Common Mistakes in English Language Usage

Sharickah Muthu*

In my years of work as a copy editor (with a stint as an English teacher thrown in) I have come across almost every type of error, in writing as much as in spoken English. Not only are these mistakes much more common than one might think, but those who make these mistakes also do so in the innocent confidence that they speak, or write perfect English! While these interesting quirks are lightly dismissed as 'mere Indianisms', a student of English would do well to heed these potholes on the road to learning English and steer clear of them.

Let us examine some of the most common ones here:

1. Incorrect—I am going to **give** an exam.

   Correct—I am going to **take** an exam.

   This probably happens because you translate directly from the vernacular, as in "*Main test dene ja raha hoon.*" In English, you don't **give** an exam (or test); you **take** it.

2. Incorrect—After reading the passage again, it is **more clear** to me.

   Correct—After reading the passage again, it is **clearer** to me.

   In the above, and similar sentences, use the comparative form, rather than adding 'more'. For eg: He is taller than his brother (not 'more tall' or 'more taller'). She looks thinner now (not 'more thin' or 'more thinner').

3. Incorrect—Vaishali has many beautiful **sarees'**.

   Correct—Vaishali has many beautiful **sarees**.

   The incorrect use of the apostrophe is very common. The apostrophe should be used to show possession or with the possessive form. When we add 's' at the end of a word, it is simply to make a plural. So, the correct usage would be:

Principal, S. D. Public School, Pitampura, New Delhi.

Vaishali has many beautiful **sarees**. (Plural)

Vaishali's sarees are beautiful. (Possessive)

4. Incorrect—Although he worked hard, **but** he missed the first rank.

Correct—Although he worked hard, **yet** he missed the first rank.

Remember, **although** and **yet** are used as a pair in the same sentence for emphasis. If you don't want to use 'although' and 'yet' you could use **but** by itself in a sentence, as in:

He worked hard, **but** he missed the first rank.

5. Incorrect—She **feeded** the baby and put him to sleep.

Correct—She **fed** the baby and put him to sleep.

This is a typical example of incorrect usage of tenses. 'Feed' is the present tense and 'fed' is the past tense. **Fedded** becomes a double past tense and therefore incorrect. A similar example would be **lead** (present tense) and **led** (past tense). For example: She was born to **lead**. She **led** the team to victory.

6. Incorrect—The damp weather **effects** their health very badly.

Correct—The damp weather **affects** their health very badly.

'Affect' and 'effect' are commonly confused with each other. The difference is simple – 'affect' is a verb while 'effect' is a noun. So, we should say:

The damp weather **affects** their health very badly.

The **effect** of damp weather on their health was very bad.

7. Incorrect—A dog is always loyal to **it's** master.

Correct—A dog is always loyal to **it's** master.

Again, a rather common mistake. Two tiny words but what a difference! Remember, **it** is the possessive form of **it** while **it's** is the short form of **it is**. So, we should write: A dog is always loyal to **its** master. **It's** (It is) man's best friend.

8. Incorrect: He is unable to **cope up** with his studies.

Correct: He is unable to **cope** with his studies.

'Cope' itself means 'to keep up with' so there is no need to add 'up'. Just use the word 'cope' by itself.

9. Incorrect—The committee will **discuss about** this matter tomorrow.

Correct—The committee will **discuss** this matter tomorrow.

The word 'discuss' itself means to 'talk about', so there is no need to add the extra word 'about'.

10. Incorrect—"What's your good name?"

Correct—"What's your name?"

Can a name ever be 'bad'? So why ask someone their 'good name'? Simply asking their name would be enough.

11. Incorrect—The guests **entered into** the hall.

Correct—The guests **entered** the hall.

The word 'entered' means 'to get into', so adding 'into' after 'enter' is redundant.

12. Incorrect—What's the time **in** your watch?

Correct—What's the time **by** your watch?

Again, this mistake is the result of a literal translation from the vernacular (Tumhari ghadi mein kya samay ho raha hai?)

13. Incorrect—My mother is a great **cooker**.

Correct—My mother is a great **cook**.

Remember, 'cooker' is the vessel in which food is cooked while 'cook' is the person doing the cooking. A similar example would be:

Incorrect: He works as a domestic **helper**.

Correct: He works as a domestic **help**.

14. Incorrect: Ankit is sitting **on** the table/desk/computer.

Correct: Ankit is sitting **at** the table /desk/computer.

You never sit 'on' the computer or 'on' the table, unless you are literally using the table/desk/computer as a seat! You always sit 'at' a table or desk or computer.

15. Incorrect—Hello! Myself Subhadra.

Correct—Hello! My name is Subhadra.

When introducing yourself, don't refer to yourself as 'myself'. The correct English form is to say: My name is___. Or, I am ___.

Even if you have been making these mistakes, none of these is difficult to correct. Practise the correct forms a few times and you will never make these errors again. Start now!