For Whom the Bell Tolls

The inexorable decline of America’s least favorite pronoun

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Whom, I am thrilled to inform you, is dying. But its death, I am less thrilled to inform you, has been slow. According to Google’s expansive collection of digitized books, the word has been on a steady decline since 1826. The 400-million-word Corpus of Historical American English records a similar slump. Articles in Time magazine included 3,352 instances of whom in the 1930s, 1,492 in the 1990s, and 902 in the 2000s. And the lapse hasn’t been limited to literature or journalism. In 1984, after all, the Ghostbusters weren’t wondering, “Whom you gonna call?”

Whom, in other words, is doomed. As Mignon Fogarty, the host of the popular Grammar Girl podcast, told me: “I’d put my money on whom being mostly gone in 50 to 100 years.”

But why? One explanation is that the word has outlived its ability to fulfill the most important function of language: to clarify and specify. Another is that its subject/object distinction can be confusing to the point of frustrating. The most immediate reason, though, is that whom simply costs language users more than it benefits them. Correctness is significantly less appealing when its price is the appearance of being—as an editor at The Guardian wrote—a “pompous twerp.”

In a culture that values collegiality above so much else, the ability to communicate casually and convivially and non-twerpily is its own kind of capital. Casualness in writing can imply self-assurance, putting the incentives even more squarely on the side of the informal. As a result, Dear so-and-so gives way to Hi so-and-so or even Hey so-and-so. Infinitives split, wantonly. Prepositions end sentences. And, yes, whom
becomes who—or disappears entirely. (Consider William Safire’s advice on the subject: “The best rule for dealing with who vs. whom is this: Whenever whom is required, recast the sentence.”)

Technology seems to be speeding the demise. Online, on-screen, strict rules are systematically broken—for brevity’s sake, for clarity’s sake, and sometimes for the sake of ease or irony or fun. (Because LOL, amirite?!) What the Indiana University linguist Susan Herring refers to as “e-grammar” is, she points out, a grammar only in the broadest sense of the word. In a context that can make whom seem almost aggressively retrograde, we err intentionally, breaking rules that are in some cases, Jack Lynch writes in his book *The Lexicographer’s Dilemma*, simply “prejudice representing itself as principle.” And the Internet, itself almost aggressively forward-looking, institutionalizes the errors. Dating sites talk about the people “who you match with.” Twitter offers its users a recommendations list titled “Who to Follow.”

We break the old rules, then, because new rules are, effectively, replacing them. Few of us still use whom in speech, and we’ve adopted that practice in our writing, particularly in more-casual forms (e-mails, texts, IMs). What scholars refer to as “secondary orality,” the tendency of written language to adopt the characteristics of speech, is for many of us the new linguistic reality. According to the language blogger Stan Carey, “Whom is unnecessary—indeed, it’s out of place—where a conversational tone is sought.” We type with our telephones and we chat with our keyboards and we write, increasingly, as we talk. And—to whom it may concern—our words rise, and fall, accordingly.

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