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***NEW VISTAS IN ELT:  
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**“Illogical” Rules of English Grammar**

**Dr. D. Nagarathinam & Prof. L. Lakshmanan**

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**Abstract**

One of the major problems in learning English Grammar is the ever changing rules. Grammar rules are not laid down once and for all. They ‘EVOLVE’. You, no longer use ‘thee’ and ‘ye’ in everyday language. You no longer say ‘thou art’ or ‘mine eyes’ or ‘it raineth’. If language did not develop people in Britain, might still be speaking the Middle English of Chaucer, or something even older. Here in this paper, we’ve chosen some of the disputable

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points which we consider *the most illogical rules of English grammar* that have been flouted by good users of English.

The factors in dispute: Split infinitives: Infinitive with to, Infinitive without to, Without subject, Post-posed prepositions; Double Negatives; It's me or It's I?; Sexist languages gender-neutral language in English (he or she); Prepositional verbs; and Ambiguity.

**Keywords:** English Grammar, Ever-changing Rules, Split Infinitives, Double Negatives, Gender-neutral language.

## Introduction

“Flouting the rule: and a number of modern writers have been equally happy to flout the traditional rule. None the less for all the squalor and gore facilities of syntax, are what the book aspires to the full of”---**Martin Amis - The Observer.**

English is an International language. Grammar, being a mechanism of language, takes a vital role in the English language. The grammar of a language has to be put to use with cleverness, involving all the nuances of the language. The logical and illogical rule of English language is described as follows:

## Logical / Illogical

**Question tag:** Logical is positive statement (+) ends with Negative tag (-)

Negative sentence (-) ends with positive tag (+)

Eg: She is a dancer, isn't she?

She is not a dancer, is she? (Logical)

I'm honest, amn't I? (Logical) - But, it is not accepted by modern writers.

I'm honest, aren't I? - accepted. This seems to be illogical, doesn't it?

**Article:** Similarly, with the article 'a' and 'an'

Eg. a eagle-→an eagle; a-one-rupee-coin; a university

Here, in order to avoid the clash between the two vowels the weakest consonant 'n' is added between the strong sounded letters. This is for the convenience of the tongue.

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Let's probe into some of the disputable logical/illogical points here:

### **Split Infinitives**

E.g. "To boldly go where no one has gone before" opposed "to go boldly where no one has gone before"

### **The Infinitive with 'to'**

**Without subject:** 'The best thing would be to tell everybody'

**With subject:** 'The best thing would be for you to tell everybody'

### **Infinitive without 'to'**

**Without subject:** All I did was hit him on the head

**With subject:** Rather than John does it, I'd prefer to give the job to many.

### **That's the man we sold it to'**

'**That's the man to whom we sold it'** (this is grammatical but very formal and very formal – and using very formal grammar in a less than formal setting represents a lapse of appropriateness if not a lapse of grammar.

'What's that you are looking at?'

Corrected: '**What's that at which you are looking?**

Shifting the preposition from the end can be particularly clumsy or confusing when the preposition then becomes separated from the word it relates to.

**To whom are you referring, may I ask?**

**For whom was he looking?**

Others however sound absurd.

**About what's your book?**

**On what does it depend?**

It is more or less impossible to avoid end prepositions after exclamations containing 'wh'- words.

**E.g.: ‘what an embarrassing thing about which to talk?’**

**In to what a fine mess you’ve got us?**

Other structures to think about:

Final prepositions are natural even un-avoidable

**‘We were looked after’ (prepositional verb)**

The whole question needs looking in to. Consider also constructions with an adjective plus to infinitive.

**She is lovely to look at.**

**‘He is impossible to live with,’** or with an indefinite pronoun plus to infinitive.

**That’s something to look forward to.**

**I’ve got nobody to talk to.**

**Is there anyone to write to?**

In formal relative clauses and some questions in particular, an earlier position may / will be preferable.

**Do you know the girl on the deck whose father’s ship Alec stowed away?**

**You know the girl whose father’s ship Alec stowed away on the deck of ? ‘Do’**

And longer prepositions such as during and throughout, and multi-word prepositions such as with ‘regard to’ and ‘because of’ usually sound very awkward with end position.

**Which country did the renaissance take place in during/throughout?**

**‘That’s the scandal he resigned because of’**

### **Post-posed Prepositions**

Normally a preposition is followed by its complement. Sometimes it doesn’t happen. Because the complement takes first position in the clause or it is absent.

### **Wh-questions**

**e.g.: ‘Which house did he leave it at?’**

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**‘At which house is he staying?’ (Formal)**

**Relative Clause:** ‘the old house which he was telling you about is empty.’

**E.g. About which I was telling you; (Formal)**

**What did you - ‘On what did base your prediction? (Formal)**

**What did you base your prediction on?’ (Informal))**

### **Double Negatives**

The double negative: for example produces a positive sense (- x - = +) in modern English (in earlier forms of English, and in some other languages, a double negative simply reinforces the negative sense.

**‘I wouldn’t say that he isn’t telling the truth’**

Consider these sentences:

**‘I barely knew anyone at the meeting’.**

No judge but the most stony-hearted could deny the ice-dancers anything but full marks.

