
The intrusive hyphen is everywhere

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Is seemingly indiscriminate hyphen use symptomatic of current language change?

When can a hyphen be described as ‘intrusive’? As with many other ‘rules’ of grammar and of punctuation, use of the hyphen is limited to a specific syntactical context. Hence, to use a hyphen where it should not be used makes it intrusive. Just like the apostrophe, it cannot be used arbitrarily. There is, for instance, a tattooist parlour in the English town of Oldham whose shopfront advertises *Inkcredible Tatoon’s* (sic) and, with it, both the owner’s or owners’ ability to play on words in writing and their inability to sign a plural form correctly – the rule being that apostrophes are not used to mark the plural of either common or proper nouns in written English.

So what is the rule for hyphen use and when does such use become intrusive? Hyphens are used to disambiguate and highlight ‘chunks of meaning’. Were it not for a hyphen in writing, the sentence *They were able to obtain key data and follow up information on developments* could be interpreted in two ways: either both key data and subsequent related information were acquired; or the people in question, having acquired the data, could also pursue matters further. The addition of a hyphen (linking *follow* and *up*) makes clear which meaning is intended.

Hyphens are also commonly found in pre-modifying, attributive, phrases that have an adjectival function with respect to the following noun, for example: *out-of-work plasterer*, *seventeen-year-old trainee* or *state-of-the-art technology*. Typically, in such ‘compound modifiers’, hyphens are employed to chunk the meaning, i.e. indicate the semantic connection between the pre-modifying words, grouping these together to ensure unambiguity of expression. This is especially the case with three-word noun phrases

(TWNPs) consisting of modifier, adjective or functional adjective, and noun.¹

That the incorporation of a hyphen helps to remove uncertainty of meaning in written sentences is apparent from the following two examples:

- a. *This is a set of fine tuned instruments*
- b. *This is a set of fine-tuned instruments.*

In a. the writer (or speaker if we are looking at a quotation) is making a positive value judgement about the quality of the tuned instruments under review: in his or her opinion, they are exceptional. In b., by contrast, the writer is offering an objective description of the type of instruments to hand: they have been subjected to fine tuning, i.e. small adjustments have been made to them to enhance their performance. The semantic correlation for each of the two TWNPs found in a. and b., might



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thus be described as *fine + tuned instruments* and *fine-tuned + instruments* respectively, as the hyphen signals in writing. In both cases, *fine + tuned* have an attributive role with respect to *instruments*.

There is another point to be made here, though, which impacts directly on the question of hyphens being used erroneously, in violation of the rules. Although *fine* in b. is adjectival in form, it functions adverbially in this phrase, modifying another functional adjective that is in essence verbal (i.e. a past participle). It is for this reason that it is customary to include the hyphen in writing in such contexts: to indicate, firstly, that the two terms preceding the noun which together they modify are related in their attributive role (as stated) and, secondly, that the initial modifying term in this relationship is of a different grammatical category to the one normally associated with its word class or 'lexical category', which is not obvious at first sight (unlike the verbal adjective that it modifies).²

This lack of obviousness is important since, more often than not, adverbs are identifiable from the suffix *-ly* (*accurately, broadly, correctly*, etc.). However, there is a set of adverbs that do not terminate in this way, being indistinguishable from adjectives. Examples here include *fast, hard, long* and *well*. Yet, precisely because their word class is not obvious, a hyphen is incorporated in writing to highlight the semantic relationship/joint modifying function before the noun, thus: *fast-paced, hard-working, long-lasting* and *well-earned*. The only exceptions to this are so-called adverbs of degree, typically *very*, as in *very worn tyres, quite*, as in *quite heated discussions, rather*, as in *rather bold statements*, and *somewhat*, as in *somewhat outdated attitudes*.

Similarly, some adjectives end in *ly*. Notable instances in this case are *friendly* and *likely*, and again, to indicate their word class, the hyphen is added in writing before the noun, e.g. *friendly-seeming* and *likely-looking*. The same is also true of a limited number of nouns: *assembly, family, monopoly*, etc. Hence, we can see written: *assembly-based, family-run*, and *monopoly-controlled*.

