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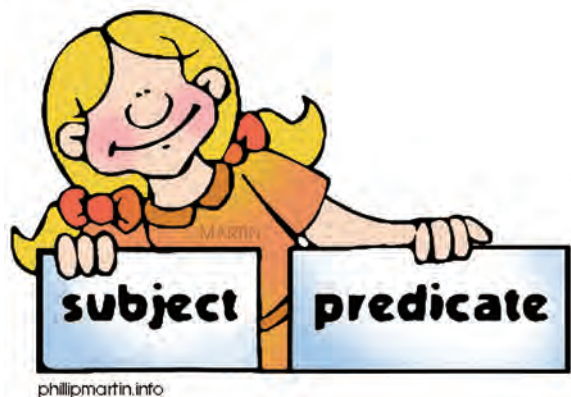


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SENTENCING



Writing plainly or writing plain English may be easier said than done. And plain words are easier to master than plain sentences. There is a fine line between plainness and sophistication, and a finer one between sophistication and incomprehensibility.

Among those shortlisted for *TLS*'s first Mario Ortiz Robles Prize for Incomprehensibility (2011) is this sentence (yes, one sentence) from the essay 'Reading Skin Signs' by **Jeremy Redlich** (in *Performative Body Spaces*, ed. **Markus Hallensleben**):

*Working with selected texts by the Japanese-born author **Yoko Tawada**, who writes in both Japanese and German, I examine how the contours or boundaries of the body cannot be taken for granted as biological givens, but rather how these boundaries are continuously in a process of materialization, subject to the cultural, social and linguistic impressions that mark the bodily boundary, namely skin, as a surface that is coded and decoded like any other text.*

A perfectly grammatical and syntactically well-balanced sentence, its qualification for the year's top honour in English writing, courtesy of the twisted humour of *TLS*, is due to three things: prolixity, embeddedness and academic jargons. As only a small number of writers of English belong to the elitist club of the academicians, a better understanding of the first two things will make us a lot more comfortable with our medium.

An English sentence is inherently capable of going on forever and attaching to itself various forms of add-on that give it an onion-like structure. Let's look at the following sentence from Kingsley Amis (in *The King's English: A Guide to Modern Usage*):

The most serious objection to the use of hopefully in a dangling position, often signaled by a following comma, is not that it is not good English, though it is not, nor that it is a trendy usage, though it is, nor even that the thing remains obstinately afloat after many well-aimed salvos of malediction, but that it is dishonest.

The 60-word sentence is not particularly prolix by the standard of English. But because of its abstract subject and the many enfolded negatives its meaning may appear obscure at first sight. Coming to such labyrinthine constructions, one must go back firmly to the basics—identify the main sentence, ascertain what the pronouns refer to, know which parts are subordinate clauses or phrases (each of which may have its own subordinate clauses or phrases, potentially *ad infinitum*).

Reduced to a bare subject-predicate structure, Amis's sentence looks like:

The most serious objection to the use of *hopefully* in a dangling position is not A nor B nor C but D.

At least the comprehension of this no-frill sentence is humanly possible.

Next, the pronoun 'it', which occurs five times throughout the sentence, refers to one thing, namely:

The use of *hopefully* in a dangling position (with the adjectival phrase 'often signaled by a following comma')

What A, B, C and D stand for are:

A = it is not good English (with the adverbial clause 'though it is not')

B = it is a trendy usage (with the adverbial clause 'though it is')

C = the thing remains obstinately afloat (with the adverbial phrase 'after many well-aimed salvos of malediction')

D = it is dishonest

Note the functions of 'that' and the double commas. The former cues the objection (to the use of *hopefully* in a dangling position) to be called up for consideration. The latter delineates the clause or phrase that modifies what precedes immediately. In Amis's exegetical sentence of the word *hopefully*, not one bit is superfluous and not one bit is dispensable.

魚魚相扣
Ouroboros of Pisces

中國文化研究所吳多泰中國語文研究中心的標誌是由簡單俐落的線條組成的「雙魚」，靈感來自中國文化研究所庭院水池中的錦鯉。紅橙二色正是錦鯉的典型顏色，而雙魚重疊的綠眼睛，則與該所所徽的顏色一致，代表吳多泰中國語文研究中心是研究所的成員，兩者關係緊密。

中心從1966年成立，到1978年及1980年重新命名，成為吳多泰中國語文研究中心後，都一直沒有任何標誌。主任鄧思穎教授在2011年建議設計標誌，希望能借此凸顯中心的研究重點，並提升形象。「『雙魚』這個概念和標誌的初步構思由我提出，並由當時擔任研究助理的湛綺婷女士負責具體的美工設計。標誌簡單的線條象徵中心追求學術卓越的務實態度。雙魚活潑的姿態，則代表吳多泰中國語文研究中心致力成為一個具活力創意的學術樞紐。語言變化多樣，如錦鯉一般生氣盎然。語言學亦擁有同樣特點，無論是本體研究還是應用研究，都充滿活力氣息。」

緊密扣連的雙魚令人聯想起埃及和希臘的古代銜尾蛇符號。符號形狀是一條正在吞食自己尾巴的蛇或龍，象徵萬物的協調及一致性。兩邊尾巴銜接成一個圓環，代表永恒更生的循環。中國文化研究所水池中盤繞的錦鯉與吳多泰中國語文研究中心互相連結的標誌不但相互呼應，還具有深層的文化哲學象徵意義，表現出設計者的心思及創意。

The logo of T.T. Ng Chinese Language Research Centre of the Institute of Chinese Studies consists of two fish sketched in simple lines. It was inspired by the koi in the pond of the Institute. Red and orange are typical colours of koi and the two fish come together in a green eye which is of the same hue as the Institute's emblem. The close relationship between the Centre and the Institute goes without saying.

T.T. Ng Chinese Language Research Centre did not have any logo when it was originally founded in 1966 and subsequently renamed in 1978 and 1980. In 2011, Prof. **Tang Sze-wing**, director of the Centre, proposed to create a logo to showcase the Centre's research foci and image. 'I came up with the idea of the Pisces and Ms. **Mian Cham**, then research assistant, did the artwork. The simple lines of the logo signify the Centre's modest and pragmatic approach to achieving academic excellence. The curving and coiling koi underscore the Centre's determination to become a vigorous and creative academic hub. Human language shares the same fluidity and vitality of the koi. The study of language, be it pure or applied, also leads one into a realm of endless wonders and insights.'

The interlocking Pisces may remind one of the ouroboros, the ancient symbol of the Egyptians and the Greeks which depicts a snake or dragon eating its own tail. It symbolizes the unity of all things, physical and spiritual, engaged in a perpetual cycle of change and re-generation. The koi that twirl in the pond of the Institute of Chinese Studies and twine in the logo of T.T. Ng Chinese Language Research Centre are pregnant with no less cultural and philosophical symbolism.