**‘No head injury is too trivial to ignore.’**

Near negative units such as hardly, barely, scarcely, rarely and seldom are usually ungrammatical with fully negative words. So the finish sentence should read like this.

**‘I barely knew anyone at the meeting’.**

Negative sentences are usually thought of as containing not, no, none, never, nobody and so on. But they can be made in other ways too, as by the use of ‘**un**’ ‘**without**’, ‘**unless**’, ‘**ignore**’, ‘**deny**’, ‘**fail**’ and ‘**miss**’. These words can cause real confusion if carelessly combined with the usual negative words.

Even an apparently simple sentence such as the third of the examples above, ties itself in knots when it mishandles negatives. Analyze it carefully, and you will see how misleading if really is. The supposed meaning is properly conveyed by any or the following versions:

**‘No head injury is too trivial to treat.’**

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**‘No head injury is trivial enough to ignore.’**

**‘No head injury, however trivial should be ignored.’**

**‘All head injuries, however trivial, should be treated.’**

**It’s me or it’s I? :**

The most controversial question about pronoun is whether to use the subject or object case after **is, was,** and other forms of the verb **to be.**

Modern Standard English remains undecided about what to do here, but the fact is that most people nowadays say it’s me and was that her? .This is an acceptable usage for everyone except the most formal and traditional. As always you can rephrase things to avoid the problem entirely. In answer to the question ‘who’s there?’ You do not have to stay either **it’s I** or **it’s me:** you can say uncontroversial, ‘I am’ instead.’

Note that if a ‘who’ - clause follows the personal pronoun; Standard English usually prefers a subject form for example:

e.g.: ‘It’s I who does the shopping’.

### **Sexist Language - Gender-neutral language in English (he/she)**

The most vexing problem concerns ‘he’, ‘him’ and ‘his’. As with man, these terms are often used neutrally-

**‘If anyone here wants to upgrade his computer, he should remember what Mrs. Murray told him’.** In this particular example you could easily devise a non- sexist phrasing by applying one of two standard techniques. Either you could use the second person forms ‘you’ and ‘your’.

**‘If you want to upgrade your computer, you should remember...’or you could recast the sentence in the plural.**

‘If anyone here wants to upgrade his or her computer, **he, or she** should remember...’using **she or her, hers** instead of **he, him, his**, or alternating the two sets) tends to look very contrived. So too does one and one’s: and all the more so does the use of new terms such as ‘herm’ (**her, or him,**) or **s/he (she or he)** and to use **they, their, them** after anyone, each, or the like is to fly in the face of strict grammar.

### Prepositional Verbs

The preposition in a prepositional verb must precede its complement. Hence we can contrast the prepositional verb call on (visit) with the phrasal verb call up (summon).

They called on the man	They called up on the man X
They called on him	They called up him. X
X They <i>called</i> the man <i>on</i>	<b>They called the man up</b>
X They <i>called</i> him <i>on</i>	<b>They called him up</b>

On the other hand, the prepositional verb allows an inserted adverb after the verb and a relative pronoun after the preposition:

They called early on the man	They called early up the man X
The man on whom they called	X the man up whom they called

In general, prepositional verbs, such as *call on* or *look at*, plus their prepositional complement differ from single word verbs plus prepositional phrases, as in

They called on the man-----who (m) did they call on?

Where did they call? X

They called at the hotel (or after) lunch---what did they call at (or after)? ---Where did they look?

X

They called at the hotel (or after lunch) where did they call at? X (or after)? ---where(or when) did they call?

Many prepositional verbs allow the noun phrases to become the subject of a passive transformation of the sentence:

They called on the man---the man was called on

Visitors did not walk over the lawn

The lawn wasn't walked over (by visitors)

### Visitors can't walk over the lawn

Like phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs vary in their idiomatic set up. Highly idiomatic combinations include go into (a problem), 'investigate', come by (the book), 'obtain'.

A sentence like *He looked at the girl* can be given two analyses: In one, there is an intransitive verb (looked) followed by a prepositional phrase (at the girl) functioning as adverbial. In the other analysis, implied in the previous section, the prepositional verb *looked at* is a transitive verb and *the girl* is direct object.

### \*Stood near Why is this here?

The two analyses are equally valid ways of looking at the same sentence, and account for different aspects of it. In this chapter, in which we are concerned with complementation of the verb, we adopt the second analysis and consider prepositional verbs to be transitive verbs.

### Ambiguous Sentences

Ambiguous statements or words create vagueness and that constitutes the basis of unintended comedy. Ambiguity is found in the use of word choice. Ambiguity means the use of words, which have several different layers and meanings. For e.g.:

“He loves his pet dog more than his wife”.

### Conclusion

The English language is a living one - the earlier Grammar books are incomplete. Flouting the rules of any language is a healthy attempt. The spelling of 'woman' is changed 'womyn' / wimin /. This is accepted by oxford by the influence of feminists. What does it mean? Basically, English language teachers are communication facilitators and they are incidentally grammar explicators.



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