It is very evident that the orthographic intention of including a hyphen is to rule out any other possible interpretations of meaning, preventing the reader, say, from assuming – especially with the adverbial use of adjectives – that the writer is passing judgement on the object described, as occurs in a. Indeed, the inclusion of the hyphen, as found in b., makes the precise meaning here, in fact, synonymous with the phrase:

c. *This is a set of finely tuned instruments.*

And this wording literally spells out the relationship of the two terms preceding the phrase-final noun, without the need for additional marking as provided by hyphenation, because the appended suffix *-ly* makes clear the attributive relationship. From this it follows that *finely*, already marked as an adverb by the suffix *-ly*, will never require *as a general rule of written English* any further orthographic intervention to indicate its adverbial function. The use of hyphens after the suffix *-ly* is therefore otiose. Increased clarity of expression is not provided by their inclusion. And while such inclusion does not inevitably obfuscate understanding, as the unnecessary addition of an apostrophe might (as with *it's* instead of *its*), nevertheless the incorporation of a hyphen into phrases involving adverbs ending in *ly* is totally redundant. Communicatively, it adds nothing to improve the meaning of written English.

Hence, the rule for hyphen inclusion in TWNPs is that only adjectives and nouns, and adverbs not ending in *ly* (excepting adverbs of degree), require the hyphen after them; adverbs ending in *ly* do not. Otherwise, the hyphen becomes intrusive.³

Such concentration on 'the rules' may suggest an overly prescriptive bent at work here, often perceived negatively as a sign of linguistic purism. Rather than adopting this view, the reader is advised to regard this focus more as an observation of the extent to which current English may or may not be changing. Unsurprisingly, given the niceties of English grammar and punctuation, which can be confusing at the best of times and no less so in this instance, there appears to be widespread misuse – or arbitrary use, if you will – of the hyphen. Can this be attributed to general confusion among a populace not necessarily well versed or, indeed, schooled in the finer points of English grammar and punctuation? It may very well be, but what is surprising is the level at which the intrusive hyphen manifests itself. In short, the intrusive hyphen is everywhere, not just at 'street level'.

Writing online in *Quartz* on August 1, 2017 about the economic impact of driverless vehicles, for instance, Cathy Engelbert, CEO of Deloitte US, states that 'The trucking industry faces a seemingly-chronic shortage of commercially licensed drivers'. In a similar vein, Jonty Bloom, business correspondent for BBC News, writes on the latter's website, on August 9, 2017, of 'genetically-modified (GM) crops, where America thinks the EU approvals process is far too complicated.' In addition, on the official website of American author Michael Lewis, it is

said of his 2018 book *The Coming Storm*: ‘Lewis’s narrative reveals the potential cost of putting a price tag on information with the potential to save lives, raising questions about balancing public service with profits in an ethically-ambiguous atmosphere.’

Quality British newspapers too are not immune to the intrusive hyphen. For example, in the *i* of 18 April, 2018, you find printed: ‘a hastily-arranged meeting’ (p. 7), ‘a fully-fledged issue’ (p. 53), ‘publicly-funded tests’ (p. 56) and ‘specially-trained dogs’ (pp. 49, 56). A week later on 25 April, you read of ‘Disney’s most heavily-guarded and secured event’ (p. 13) and ‘deeply-held prejudices’ (p. 18). This intrusiveness even extends to the concise crossword of this date, with ‘Lightly-perfumed liquid’ (p. 45) being offered as a clue. What is more, it is not as if these quotations were lifted from readers’ letters, which might be more reflective of a less informed written style; rather, the first example is from the political editor, Nigel Morris, and another, this time on 2 May (‘liberally-minded Tories’), is from a journalist, Katy Balls, who also writes for the weekly politics and current affairs magazine *The Spectator*.⁴

The situation is little different in quality magazines. Among the pages of that ‘esteemed organ’, the UK’s popular news and current affairs magazine *Private Eye*, renowned for its high-quality satirical content and investigative journalism, random misuse of the hyphen can also be found. As with any newspaper, this may be due to the contributing author of the piece; nevertheless, in issue 1477 of 24 August–6 Sept, 2018, you can read of a ‘hugely-publicised car-crash’ in the ‘TV Eye’ section by ‘Remote Controller’ (p. 12); in issue 1480 of the ‘new, locally-based electricity supply company’ in ‘Mark his words ...’ by ‘Old Sparky’ (p. 39); in issue 1481 of the ‘suitably-named Harry’ in ‘Rich Pickings’ in the ‘HP Sauce’ section (p. 11); and in issue 1483 of the ‘newly-installed chairman’ and ‘recently-released memoir’ in ‘Paul v Al Face Off!’ in the ‘Street of Shame’ section (p. 10).⁵

Academic writing is not exempt from the intrusive hyphen, either. To take just one example: in the case of the ‘meme’, the coiner of the term, Richard Dawkins, and his ideological opponent, Alistair McGrath, are both guilty – or their proof-readers and editors are – of allowing the hyphen to intrude into their written argument. Dawkins writes in his work *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) of ‘precisely-coded digital information’ (p. xiii), while McGrath refers in *Dawkins’ God* (2005) to the ‘scientifically-informed person’ (p. 16). It seems unlikely that a typesetter should suddenly

decide to add a hyphen at these points in the text, but not throughout.

