

## The world in which we live in: Beatles, blends, and blogs

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*The language of popular music is a great source of data for ELT, especially because of its motivating force among young people - and the not so young, for older people remember the pop songs of their youth with accuracy and nostalgia. Pop songs are also one of the most ubiquitous manifestations of English as a global language, so it is not surprising to see them often used in ELT classrooms. But there has been relatively little analysis of the kind of English that they contain. As we are in Liverpool, this talk takes the songs of the Beatles as a starting-point to explore a neglected grammatical feature, syntactic blends, and finds trends that go well beyond pop lyrics, affecting both spoken and written language, and especially encountered in Internet domains such as blogging. The relevance for ELT is briefly discussed.*

Welcome to my town. Well, sort of. I wasn't born in Liverpool, so I can't claim to be a real Scouser, but my family moved here in 1951, when I was 10, and I had all my secondary schooling a couple of miles north of where we are now. The accent you're listening to still has echoes of those teenage years. And I have the happiest of memories of being in this place at that time. For this was the 1950s. Lonnie Donegan and his skiffle group had us all singing 'Rock Island Line' in 1954. A year later, Bill Haley and the Comets would introduce us to rock 'n' roll, when his hit song 'Rock Around the Clock' was sung in the film *Blackboard Jungle*. Teenagers rocked away in the cinema aisles, and had to be hosed down by firemen to calm them down. A couple of years later, a group of teenagers living just south of here formed a group which they eventually called The Quarry Men (after the name of their school, Quarry Bank). They did the rounds of the church halls and school dances, along with several other wannabe pop groups, until in 1960 they went up in the world, as The Beatles. I'll tell you a nice story about one of those groups at the end of this lecture.

So, first thing in the morning on a grey day in Liverpool? We need waking up. Here's Paul McCartney, who joined the Quarry Men in 1957, providing the theme song for the 1973 James Bond movie, *Live and Let Die*. It was performed by Wings, the band he created after the Beatles broke up.

Today we are doing linguistics, not musical acoustics, so there will, I hope, be no need for IATEFL to call the fire brigade to calm your excitement down when we discover something interesting about the lyrics of this song. Here are the opening lines.

(1) When you were young and your heart was an open book  
You used to say live and let live  
(You know you did, you know you did, you know you did)  
But if this ever changing world in which we live in  
Makes you give in and cry

Say live and let die.

It's the fourth line I want to draw your attention to: 'this ever changing world in which we live in'. People don't notice the double preposition while they are listening to the music. Only sad linguists do that. But when they see it, they immediately say this is not a grammatical sentence. It ought to be either *this ever changing world in which we live* or *this ever changing world which we live in*. Not both. What is going on?

The point has attracted some discussion by Beatles' fans. A couple of years ago there was a lively debate about whether the line was actually

(2) ... world in which we're livin'

with the final -g dropped, as often happens in rapid colloquial speech, and which is commonly heard in the Liverpool accent. But this seemed unlikely. The version I've quoted is the one we read in the published sheet music. And when Paul himself was asked to comment, he said he couldn't recall which it was originally, but thought the published version 'wronger but cuter'!

I assume by 'cuter' Paul meant the artistic shape of the line in its context. The end-placed preposition is echoed by the phrasal verb in the next line, *makes you give in and cry*. The fourth line has an iambic rhythm which requires an *in* before *which*. And the tune demands an unstressed syllable at the line end. Imagine how it would sound if the line ended on *live*, with an elongated vowel, *li-ive*. The tune needs a lyric with two prepositions. When music calls, grammar bends.

Linguists have no problem dealing with such sentences. We call them *blends*. A blend is a conflation of two independent entities. They can be words - as in the case of *brunch, heliport, motorcade, internet*, and many more. And they can be syntactic constructions, as here - the end-placed versus the mid-placed preposition. But there's a big difference between lexical and syntactic blends. Many lexical blends quickly become part of standard English: they get into the dictionary. Syntactic blends don't get into grammars. You'll never see *in which we live in* in an English grammar. Which is why grammar books are no help at all when it comes to understanding how syntactic blends operate.

