

Grammatically Speaking

Richard Firsten explores English grammar
and answers your grammar quandaries.

From now on, look for Grammatically Speaking bimonthly!

Dear Mr. Firsten:

I recently came across the following sentence: “Mental health experts say one in 10 people **has** some form of depression.” But I found the following somewhere else: “... one in 10 people **have** at least one in their lifetimes – most people have mistaken ideas, or no ideas at all, about what do to.”

My question is, should the verb be *has* or *have* after saying *one in 10 people*? I really don't want to teach this incorrectly if it ever comes up in my classes.

Thanks for helping me out.
Confused
Amarillo, Texas USA

Dear Confused:

Even though I'm not at all happy to tell you this, both forms are acceptable these days. Strictly speaking, and for formal usage, after phrases like *one out of ____*, *one in ____*, and also *one of ____* the singular form of the following verb (in this case, *one out of 10 **has***) is right as it agrees with the singular subject, *one*.

In conversational English, however, it's become acceptable to follow the rule of proximity and use the plural form following that plural number (in this case, *one out of 10 **have***). The thing is, as more time goes by, less and less attention is being paid to a strict delineation between the formal written language and the informal spoken language; ergo, the overlap.

My suggestion is that you teach your students, who I assume are a more advanced group, that they should still maintain strict agreement between the subject (*one*) and the verb that follows, but that if they go with the rule of proximity, they won't be committing a linguistic sin, so to speak.

Thanks for sending in a question that I'm sure many teachers have wondered about.

Dear Richard,

I have recently had one of my unusually curious Japanese university students ask me relentless questions about how to properly use the words *price* and *cost*. He seems to use a dictionary for his examples, but my own answers just add to the confusion.

The price of war is in human lives.
The cost of war is in human lives.

Which is correct, and why? *Price, cost, fee, charge*, etc. are all so close in meaning, and I can find no source to help define precisely when each is used (or not used), and why:

- the price/cost/fee/charge for a haircut
- The store is cutting the cost/price of meat.
- At what price/cost does John study, study, study (and avoid his friends)?
- a lawyer's fee, but not a lawyer's charge/cost/price

A lawyer's fee is fine because he does a service. *A doctor's fee* is all right for same reasoning, so why not *a barber's fee* or *a carpenter's fee*?

Advice would be greatly appreciated. Thank you in advance.
Glen Hill
Hokkaido, Japan

Dear Glen,

Whew! Okay, I'm going to roll up my sleeves and tackle these one at a time. All I can offer is my own interpretation and how I would use these terms in the contexts you've supplied. There may well be those who disagree, but here's my take on these terms. Let me mention right up front that I'm going to discuss nouns only, not verbs.

the price/cost/fee/charge for a haircut

The only word I don't think can work is *fee*. To my mind, *price* and *charge* seem to come from the barber's point of view. The barber is the person who sets the price or the charge for a haircut. I'd say that *cost* seems to come from the customer's point of view. This is what the cost is to the customer. So those three terms work, depending on who is using them.

The store is cutting the cost/price of meat.

I find these interesting, again depending on the point of view. If I say *The store is cutting the cost of meat*, it makes me think that the store has found a more reasonably priced wholesaler or middleman, thereby reducing what the store will pay to procure the meat. *The store is cutting the price of meat* makes me think that they're reducing what their customers will have to pay for meat. (This is all quite arbitrary, perhaps, but it's the intuitive way I'd interpret the use of *cost* and *price* in this context.)

At what price/cost does John study, study, study (and avoid his friends)?

In this context, I think the answer is that only *cost* works. The reason is that *cost* doesn't only refer to dollars and cents; it can refer to something that you lose, give away, or damage in order to achieve something. And that's how it's being used in this context.

Yes, we do have idiomatic expressions like *to pay a price for something*, but that's not in use here. Just as the question is, I think only *cost* works well.

a lawyer's fee, but not a lawyer's charge/cost/price

Right, Glen. We usually use the term *fee* for a service rendered, which is what a lawyer offers a client. In fact, that's normally why the people are called clients, not customers, because they pay for a service rather than a product.

