

Mistakes with adjectives, adverbs, and determiners

FAST, FASTLY, BUT NOT FURIOUSLY

Many English learners use the word “fastly” as an adverbial form of “fast”, which seems quite logical because this is the way adverbs are usually formed. For example, if something is slow, you say that it “moves slowly”, which is completely correct.

Unfortunately, languages develop in a way that is not always logical, and the situation of “fast” vs. “fastly” falls exactly into this category. The fact is that **there is no such word as “fastly”**. “Fast” is already both an adjective and an adverb, for example:

The athlete runs really fast. (correct)

The athlete runs really fastly. (wrong)

It doesn’t matter whether “fast” refers to a movement or to the rate at which something is being done; it’s always just “fast”:

He can’t write fast enough. (correct)

He can’t write fastly enough. (wrong)

The word “quickly”, used as an adverb, is synonymous to “fast”, but it usually refers to the time an action takes rather than to the speed of movement. For example, when you say

||||| *Come here, quickly!*

you want the other person to come *soon*; you don't really care how fast he or she will be moving. "Quickly" can also refer to the actual speed (as in "he runs quickly"), but such usage is much less common.

There is one situation in which it is obligatory to use "quickly" (or "swiftly" or a related adverb ending with "-ly") instead of "fast": if the adverb precedes the verb it modifies:

||||| *He quickly ran out of the building. (correct)*
||||| *He fast ran out of the building. (wrong)*
||||| *He fastly ran out of the building. (wrong)*

(A) LITTLE, (A) FEW

First, we will take a look at "a little" and "a few". Both mean essentially the same: "some", "a certain amount that is not large". "A little" is used with uncountable nouns (e.g. sugar), and "a few" is used with countable nouns (e.g. people), for example:

||||| *Could you please put a little sugar in my coffee? (correct)*
||||| *Could you please put a few sugar in my coffee? (wrong)*

||||| *I made a few friends in college. (correct)*
||||| *I made a little friends in college. (wrong)*

"A little" is more common than "a few" because it is used with abstract qualities, like knowledge or anger:

||||| *I know a little about the topic.*
||||| *She is a little upset.*

“Few” and “little” are used in the same vein—“few” with countable nouns and “little” with uncountable—but the meaning is different. They mean “almost no”, “a negligible amount of”, for example:

- Few people would argue that it was a good decision. (correct)*
- Almost no people would argue that it was a good decision. (correct)*
- Little people would argue that it was a good decision. (wrong?)*
- I know little about the subject. (correct)*
- I know almost nothing about the subject. (correct)*
- I know few about the subject. (wrong)*

The sentence starting with “Little people” above is grammatically correct, but it means that “small people would argue ...”. “Little” and “few” can be used also in the sense of “not enough” which directly contrasts with “a little” and “a few”. For example:

- There is little milk left—could you buy some?*
- [There is not enough milk left—could you buy some?]*
- There is still a little milk; you don’t have to buy any.*
- [There is still some milk; you don’t have to buy any.]*

SECOND OR OTHER

Imagine the following scenario: you are sitting next to a relative at a family gathering. There are two bottles that you cannot reach, and you would like to take one of them. You ask your neighbour: “Could you please pass me the bottle?” He can’t see which of the two bottles you are pointing at, so he points at one of them and asks: “This one?” As it happens, it wasn’t the correct one. How should you break this through to him?

In some languages, you'd literally say "No, the second one." In English, however, when there are only two options, we refer to the "second" option using the word "other", i.e. the correct way of saying that is:

A: Could you please pass me the bottle? [pointing at two bottles]

B: This one?

A: No, the other one. (correct) / A: No, the second one. (unnatural)

Of course, this principle applies to every situation when you are referring to "the other" of two objects or people, for example:

Carlsen will probably beat the other player in tomorrow's chess match. (correct)

Carlsen will probably beat the second player in tomorrow's chess match. (wrong)

There are two players in a chess game. One of them plays as white, *the other one* plays as black, but there is no "first" or "second" player.