A comparable situation can be seen in the area of literary review. Writing in his 2001 introduction to Philip K. Dick’s novel *The Man in the High Castle*, present-day author Eric Brown regularly employs an intrusive hyphen, making reference to ‘badly-written space adventures’ (p. v), ‘fully-realized characters’ (pp. vii, x) and ‘fully-developed characters’ (p. xii).

While not a written medium as such, British television also evinces misuse of the hyphen. And at times subtitles seem to endorse free use of hyphens as if unrestricted deployment were the norm. Likewise, hyphens intrude regularly in written questions and clues on TV quizzes and panel shows. For example, on the British TV quiz show ‘The Chase’ broadcast on April 6, 2018, one of the questions was ‘Which of these critically-acclaimed films was the earliest?’ followed by a choice of three titles. Similarly, on the BBC panel show ‘Have I Got News for You’ broadcast on April 20, 2018, a question in the ‘Missing Words Round’ read ‘Unfortunately-placed exhaust pipe ruins ...’ – with an ellipsis left to complete the missing phrase but, sadly, no lacuna left in the modifier; instead, the hyphen itself unfortunately placed.

The intrusive hyphen also appears in public pamphlets. In Oxfam’s newsletter *Inside Oxfam*, Spring 2018, for example, we find reference to ‘poorly-paid and insecure work’ (p. 27). And in the charity War on Want’s journal *up front* of Autumn/Winter 2018, we read of a ‘weakly-worded human rights policy’ (p. 5). In the same way, the TV listings magazine, the BBC-related *Radio Times* of 22–28 September 2018 refers to ‘rarely-viewed interviews’ (p. 105) in relation to its programme ‘Manson: the Lost Tapes’.⁶

If, as it would appear, then, want of education is not the reason for today’s apparently liberal use of the hyphen, what might explain its frequent occurrence? Might this be evidence of the English language in flux?

This is not so extreme a claim as might first appear. Other contemporary instances of ‘rule violation’ include the progressive use of so-called state or stative verbs (*I’m loving it*) and change of word class as found in the nominalization of common verbs not normally encountered as nouns, e.g. *a big ask* or *a good watch*, where the latter example involves the creation of a new noun with a different meaning from previously.⁷ Furthermore, discounting the possibility of hyphen intrusion being attributable to typographic error (the sheer frequency

and manner of occurrence belie this), there may be any number of reasons for such change: analogy, confusion, laziness, naturalness, or a combination of some or all of these factors.

With respect to **analogy**, Trask (2010) shows how the English plural has become simplified (if not altogether standardized) over the centuries as a result of speakers gradually applying the principle of s-addition to nouns. He writes, ‘we human beings adore analogy. Every one of us is eager to see patterns in the world, and language is no exception. And this desire to find patterns can lead us innocently into changing our language.’ (p. 35) In light of this, one could conceivably argue that the principle of hyphen insertion is due to writers overgeneralizing usage where pre-modifying adverbs are concerned, through drawing an analogy with adjectives, nouns and, of course, adverbs not ending in *-ly*.⁸ This process is referred to as ‘analogical levelling’, which Bybee (2015) describes as occurring ‘when the new form eliminates an alternation that existed in the older form’ (p. 94). The ‘older form’ in this instance would be the hyphen inclusion rule.

Where **confusion** is concerned, it would seem evident that, where the rules of grammar and punctuation are based on subtle differentiations that are not immediately obvious, writers of English, even well-educated ones, cannot be relied upon generally to understand the rule and apply it appropriately. As Chapman (2010) comments, ‘Prescriptions that depend on fine-grained distinctions would seem less likely to be repeated’, arguing that such a distinction might not be ‘easy to maintain in actual language use’ (p. 151). In the present case it seems quite probable that the niceties of punctuation involved might be unclear to many people and therefore easily misunderstood and misapplied, especially if one considers how, in written British English, the spellings of the noun *practice* and the verb *practise* are frequently confused (with the verbal forms *to practice*, *practiced*, etc. frequently found), as are *affect* and *effect* (with the two often interchanged) – even though, in both cases here, there is only an either/ or option to choose between the two spellings.⁹

On investigating **laziness** as a possible reason for language change, Trask (2010) prefers to speak in terms of ‘impatience’ or ‘ease’ as a motivating force, as witnessed in speakers’ preference for shorter lexical items (e.g. *DDT* instead of *dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane*). Interestingly, in the present case, he writes, ‘A splendid example from English is the adverbial ending *-ly*, [...] which was originally the word *like*’ (24), whereby *slow-like* was reduced to *slowly* due to ‘natural

impatience’. One might take from this that all variation in the application of pre-modifying hyphenation is seemingly being reduced to a generalization (i.e. insert a hyphen everywhere), with writers too impatient to consider the rule and preferring the ease of universal insertion. The result takes the form of ‘sloppy writing’.