The point to note is that blends are very frequent, especially in speech. Paul McCartney is by no means alone. Not so long ago I heard someone say *I don't know to which hotel I'm going to*. And the blend can even be seen in writing, as you will see on these websites:

- (3) For which party will you be voting for in the March 9 election? (You'll find several examples of "for which party will you vote for" online.)
- (4) Mentors can help you with your marriage, too. After all, we all have marriage role models, couples to which we look up to and aspire to be like.
- (5) From which country does a Lexus come from?

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## Marriage Mentors

By **Francesca Di Meglio**, About.com Guide January 11, 2013  
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Did you know that January is [National Mentoring Month](#)? This might not seem like an important occasion for married people. Mentors are for businesspeople and those who want to enter some sort of trade, right? Wrong. Mentors can help you with your marriage, too. After all, we all have marriage role models, couples to which we look up to and aspire to be like. Mentors are one step above role models. These are people who know you admire them. And now you can ask them to give you a hand in [making your marriage last](#). They might provide [marriage advice](#). Or they can offer words of encouragement when your marriage has challenges to overcome. Most importantly, they are willing to share their personal experiences, so that you can learn from them or draw strength from them. Start looking for your marriage mentor now. Remember, it does not have to be some sort of formal arrangement, where you're having weekly meetings to discuss your

relationship. It can be far more casual than that. The point is to have someone to whom you can turn when you need help navigating your relationship.

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jess | My friends says she wants her mom's Lexus because it is an "Italian sports car" as she says. But I didn't think that Lexus was Italian. | Report Abuse | 3 years ago

**Best Answer** - Chosen by Voters

The Raven | LS, GS, IS, GX - Tahara, Aichi Prefecture.  
ES, HS, IS, RX - Miyawaka, Fukuoka Prefecture.  
LFA - Toyota, Aichi Prefecture.  
SC - Susono, Shizuoka Prefecture.  
LX - Toyota, Aichi Prefecture.  
RX - Cambrige, Ontario.

As you can see, all Lexus are built in Japan. The only exception is the RX which is built in Ontario, Canada. You will also notice that a few models are assembled in multiple manufacturing plants. | Report Abuse | 3 years ago

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There's no musical justification in these cases, so what is going on here?

Syntactic blends arise when people are uncertain about which construction to use - so they use them both. It's an unconscious process, which operates at the speed of thought. So the interesting question is why there is uncertainty. In the case of the two prepositions, it arises from the choice between formal and informal usage, which has long attracted prescriptive discontent. We can say both the formal *This is the man to whom I was speaking* and the informal *This is the man I was speaking to*. Native-speakers are often uncertain about the distinction because, in the prescriptive tradition which dominated schools since the 18th century, teachers tried to eliminate the informal version by imposing the rule 'Never end a sentence with a preposition'. It was never an authentic rule, of course, for end-placed prepositions can be found in the language from Anglo-Saxon times, and are frequently found in, for instance, Shakespeare. But the rule appealed to classically minded pedants and it became a standard shibboleth for over 200 years. I was taught it in my Liverpool school. It would hardly ever be taught nowadays, thanks to decades of scorn poured upon it by writers and orators - notably Winston Churchill, in his famous remark that this was a rule 'up with which he would not put'. But it has left a legacy of doubt in the minds of many, who feel that putting a preposition at the end of a sentence is somehow wrong. So they bring the preposition forward, thinking that this is a more correct usage. But then the natural pattern of the language takes over, prompting them to keep the preposition where it most easily falls, immediately following its verb. They realise they need a preposition at the end to make the sentence sound natural. So they put one

in, forgetting that they have used one already. This is especially likely when the preposition is monosyllabic and the phrasal verb has a highly predictable collocation, such as we see in *live in*, *go to*, *vote for*, and *look up to*.

The double preposition also occurs especially when there is some length between the first and second use. Compare the following examples. We are less likely to encounter (6), because the two prepositions are very close to each other.

(6) For which candidate will you vote for?

We are a bit more likely to encounter (7), because there is more to process:

(7) For which of the five candidates are you going to be voting for?

And we will certainly hear examples like (8) - this one on a BBC news channel recently:

(8) For which of the five candidates in the forthcoming by-election will the people of Eastleigh be voting for?

I shall return to the question of length later.

