Q: I'm curious about the phrase *a long ways*, which often replaces *a long way*. Is it grammatical to add a plural noun to the singular article *a*?

A: No, only in colloquial English, not in standard English. The word *way* entered Old English through Gothic before 1300, as the verb *wegan*, which meant "to move." As is common in English, the verb soon became a noun (*weg*), which originally meant "movement," but then the noun expanded to mean "a thoroughfare designed for transportation." That meaning is still listed as one of the many synonyms that dictionaries currently list for *way*. W*ebster's* devotes almost a full page to defining the noun *way*.

But how did *way* take on that *s*? Ernest Weekley's usually helpful *Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* says only that *ways* is interchangeable with *-wise* in expressions "likewise" and "endwise." Perhaps *ways* came into English by analogy to *sideways*, which corresponds in meaning to *sidewise*. The expression *a long ways from home* has been colloquial English at least as far back as the l8th century.

Webster's Third classifies the adverb *anyways* as archaic, but the dictionary's Usage Panel must not have had its ear to the ground: *Anyways* is alive and healthy colloquially, though it is not standard English. It seems to have originated as an alternate to *anyway* in New England but has spread throughout the United States. Like its counterpart, it means, "in any case." But because *a long ways* has been used so often for so long it has become idiomatic and is used freely in informal speech.

But why add an unnecessary *s* to a perfectly good word? To paraphrase Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof," "I'll tell you—I don't know."

Typically, in standard English, the opposite tendency is more likely to occur. For example, in the phrase *there's* (contraction of *there is*) many people use a plural noun, as in, "There's many issues with the electoral college." But the plural noun follows the singular phrase *there is* only when it is abbreviated to *there's*. See, for example, the comment of a local television reporter about a sold-out football game, "There's more tickets sold than there are seats in the stadium." Like the reporter, most speakers follow *there's* with a singular noun, but use the correct and traditional plural noun after *there are*.

Traditionally the word *there* in the phrase *there is* or *there are* has no number; it always adopts the number of the noun it precedes. So the current usage of *there's* followed by a plural noun, though common, is not yet standard English.

Plural verbs are likely after singular nouns if those nouns are collective nouns. For example, when you say "A variety of results are possible," you are adding a plural verb to the singular (collective) noun *variety*. The collective noun *number* is followed by the plural verb *were* in the expression: "A number of people were present." Some other collective nouns are *class, board, minority, jury, company,* and *group*.

Q: Is the word *irregardless* now standard English? I sometimes see it used in opinions written by learned jurists.

A: The law professor who asked this question could not give me any direct quotations of that usage, but he suggested that if *irregardless* is proper English, it would provide an illustration of the two negatives, *regardless* and *irregardless* as synonymous.

The English language does have a few pairs whose affirmatives and negatives are synonyms. The pair *raveled* and *unraveled* are synonyms; *flammable* and *inflammable* share a single meaning, as do *radiate* and *irradiate*. Readers have contributed two additional pairs that are not as well-known: *fend* and *defend* and *personate* and *impersonate*.

But *irregardless*, which begins with the negative prefix *ir-* and ends with the negative suffix *-less* is not standard English and will probably not attain that rank any time soon, despite the tendency of English speakers to add extra negatives. President Bush delighted the press when he added a second negative prefix to coin the verb *misunderestimate*.

On the other hand, some people omit a necessary negative in the expression, "I could care less," which should be, "I couldn't care less" (meaning, "I care not at all"). When you say "I could care less," you are really saying that you do care, at least a little.

Negative statements are usually not as forceful as affirmative statements. The statement, "I am not unaware of his good points," is hardly a glowing tribute to the person concerned. When you say, "I am not unwilling to concede …" you do not mean that you are happy to concede. A good illustration of negative writing is the original Model Penal Code (§ 501(2)). The negatives are highlighted: "Without *negativing* the sufficiency of other conduct, the following, if strongly corroborative of the actor's criminal purpose, *shall not* be held *insufficient* as a matter of law."

Here is a later revision of the code, with the negatives deleted: "Although other conduct may also suffice, the following conduct, if strongly corroborative of the actor's criminal purpose, shall be held sufficient as a matter of law." The positive statement says the same thing as the negative statement, and it is clearer, shorter, and more forceful. **TFL**

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