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English Today / Volume 30 / Issue 04 / December 2014, pp 3 - 4
DOI: 10.1017/S0266078414000327, Published online: 11 November 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0266078414000327

How to cite this article:
Carmen Ebner (2014). The dangling participle – a language myth?. English Today, 30, pp 3-4 doi:10.1017/S0266078414000327

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The dangling participle – a language myth?

CARMEN EBNER

A fifth invitation to contribute to questions studied by the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable Project' at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

Usage problems are a prickly affair. Not only are speakers' attitudes towards them divided and do they tend to fluctuate, but also the problematic statuses of alleged problems are debatable. Hence, studying usage problems sometimes feels like manoeuvring through a minefield. Stepping into the disputed terrain of language use requires a solid understanding of what the subject matter is, as well as what people think about these so-called usage problems.

As a member of the Bridging the Unbridgeable Project, I investigate the general public's attitudes towards usage problems in British English and I have so far collected some first-hand experience in the battlefield of English usage. Treading the fine line between prescriptivism and descriptivism and maintaining the role of an observer is an exciting yet difficult task, as I need to leave my personal judgements aside.

In order to assess the general public's attitudes and judgements of usage problems I created an online questionnaire,[1] which has enabled me to get an insight into what kind of usage people consider problematic, incorrect or perfectly fine and acceptable. A similar study was conducted in the late 1960s by W.H. Mittins and his colleagues at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which facilitates a comparison of attitudes towards usage problems across time (Mittins *et al*., 1970).

One of the usage problems included in my questionnaire was an example of the so-called dangling participle, also known as hanging or unattached participle or simply dangler. Its problem lies in the lack of a subject in the participle clause, which results in a linking of the participle clause to the subject of the following main clause and hence in a mismatch of referents. As a syntactical usage problem, it is often said to cause ambiguity and misunderstandings. But is this really true? Surely the context will provide us with the lacking referent. Is the dangling participle really causing problems?

In Mittins *et al*.'s study the following example was investigated, which after a slight modification was also included in my questionnaire:

Pulling the trigger, the gun went off unexpectedly.

The subject of the main clause – the gun – would be responsible for the action described in the participle clause – the pulling. The participle, therefore, is said to be dangling as it is unattached to a suitable subject, which thus renders the sentence illogical. But what if the sentence was part of a novel and the protagonist Mr Jones was the main agent in the plot. What if the sentence had the following context:

Mr Jones entered the living room with caution, as he knew that the burglar was still in his house. He saw a shadow next to the window and clutched his revolver tightly. Pulling the trigger, the gun



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doi:10.1017/S0266078414000327
English Today 120, Vol. 30, No. 4 (December 2014). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2014 Cambridge University Press

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went off unexpectedly. Mr Jones stood stone-still as the shadow collapsed.

Would you doubt who was pulling the trigger? The gun, the burglar or Mr Jones? Would it be illogical? Mittins and his colleagues assigned the dangling participle to the category 'Language myths, where the censorious tend to invoke a prescription of dubious authority [. . .]' (Mittins *et al*., 1970: 15). This categorisation reflects the debatable status of the dangling participle as a usage problem par excellence. In the survey, the dangling participle achieved only 17% acceptability (Mittins *et al*., 1970: 14).

The 198 respondents of my questionnaire provided me with an insight into what people think today about the dangling participle. Interestingly, the results showed that the acceptability rate has increased to 25.9%, although a majority of 51.5% still considers the sentence unacceptable. Many respondents commented on the ambiguity and lack of clarity caused by the dangling participle, as can be seen in the examples below:

(1) Did the gun pull the trigger? (Female, above 60, retired Primary and EFL teacher)
(2) What was pulling? Sounds weird. (Male, 18–25, student)

On the other hand, we find respondents who mention the occurrence of dangling participles in a literary context, while others simply saw nothing wrong with the sentence itself, as the following examples show.

(1) BY pulling the trigger would be fine – without by I am not sure, but maybe in some kind of literary context (Male, 26–30, Postgraduate student)
(2) Seems OK to me! (Female, above 60, Economist & statistician)

Despite the majority of respondents considering the dangling participle unacceptable, we can still find people standing on the other side of the battle line. From a syntactical point of view, prescriptivists might have won the battle, but the war of the dangling participle is not yet won. What is your opinion on the dangling participle? Does context make up for the lack of a suitable subject? Let us have your thoughts and fill in the questionnaire!

Note

1 The questionnaire can be found at http://properenglishusage.com/the-survey/.

Reference

Mittins, W. H., Salu, M., Edminson, M. & Coyne, S. 1970. *Attitudes to English Usage*. London: Oxford University Press.

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