

Q. “Presidential candidate Mike Huckabee used the word *irregardless* in his comments during the political campaign. Joe Biden later used the phrase *a long ways*. Are these expressions correct grammar?”

A. No. Language becomes “correct” (that is, standard English) only after the following criteria are satisfied: The language is in *current, wide use by educated speakers*. Neither expression the reader asked about has reached that status. However, dictionaries regard *a long ways* as a substitute in colloquial, informal usage for *a long way*.

The word *irregardless* is labeled “nonstandard.” Most educated speakers consider *irregardless* a nonword because of its double negative. *Webster’s Third* suggests that the double negative resulted from a blend of the suffix *-less* in *regardless* and the negative prefix *ir-* (as in *irrespective*). However, my guess is that people who say *irregardless* are probably not the people who use the word *irrespective*.

The reader who sent the question labeled both expressions “improper perversions [that] should never, never be used,” and she added: “Just writing this has made my teeth ache.” If that reaction is typical, neither expression will be considered standard for some time.

But double negatives are not uncommon in English. During one speech, President George W. Bush coined the word *misunderestimate*—to the delight of the reporters present. Sometimes, however, prefixes that look like negatives are not. The *in* of *invaluable* is not a negative; it is an intensifier, boosting the meaning of *valuable*. The *in-* prefix causes *invaluable* to indicate an item so valuable that its worth cannot be measured. To convey a negative meaning to *valuable*, you must add the negative *-less* at the end, giving you *valueless*. (But the English language is sometimes unpredictable; if you add the same negative (*-less*) to the noun *price*, you get *priceless*, which means “so valuable that its worth cannot be calculated.”)

Adding *in-*, *im-*, *ir-*, and *un-* to most adjectives usually does create a negative, as in *ineffective*, *imperfect*, *irreplaceable*, and *unreliable*. But in other adjectives—like *incandescent*, *intumescent*, and *incalescent*—the affix *in-* acts as an intensifier to increase the meaning of the adjective to which it is attached, not as a negative.

How do we decide whether to add *in-*, *im-*, or *ir-* to a word? Because we all have “lazy” tongues, we choose affixes that make the transition easy for our tongue to move from one sound to another. If you change the prefixes in the adjectives listed above, you will find that the correct prefix allows your tongue to slide easily from one sound to the next. In language we are all conservationists.

However, there are a few exceptions: The words *flammable* and *inflammable* as well as *radiate* and *irradiate* have the same meaning with or without a prefix. Both *plant* and *implant* mean “to fix or set firmly in position,” although the negative form is almost never used, except in landscape terminology.

From the Mailbag

Several readers have sent in linguistic “blends” they saw in the news. One new word is *frienemies*, which describes the current relationship between Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico and former President Bill Clinton, which is said to have begun when Gov. Richardson endorsed Sen. Barack Obama instead of Sen. Hillary Clinton during the Democratic primary campaign. The neologism *frienemies* combines “friends” and “enemies,” seeming to indicate erstwhile friends who have become enemies.

Another new compound is *greenmail*, which a reader detected in a recent issue of *Time* magazine. The word is a blend of *green* (the first half of the

compound noun *greenback*) and *mail* (the second half of *blackmail*). *Greenmail* refers to the practice of buying a large block of a company’s stock in order to force a rise in the price of stock to thwart a possible takeover. (However, to some readers, that term must be ambiguous because the adjective *green* now also refers to environmentally favorable products.)

Another noun, *schlub*, is not listed in the 1996 edition of Webster’s Third, but it appears online in the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2000 edition), where it is defined as “a stupid, clumsy person.” The noun is similar in meaning to *schmo*, *schmuck*, and *schlemiel*—all of Polish Yiddish origin and derivation. A reader found *schlub* in a *New York Times* column, which rhetorically asked, “A schlub beneath your sink?”

But the noun *schlub* has dramatically improved in meaning because of the celebrity of one “Joe the Plumber.” The image of a *schlub*, who spends his visits under your sink or unclogging your toilet, has disappeared, and the “schlub” has become a celebrity. **TFL**

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