ALL THAT, ALL WHAT, ALL WHICH

What you most likely want to say is "all that ...", as in

All that glitters is not gold. (correct)

All what glitters is not gold. (wrong)

All which glitters is not gold. (wrong)

The confusion stems from the fact that "all" is followed by "what" in many other languages, e.g. *alles was* in German. If you feel the need to say "all what" in English, the best option is usually to leave out the pronoun altogether:

This is all you need to know. (correct)

This is all what you need to know. (unnatural)

“All which” is not strictly speaking wrong, but it sounds rather formal and outdated (it was somewhat widespread before the 19th century).

BOTH AND EITHER

These two words tend to be translated using a single word into other languages. The meaning of “both” is usually quite clear. It means “the one as well as the other”. When you speak about two restaurants, for instance, you can say:

Both restaurants are good.

[The one restaurant, as well as the other restaurant, is good.]

A common construction is “both X and Y ...” which means the same as “X and Y ...”; only the fact that the statement is true for X and Y *at the same time* is emphasized:

Both Peter and his father have red hair.

[Peter, as well as his father, has red hair.]

The situation is slightly complicated for “either” because it is used in two similar but different situations. “Either” can be used in the construction “either X or Y”, which means “X or Y but not both”. For example:

I’d like to eat either an apple or an orange.

[I’d like to eat an apple or an orange but not both of them at the same time.]

When “either” is not followed by “or”, the logic stays the same. It means “any one of two possibilities but not both of them simultan-

ously”. This is best illustrated by the most dangerous possible misunderstanding of the difference between “either” and “both”: when it comes to dosing medication.

Suppose you tell your doctor you have two brands of painkillers at home, and you ask him or her which one of those you are supposed to take. If your doctor replies

||||| “*You can take either.*”

it means you can take one or the other, but **not both of them simultaneously**, unless the doctor further clarifies that you can. If he or she, on the other hand, says

||||| “*You can take both.*”

the implied meaning is that it is safe to take the one *and* the other at the same time.

FREEER OR FREER

Since the comparative form of short adjectives is formed by simply adding -er to the end of an adjective (apart from a few irregular adjectives like “good/better”), learners and native speakers alike sometimes think that when something is “more free”, it should be “freeer”.

The truth is that there is not a single word in English whose standard spelling would contain “eee”. The simple rule is:

If you think there should be three e’s in a row, write only two.

For example, “most free” would be “freest”, not “freeest”. Note, however, that “freest” is pronounced as if it were written “freeest”, i.e. /fri:ɪst/. The same goes for “freer”, pronounced as /'fri:ə(r)/.

“Free” is in fact the only comparable adjective ending in “ee”, so there are no other such candidates for -eeer.

The -er suffix can be added also to verbs, where it expresses the person who does the action. For instance, someone who skies (/ ski:z/, from the verb “to ski”, not /skaɪz/, the plural of “sky”) is a “skier”, pronounced /'ski:ə(r)/.

In the same vein, someone who sees (the future) is a “seer”, not a “seeer”, in accordance with the rule above. The pronunciation in this case is slightly more complicated. In British English, it is / si:ə/, i.e. exactly like “see” + “er”. In American English, it can be either / si:ər/ or just /si:r/.

CLASSIC OR CLASSICAL

The word “classic” can be either an adjective or a noun. There’s a beautiful and witty quote that explains the meaning of the noun:

‘Classic’ - a book which people praise and don’t read.
— Mark Twain

A “classic” is a book, song, film, or any other piece of art that is considered to have set a high quality standard in its respective genre. Much less frequently, it is used also for the author of such a work.

Similarly, “a classic *thing*” is something that is in some way typical for its class, e.g. “a classic mistake”:

This is a classic mistake English learners make. (correct)
This is a classical mistake English learners make. (probably wrong)

“Classical” means “traditional” or “being present for a long time”. In science, for example, a “classical theory” is a theory that has well established itself as a useful scientific theory, although it often contrasts

with another “modern theory” which is able explain more than the classical one. “Classical music” refers to well established music genres of the past centuries.

A classic example of the distinction between “classic” and “classical” is “a classic(al) example”. A “classical example” means an example that has been around for a long time. But what you mean 99% of the time is “a classic example”, which is the same as “a typical example”.

“SYMPATHIC”

Sympathique in French, *sympathisch* in German, *sympatický* in Czech; the word has spread in some form probably to all European languages. With one major exception: English. That’s right, “sympathic” is not an English word, as a quick search in any respectable dictionary will tell you.