Now, if it were simply a matter of double prepositions, the point would hardly be worth a keynote lecture. But blending can take place between *any* two (or more) closely related constructions. The Beatles songs illustrate several more. Here are two examples, both driven by the rhythmical needs of the metrical line. In 'Bad Boy' we hear:

A bad little kid moved into my neighborhood.  
He won't do nothing right just in sitting down and look so good

Standard English requires *looking*, but the extra syllable won't work, so we end up with a blend of *sitting down and looking* and the creole-like *he... look so good*.

(9)  
sitting down and looking so good  
he... look so good > sitting down and look so good

In 'Boys' we hear:

I been told when a boy kiss a girl,  
Take a trip around the world,

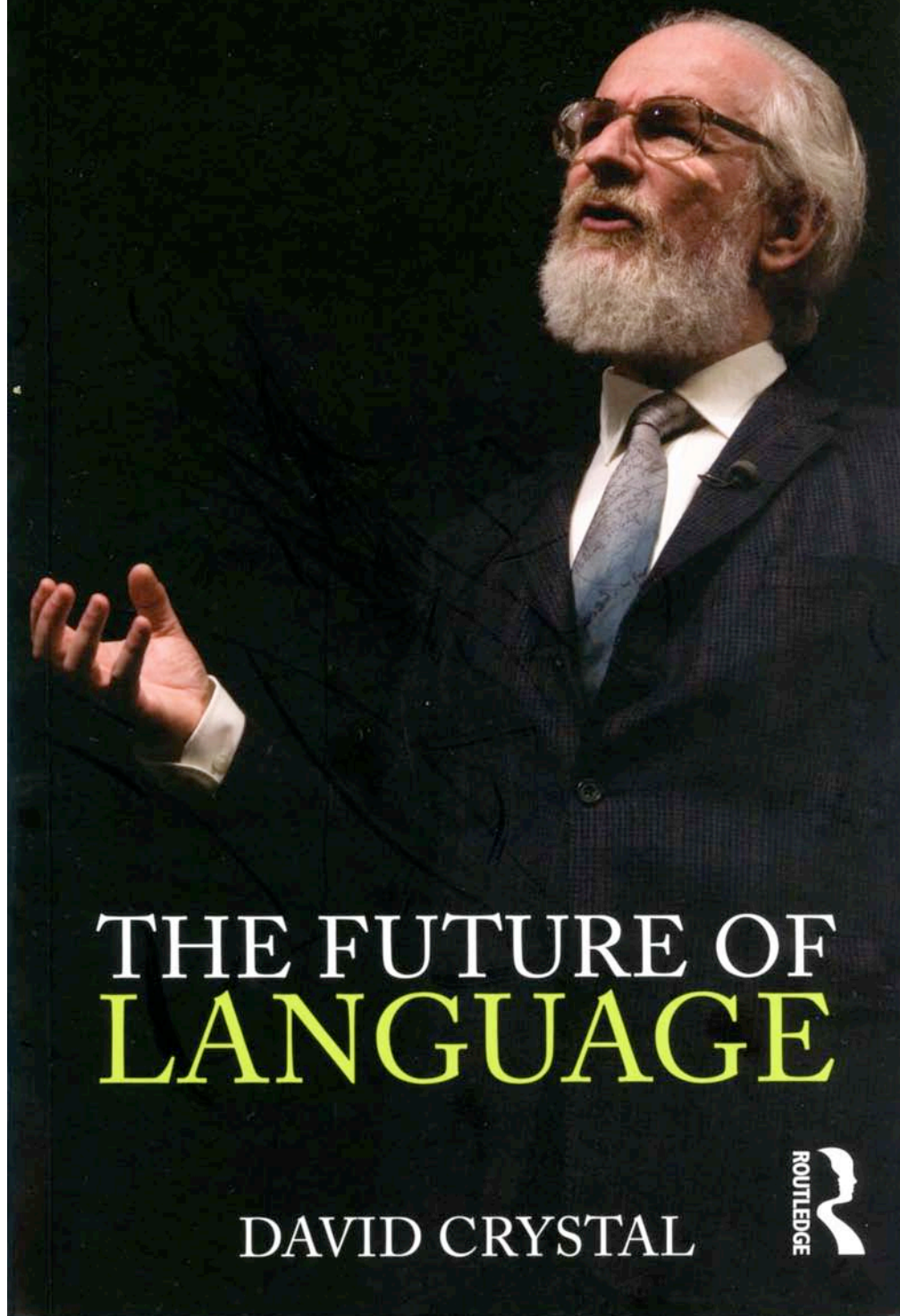
Here the *when* construction, which requires *kisses*, is blended with some other one, such as *should a boy kiss a girl* to get the required metre.

