

Q. In newspaper articles and elsewhere I see the words *between ... to* in sentences in which I used to see *between ... and*: for example, “It’s just a fifteen-minute drive between this town *to* the next.” Shouldn’t that be “between this town *and* the next”? That word *to* makes no sense to me.

A. You are right in both your conclusions: *Between ... and* is a standard English idiom; the recent innovation *between ... to* is not idiomatic standard English, and it does not make sense. Some people incorrectly substitute *between ... to* in sentences like the one submitted. But nobody substitutes an incorrect *between ... to* for *between ... and* in the phrase “between you and me.”

The phrase *between ... to* merges two separate idioms: *from ... to* and *between ... and*. These idioms are correctly used (and highlighted) in the sentences below:

- The students will spend **between** six months **and** a year visiting Europe.
- The students will spend **from** six months **to** a year visiting Europe.

Both of the above sentences are correct, and both make sense. Recently, however, we sometimes see the two idioms merged in sentences like, “The students will spend *between* six months *to* a year visiting Europe.” That construction is incorrect, and it doesn’t make sense.

But the fact that an idiom makes no sense may not prevent its becoming popular. The nonsensical statement, “I could care less,” has become a popular expression created by dropping the negative *n’t* from “I couldn’t care less.” The original, “I couldn’t care less” meant that the individual cares not at all; but by removing the negative *n’t* the sentence means that the individual does care, a meaning opposite to the intended meaning. Consider also what has been done to the traditional idiom, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating,” which—due to the deletion of a few words—is now misstated as, “The proof is in the pudding,” implying that some small token has been

placed into the pudding.

Linguists call mismatched idioms blends because they form a merger of two idioms by attaching the first part of one idiom to the second part of another. You may have noticed that *between ... and* is also changed to *between ... or*. A recent newspaper article announced that buyers of General Motors cars can now choose “*between* bargain prices on new cars *or* huge rebates.” In that mismatch, the two idioms—*either ... or* and *between ... and*—are merged. Another reporter criticized the state supreme court for failing to cite an individual for perjury, writing, “It would have been better to compel the accused individual to choose between perjured testimony *or* assistance of counsel.”

The traditional idioms *more ... than* and *as ... as* are sometimes changed, creating the incorrect blend as *much ... than*, or *as likely ... than*, or even *as wide ... than*. In an item headed “Suicide Rate Increases in Young Adults,” the editorial announced ungrammatically, “Young adults aged 20 to 24 are twice *as* likely to die of suicide *than* their elders.” And an airline agency reported that today’s fliers needed seating space twice *as* wide *than* their parents did 50 years ago.

Although the phrase *both ... and*, as in “Bring *both* pencils *and* erasers,” is well-established, sometimes journalists substitute just one word: *plus* (“Bring pencils *plus* erasers”). But wordy educators have added an incorrect “plus” to “both ... and.” The result: “Bring *both* pencils *plus* erasers.” Another tautology: adding the word *rather* to the traditional idiom *more ... than*, resulting in, “Japanese companies put *more* emphasis on improving the company image *rather than* shareholders’ profits.”

In all living languages, new blends are often short-lived. Those that survive become so much a part of our

vocabulary that later generations do not realize they were once neologisms. You may be surprised to learn that the verb *twirl* is a combination of *twist* and *whirl*. From *flash* and *blush* came *flush*. If you are younger than 30, you may not recognize *brunch* as a merger of *breakfast* and *lunch*. How about *motel*, the combination of *motor* and *hotel*? And of course the all-popular *cheeseburger* blends *cheese* with *hamburger*. Finally, the adjective *mingy*, recently coined by *Time* magazine, combines *mean* and *stingy*. Only time will determine its permanence.

During a presidential election, Sen. Tom Daschle created the word *prebuttal* to describe the Democratic response to President Bush’s following address. That blend combined the noun *rebuttal* with the preposition *pre*. *Time* magazine added the same preposition to the French word *sequel*, which had been adopted into English during the Middle English period (circa 13th century). This addition gave Modern English the word *prequel*, defined as “a new work, preceding a similar former work.”

Finally, a reporter dubbed Roger Federer’s third-straight singles-match win a *threepeat*, after his victory at Wimbledon on July 3, 2005. Another new word is now needed to describe Federer’s current accomplishments.

More on idioms: Why do we say a *10-foot pole* instead of a *10-feet pole*, when we also say that a pole is *10 feet long*? It’s because the *10-foot pole* idiom originally described the length of a single human foot. As a result, we say that our cat gets underfoot, though it may have gotten under both feet. One uses both feet to walk on a footpath, and walking too far may make both of our feet footsore. Other idioms derived from the original one are *foot soldiers*, *swift of foot*, and *foothold*. The same answer solves the question, “Why do we say *10 dollars*, but a *10-dollar gift*”? **TFL**

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