

“Between a Rock and A Hard Place” Supplemental Studies

Supplement II

The Battle Over *Whom*: Is *Whom* Dead or Just Dying?

The word *whom* is engaged in a life-or-death struggle for survival. The editor of a major American newspaper, who describes himself as a “moderate prescriptivist,” summarizes the current situation thus:

In conversation, *who* appears to have supplanted *whom*, almost universally. There is no going back.

In formal writing, such as an academic paper or book, *whom* remains on its precarious perch.

In middle-level discourse, such as journalism, which aims at a conversational tone while adhering to the conventions of standard written English, *whom* is slowly slipping away, and probably should. ...

It may be time to discuss letting go of the distinction in journalism. No doubt my fellow prescriptivists will see this as a counsel of despair, even though I am holding the ground on *imply* and *infer*, *comprise* and *compose*, even though I continue to use *whom* in my own writing when the pronoun as object is called for, I am two-thirds of the way toward being a dead white male, and I think that *whom* will see me out.

But language is tricky, and it defies predictions. School-teacher superstitions, such as the supposed prohibition against the split infinitive or the preposition at the end of a sentence, persist despite having been repeatedly exploded.

For now, *whom*, though it may have seen its best days, is going, going, but not quite gone.

The distinguished pedant H. W. Fowler already foreshadowed this tragedy in his 1908 edition:

The interrogative *who* is often used for *whom*, as, “Who did you see?” A distinction should here be made between conversation, written or spoken, and formal writing. Many educated people feel that in saying, “It is I” or “Whom do you mean?” instead of “It’s me or Who do you mean?” they will be talking like a book, and they justifiably prefer geniality to grammar. But in print, unless it is dialogue, the correct forms are advisable.

Fowler’s 1908 rule is pretty much the rule EHV follows: “In print the correct forms are advisable unless it is dialogue.” Actually, this was “old news” already in 1908 since substitution of *who* for *whom* occurs already in Shakespeare.

Bryan Garner (see the review in Supplement II) writes:

It’s true that in certain contexts, *whom* is stilted. That has long been so: “Every sensible English speaker on both sides of the Atlantic says, *Who were you talking to?* and the sooner we begin to write it the better.”

According to the LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX measured by ngrams, “*Who* as an object not following a preposition” is “Stage 4.” That means that it is “virtually universal but is opposed on cogent grounds by a few linguistic stalwarts” (die-hard snoots). *

***NOTE:** In Garner’s book, “snoot” is not a bad word, since he is a “half-snoot” himself but to have a clear grasp of the meaning, be sure to read his description of the word on page 840. It’s both serious and worth a chuckle.

Garner is careful to note that *whom* is not dead in American English, and, *who* is not always acceptable. For example, “*Who* as an object following a preposition” is only “Stage 2” on the LANGUAGE-CHANGE INDEX. That means that it is unacceptable in standard usage” even if a significant fraction of the language community might use it. In other words, it is not acceptable to say:

That sits well with the local leaders, *one of who* [read *one of whom*] drew upon his own analogy to describe the party.

There are a number of other problems with rigid attempts to enforce the law of *who* and *whom*:

1. It is a futile attempt at an Amish-style freeze in time, which is impossible in a living language. If we want to preserve the purity of the English language, we need to preserve not only the cases of *who/whom* but also the cases of the 2nd person pronouns: *thou*=singular subject, *thee*=singular object, *ye*=plural subject, *you*=plural object. If the English language can survive the loss of *thou*, *thee*, and *ye*, it can survive the loss of *whom*. Actually the loss of *thou*, *thee*, and *ye* is much more serious than the loss of *whom* since it is not the loss only of the subject/object distinction but also the loss of the useful singular/plural distinction.
2. It is an ill-advised attempt to impose the grammar of a dead Romance language on a living Germanic language. A partisan of the lost causes of “who/whom” and “no preposition last” explained it this way: “When in doubt about correct English grammar, I always relied on the rules of Latin.” Even among the ancient Romans nobody talked like a book, except for Virgil and Cicero, the two guys who did more than anyone else to assure that Latin would become a dead language.
3. When people try to apply dead rules to living language, they over-correct and make clumsy mistakes like “*a woman whom I think is a genius.*” *Whom* is not the object of *I think*, as rearranging the words demonstrates: “*a woman who is a genius, I think.*” They try to use archaic forms like *thee* and *thou* with little feel for the right usage and think *ye olde Inn* is pronounced *ye olde Inn*, rather than the correct *the olde Inn*. (The letter that looks like y is actually *thorn*, þ, an archaic form of *th*.)

In the Wartburg Project we try to use language that is both correct and alive and to observe the distinction between written communication and conversation (even conversation recorded in writing).

Discuss: Is *whom* dead or dying?

What is its life expectancy?