Why not *a barber's fee or a carpenter's fee*?

What barbers and carpenters offer I think falls more in the realm of a product (such as a new cut or hairstyle that a barber creates) and not a service, so that's why they have customers, not clients (as lawyers and accountants do) or patients (as doctors and dentists do). For that reason, I think we're more comfortable saying that *charge or price* is more suited for situations involving trades people.

I hope I've helped, Glen. We all know how the subtleties of words can be hard to pin down, and we also know that sometimes our idiolects contribute a lot to how we use one word over another in any given context. You certainly gave me a challenge, Glen!

Dear Richard,

Could you shed any light on this? In the "Modern Love" column in the May 28, 2010 issue of the *New York Times*, I read something that struck me as wrong, jarringly wrong—a misuse of the subjunctive out of fear of failing to use it when needed (much as people say *between you and I*, shunning the appropriate *me* out of fear of being lumped with those who would say *Me and my friends are going ...*)

Here's the (possibly) offending paragraph:

“He asked if I **were** seeing anyone, if I **were** in love, and I told him that I have bad luck with men. Seeing him, hearing his vibrant voice, I wondered if I **were** still single because he had been in my life for so long, and in my heart. At least I'd never met another man I loved as much.”

To my mind, the subjunctive is misused here. In the first two uses of *were*, this is not a hypothetical, but a query about the fact of the matter. In the third use, the fact of the matter is implied. But if I am right, how on earth could this have escaped the attention of *New York Times* editors?

Sharon Mast
Bronx, NY USA

Dear Sharon,

“Jarringly wrong” is a very apt description for what you've cited, even though you can find lots and lots of examples of such inappropriate usage if you do a Google search. I think it's a hypercorrection such as the example you pointed out with *between you and I*. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as they say, and since the sentences you've cited are examples of indirect or reported speech, all we need to do to test out if they're grammatically correct is put them in the narrative present:

He asks me if I'm seeing anyone, if I'm in love, and I tell him . . .

I wonder if I'm still single because he has been in my life for so long, . . .

There you go. There's nothing imaginary or hypothetical in the sentences above, so if reported speech is used, the sentences are

*He asked me if I **was** seeing anyone, if I **was** in love, . . .*
*I wondered if I **was** still single because he had been in my life for so long, . . .*

That inappropriate usage may escape some people in that specific context, but what about a sentence like *He asked if I *were the new secretary* or *She asked me if I *were leaving in a few minutes*? Such sentences are even more jarring, wouldn't you say?

As for the *New York Times* editors, I don't know if these actually escaped their attention or if they just don't recognize that using the present subjunctive form (*were*) in these sentences is hypercorrection and doesn't even make grammatical sense. Frankly, Sharon, since language arts became a not-so-important subject in our public school systems, I have found that many educated people are making grammar mistakes that my public school and college teachers wouldn't have found at all acceptable. But as they say, "Don't get me started!"

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to bring up a very important but controversial topic, Sharon.

Hi, Richard.

I came across the following sentence when I was reading a book. I know what it means but I could not understand what grammar rule was used. Is it an inversion? I consulted many grammar books, but I could not find an answer. I would like to know why the sentence is formed like this so that I can explain it to my students. The sentence in question is, "The job of the linguist is to reveal and **make explicit this knowledge** about meaning that every speaker has." (from *An Introduction to Language*)

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely Yours,
Chikako
Niigata, Japan

Hi, Chikako!

I'm afraid that you've misinterpreted the role of certain elements in the sentence – which is perfectly grammatical, by the way. There's a verb (*reveal*) and a verb phrase (*make explicit*) that both precede their one direct object (*this knowledge about meaning*), which is followed by a relative clause. It's really as simple as that.

I hope that clarifies this for you. Thanks for sending in the question.

Now let's get to the Brain Teaser from my last column. The question was: Is the grammar in the following sentences acceptable?

