Defending Strunk and White

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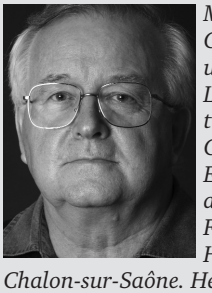
A response to Geoffrey K. Pullum's attack on *The Elements of Style*

Introduction

In *ET*102 (June 2010), Geoffrey K. Pullum poured scorn on the book *The Elements of Style* by W. Strunk and E. B. White, saying it had a 'vice-like grip on Americans' view of grammar and usage' and that 'almost everything they say on that topic is wrong.' *Elements* is a fairly short book, containing 85 pages of advice on writing, presenting some of it in a way you could describe as rules of usage. Pullum thinks that many Americans go further and treat it as holy writ. I should like to defend *Elements* here and to attack Pullum's critical method. Some *ET* readers may be surprised by this, as in 1992 I wrote 'The vital principle is that there are no rules of correct usage. The basis for choice is aesthetic, not technical, and since language rests on convention, there is no authority that can justify your preferences.' I stick to that. How, then, am I going to defend *Elements* without seeming to contradict myself? I think the answer is in what I went on to say: 'That does not mean you should not make linguistic judgements: you should, but on grounds of quality, not of correctness.' (Who Controls the Language?, *ET*31, July 1992.)

Pullum ignores quality, nor does he consider context in his criticism of *Elements*. He attempts only an objective refutation. So, whereas I share some of his misgivings, I find his reasoning wrong. The reader *Elements* is intended for would end up worse off influenced by Pullum than by Strunk and White. Pullum's favourite method is to find counter-examples from literature. In discussing S&W's advice not to put *however*, in the sense of 'nevertheless', in first position, he tells us Lewis Carroll and Mark Twain often did it. If, after reading Pullum's comments, the uncertain writer felt relieved of the burden of wondering where to put contrastive *however*, that would be worse than slavishly following Strunk and White. You'd have some awkward sentences and a writer who didn't care. Pullum's criticism is of no help. We need to show the examples to the uncertain writer, guide him in wondering why the authors did or did not put contrastive *however* first and even prompt him to judge whether it was a good choice in the context. Just to say 'Mark Twain did it, so you can too' is of no use to anyone.

What, then, are the virtues of *The Elements of Style*? Not even Geoffrey K. Pullum could deny that its authors care about the health of English. They wrote for those wanting guidance, 'the bewildered reader', as White puts it. If you are obedient by nature and follow all S&W's injunctions, your written English will be acceptable and, if you were a 'bewildered reader' to start with, better than if you had followed no advice. I myself am disobedient and a confident writer. I found *Elements* pleasantly robust. It gave me useful reminders and some ideas to chew on. Most of it consists of particular and general advice you would do well to



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follow, going against it only when you had some strong reason to. It tells you to avoid *ongoing* and *in the foreseeable future* and to be concise, straightforward and natural. Pullum writes of 'all the harm' it has done. I don't believe it. I see no evidence for it. Pullum does not cite any sentence or any person he thinks has been harmed by *Elements*. On the other hand, much of the academic prose in English of the last 50 years, particularly from the USA, has been prolix, pointlessly complex and unnatural. It doesn't look influenced by *Elements*. Would that it had been!

Pullum and others who share his approach in these things use the word 'peeve' for what they see as attempts to impose preferences. This reflects the view that you shouldn't treat language judgementally. Why, though, make language a special case among social activities? If it is all right for me to try to affect your behaviour by persuading you to prefer left-wing politics to right-wing, deontology to utilitarianism, vanilla Yop to strawberry, why shouldn't I be equally free to tell you to write *you could say* rather than *it can be argued that* in an academic essay? There is, after all, no more important social activity than language. So this is why I'm with Strunk and White. They have preferences and they want us to share them. They wrote a style guide, not an overview of usage. If they think it's better to write *he* than *he is a man who*, what would Pullum have them do? Keep it quietly to themselves? As you may have gathered, I think it is Pullum and his ilk, rather than the writers of style guides, who are the repressives in these matters.