(10)  
when a boy kisses a girl  
should a boy kiss a girl > when a boy kiss a girl

When we leave music behind, and begin to listen to everyday conversation, we find blended constructions all the time, as people begin a sentence and, in the middle, change their minds as to how it should end. What we have is technically described as an *anacoluthon*, defined (eg by the *OED*) as 'a construction lacking grammatical sequence'. They appear in lecturing too. You won't hear any examples in lectures that have been carefully written down, like this one; but when lecturers speak spontaneously, you'll hear lots - though you probably won't notice them, as you are paying more attention to what is being said than to how it is being said. In these next four examples, test yourself: see if you can detect the blend before I point it out.

I take the examples from a recent DVD of spontaneously delivered lectures by someone you will recognize.

THE ROUTLEDGE DAVID CRYSTAL LECTURES



(It had to be me. People get uncomfortable when you say you're going to reveal their blends in public!)



The first is from a lecture on the future of English:

... where English has some status as the language of the press or of broadcasting, or the Church, or the government, or what it might be, the law courts...

*Or what it might be.* It's always difficult to be sure what is going on in a speaker's brain, when such things happen, but I have asked the lecturer, and he thinks that the two constructions blended here are a question and a statement:

- (11)  
Or what might it be?  
Or whatever it might be > Or what it might be

Try this next example:

And within ... how long do you think? ... Within how long did it take for an American English to start to grow

*Within how long.* This time the blend constructions are two questions. The direct question to the audience interrupts the flow of thought, and a blend is the result.

- (12)  
Within what period of time did it take for an American English to start to grow?  
How long did it take for an American English to start to grow?  
  
> Within how long...

The third example is from a lecture on language death, where the lecturer is role-playing a dialogue between a young person and his parents. The youth is asking them why they no longer speak his ancestral language, and they are blaming *their* parents:

'We don't speak it?' 'Why don't we speak it?' 'Well, cos I was never taught it.' 'Why weren't I taught it?'

*Why weren't I taught it?* The rhetorical build-up is first-person plural, *we...we...we...*, but the parent switches to the first person, *I*. The response conflates two constructions: *Why weren't we taught it?* (continuing the rhetorical pattern) or perhaps *Why weren't you taught it?* (responding to the parent's use of *I*), and *Why wasn't I taught it?* (which is how the dialogue began in the first place). In the enthusiasm of the role-play, these alternatives blend. (I should add here, as a footnote, that the lecturer does not speak a regional dialect where *weren't I* would be normal.)

- (13)  
Why weren't we/you taught it?  
Why wasn't I taught it? > Why weren't I taught it?

The fourth example comes from a talk on language and the Internet:

So this is the dynamic character of the screen is something which makes written language very very different from anything we've had in the past.

Here the blend is between two subject-verb-complement constructions: *The dynamic character of the screen is something which makes written language different* and *This is the dynamic character of the screen, which makes written language different*. The alternatives convey the same information but with different emphasis. The first choice is a straightforward SVC construction. The second one works like a cleft-sentence, in which a bit of information is brought to the front of a sentence and given special emphasis: 'It's the dynamic character of the screen which...'. Clearly the lecturer was uncertain as to where he wanted the emphasis to fall in the sentence as he began to process it, and a blend was the result. He needs to do better.

(14)

The dynamic character of the screen is something which makes written language different.

