

Q. Is there a chance you could do something in your column about the correct use of *nor*? Is it proper only when preceded by *neither*, or is it all right to use it alone, as in, “There was no candy in the jar, nor was there any in the cupboard.”?

A. Senior Deputy County Counsel Judy Luby of Monterey Park, Calif., asked this question, which I cannot recall having been asked before, although I’ve frequently seen both *nor* and *neither/nor* used incorrectly.

First, if you use the words *neither ... nor* to connect two singular subjects, the verb you use must be singular: “Neither a bluebird nor a robin is commonly seen here in the winter.” If *neither ... nor* connects two plural subjects, the verb must be plural: “Neither rumors nor people’s memories are found to be reliable.” (This rule applies also to other pairs: *either ... or* and *not only ... but also*.)

But suppose one of the pairs is singular and the other is plural, what do you do? For example, what is the correct verb in the following sentence? “Neither rumor nor people’s memories is/are found to be reliable.” In that situation the rule is that the subject closer to the verb decides the number of the verb, so in the sentence cited above, you would choose *are*. Grammarians often dub this convention the “rule of attraction”—that is, the number of the closer noun “attracts” the number of the verb.

However, if applying the rule of attraction results in a sentence that sounds awkward, I would merely change the order of the subjects of the verb to avoid that result. Applying the rule to the same sentence when the subjects are reversed would result in what I consider an awkward statement: “Neither people’s memories nor rumor is found to be reliable.”

The word *nor* may be used alone, as long as the clause containing *nor* contains no other negative. “She has committed no misdemeanor, *nor* has she been accused of one.” The word *nor* is the only negative in the clause in which it is found, although there is a negative in the previous clause. Had the word *one* been replaced by *none*,

there would have been two negatives in that clause so it would have been ungrammatical (and confusing) to say: “She has committed no misdemeanor, nor has she been accused of none.”

Therefore, if you do use a negative (like *no*, *none*, *nothing*, or *never*) in a clause, be sure that all other verbs and expressions in that clause are positive:

- No injury occurred to *either* passenger.
- He has *never* attended *any* meetings.
- *None* of the participants requested further help.

Q. A word that was once only a noun, but that I now often see as a verb, is *disrespect*. When did it become a verb and is it currently considered correct?

A. I don’t know exactly when it became a verb, but *disrespect* is not listed as a verb in the 1985 edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary (AHD)*. It is listed as a verb, however, in *Webster’s* third edition, published in 1993. The reader is right that the word is now widely used as a verb. It is so common that it is often abbreviated (in the past tense) to *dissed*, as in “He dissed me.” The abbreviation *dissed* is not listed in *Webster’s* third edition, but it may soon be—as either slang or colloquial usage.

The abbreviation *dis* parallels the similar shortening of other words that have become popular. The noun *metamorphosis* became a respectable verb—to *metamorphose*—and then was shortened to *morph*, which is colloquial. The noun *pornography* became an adjective—*pornographic*—and then, in an abbreviation of the original noun, it was listed as *porno* in the 1985 edition of *AHD*. Since then the word has dropped the second *o* and has become *porn*.

That’s the way of language; its speakers change it to suit their whims. Before 2002, we used *embed* only when referring to objects. During the war in Iraq, the military began to *embed* human beings into operations abroad. Finally we created the noun *embed* from the verb, so we now have human *embeds*.

When words change and enter new categories, readers send indignant e-mail. Some time ago I quoted a university administrator who complained that a fellow-administrator was “just desk-ing in his office.” Readers protested. One wrote, “If *desk-ing* is okay, why not, ‘I *office* here and *administrate* next door.’” On checking, I found that, in fact, the verb *office* is not new, having appeared in *The Nation* in 1892 in the locution, “An attorney officing in the same building. ...” (But my spell checker still protests that word.)

The verb *administrate*, a back-formation, is newer. First came the verb *administer*. From the verb we got the noun *administration*. Then from that noun, came the back-formation, the verb *to administrate*. That new verb is unnecessary, and it now often replaces the perfectly good original verb *administer*.

The process of back-formation has created other unnecessary verbs like *orientate* (from the original verb *orient* to the noun *orientation* and back *to orientate*). The verb *to obligate* is a back-formation that began with the verb *to oblige*. Back-formation has also given us the silly verb *to notate*, from *notation*, the noun form of the original verb *to note*. But such is the way of words—or perhaps, more accurately, those who speak them. **TFL**

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