1. *This is a relatively new phenomena.*
2. *We haven't seen this bacteria before in our water supply.*
3. *It's now thought that red algae was responsible for the Nile River turning red in the Old Testament story of the Exodus.*
4. *The data you have isn't enough to allow us to make any final conclusions.*

If the grammar isn't acceptable, why isn't it? And if it is, why is that?

The first correct response was sent in by Charles Nelson of Union, New Jersey USA.

For #2, 3, and 4, these nouns can be considered collective nouns, such as *family*, which allow for a singular verb in American English.

In the case of #1, although I imagine many people use *phenomena* with a singular verb, it is not being used as a collective noun, and so it is better to use a plural verb with it.

Succinctly explained, Charles. I find your explanation for no.'s 2, 3, and 4 acceptable, but I seriously wonder if these Latin plural nouns have taken on singular usage in English more out of ignorance of their role as plural nouns than out of any grammatical alternative, such as sometimes using a word like *family* with a singular noun and sometimes with a plural, depending on how *family* is being viewed by the speaker or writer.

Strictly speaking – or perhaps speaking in “old fashioned” terms – the correct phrases should be *this bacterium/these bacteria*; *red alga was/red algae were*; and *the datum is/the data are*. But as we all know, *data* has gone the way of *agenda* (whose original singular form is *agendum*), and both are commonly used as singular nouns these days. And, sadly, I think *phenomena* is beginning to take the place of *phenomenon* as a singular noun.

I still have a problem with using *bacteria* as a singular noun, just as I do with *media*. When I look under a microscope, I don't see just one little creature swimming around; I see lots and lots of them, so for me, *bacterium* is still singular and *bacteria* is a plural noun. And frankly speaking, I just don't get it when it comes to using *media* as a singular noun. When I think of *the media*, I think of radio, television, newspapers, and magazines, not to mention the Internet, which includes Facebook and Twitter. I don't picture them as one collective entity in my mind, so for me the radio is a *medium* of communication, newspapers are a *medium* of communication, etc., and all together they're the *media*. That's why you'll always hear me say *the media are*.

Here's one final word on this subject: I'll never understand why *Taliban* is considered a collective noun used with a singular verb (*the Taliban is*). To my way of thinking, reporters and others should be saying *the Taliban are*, just as we always expect to hear *the police are* and *people are*.

Thanks for sending in your answer, Charles!

Here's where I would normally place my next Brain Teaser, but there won't be a new Brain Teaser, for this is my last column. I've had the pleasure and privilege of writing "Grammatically Speaking" for over eight years, and have enjoyed doing so very much. I'm retired now, and have decided to wean myself off all professional activities that I've kept up since my official retirement date. This is the last such activity, and the time has come for me to end this as well.

I sincerely hope that all of you have enjoyed reading my column over the years and have benefited from the information provided. Your questions have always been thought provoking and very useful for the many people who've read my column, and I want to thank each and every one of you for participating in making "Grammatically Speaking" such a successful feature for TESOL.

I wish you all good luck and successful careers, and I want to thank TESOL for supporting my column from its inception in *TESOL Matters* and through the transition when it went online. I hope I've made a difference in our field, and I hope you'll make a difference in the lives of all of your students.

Sincerely,
Richard Firsten

TESOL thanks Richard Firsten for his many years of service (and impeccable grammar), and would like to introduce T. Leo Schmitt as your new Grammatically Speaking columnist. Leo is assistant director of the Intensive English Communication Program at Penn State University and has over 20 years of English language teaching experience. He has lived and worked all over the world, including in the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, and Taiwan. TESOL welcomes Leo as your new grammar expert.

Leo's first brainteaser:

Look at the two sentences below. Each sentence gives an example of an exception to a general rule. Explain the rule and the exception.

1. The doctor did not have any idea what answer would please the patient most.
2. It did not make any difference that the student had done the work on her own.

Please e-mail your grammar questions and Brainteaser responses to Leo at GrammaticallySpeaking@tesol.org.

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