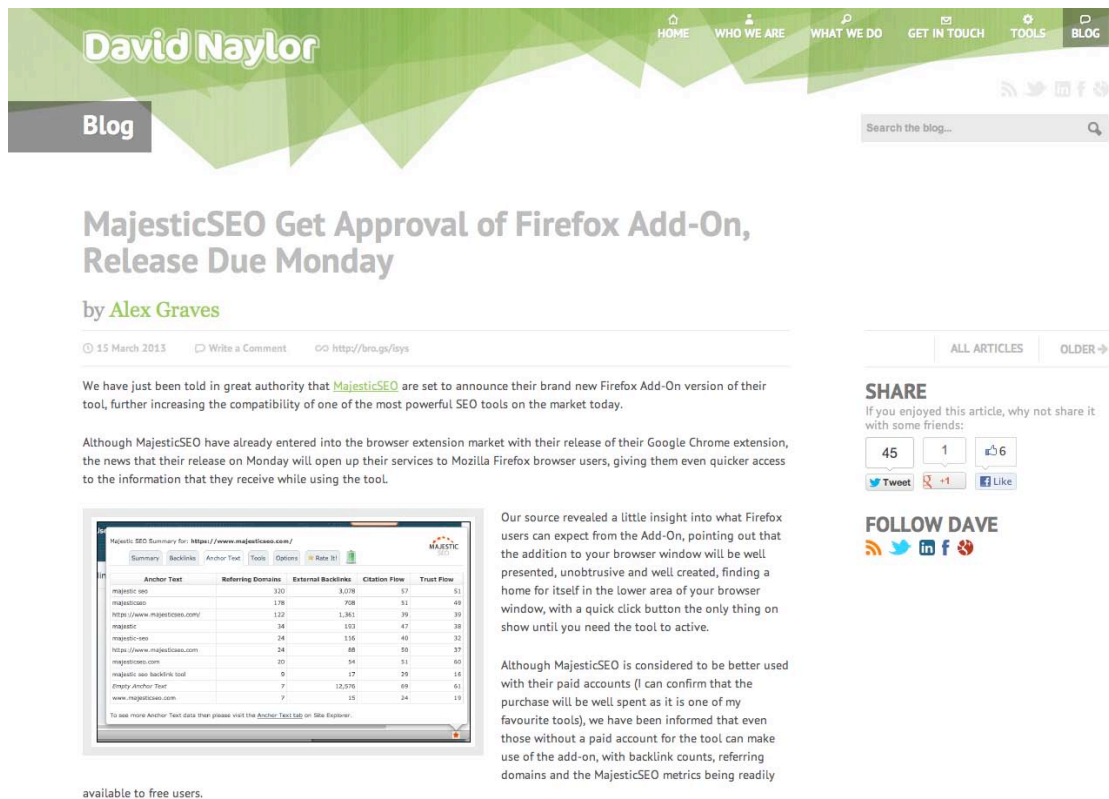
This is the dynamic character of the screen, which makes written language different.

> This is the dynamic character of the screen is something which makes ...

These are all examples from speech. It's much more difficult to encounter examples in the traditional domain of the written language. Blends rarely appear in public writing because we notice them when we reread our text prior to publication - or, if *we* don't, someone else does, such as an editor or copy-editor - and the anomaly is eliminated by rephrasing. You have to remember that standard English is, first and foremost, what you read in the public domain, and to appear there a piece of writing has to pass through a number of filters, whether it is a book, a magazine, a newspaper, a billboard, a brochure, or a notice on a wall. The checks are carried out by editors, sub-editors, copy-editors, proof-readers, and printers, whose job is to ensure that a use of written language is clear and consistent, and reflects the house-style of the publisher. If you have written anything for public consumption, you will know about house-style, and how your submission is edited by others before it appears in print. It is a practice which has steadily grown since the 15th century, and is standard procedure today.

But not on the Internet. In blogs, social networking sites, web page forums, and in personal websites there is little or no external editorial influence. We see our writing there in its most naked form, in passages of continuous prose (often of considerable length), but presented in a screen typeface that can be as elegant as in any paper publication. The style might be totally spontaneous and conversational, but the visual impact is one of care and revision. Indeed, we can - if we wish, and have the time - revise our posts so that they conform exactly to what we believe to be standard English; but the evidence is that most people do not, especially in interactive contexts where emotions are running high (as is so often the case on the Internet). As a result, blends of the kind I am illustrating are increasingly to be found.

