

Ultan's grammar quip

The Urth list — 9 messages, 4 voices, 13 May 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6007>

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Jason H — 13 May 2011, 09:15

Shadow Grammar Puzzle:

When Ultan meets Severian, he asks him whose apprentice he is; Severian replies that Master Gurloes sent him and that Master Palaemon teaches the apprentices; Ultan replies "But not grammar".

The implication of his little joke is that Severian made a grammatical error at some point since they met. What's the error?

(I *think* I know, but I'm only 75% sure. So I'm curious what other people think.)

-Jason

David Stockhoff — 13 May 2011, 11:47 · in reply to Jason H

I assume it's "Master Palaemon teaches us apprentices, mostly."

I think Ultan means the word "mostly" is misplaced, making it sound like Palaemon teaches "apprentices" as a subject, thus, "but not grammar."

On 5/13/2011 5:15 AM, Jason H wrote:
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James Wynn — 13 May 2011, 14:23 · in reply to David Stockhoff

For the same reason, I always thought the problem was with "us apprentices". But this is really a style issue rather than a grammatical one. Perhaps it was a pet-peeve of style guide writers when Wolfe went to college. The problem is that it uses two direct objects (which could be argued to be a grammatical error, I suppose). Thus, it is cumbersome and confusing for the reason David gave. So, it is for clarity's sake, rather than ignorance, that people tend to replace the "us" with "we" which is technically incorrect. One should avoid the pattern entirely. If "us" needs to be qualified and the speaker needs to clarify his membership to "us", there are lots of

ways to speak and write the thought more clearly.

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avast! Antivirus: Outbound message clean.

Virus Database (VPS): 110512-1, 05/12/2011

Tested on: 5/13/2011 7:47:24 AM

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<http://www.avast.com>

Jason H — 13 May 2011, 18:33 · in reply to James Wynn

I agree that Severian's grammatical error occurs in "Master Palaemon teaches us apprentices, mostly", but I have a different take.

There's nothing inherently wrong with the "us apprentices", grammatically or stylistically. People often misuse "us" vs. "we" in this setting (as James says), so our suspicions here are raised, but Severian's use is correct. So why does Ultan imply that he didn't learn grammar?

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Adverb placement is a common but subtle issue. It's the difference between saying "John eats only sushi" (correct), and "John only eats sushi" (commonly used, but wrong: it implies that John does nothing but eat; he doesn't sleep, or work, etc.).

To me, this little "grammar puzzle" Wolfe sets up is more interesting than speculating on whether Severian's great-aunt might actually be Baldander's cousin. But I realize I might be in the minority here. :)

-Jason

On Fri, May 13, 2011 at 7:23 AM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 13 May 2011, 18:44 · in reply to Jason H

On Fri, May 13, 2011 at 11:33 AM, Jason H <beet31425 at gmail.com> wrote:
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If Severian meant that, he would probably say "Master Palaemon teaches mostly us apprentices" -- or, more properly, "mainly." The hanging adverb, separated by a comma from the rest of the sentence, is used by Mark Twain (especially in the voice of Huck Finn) exactly as Wolfe-through-Severian uses it here: to modify the verb, but to have that modification come as an afterthought. The sentence as provided is perhaps technically ambiguous, but the meaning is clear: it is the same as if the "mostly" had been placed before "teaches."

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Jason H — 13 May 2011, 19:11 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Hmmm... I *think* we're basically agreeing, Dan'l.

Severian's meaning is certainly clear, I grant you-- that's how Ultan knew what he meant. And I'm sure that great writers, including Mark Twain, use it that way, especially if they're writing colloquially. The question here is: what grammatical fault is Ultan chiding Severian for? And I think the answer is that this dangling adverb, modifying a non-adjacent word, is not just "perhaps technically ambiguous", but, to Ultan, grammatically wrong.

-J

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I don't think that is what Sev is saying. He is saying "Although Gurloes sent me, my training is PRIMARILY received by Palaemon...but not entirely. I consider myself Palaemon's apprentice, if I had to choose one." It is true that "mostly" is ambiguous here. So is the use of "us apprentices". The placement of "mostly" is ambiguous and so is its usage in the first place.

J.

Jason H — 13 May 2011, 20:23 · in reply to James Wynn

James,

Good ear, and I think I now agree with you as to what Sev meant. But I wouldn't say "the placement of 'mostly' is ambiguous". If we want to be really strict, there are right and wrong placements, depending on the meaning of the sentence.

Here are three possible meanings:

1. Most of the people Palaemon teaches are apprentices.
2. Most of what Palaemon does is teach.
3. Most of the teaching is done by Palaemon.

I still think that to a strict grammarian like Ultan, Sev's statement is only correct if he means (1). (Which he doesn't, hence the error.)

If Sev had meant (2) (as I originally thought), he should have said "Master Palaemon mostly teaches us apprentices."

If Sev had meant (3) (which, I agree with James, is what he really does mean), he should have said something like "Mostly Master Palaemon teaches us apprentices." (Although I guess "Master Palaemon mostly teaches..." works here too.)

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J.

David Stockhoff — 14 May 2011, 12:37 · in reply to Jason H

Certainly Ultan would be a grammar nazi, and certainly the placement of "mostly" is ambiguous. But does all this address Ultan's joke?

How do these strike you in terms of Ultan's completion of Severian's sentence:

1. Most of the people Palaemon teaches are apprentices, but not grammar.
2. Most of what Palaemon does is teach, but not grammar.
3. Most of the teaching is done by Palaemon, but not grammar.

#1 doesn't work at all. #2 and #3 are marginal at best.

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