

English-Usage And Abusage

by Anonymous

Ringing The New Year In

IN a burst of New Year rhetoric, a columnist wrote recently of the Old Year 'ringing out' and the New Year 'ringing in'. In the expression or idiom the beginning of another, 'ring' is a transitive verb. A year cannot in this sense ring out or ring in; it has to be rung out or rung in. The phrase was used in Jennyson's *In Memoriam*; he was not the first man to use it in this sense but ever since the publication of that poem, it has acquired a currency it probably never had before. But mistakes, as in the case of the columnist, occur because 'ring' is also an intransitive verb. A bell rings; you can also ring the bell. But in the phrase relating to the end and beginning of years, ring is a transitive. In any case, the phrase is an idiom which has to be used as the native speakers do.

New year writing also saw an outbreak of numerous other errors, of which Anonymous will mention a few in today's column.

Questions : Some writers appear to believe that all you need do to frame a question is to use 'why', 'what', 'how' or 'where' in a sentence and put a note of interrogation at the end. That is what happens in Bengali where the only difference between an interrogative and an affirmative sentence consists in the presence of a particle implying a question. 'He came' and 'Why did he come' in Bengali are indistinguishable except for a 'why' in the second sentence. But in English you must use an auxiliary verb immediately after the interrogative term. This is one of the basic rules in English which people are believed to learn in primary school, but Anonymous notices with some concern that the rule is being frequently ignored even by those who write books in English.

Anonymous will make no attempt to account for this practice but he supposes that it is also a habit which has spilled over from the mother tongue. Probably, he would add, because in many instances the error is due to sheer carelessness. One person recently wrote indignantly: Why the government failed to check adulteration? The obvious correction would be : Why did the government fail to check adulteration?

Sometimes when some one is attempting a long sentence with the intention of making a statement and then turns it into an interrogative in an access of anger or emotion, he forgets its beginning and leaves it as it is.

SYNTAX On other occasions writers forget that every word in a sentence has to be related to every

other in syntactical order in order to conform to grammar. Take the following passage :

"Everybody thought that young woman's fickle mind, within a few days her day dream would be smashed. She would be tired of the rotten environment of village and run to Dacca."

The phrase 'young woman's fickle mind' has no grammatical relation to what follows it. One can guess that the writer probably wants to imply that because of the young woman's fickle mind her day dream would not last. But guessing the meaning is no substitute for grammar. One can somehow extract sense from a jumble of words, if they are not too confusing, but that is not what writing means. The trouble with many people is that they insist that as long as a set of words can yield some meaning, one should not object.

Here is another example of ungrammatical construction:

"Although she needed no shopping she rushed to the shops and kept the salesman and sales girls busy asking and searching for."

Believe it or not, there is nothing after 'for' in that sentence. It is difficult to imagine what led the writer to leave the preposition 'for' dangling in the air. Had he stopped at 'searching' the sentence would make sense. But as it is, it is ridiculous.

Yet another example of indifference to syntax is the following:

'Hasan got first class first position'.

The meaning is clear but how are you to connect 'first position' with the first part of the sentence grammatically? The writer means 'first position in the first class. First class first position would pass master in colloquial English, but it won't do in writing.

This difference between colloquial speech and writing is little appreciated by people with a weak command of grammar. They argue that if the person to whom words are addressed understand what you mean, you shouldn't bother about grammatical rules. Writing however calls for discipline and order, and grammar is nothing but linguistic discipline, without which language would soon degenerate into gibberish.

The kind of English that seems popular in Bangladeshi writing is an odd mixture of the colloquial and the standard, unsyntactical and unidiomatic phrases jostling with correct usage, and it is also characterised by the use of words and idioms in senses which they do not carry.