I spent just a few minutes randomly dipping into the top 100 UK blogs, as established by the Branded website, and saw these examples on the opening pages. First, the number 5 site:



(15)

Although MajesticSEO have already entered into the browser extension market with their release of their Google Chrome extension, the news that their release on Monday will open up their services to Mozilla Firefox browser users, giving them even quicker access to the information that they receive while using the tool.

We need a finite verb after *users* to make this sentence grammatical. It has to be *gives them* or *is giving them* or *will give them*, or the like. The problem here is that, by using a very long subject (*the news ... users*, 17 words), by the time the writer gets to the verb he has forgotten how the sentence is going. He evidently thinks that the sentence began at *Their release on Monday will open...*, where a non-finite *giving* would be acceptable.

(16)

the news ... gives them ...  
 their release on Monday will open up their services to Mozilla Firefox browser users, giving them ...

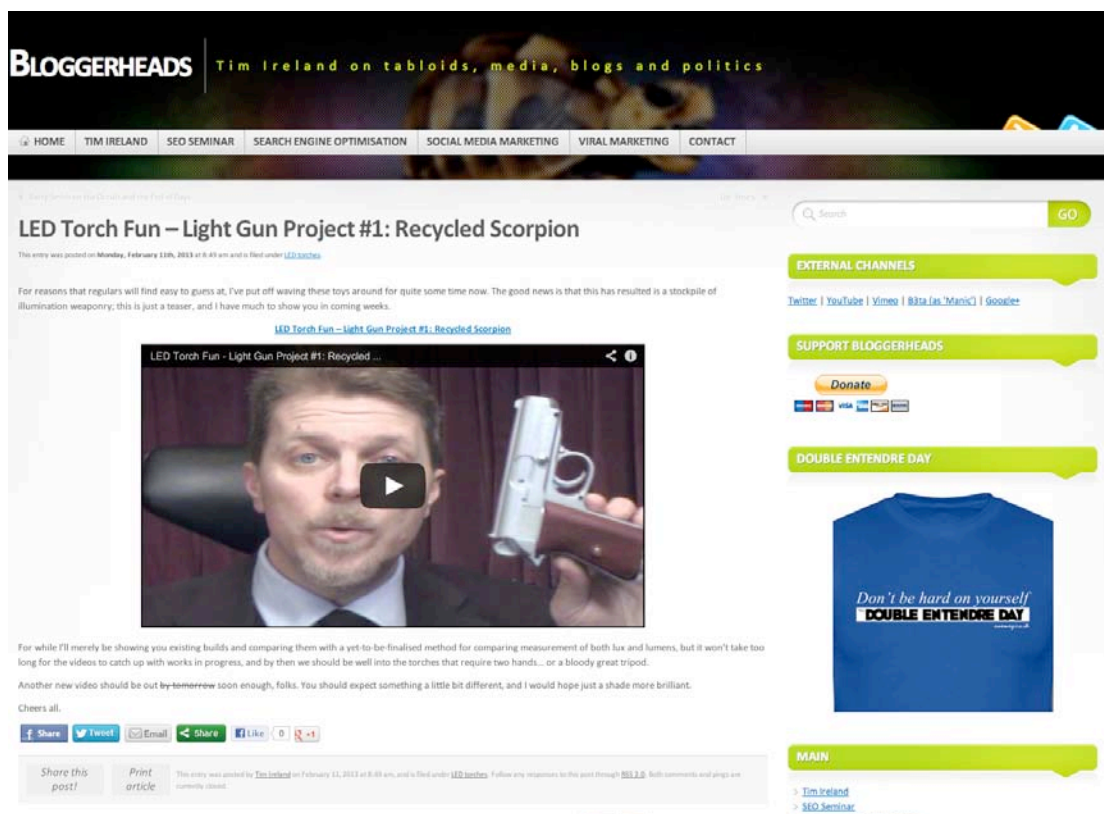
Here what is semantically most important in his mind (the news of the release) has taken priority over grammatical construction.

