



Kicking the Habit

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KICKING THE HABIT

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Continuing Carden and Miller's squib on "Problominalizations" in the October, 1970 issue (wherein they treated the advertisement "We're experts at enlarging. Let us make some for you."), consider the following taken from a cartoon in the Los Angeles *Times* a year or two ago:

- (1) Nailbiters just can't kick it alone!

Here we are not just dealing with "simple" nominalization or verbalization: "it" must refer to an expression such as "the habit of biting (one's) nails". We are faced now with the splitting up of an idiom ("to kick the habit") in addition to all of the other problems—which, it seems to me, is linguistic quicksand for the present theories.

COMPARISON AND PRESUPPOSITION

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Some adjectives appear able to "neutralize" in comparisons. In (1) and (2) below both John and Mary might be tall or average or short, or John might be gigantic and Mary pint-size:

- (1) Mary is not as tall as John.
(2) John is taller than Mary.

But that is not the case in (3), where "complementary" *so* replaces *as*:¹

- (3) Mary is not so tall as John.

In (3) John must be considered tall, and so must Mary, I believe. Both (4) and (5) with *so* appear distinctly odd, whereas (6) is quite acceptable:

- (4) Little Mary is not $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} \text{as} \\ *_{so} \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ tall as a pygmy.
(5) A pygmy is not $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} \text{as} \\ *_{so} \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ tall as a giant.
(6) Even a *tall* pygmy is not so tall as a giant.

The fact that the pygmy in (6) is tall only for a pygmy does not prevent each referent from being considered "tall"; thus *so* is appropriate. Apparently frames of reference are taken into account.

In contradistinction to (3), the addition of *even* to the predicate of (1) demands that both John and Mary *not* be tall—in the prevailing frame of reference:

- (7) Mary is not even as tall as John.
(8) Mary is not as tall as John, even.

"Not tall" is to be interpreted against some standard; as (9) indicates, there are many possible standards:

¹ Many school grammars recommend or prescribe replacing *as* with *so* in a negative comparison.