Gerund and participle

I should now like to demolish some particular criticisms Pullum made of *Elements*. Let us begin with the gerund, the verbal noun that ends in *-ing*. Pullum cites the two sentences:

a Do you mind me asking a question?
b Do you mind my asking a question?

The issue is the choice between the object form *me* and the possessive *my*. In sentences like Shakespeare's 'Thou art too dear for my possessing' or, from an article about computer operating systems, 'My preferring the Dock over the Start Menu is admittedly subjective' or, from *Great Expectations*, 'He was very much pleased by my asking if I might sleep in my own little room' or, from a website about horses, 'I do all my washing of horse rugs, dog coats and blankets there', you wouldn't change *my* to *me*. Pullum, in supporting the object form and saying the use with the genitive is a late innovation, seems to be concerned, then, with gerunds in some types of sentences, but not ones like those. He claims that the 2000 edition of *Elements* says that 'clauses with non-genitive subjects and gerund-participial verbs are not grammatical.' That edition neither says nor implies any such thing. It says (p.12) that 'Gerunds usually require the possessive case' (note the word 'usually') and 'A present participle as a verbal takes the objective case.' Pullum also claims that White, embarrassed by Strunk's earlier advice against (a), 'quietly dropped' it from later editions. That is not so. In the current edition, sentences (a) and (b) appear together, as grammatically acceptable, on p.13 with the comment 'In the first sentence, the queried objection is to *me*, as opposed to the other members of the group, asking a question. In the second example, the issue is whether a question may be asked at all.' White takes *asking* in (a) as the participle, not the gerund. Although I would say you could hear *asking* in (a) also as a gerund and so with the same sense as in (b), it is clear that, if you intend the point at issue to be the action rather than the person, (b) is less likely to be misunderstood. I think it is also more elegant for that sense.

I cannot let this point go without commenting on Pullum's reference to his and Rodney Huddlestone's work, the *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. They say that, as you couldn't tell a gerund from a present participle just by looking at them, there should be a single hybrid term 'gerund-participle'. There cannot be a grammarian of English alive or dead who, having fixed on a meaning for a sentence containing a word ending in *-ing*, wouldn't be able to say whether it was functioning as a verbal noun (gerund), a verbal adjective (participle) or something else. To lump gerund and participle together like that is as daft as it would be to lump all the uses of *which* together and invent a quadruple-barrelled term for them.

Split infinitives

This is where you put something between *to* and the rest of the infinitive phrase, as in 'I'd

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prefer you to quietly munch your crisps' or, with a perfect infinitive, 'She seemed to almost instantly have realised her mistake.' Pullum quotes Strunk (1918 edition) as saying it 'is avoided by nearly all careful writers.' I'd go along with Pullum in criticising that as advice dressed up as fact. In the current edition it has become 'should be avoided unless the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb.' That is more qualified. The example in *Elements* to be corrected is *to diligently inquire*, compared with the unsplit version, *to inquire diligently*. Pullum seems to interpret the advice about the stressed adverb as referring to an intonation pattern, but I think that is not what is meant. It is more to do with the sense. As the *to* creates the expectation of a verb to follow, anything trapped between them becomes part of the sense of the infinitive phrase, that starts with *to* and ends with the verb. The modifier, in that case, has a special force, as it affects the verb in a way it might not if it came earlier or later. We can compare this with phrases like 'to half expect' or 'to double click', where the modifier is so intrinsic to the sense that it cannot be put outside.

So, if I say 'I should like you to diligently inquire', that suggests a style of inquiring, just as 'half expecting' is a special type of expecting, whereas if I say 'I should like you to inquire diligently', that only implies inquiring plain and simple, but to be done with diligence. The former seems to me the exceptional case and that, I think, is why we have the condition about 'unusual stress' above. Once again, the learner writer will be on safe ground following S&W's advice. Experiment can come later. It may be prudent to add that the distinctions here are purely conceptual. You need not imagine that in practice 'diligently inquiring' would be carried out any differently from 'inquiring diligently'.

