Q: Should we insist on retaining words that make unimportant distinctions? For example, in your March column, you answered a reader's question about the difference between the verbs *loan* and *lend*. (They differ only in that *loan* is a noun and *lend* is a verb.) When almost everyone now uses *loan* as both noun and verb, why keep the verb *lend*?

A: That's a good question. Apparently, a large majority of Americans agrees with you that *lend* is not important, for it is mostly ignored. Your question could be expanded to, "Should we only keep language distinctions that make a difference?" One word has already virtually disappeared from some word-pairs: the *as* of the pair *like/as*; the *whom* of the pair *who/whom*; and the *well* of the pair *good/well*.

As began to disappear long before that old ad, "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." In that ad, the word *like* (a preposition) is ungrammatical; the word *as* (a conjunction) is correct. So the idiomatic "*like* I said" should be "*as* I said." The sentence, "It felt *like* a dream" is correct, but "I felt *like* I was dreaming" is not. It's correct to say, "He looks *like* my brother," but not "He looks *like* he could be my brother. That should be "He looks *as if* he were my brother." There is no semantic reason to retain *as* or *as if*, only a grammatical one: *as* is a conjunction, and those few people who observe the grammatical rule are the only ones who insist on *as if*.

Even fewer Americans observe the grammatical rule of *who/whom*, and those who try to often get it wrong. "The person who sent the letter" is correct, but "The person who the letter was sent to" is not, because *who* is the subjective form; *whom* is the objective form. (That also explains the requirement for "between you and me," instead of "between you and I," although the latter is heard more often.)

Not many Americans choose the correct objective pronoun (*me*) when it is the object of a verb, but the minority vociferously derides the majority who does not. Some Democrats ridiculed President George W. Bush when he said, "The prime minister entertained my wife and I at dinner." But that isn't just a Republican error. President Obama made the same mistake, when in a recent speech he incorrectly said *I* instead of *me*. The op-ed page of *The New York Times* was immediately inundated with indignant mail. One reader wrote, "Of all the grammatical errors Americans make, the fingernail-across-the-chalkboard is using 'I' instead of 'me' as an object. ... I know that President Obama is capable of correcting that in his oratory. Now let's hope that all the rest of our fellow Americans will take note and alter their own usage accordingly." Another reader wrote: "I have spent a lot of time pointing out this egregious misusage; thus, I am gratified that it has now been given exposure." (Imagine the chagrin that poor man felt when the newly appointed secretary of education made the very same error in his acceptance speech!)

The same problem exists with the traditional distinction between *good* and *well*, which has long been taught and almost never observed. Our grammatical system is the problem: *well* is an adverb that is correctly used after "linking verbs," the most common of these is the verb *be*. Others are verbs like *taste*, *feel*, *seem*, *look*, and *appear*. Use an adjective after these, but use an adverb after all other verbs. So you would say, "I felt good," but "I did badly." The best illustration to show the difference between linking and common verbs is the famous comment about the founder of the Dole Corporation who "went to Hawaii to do good, and did well."

You can probably think of other distinctions for which there seems little reason: *different than/different from*; *which/that*; *lie/lay*; *between/among*; *shrank/shrunk*; *affect/effect*; and *bring/take*. Which—if any—of these would you retain and which—if any—would you ignore? People who are over age 50 might want to retain them all; people under age 30 might prefer to drop them all. Do you stand somewhere in between? Send me your thoughts.

But if you drop other distinctions—the semantic ones—you lose nuances in meaning. How about ignoring the difference in verbs like *bring* and *take*? The modern tendency is to drop *take*, substituting *bring*. But the two words are not synonyms. They are distinguishable by the orientation of the speaker (a situation sometimes called "aspect"). *Bring* something to me, if I am at home or wherever I am, but *take* it to my home or elsewhere if I am not there.

The semantic difference in other pairs is also being lost: for example, the difference between *credible* and *credulous*. Actions can be *credible* ("believable"), but only persons can be *credulous* (believing too readily, thus "gullible"). *Ingenious* means "clever," but *ingenuous* means "naïve." *Historical* means "occurring in history"; *historic* means "important to history." *Fame* is achieved "for honorable behavior"; *notoriety* is achieved by being "well-known for dishonorable behavior."

The distinction between *enormity* and *immensity* is being forgotten. President Obama recently used *enormity* to mean something extremely large; but it means something that is enormously wicked. The unrelated words *reluctant* and *reticent* resemble each other only slightly, yet journalists often use *reticent* ("characteristically reserved") to mean *reluctant* ("hesitant or unwilling"). Even lawyers sometimes forget the difference between *precedent* and *precedence*, using *precedence* ("priority") for *precedent* ("a judicial decision that may provide the basis for future decisions").

Changes in language are ongoing and unavoidable. The majority always wins out; but it seems to me that, at least in our own usage, we should retain important distinctions and even challenge errors. **TFL**

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