So how do you translate “sympathic” (I’ll use this word to refer to its meaning in other languages) into English when there is no such word? The fact is: you don’t. There’s no direct English equivalent for what “sympathic” is expected to mean by speakers of other languages, so you will have to work with words like “nice” and “kind”:

- She’s a very nice girl. (correct)
- She’s a sympathic girl. (wrong)

You can also use the verb “like” if you find somebody “sympathic”:

- I like her. (correct)
- I find her sympathic. (wrong)

There is one word that has a meaning similar to “sympathic”: *congenial*. Unlike “sympathic” in other languages, “congenial” is a fairly formal word, and using it in an everyday conversation could make

you sound pretentious, so I advise against using it unless you know what you are doing.

So far, so good, but there is one more trap many learners fall into. In English, there is a word “sympathetic”, which means “compassionate to someone” or “approving of something”, but not “sympathic”:

She was a very sympathetic listener when I felt sad. (correct)

I find her sympathetic; she is nice and pretty. (wrong)

MANY/SOME/FEW (OF)

Many, some, and similar expressions mean essentially the same whether you use them with or without “of”, but the two variants are not interchangeable. Before nouns without determiners (“the”, “his”, etc.), we don’t use “of”:

Many students study to get a better-paying job. (correct)

Many of students study to get a better-paying job. (wrong)

Some people can never be satisfied. (correct)

Some of people can never be satisfied. (wrong)

If there is a determiner (e.g. “the”, “his”) before the noun, we do use “of”:

Some of the students failed the exam. (correct)

Some the students failed the exam. (wrong)

A few of my friends moved overseas. (correct)

A few my friends moved overseas. (wrong)

Before pronouns, we use “of” as well:

I've seen a few of them. (correct)

I've seen a few them. (wrong)

The word “both” seems to be a special case. Just like with the rest, we wouldn't use “of” with a bare noun, for example:

Both policemen were very friendly. (correct)

Both of policemen were very friendly. (wrong)

and we do use “of” before pronouns:

They want both of us to work for them. (correct)

They want us both to work for them. (correct)

They want both us to work for them. (wrong)

Note that “us both” is more common than “both of us”, but both expressions are correct.

It is not that common to use “both of” in connection with “the”; it is usually more elegant to reformulate the sentence with “both” in another position.

Both of the fastest sprinters share the same time. (possible)

The fastest sprinters both share the same time. (better)

However, there is a big difference when it comes to possessive pronouns. The variant without “of” is actually the preferred one:

Both my parents are doctors. (preferred)

Both of my parents are doctors. (uncommon)

It is worth noting that “both of my/his/our/...” is virtually non-existent in British English, and it is less common in American English as well. It is therefore better not to use “of” in this case.

Finally, there is an idiomatic expression with “many” which doesn't follow any of the patterns mentioned above, namely “many a”. We

can use “many a + singular noun” in the same sense as “many + plural noun”, for example:

Many a learner doesn't know that “many” can be followed by “a”.

This usage is limited mostly to formal writing, however, and is only rarely heard in the spoken language.

SO/AS FAST AS

When we compare two things which are similar or equal in some respect, we use the construction “as ... as ...”, not “so ... as ...”:

She is as fast/good/tall as him. (correct)
She is so fast/good/tall as him. (wrong)

When negating the sentence, using “not so ... as ...” was quite common historically, but it is slowly falling out of use. “Not as ... as ...” is much more common, so it is better for a learner to stick to “as ... as ...” in both cases, for example:

The film was not as good as the book. (correct)
The film was not so good as the book. (dated)

LIKE MORE/BETTER/MOST/BEST

Both “like more” and “like better” (as in the sentence “I like apples more/better than oranges”) are widespread, but “like more” is preferred in British English whereas Americans are more likely to choose “like better”:

I like apples more than oranges. (correct)

I like apples better than oranges. (correct, colloquial in the UK)

Expressions “to like most” and “to like best” seem to be used interchangeably both in American and British English. Some speakers use the variant with “the”, i.e. “to like the most/best”, but others consider it less grammatical. It is therefore advisable to stick to the variant without “the”:

I like him best. (correct)

I like him most. (correct)

I like him the most. (considered less grammatical by some)

I like him the best. (considered less grammatical by some)

LOOK/SMELL/FEEL GOOD/WELL

Sentences with the verb “look” (in the sense of “appear, seem”) have a structure different from what many English learners think. “Look” is followed by an adjective, not an adverb:

He looks good. (correct)

He looks well. (see below)

Both sentences are grammatically correct, but “well” here was used as an adjective meaning “in good health”, so:

“He looks good.” = “He is good-looking.”