On p.78 of the current edition we find, as Pullum has to acknowledge, support for the split infinitive of *I cannot bring myself to really like the fellow*. That sentence works well, I think, for the reason I suggested above, that the concept of 'really liking' is comprehensible and distinct from 'liking really', whereas a sentence such as 'After that, I wanted to never mow the lawn again' does not work so well, as the activity of 'never mowing' is less imaginable. The paragraph about split infinitives on p.78 of *Elements* says 'Some infinitives seem to improve on being split' and ends 'A matter of ear.' That is exactly it. But Pullum does not seem to want to use his ear. He tells us, instead, of the thousands of examples of split infinitives collected from literature by George O. Curme. I should like to have read Pullum discussing even one of them, but he doesn't. I bet, though, that the best ones work for some good reason or other and not just because splitting is a syntactical option. *Elements*, then, does not proscribe the split infinitive, but warns against using it without care. The best-known modern example is, of course, Star Trek's 'to boldly go'. I'm a fan of it and maybe the next edition of *Elements* will include it alongside 'to really like' as an infinitive well split. A matter of ear.

That and *which*

This topic, about restrictive relative clauses, is dear to my heart, as Geoffrey Pullum gleefully made fun of me about it in his online Language Log when I had put my foot down too hard and too quickly and ended up with it in my mouth (http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=1689). The issue is which word, if any, to choose for a certain type of adjectival clause. Here is an example of a possible context. If I had bought some beans in the market and wanted to refer to them, identifying them, there would be these options, among others:

a ...the beans which I bought...
b ...the beans that I bought...
c ...the beans I bought...

Elements says (p.59) *'That* is the defining, or restrictive, pronoun, *which* the nondefining, or nonrestrictive' and goes on to say 'Careful writers... go *which*-hunting... and by so doing improve their work.' In other words, *Elements* advises against (a).

Pullum is dismissive, calling this 'the most famous of all time-wasting American copy-editor bugaboos'. In other words, he's against *which*-hunts. He also accuses White of falsification in rewriting some sentences of earlier editions where Strunk had used the defining *which*. I am sure Pullum is correct here and his criticism is justified. As usual, Pullum points to usage from literature. No one, though, would argue with him about the facts. Yet, not only *Elements*, but other style guides too advise against restrictive *which*. Those of the *Guardian* and the *Economist*, for example, say tersely 'That defines, which informs.' The question to

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ask, then, is not what is done but why the authors of those guides, who cannot be complete idiots, advise caution.

The answer is simple. If the clause is non-defining and the antecedent non-human, you will generally use *which* and put a comma before it, as in 'She blew out some cigarette smoke, which formed small circles in the air.' If the clause defines the antecedent you will not put a comma. Why, then, for the latter case, should you think of *that* or a possible zero as the default? It is simply because they look and sound different from *which*. Something different will make the difference clearer and you don't need to rely on the comma that isn't there. From that angle, at least, there is no advantage in going on a *that*-hunt to change it to *which*. Also, even in silent reading, you are conscious of the weakened pronunciation of *that*, with the schwa vowel, something impossible for *which*. In the non-restrictive case, you can pause: '...some cigarette smoke, *(pause)* which formed...'. In the restrictive case, though, you must maintain the flow. There, the weakly pronounced *that* is a neater link, and putting nothing at all is even neater. That is why, going back to the beans, I'd put (c) at the top of my list: 'Where are the beans I bought in the market this morning?'

What should we conclude, then, about these defining clauses? Logic is of little help. If you want to put a preposition in front, then *which* is the only option. If it is correct, therefore, to say '...the beans in which I put my trust...', you can hardly argue it is incorrect to say '...the beans which I trust...'. When there is a choice, though, *that* or zero is more practical. It removes the importance of the absence of the comma and will, I think, in many cases read better, especially the zero option. I say that with some feeling. In an article in *ET*86, writing about the unnecessary inclusion of the objective relative (Was *that* necessary?, April 2006), I recounted how, when reading some linguistics books by American authors, I became fed up with the unrelenting restrictive *which*. There was hardly a relative *that* in sight and, where it would have been possible, the zero option was never taken. Did the copy-editors of those authors suggest some changes, which were rejected? Were they too lazy or too hard-pressed to suggest any? Or had they read Pullum and were frightened to go on a *which*-hunt? So I come down in favour of Strunk and White's advice. The learner writer should follow it to start with and the experienced writer who is a compulsive *which*-user should go on a *which*-hunt.

