing of words in parsing or diagraming. An adverb is classified as a “modifier of the *verb*,” whereas, if we view the thought-pattern realistically, we see that what the adverb modifies is *the verb plus its object*. So, in this text-book example, what “adequately” modifies is the indivisible phrase, “to present my claim.” Naturally therefore the adverb follows it: *to present my claim adequately*.

The fundamental principle of word-order which makes it graceful and easy to follow is that each element should be as close as possible to whatever else is closest to it in thought—which is the same as saying in grammar. Thus a verb and its object stick together, and the adverb follows—after we already have in mind *what* action it describes. When some separation of closely-related elements is inescapable, we choose as by instinct the arrangement which causes least interruption. The way this system works can be shown by a simple example:

He considers each plan thoughtfully.

He considers thoughtfully each plan which is submitted to him.

In the latter version, the adverb “thoughtfully” slips in ahead of the long phrase forming the object, which would otherwise separate it awkwardly far. Moreover, if “thoughtfully” were held to the end, it would appear to mean the way the plan was “submitted to him.”

The question of split infinitives was brought to my serious attention a good many years ago by the pronouncements of George O. Curme of Northwestern University, who seemed to have made more or less of a lifetime hobby of defending them as “useful” or “necessary.” In fact, as a prominent apologist for the split infinitive he became more widely known than for anything else he ever did. In at least one obituary, he was mentioned as “noted champion of the split infinitive.” Evidently he convinced many people. Now, for purposes of analysis, we may consider what appears to have been a favorite example, which

2. *A College Handbook of Writing*, by George B. Woods, Doubleday, Page and Co., (1922) p. 71.

he evidently took to be a conclusive demonstration. To prove that a split infinitive may be “quite necessary,” he compared two sentences:

He failed *completely to understand* the question.

and

He failed *to completely understand* the question.

According to Professor Curme, “it is obvious that the meaning of the second expression is entirely different from that of the first, and . . . the split form is needed in order to convey the impression of partial understanding.”

Actually, it is not “obvious” at all that the two statements are different in meaning. The first,

He failed completely to understand the question,

is ambiguous. If we heard it *spoken*, we might be sure of what is meant, but as a written sentence it is not clear. Emphasis on *completely*, with momentary hesitation after it, would make it seem to modify *failed*. Otherwise it echoes the old-fashioned stilted style which we noticed earlier, rebellion against which must have caused blundering into split infinitives.

Well-worn paths of idiomatic expression, in keeping with the basic principle of word-order, will take care of the situation quite naturally. According to the meaning intended, it is either:

He *completely failed* to understand the question.

or

He failed to understand the question *completely* (or to understand the complete question, or the question in its entirety).

In the second sentence it will be observed that *completely* modifies not “failed” but *to understand the question*, which is as truly a unified idea as if it were a single word. So a little open-minded study of the split infinitive illuminates the whole business of normal placement of modifiers, the basic principle of word-order which is part of the well-developed system of our language. But it can shed light on other things as well.

As in the case we have just examined, most often a split infinitive is the result of a misplaced adverb which clearly belongs elsewhere. It may, however, result from some other kind of clumsiness. For instance, it may be caused by loose use of words without attention to their meaning. A typical example is a statement by an educator that “inability *to satisfactorily measure up* to the expectations and demands of his parents or teachers” may cause a child to have excessive worry

and fear.³ Now what can “measure up” mean unless it is to be *satisfactory*? The idea would be completely expressed by saying “to satisfy the expectations . . .”

Sometimes a split infinitive betrays befuddlement in the grammatical structure of a sentence. Thus a newspaper review of a play stated its theme as that of “a poor boy who married a wealthy girl but refuses *to simply be her husband*.” This sounds as if *being* her husband implied a contrast with some other idea—say having been, or becoming, or remaining. If “simply” means anything at all, it must be a matter of being *simply her husband*.

A firm offering investments for savings used as an argument to win clients the claim that “people who accumulate a reserve fund are unlikely *to ever commit suicide*.” This sounds as if the writer had forgotten the meaning of “suicide”—as if that act could be committed (by the same persons) frequently, only once in a while, or not ever! The trouble seems to be that the negative is in the wrong place; *are never likely* would make more sense.

One time a distinguished editor wrote me: “Originally I was a stickler for all the rules, I was ‘pure.’ Gradually, in an effort to get vigor, I relaxed from the rules and went in for the vernacular, even for practices which theretofore I regarded as ‘vulgar’ . . . I prefer to deliberately break rules—and just *see* how I split that infinitive—which is one of the practices you would *have done with*.”

