

Lie, lay: a grammar trap lying in wait

January 12 2011, By Judith Smith



Many people are self-conscious about how they put words together, particularly if they know they are speaking with a grammar expert such as Elly van Gelderen, professor of English at ASU.

(PhysOrg.com) -- "I'm going to lay down and take a nap," the man said to his wife.

"You can't lie that one on me. I know you're lying," she sternly replied. "You've never laid down for a nap in your life. What are you really going to do?"

Eeek. Doesn't anyone know the difference between "lay" and "lie" anymore? Does anyone even care?

And furthermore, should we care?

Today's usage of "lie" and "lay" is "totally arbitrary," said Elly van Gelderen, professor of English. "The Oxford English Dictionary – Samuel Johnson's dictionary – decided on these forms, and I think we should get rid of them. I don't see them as errors, just that things are changing."

The "correct," or "prescriptive," usage of lie and lay seem to be moving farther (or should that be further?) away from people's conscience, as a careful reading of current newspapers illustrates.

Just ask the two people who uttered these sentences:

"You don't get a choice really. You can lay there and you can die, or you can get up and get going again."

"This is just money laying on the table that companies haven't gotten around to doing."

And, many of van Gelderen's students don't know the difference. As part of a 10-question grammar quiz, she asked the students to choose the right usage for lay and lie – "and only two students got all 10 sentences right," she said.

(Lesson: 'Lay' is a transitive irregular verb – it needs an object: "The chicken lays an egg every day." 'Lie' is an intransitive irregular verb that does not need an object: "I lie down regularly.")

And then there's the quandary of "who" and "whom," which, van Gelderen says, has been around since the time of Shakespeare.

(Lesson: 'Who' is subject and 'whom' is the object of a preposition or verb.)

Speaking of Shakespeare, the dramatist actually wrote this sentence in “The Merchant of Venice”: “All debts are cleared between you and I.” (Another subject-object conundrum.)

But if you read a modern version of the play, you’ll find that it has been changed to “between you and me.”

(Shakespeare’s spelling of “cleared” as “cleerd” in “The Merchant of Venice” also has been “fixed,” and there are numerous other examples of how his language has been “cleaned up.”)

A new wrinkle in grammar is the increasing use of “goes” instead of “says,” as in the following exchange:

“He goes, ‘You are so last-year. Why are you wearing those ripped-up jeans?’ Then I go, ‘Because I just fell and torn them.’”

This use of “go” is “quotative,” van Gelderen said. “The speaker will say ‘go’ or ‘goes’ then go on to quote someone.” Many people are self-conscious about how they put words together, particularly if they know they are speaking with a grammar expert such as van Gelderen.

If she happens to mention, say at the dentist, that she teaches grammar, the usual reaction is: “‘Oh, my grammar is terrible.’ Therefore I never say that I teach grammar,” she said.

So why bother learning the rules of grammar? Why not just let it all go and say, “Me sees you” instead of “I see you”?

“We stick to the rules because it makes us sound educated,” van Gelderen said. “To some extent it does empower people to learn grammar. It’s important in our society.”

And, she added, though [grammar](#) does subtly change, “too many people have a vested interest in keeping it the way it is.”

To say it another way, people want to see things stay like they are. (Or should it be as they are?)

Pop Quiz: See if you can use the appropriate form of ‘lie’ or ‘lay’ in the following sentences.

Choices: lie, lay, laid, lay, laying, lying, lain, laid

1. Did you want to on the couch?
2. Did youyour pen down?
3. Earlier today, I down some towels to absorb the rain.
4. Last night, she awake for a long time.
5. Have you been brick long?
6. She was on the couch.
7. I have in the sun all day.
8. They have down their arms.

Answers: 1. lie 2. lay 3. laid 4. lay 5. laying 6. lying 7. lain 8. laid

Provided by Arizona State University

Citation: Lie, lay: a grammar trap lying in wait (2011, January 12) retrieved 13 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-01-grammar-lying.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.