Regarding **naturalness**, Chapman (2010) notes how ‘Frequent constructions may well appear natural, and therefore unobjectionable.’ (p. 145). One can see how this idea of what seems natural may derive by analogy with similar constructions and how a general pattern becomes established.

With this in mind, it is not difficult to appreciate how these factors might combine to induce change in the language: analogy can take effect where confusion prevails or the obvious choice seems the easiest to make or the most natural. And not only that; perhaps the ultimate reason for why the phenomenon of indiscriminate hyphen insertion is persisting is given by Bybee (2015):

Because language is an activity that involves both cognitive access (recalling words and constructions from memory) and the motor routines of production (articulation) and because we use the same words and constructions many times over the course of a day, week, or year, these words and constructions are subject to the kinds of processes that repeated actions undergo. When you learn a new activity, such as driving a car, which has many different parts, practice or repetition allows you to become more fluent as you learn to anticipate and overlap one action with another and to reduce non-essential movements. A similar process occurs when you repeat words and phrases many times. (p. 9)

Repetition reinforces the rule, especially if we understand by ‘rule’ a pattern to be copied. However, if the pattern we understand to be correct is, in fact, more intricate than we imagine, repetition of the cruder pattern will arguably reinforce the rule violation.

As sure as night becomes day – or the Old English *were* has become the Modern English *man*, to provide a more linguistically apposite parallel – language changes over time. And since spelling, to quote Crystal (2012), ‘is an integral part of language’, there is no reason not to assume that the rules and patterns of punctuation do not also succumb to change. Only time will tell, of course, as language change is invariably gradual, but the signs are already there for the intrusive hyphen in three-word noun phrases and insertion may well become the rule rather than the exception.

Conversely, confusion may reign indefinitely and indiscriminate use continue as now.

Notes

1 By ‘functional adjective’ is meant a word that functions as an adjective, not an adjective per se. On the concept of functional use of different word classes, see more below.

2 Not only is this category difference true for adjectives, such as *fine* here, but very often nouns themselves are used to modify the verbal adjective immediately preceding the ultimate noun in the phrase, random examples being *life-threatening*, *management-led*, *market-driven*, *nation-loving*, and so on. Invariably this joint modifying role is revealed orthographically by the inclusion of a hyphen.

3 For a comparable online grammar guide, see ‘Hyphens Between Words’, Rule 3 (2018), at the GrammarBook.com website founded by the late American author James Straus.

4 I once raised the issue of hyphen intrusion with a sports journalist at a former local daily newspaper, the *Oldham Evening Chronicle*, who stated that, since they were ‘a stickler for grammar’, their original submission avoided such use and that the hyphens were added at the sub-editing stage.

5 Interestingly, what is arguably the only instance of justifiable hyphen insertion that I have encountered also comes from *Eye* 1486 of 22 December-10 January, 2019, namely ‘supposedly-local TV contracts’ (p. 15), the hyphen here emphasising the questionable local relevance of the TV contracts, not that they might constitute something other than contracts relating to local television (although it is a fine distinction). The term ‘esteemed organ’ is the regular description given to it in readers’ letters.

6 The *Radio Times* originated in 1923, when John Reith, the BBC’s first director-general, conceived the idea of the BBC publishing in-house its own magazine of radio listings.

7 With reference to stative verbs, Leech and Svartvik (1994) write, ‘State verbs often cannot be used with the progressive at all, because the notion of “something in progress” cannot be easily applied to them. The verbs which do not normally take the progressive include [. . .] *love*’ (74). In the case of *watch*, previous meanings have meant either a timepiece, a period of vigil or the act of observing; here, the sense is of something viewed for entertainment.

8 There are even examples to be found where the hyphen intrudes post-positively. In the *Manchester Evening News* of 1 June, 2018, for instance, we read: ‘They could expect to command a fee in excess of £60m for a player who is still highly-regarded in Europe’ (p. 60).

9 The easy online access nowadays to American English, which makes no distinction in the spelling (*practice* only), may go some way to explaining the confusion in the first example. How far the Internet is responsible for orthographic language change across varieties of English, however, is no doubt worthy of a paper in its own right.

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