It's the length of constructions that tends to get in the way and cause blends. Once a construction goes beyond the easy limits of working memory capacity, problems arise. You may recall George Miller's 'magic number seven, plus or minus two' - a 'law' that has been repeatedly explored in psychology, with varying results depending on the kind of data being manipulated. For words (as opposed to digits), the number of chunks we can easily process is much lower than seven, perhaps as small as four. But whatever the lowest level is, it's evident that 17 words is wildly beyond our comfortable working memory. Even if we ignore the grammatical words and focus on just the items with lexical content, we are dealing with nine chunks:

(17)  
the news - their release - on Monday - will open up - their services - to Mozilla - Firefox - browser - users [giving them even quicker access]

This is an awful lot to remember. No wonder the writer loses his way. He can't recall where he has been, and is anxious to push on to his main point, which is 'quicker access'..

The same effect causes a problem in Blog No 64.



(18)  
For while I'll merely be showing you existing builds and comparing them with a yet-to-be-finalised method for comparing measurement of both lux and lumens, but it won't take too long for the videos to catch up with works in progress, and by then we should be well into the torches that require two hands... or a bloody great tripod.

The writer begins with a *while*-subordinate clause, but by the time he gets to the main clause, 22 words later, he's forgotten that. He knows he has to express a contrast, though, about videos catching up, so he turns the sentence into a compound one, using another contrastive word, *but*.

(19)

while I'll merely be showing you existing builds ... it won't take too long for the videos to catch up ...

I'll merely be showing you existing builds ... but it won't take too long for the videos to catch up ...

> while I'll merely be showing you existing builds ..., but it won't take too long for the videos to catch up ...

The result is a blend. He has expressed the contrast twice - once with *while*, once with *but* - but because this semantically reinforces his point, I doubt whether any casual reader (and all readers of blogs are casual readers) would notice the grammatical oddity. The features of a blend in writing do tend to bury themselves deep within a sentence.

Poorly constructed sentences of this kind have attracted stylistic complaints for generations. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* is full of examples attacking them. How is one to avoid them? Reading text aloud is one way, which can help in the case of blends in short sentences. But it doesn't help in the case of long ones. It's not really possible to read a 50-word sentence (15) or a 59-word sentence (18) aloud so as to retain their meaning. The only possible solution is to rephrase, or rewrite in shorter sentences. And in doing so, we must take on board one of the basic principles governing listening and reading comprehension: that comprehension is governed by the distribution of weight throughout a sentence.

English is a language where end-weight is normal. In everyday speech, speakers tend to place the most important information towards the end of the sentence, and not towards the beginning. Specifically, the weight occurs after the main verb and not before it. Take this piece of informal conversation - from the first recording Derek Davy and I made for *Advanced Conversational English* (non-fluencies are ignored in what follows). Note what happens before and after the verb:

(20)

Pre-verb	Verb	Post-verb
I	think	
it probably	is	the money for what you get, you know
I	was reading	in the paper this morning, a chap
he	's	a director of a big company in Birmingham
who	was	the world's number one football fan
he	used to spend	about a thousand a year watching football, you know
he	's watched	football in every league ground in England, all 92, and
he	's been	to American to watch West Bromwich playing in America
he	's been	to the last two or three World Cup tournaments, and
he	goes	to all the matches away, you know, European cup matches, and everything that
English teams	are playing in	
he	's	all over the world watching it, you see
this year, he	's watched	22 games so far this year
which	is	about 50 per cent of his normal, and
even he	's getting browned off...	

The vast majority of subjects in everyday conversation are like this - a single pronoun or a short noun phrase of just two or three words. If I continued this example for another 100 clauses, you wouldn't see anything different. All the length is concentrated after the main verb. Occasionally a bit of extra length is added before the verb in the form of a short emphatic adverbial (as in *probably*, *this year*, *even*). But long subjects and long opening adverbial clauses are definitely out. Making these clause elements lengthy immediately affects listening comprehension, as can be easily demonstrated. Which of the following two sentences do you find easier to process?

(21)

It was nice of John and Mary to visit us the other day.

For John and Mary to visit us the other day was nice.

The answer is obvious. So note the potential problem, then, when we encounter an exercise like the following, in an ELT coursebook, which I took at random from my shelves. It is part of a lesson on relative clauses.

(22)

*Exercise 4*

Finish these sentences, e.g. Salesmen who sell books at your door are a nuisance. The books they sell are often expensive.

