Microsoft Grammar and Style Checker ('Consider Revising')

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Another in a series of invitations to contribute to questions studied by the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable Project' at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

I had never given much consideration to the influence of the Microsoft Word grammar and style checker on the average Microsoft Word user. Perhaps that is because I never felt quite bothered by it; as someone who has studied English for almost twenty years now, I always felt I could make my own decisions when it comes to grammar and style matters in English. This feeling, however, changed recently when, in a matter of days, the Microsoft Word grammar and style checker on my recently purchased laptop started disliking all my passive constructions, and suggested that I should replace them with active clauses.[1] I was not impressed. (And even as I am writing this, a lot of the passive constructions in this text are underlined as 'errors'.)

One of the sentences in question was: 'The purpose of a usage guide writer is thus strikingly contradictory to that of a linguist, as it goes against the principle of objectively describing language as it is used by speakers.' The suggestion from the grammar and style checker was that the sentence should end with 'as speakers use it'. I did not see a problem with my original construction, so I left it as it was. It did, however, make me think about the possible reasons behind this sort of suggestion. I was reminded of Geoffrey Pullum's 2014 article on the 'fear and loathing of the English passive' that is ubiquitous in public discourse on language nowadays. The problem with such condemnation of the passive, Pullum notes, is that there seems to be 'rampant confusion about what "passive" means linguistically.' (Pullum, 2014: 61) That is exactly what I thought – right before deciding to ignore the suggestion – when the grammar checker underlined my passive: it must be 'confused'. But there is much more to this than my brief annoyance

with the green squiggly line, as the grammar and style checker cannot really be 'confused' about what a passive construction is linguistically in the same way that speakers might be. There are two very important issues that arise from this kind of experience. First, how does the Microsoft Word grammar and style checker decide what to flag as an 'error'? And if such 'errors' are stylistic rather than linguistic, whose recommendations form the basis of the error-flagging process? Second, is everyone as dismissive of the grammar checker's suggestions as I am, or are people significantly affected by it because the squiggly line makes them insecure?

These questions have been raised before, although scholarship on the effects of the Microsoft Word grammar and style checker is still rather limited. In a recent thought-provoking discussion on the subject, Anne Curzan (2014) rightly raises the question of the effects of the Microsoft Word grammar and style

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checker on users and, consequently, on language use in general. Thus, I felt obliged, as a user of Microsoft Word, to look into the way in which the program's grammar and style checker works. What interested me even more was the basis of the stylistic suggestions offered by the program. The flagging of the passive construction does not seem to be based on the grammatical unacceptability of the construction, but on its supposed stylistic inadequacy, which echoes some of the prescriptivist condemnations of the passive (see, for instance, Strunk, 1918). The grammar and style settings of Microsoft Word contain a list of twenty-six areas which are checked for potential errors; these settings allow users to select the particular areas they want to have checked. It is obvious from that list – which includes anything from capitalisation and punctuation to passives, clichés and wordiness – that these areas are indeed not entirely about grammatically possible sentences in English, but quite often about style. At the same time, it is not quite clear what kinds of sources form the basis of these stylistic suggestions. Curzan notes that some influential usage guides in English, such as the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, have been consulted for the purposes of developing and improving the Microsoft Word grammar and style checker; the way in which those sources are used, however, remains unclear (Curzan, 2014: 76–77).

Examining the experiences of users may thus reveal quite a lot about the actual influence of the grammar and style checker on people's perceptions about language use. Do people accept the program's suggestions uncritically, or do they engage with it and adapt the settings based on their own stylistic preferences? Do they alter their sentences just to make the squiggly line disappear or do they turn the grammar checker off completely? To find out, I have launched a short survey on the topic; readers are invited to contribute by filling out the survey available at http://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/english-today/. All feedback will be greatly appreciated and the findings will be presented on the Bridging the Unbridgeable blog.

Note

1 A blog post containing the sentences which the checker did not like was published on the Bridging the Unbridgeable Blog and is available online at: http://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2015/03/25/fragment-consider-revising/

References

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