Connective *however*

I mentioned this in the introduction. Pullum quotes the current edition of *Elements* (p.48) as saying 'Avoid starting a sentence with *however* in the sense of "nevertheless".' He does not quote the next sentence, 'This word usually serves better when not in first position' (note, as before, the word 'usually'). The example to be corrected is *However, we at last succeeded* (note, with a comma after the *however*), the corrected version being *At last, however, we succeeded*. S&W go on to say that *however* as first word means 'in whatever way' or 'to whatever extent'. It would have been helpful if they had added 'without a comma after it'. Including a comma, or not, after initial *however* prevents temporary ambiguity between its contrastive and indefinite senses. This applies only to writing, of course, and not to speech, where intonation decides the sense. Pullum speculates that S&W's advice may have come from a worry about the burden that that comma, or its absence, has to bear. Nothing like that is stated, though, in *Elements*.

Why, then, should we agree with S&W in advising writers to think about putting connective *however* later in the sentence as a general, but not absolute, rule (remember the word 'usually')? Remember, too, we are talking about ordinary writing, not *Alice in Wonderland*. One reason is psychological. The ordinary writer, sensing a contrast coming up, will be tempted immediately to think of a contrastive word and put it down without further thought. If his choice is *however*, S&W's advice may make him pause. In the hands of an inexperienced writer, connective *however* as first word can sometimes have an unfortunately petulant tone, which is less likely in a later position. Another reason is a practical one. When connective *however* comes later, the commas around it are less important and, as is suggested on p.2 of *Elements*, you can sometimes safely omit them. But the best reason concerns the sense. By putting contrastive *however* immediately after the word the contrast relates to, you can often reinforce the sense. If I write 'The woodlice in Leicester, however...', it is clear I intend a contrast with some other place I have mentioned, whereas if

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I write 'However, the woodlice in Leicester...', it is not so clear.

Verb agreement

This refers to section 9 of *Elements*, pp.9–11. According to Pullum, S&W say here that you shouldn't put a plural verb after the word *none*. He castigates this rule as 'breathtaking arrogance' and cites examples from Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker and G. K. Chesterton to disprove it. In the middle of page 10, S&W say 'A plural verb is commonly used when *none* suggests more than one thing or person' and they give as an example, recommending it, *None are so fallible as those who are sure they're right*. Pullum, I suppose, didn't read that bit and so won't have understood S&W's explanation that *none* takes a singular verb when it means 'no one' or 'not one' and a plural verb when it means 'not any'.

As with what I said about the split infinitive, the distinction here is conceptual rather than realistic. If I lose four things, there is no realistic difference between my not finding even one of them and my not finding any out of one, two, three or all four. But there is a conceptual one. In the former case, I could say 'None of them was to be found' and in the latter 'None of them were to be found.' With his examples from literature, Pullum unwittingly confirms the principles explained in *Elements* on this point.

The other criticisms

Here are some brief comments on the other criticisms made by Pullum.

Pronoun case

This relates to section 10, pp.11–13, of *Elements* and is about choices between *I* and *me*, *who* and *whom*, *you* and *yourself*, and so on. Pullum picks on one example only, *The culprit, it turned out, was he*, which is admittedly stiff, but he ignores twenty lines of explanation and 18 other examples, most of which offer sound advice. For myself, I'd prefer *Who should I ask?* in most circumstances to S&W's *Whom should I ask?*, but these pages of *Elements* would be salutary reading for those who write things like '...an agreement between yourself and the vendor' and 'It is difficult for we historians.'

Actives and passives

I agree with Pullum that S&W mostly get in a muddle here, but Pullum misreads part of it. On p.18, S&W say it is often better to use an active transitive verb than an expression such as *there is*. Four examples are given with corrections. Pullum is right that the verb in one of the 'correct' versions is not transitive, but he complains that three of the examples to be corrected did not contain a passive verb to start with. There was no suggestion they would.