Salesmen who sell books at your door	are a nuisance.
The books they sell	are often expensive.
People who buy expensive clothes	go shopping at ---.
The clothes they buy	are ---.
Men who drink and then drive	---.
The passengers they carry	---.

The pattern is a complete reversal of what we encounter in everyday speech.

Now, I'm not of course saying that such exercises are of no value. All I'm saying is that teachers need to be aware that, by putting so much weight before the verb, they are making such sentences more difficult to process than they need to be, so that it would be wise to leave them until later in a course. In the earlier stages of teaching relative clauses, it would be sensible to keep the subjects short and introduce the relatives after the verb. So:

(23)

I don't like salesmen who sell books at the door.  
It's often expensive to buy the books they sell.

And so on. You can do better than this. I am no materials writer. But I hope you see that these constructions are much easier to process, and the exposure to relative clauses is still there.

You can perhaps now see why my blogging examples caused their writers such difficulty. They begin with lengthy constructions which take up so much processing power that the sentence breaks down as it switches from subordinate to main clause.

(24)

For while I'll merely be showing you existing builds and comparing them with a yet-to-be-finalised method for comparing measurement of both lux and lumens, [but] it	won't take too long...
Although MajesticSEO have already entered into the browser extension market with their release of their Google Chrome extension, [the news that] their release on Monday	will open up their services...

The writers are no longer in control. Notice that there's no ambiguity in sentences that contain blends, because the semantic content remains clear in their minds. It is simply that the grammar has not kept pace with the thought.

I said earlier that syntactic blends don't get into grammars. *Could* a blend ever become part of standard English? I don't see why not, actually, but it would take a lot

of usage to get one established, and it would have to get past the eagle eyes of the copy-editors. One possible candidate is seen in these next two examples, both from books, where something did get through. The first is by a logician, Giovanni Sambin; the second is by a scientist, Juan J Gomez-Ibarra:

(25)

The means by which one can solve the definitional equations are some very simple properties, which one should better specify in advance, and these are the properties of *and* and of *yields*.

(26)

One should better pay attention to what Darwin and Wallace had to say about the same problem. When faced with the monumental task of classifying natural life, both biologists came to the conclusion that all divisions were arbitrary.

*Should better*. The blend here is between two modal constructions which both mean 'ought to', *had better* and *should*, and a third construction where the *better* is an adverbial modifying a following verb:

(27)

One had better pay attention...

One should (rather) pay attention...

One should better + pay attention... i.e. pay better attention

I've heard this usage in regional dialects (*you should better go, you should better*), but it hasn't yet established itself as standard English. I've also heard it quite a lot from learners of English as a foreign language, so it's probably already being claimed as a feature of English as a lingua franca.

Which brings me back to ELT. You have come across blends before, I have no doubt, in your students' writing. Learners' writing often displays blends, especially when they're attempting to use more advanced syntactic constructions. Sentences start in one way and finish in another. Getting them to read through their work before giving it in can help, or getting them to read the problem sentence aloud, but it won't solve all problems, as in some cases there's a genuine lack of awareness as to what the problem is. In such cases, it will be necessary to tease apart the contributing structures, to show what went wrong, in the way I've done with my examples.

Here's an example from a piece of writing by a 15-year-old: *Does it not worry you that the man to whom you will marry might be cruel to you?* The extra *to* could be here for either (or both) of two reasons: the student could have been uncertain about how to use the *whom* construction, or she was planning to write *the man to whom you will be married*, and changed her mind half way through. It is very important to appreciate that errors such as these are signs of growth, not carelessness. To condemn a blend in a complex construction may lead to the student avoiding the construction altogether, and staying with safer, simpler expressions. Far better to spend a little bit of time analysing the sources of the blend. This points the way forward.

It's also important to know the contexts in which blends are likely to occur. Blends tend to be more common when there is pressure on the speaker or writer. The pressure





The sax player, sadly, had to leave the group to go to university, where his entire first-year grant was equivalent to what his former colleagues earned in a single night, when they later achieved fame in the Hamburg nightclubs. Over the course of his lifetime, he has earned about a billionth of what Paul McCartney has earned. But this does not bother him one jot. For Paul McCartney never ended up as patron of IATEFL.

## References

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