“He looks well.” = “He seems to be in good health.”

It is **not** possible to say “he looks well” to express the idea that someone is handsome. For some reason, the difference between “good” and “well” is the most common source of mistakes; in other cases, learners usually use the adjective correctly:

She looks pretty. (correct)

She looks prettily. (wrong)

It looks large. (correct)

It looks largely. (wrong)

If you use “look” in the sense of seeing or searching, then “look well” where “well” is an adverb makes sense. For example, we could say:

If you look well, you will see it.

Such a construction is possible, but “carefully” is more common in this context:

If you look carefully, you will see it.

Smell and feel

The verbs “smell” and “feel” follow the exact same pattern as “look”. If you like the smell of something, it smells “good”, not “well”:

The flower smells good. (correct)

The flower smells well. (wrong)

Unlike “look”, something can’t really “smell well”; we don’t usually say that a thing or a person “smells healthy”. An example for “feel”:

I feel great. (correct)

I feel greatly. (wrong)

In the case of the verb “feel”, it makes sense to “feel well” in the sense of feeling healthy:

“I feel good.” = “I feel satisfied. I experience pleasant feelings.”

“I feel well.” = “I feel healthy. I feel physically fit.”

A LOT OF/MUCH/LONG TIME AGO

The common way to say that “it’s been a while since something happened” in English is “a long time ago”, not “a lot of time ago” or “much time ago”, e.g.

It was a long time ago when I first saw the sea. (correct)

It was a lot of time ago when I first saw the sea. (wrong)

It was much time ago when I first saw the sea. (wrong)

This expression is also a nice example of how using search engines to judge grammaticality can be dangerous. By the time I was writing this book, Google returned “About 31,400,000 results” for “a lot of time ago”. Can you guess how many times this expression was used in English literary works during the last 200 years? Not a single time.

MORE BETTER

The comparative degree (“more of something”) of monosyllabic adjectives is usually formed by adding *-er* at the end of the adjective (such as “tall” and “taller”). Longer adjectives are usually compared using “more” (e.g. “expensive” and “more expensive”). This causes some learners to combine the two constructions and say “more better”, “more taller”, “more richer”, etc.

Such usage is wrong. When something is “better”, it is always just “better” and never “more better”:

My car is better than yours. (correct)

My car is more better than yours. (wrong)

It would make sense, syntactically, to say that if “A and B are better than C”, and “A is better than B”, then “A is more better than C than B”. Nevertheless, such a construction is not used in practice, and you should use “even better”, e.g.

||||| *B is better than C, and A is even better than B.*

This doesn’t necessarily mean that “better” cannot follow “more” in a sentence, for example:

||||| *We need more better people.*

The structure of this sentence is “we need more X” where X can be anything, such as roses or better people.

YET OR ALREADY

The rule is simple for indicative sentences. “Already” is used in affirmative sentences, “yet” in negative ones (usually with the present perfect):

||||| *I have already finished my homework. (correct)*
||||| *I have yet finished my homework. (wrong)*
||||| *I haven’t seen her yet. (correct)*
||||| *I haven’t seen her already. (wrong)*

The situation changes when we want to ask a question. Both “yet” and “already” may be used in both affirmative and negative questions, and while “yet” is completely neutral, “already” implies some sort of surprise or unexpectedness. “Yet” would be probably the more common choice:

Have you finished your homework yet?

Haven't you spoken to him yet?

To illustrate the kind of situation in which “already” would be used, we'll take a look at two dialogues:

A: Thanks for the sandwich. It was really delicious.

B: Have you eaten it already? I gave it to you twenty seconds ago.

“Yet” would be inappropriate here; only “already” can express that B is surprised that A ate the sandwich so fast. Similarly, in a negative question:

A: Sorry, I must go. I have a lot of homework to do.

B: Haven't you already done your homework? You told me you did.

Again, “already” implies some kind of surprise.