



by M.I. Leveson

(Reprinted by kind permission of the editor of *The Public Servant*)

I received a letter from my anonymous correspondent (at least, he wishes to remain anonymous) in January. I have not had time to reply to it until now. My correspondent complains that the contents of my January article were “a waste of print, paper and time”, and that, in fact, many of my comments and judgments provide a “disservice” to readers. I have no comment to make on these criticisms except to hope that the majority of my readers do not hold similar views.

My correspondent goes on to say that I “write off a perfectly correct expression as ambiguous”. He is referring to the sentence –

I only lent him one book.

He says: “This sentence, in common with others such as “I only met him yesterday” and “I have only seen him once”, is faultless, and yet your critic sees stupidity in it. The word “only”, it is said, is in the wrong place and the sentence should read:

“I have seen him only once.”

The word “only” is a limiting word and in these sentences it comes too late to limit any thought. “I have seen him...” is positive and “only once” is a feeble tail that cannot wag the dog. What we need in this situation is always a warning word – “only” – which we can balance with “once” or whatever word concludes the thought:

“I have **only** ... **seen** him **once**.”

“He **only** gave me a **penny**.”

“I **only** met him **yesterday**.”

In “I met him **only yesterday**” the word **only** is redundant.

I agree with much of what my correspondent says. In dreaming up examples to illustrate grammatical discussions one is inevitably led sometimes to use clumsy constructions. The sentence under discussion is one of these.

A reader asks me to discuss the following sentence –

The contents of your report dated 5th March, 1974, to the effect that you intend resigning on 21st March 1974, **have/has** been noted.

Which verb is correct? The correct verb is **have**. The reason for this is that the number of the verb is dependent on the number of the noun to which it refers. The noun in question here is **contents**. The skeleton sentence, if I can call it that, is –

The contents (of your report) have been noted.

The subject, **contents**, is plural, and therefore the verb must be plural. It is true that there is another noun in the sentence which looks as though it governs the verb. I am referring to the word **report**. But the point about this word is that it is not the main subject of the sentence, it is an extension of the subject. It is treated as though it were in parentheses, for the purpose of determining the number of the verb. If the sentence had been written as follows it would have been wrong –

The contents of your report dated 5th March, 1974, to the effect that you intend resigning on 31st March, 1974, **has** been noted.

We often find this kind of incorrect sentence in which the verb has been lured away, so to speak, from its proper number by a noun nearer to it which has a different number. It is always important to determine which is the chief noun or subject governing the verb.

Do you know the difference between the words **unreadable** and **illegible**? **Illegible** refers to the actual writing (usually hand-writing) which is indecipherable. **Unreadable** refers to the subject matter which is boring or obscure. Thus we may correctly say – His **unreadable** manuscript was virtually **illegible**.

Very often, in English, one word does duty as both noun and verb. When this happens there is a strong tendency to differentiate between the two by means of different pronunciation. For example, the word **use**, when used as a noun – He put his reading to good **use** – is pronounced *us*. When used as a verb, as in – Now that I have repaired the engine you will be able to **use** it again – **use** is pronounced *uz*.

Other words which are used in the same way (i.e. both as noun and as verb) and in which there is a differentiation of pronunciation are as follows. (What happens in these words is that the accent is placed on the first syllable when the word is being used as a noun, and shifts to the last syllable when the word is used as a verb) –

The servants lived together in a **compound** (*cómpound*).  
Your laziness **compounds** (*compoúnds*) your error.

He entered in the swimming **contest** (*cóntest*).  
The relatives **contested** (*contésted*) the will.

It took him a long time to read the **dígest** (*digest*).  
It takes eight hours to **digést** (*digest*) a meal.

He was able to give a big **discount** (*díscout*) on the stove.  
He **discounted** (*discoúnted*) the bill at a bank.

Sally was delighted with the corsage her **escort** (*éscort*) gave her.  
He offered to **escort** (*escórt*) her to the party.

He told me of his many exciting **exploits** (*éxploits*) as a soldier.  
The cruel slavemaster **exploited** (*explóited*) the labour  
of the slaves.

Thank you for the lovely **présent**.  
May I **present** (*présént*) Lady Douglas to you?

Name different kinds of **produce** (*próduce*) found in the  
Transvaal.

The factory was able to **produce** (*prodúce*) sufficient  
food for their needs.

Other words are differentiated by a change in the consonantal sound at the end of the word, for example –

That was not a very good **excuse** (*excuse*).

That does not **excuse** (excuze) you from doing your homework.

I live in a very pretty **house** (house).

The building is used to **house** (houze) the archives.

I put a sweet into my **mouth** (mouth).

He did not say the sounds aloud but **mouthed** (**th** as in **the**) them.