Adjectives and adverbs

Pullum interprets the advice on p.71 of *Elements*, 'Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs', as meaning you shouldn't use adjectives and adverbs. But, of course, it doesn't mean that. It means that in ordinary prose you should generally choose your nouns and verbs well and modify them where appropriate. Pullum acknowledges that White says adjectives are 'indispensable' and then accuses him of hypocrisy for using them.

Singular they

The problem here, discussed on pp.60–61 of *Elements*, is which pronoun to use to refer to a generalising singular antecedent, such as *somebody* or *the average reader*. S&W say 'No one need fear to use *he* if common sense supports it.' Pullum describes using common gender *he* in present-day English as 'surely unconscionable'. Neither is right. It is an awkward problem and I have no comforting advice for the learner writer. For reflexive reference, I have found myself using the illogical-sounding *themself* in recent years. In this article, in the introduction, I instinctively used 'him' to refer to 'the uncertain writer', then thought about it, and in the end decided it was all right. How did it strike you?

Nouns as verbs

Here White says, of the use as verbs of words traditionally thought of as nouns, 'Not all are bad, but all are suspect.' I agree with Pullum that there should be latitude. The flexibility of English offers creative advantages in this respect. Of the examples White wishes to correct, I am happy with the verb-forms *hosted* and *chaired*, but wouldn't yet use *gift*, *headquarter* or *debuted* myself (I wouldn't know how to pronounce the last one). I disagree, though, with Pullum's dictum that 'you should use as verbs those words that other people use as verbs.' That something is done does not justify doing it.

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Preposition stranding

This is about delaying the preposition, as in 'He forgot to count the donkey he was sitting on.' Pullum thinks S&W are against it. On p.77, they say 'Not only is the preposition acceptable at the end, sometimes it is more effective in that spot.'

Togetherness and relatedness

In section 20, pp.28–31, of *Elements* S&W advise writers to place phrases and clauses where they will not create confusion, ambiguity or unwanted ridicule. Here is an example they give of the sort of thing to avoid: *You can call your mother in London and tell her all about George's taking you out to dinner for just two dollars*. It might have been better if S&W had simply given examples and left it at that, but they try to rationalise things, advising against the separation of verb and subject or of relative and antecedent, for example. Even so, these guidelines are accompanied by qualificatory phrases such as 'not usually bothersome', 'as a rule', 'in most instances', 'if possible'. For me, some of the examples illustrate the general principle well and others are finicky. The average reader will get the point, I think. Pullum, though, seizes on the guidelines as definitive, ignores all the qualification, and attacks White for contravening his own rules.

Conclusion

At the end of his *ET* article, Pullum says there is much more he could have said. I am not so sure. Certainly, his comments cover only the equivalent of about five of the 85 pages of advice. Of the 134 topics in chapters III and IV (pp.34–65), Pullum comments on only seven. His criticisms, though, are of a type, appealing to counter-examples. I have explained why I think Pullum is wrong on the points he deals with. The remaining points in *Elements* do not seem to me the sort he could have criticised in the same way.

Pullum detests *Elements*. Many people like it. It has had numerous favourable reviews. Why, then, is Pullum angry with it? I do not think his anger is indignation on behalf of those who want advice on style. He is angry, I think, because *Elements* is an irritant to the doctrine of neutrality of much modern linguistics. And yet, Pullum is trapped by his own doctrine. For, at the end of his article, he says he has 'no time for sloppy or ungrammatical writing.' With his own students, then, does Pullum accord himself the licence he would deny to Strunk and White? But what standards of correction is he to apply? He cannot impose his personal taste, as that would be, in his own words, 'aesthetic authoritarianism', and so he has, lamely and at second hand, to appeal to the usage of 'prestigious authors'. Is that the solution then? Tell the learner writer to write like Dickens? I can imagine the disasters that would follow!

Elements dares to care. It dares to suggest that English could improve or deteriorate (a heretical idea to many modern grammarians) and that how we, ordinary people, speak and write will influence the direction in which it goes. That is why I like it. That is why, even if I disagreed with everything in it, which is far from the case, I would still like it. Long may it continue! ■

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