Considered by itself, this quotation would be an unfair representation of the author, who has demonstrated his ability to write extremely well. Here, however, he illustrates the common misunderstanding of the nature of “rules.” At the end no doubt he thought he was violating a rule against “ending a sentence with a preposition.” What we *call* “prepositions” in English are not always really such at all. Without official recognition, we make up compound verbs by piecing out simple verbs with adverbs or prepositions, to express a truly unified idea which *could* be expressed by a single word—in this case *abolish*.

As for his split infinitive, the idea of “deliberation” belongs with *prefer*; he *deliberately prefers* to break rules. When people have that attitude, however, it usually shows simply that they have never understood *why* correct forms are as they are, and therefore assume that they represent mere conformity to arbitrary “rules.”

3. *Journal of the N. E. A.*, February 1931, p. 50.

The old-time stiff word-order continues to appear occasionally, as in a recent reference to “the medical profession’s unwillingness *publicly to admit* errors and shortcomings.”⁴ A leading university seeks to give its students the kind of education which “will prepare them better to serve their country in time of need . . .” Does this mean “better prepare them” or “prepare them to serve their country better”? The ideas are not quite the same.

“Even within large groups,” writes a professor of education, “individuals were assisted in the manner and at the time which enabled them most quickly to assimilate the skills and knowledge of greatest import to them.”⁵ For the attentive reader there arises here a question which perhaps the author himself could not answer without hesitation. Is “most quickly to assimilate” an echo of the stilted style of old-fashioned “dignified” statements, showing the influence of much reading of that sort of material? Or is it simply the result of conscious or unconscious avoidance of a split infinitive, without seeing why? Does the sentence mean “most quickly enabled them” or “enabled them to assimilate most quickly the skills and knowledge”? Between the one and the other meaning there is the difference between a rapid method of instruction and rapid reaction as the result of instruction, whether the latter be fast or slow.

As a symptom of confusion of ideas we may notice what is surely one of the earliest split infinitives to be found in any writing which is at all well known. It occurs in the last stanza of Burns’s *Cotter’s Saturday Night* (1786) :

“Who dared to nobly stem tyrannic pride.”

Can anyone imagine the *stemming* of anything as being done “nobly”? Surely it is the *daring* which is noble. The poet would have had his iambic rhythm just as well by saying:

Who nobly dared to stem tyrannic pride.

The singer of Scottish songs was evidently under somewhat of a strain in writing “literary” English.

Confident statements by “authorities” of one sort or another must have operated to make a good many people (including some teachers of English) timid or hesitant about voicing any objection to a split infinitive wherever it may appear. They are overawed by pronouncements uttered pontifically in popular books of reference. An outstanding example is the comment in *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*:

4. *The New York Times Magazine*, October 30, 1966.

5. Raymond P. Perkins, in *The Phi Delta Kappan*, November 1966.

“The splitting has been widely objected to, but it sometimes is desirable or necessary, especially to avert ambiguity.” This statement has remained unchanged through different editions over many years. In a rival publication which came along later, *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (1958, p. 1408), we find what looks like a re-write of the same proclamation: “Despite the objections of some people to this construction, many writers use split infinitives where ambiguity or awkwardness would otherwise result.” Here it is interesting to note the shift of emphasis; instead of being “widely objected to” the splitting is opposed only by “some people.” The implication seems to be that any objection is merely a hopeless rear-guard action by a few old-fashioned characters obviously behind the times.

At any rate, the reference to “many writers” is simply unrealistic. In comparison with the number of places where, for the same alleged reasons, infinitives *might* have been split but were not, the actual incidence of splitting is so small as to be utterly out of proportion to all the discussion it has brought about. Occasionally it does seem to become a sort of mannerism with an individual, but on the whole it occurs rather seldom even in the writing of those who care least for what they take to be “rules” or established “correctness.” And it is exceedingly difficult to make out a case for *any* split infinitive as “necessary to avert ambiguity.”

The amusing part of it all is how, all this time, the split infinitive has so completely escaped recognition for what it really is. It has been a red herring across the trail if there ever was one. Being conspicuous, because unnatural, it has attracted attention as if it were something important in itself, whereas it is merely an incidental by-product, a symptom of something wrong somewhere—not always the same thing. The way it has been generally treated might be taken to show the fallacy of a negative approach. With words falling in their naturally proper places, according to our well-developed system of word-order, and with decent respect for their honest meanings, there is no need to worry for fear of splitting an infinitive. The occasion can hardly arise.