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Raising the verb confusion issue

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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

A CORRESPONDENT has asked me to sort out "lie" and "lay". These two verbs belong to a small group of verbs that are easily confused because they are similar both in how they sound or how they are written and in their meaning. Others in this group are "sit" and "set", and "rise" and "raise".

First let's dispose of "lie" in the meaning "to tell an untruth". Historically this is a different verb from "lie" meaning "to be in a reclining position, to be situated". "Lie" = tell an untruth comes from Old English "leogan", and "lie" = recline from "licgan". Other Germanic languages still distinguish these two. For example, the first is "lugen" in modern German, and the second is "liegen".

In technical terms, the members of the "lie"/"lay", "sit"/"set" and "rise"/"raise" pairs are intransitive vs transitive verbs. In other words, the first in each pair does not (normally) take an object but the second usually does. This is best shown through examples. So while we say "John is lying in bed" (intransitive), indicating that John is in a reclining position, we say "John is laying the newspaper on the desk" (transitive), meaning that he is placing the newspaper there.

Similarly, "sit" is intransitive, i.e. used without an object, as in "our cat likes to sit on the heater", while "set" is transitive "they set their luggage on the ground"; "rise" is intransitive – "the sun rises every morning", and "raise" is transitive – "the government wants to raise GST".

One reason why "lie"/"lay" is a particularly confusable pair is that the past tense form of "lie" is "lay": "John lay in bed for two days last week with the flu".

Although the verbs have distinct past tense forms, with the past of "lay" being "laid" ("their chook only laid two eggs last week"), the fact that the past of "lie" has the same form as the present of "lay" makes it more difficult to keep these two apart.

The *Oxford English Dictionary gives many examples across the ages of writers using "lay" for "lie", including Byron, in Childe Harold*: "Thou . . . dashest him again to earth: – there let him lay."

Alternative uses of "lay" add to the confusion. Many transitive verbs are used in an intransitive way, with the object being understood and unstated rather than explicit, as in "He reads in bed every night", where it is understood that he reads a book or other material. Similarly, "lay" is sometimes used without an explicit object.

We can lay a wager or a bet, but occasionally "lay" is used without the wager being stated, so that "to lay" means "to bet", as in "I'll lay that he does it by tomorrow".

More commonly, perhaps, we hear of chooks that aren't laying. A helpful rule of thumb that I was taught as a youngster is that you can hear the word "lay" in the word "place", so that if you can use "place" then "lay" is the word you want – please place the book on the desk = please lay the book on the desk.

The "sit"/"set" distinction has similarly caused difficulty over the years. These days not many people use "set" to mean "put/place", except in phrases like "set the table". More frequently we will see other, intransitive meanings for "set", as in "the jelly is setting", "the sun is setting". Then there are some uses of "sit" with an object, but these are relatively clear, such as "sit Johnny up for his dinner", "Can you sit the baby for me tonight?"

Finally, turning to "rise"/ "raise", when you raise your hand, your hand rises, and if your employer raises your pay, then your pay will rise. But do you get a pay rise or a pay raise? While the verbs seem straightforward, both nouns are found, but with some regional variation – setting the search space to the UK in Google produces nine times as many hits for "pay rise" as for "pay raise", while for the US we get twice as many "pay raise" as "pay rise". New Zealand is more in line with the UK, preferring pay rises to pay raises. But in the current economic climate we'd be happy with either.

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