Who still bothers with whom, and does it matter?

Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

SHOULD we still worry about the difference between who and whom, asks a reader.

Historically, that "m" on the end of whom is meaningful: it is like the "m" on the end of him and them. So the places where you use him or them are the places where we used to use whom. "I crashed into them", "the people whom I crashed into" (or, for some writers, "into whom I crashed"); "I should see him", "I should see whom" = "Whom should I see?"

Who, on the other hand, corresponds to he and they: "He arrived early", "The man who arrived early", "Who arrived early?" You can see there are two kinds of both who and whom here: one asks questions and one does not; but both use the same general principles for deciding between who and whom. For those who still remember Latin grammar, who is nominative, whom is accusative or dative.

The reason we find this difficult is that we do not do this in everyday speech any more. We ask "Who should you see?" It corresponds to "I should see him", and more conservative English would require "Whom should you see?" If we said that these days, our friends would wonder who we were pretending to be.

Why should whom have gone out of fashion to such an extent? The answer seems to be that we no longer use him and them clearly as accusatives and datives. For more than 400 years there has been a problem in English as to whether we say "It was him" or whether we say "It was he". Shakespeare uses both forms. There has been doubt as to which to use ever since.

If English were Latin, "It was he" would be correct; if English were French, "It was him" would be correct. English has been strongly influenced by both French and Latin, but is neither of them. We tend to prefer the French solution of "It was him", but sometimes in formal writing we go for the Latin solution instead.

If we don't know when to use he and when to use him, the difference between who and whom is just as difficult, so rather than making things overly complicated, we cut the Gordian knot and use "who" whenever possible. This makes my "who we are pretending to be" right in conservative grammar, but also in modern usage.

So perhaps a better question is, Are there ever situations when we have to use whom? Yes: in the fixed phrase "To whom it may concern", we must have whom. Notice that we are unlikely to say this phrase — it is a phrase of formal written English. In ordinary spoken English, we would say "Don't ask who the bell tolls for"; only in formal (and old-fashioned) written English is this "Ask not for whom the bell tolls".

Another correspondent asks about the celebrated split infinitive in English. An infinitive, for those who do not know, is a verb form like to know, to perceive or to create. We also have infinitives without "to", but they are irrelevant in this context.

A split infinitive is when something is added between the "to" and the rest: to really know, to clearly perceive, to accidentally create. At one stage, there were people who considered this to be a really grave error in English style.

Now, when few can recognise an infinitive, it passes unnoticed, and infinitives are split more often than they are left unsplit; we tend not to say really to know, clearly to perceive or accidentally to create.

Why were split infinitives a problem? Because in Latin you can never split an infinitive. The reason for this is clear: in Latin an infinitive is a single word, not a sequence of two words (there is nothing corresponding to the infinitival "to" of English). You could no more split an infinitive in Latin that you could say "knowreallying" for really knowing in English.

Applying the rules of one language to a completely different language leads to all sorts of strange effects. No doubt most of us will now, like Trekkies, continue to boldly go wherever we have to, and refuse to go boldly forwards.

■ *Laurie Bauer is a linguist from Victoria University. Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz*