

Part Two: Sentence Structure

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In Part One we dealt with various types of unnecessary words. All the chapters in that part related to one central concern: the need to make an English sentence concise.

In Part Two we shall deal with various aspects of sentence structure. All the chapters in this part will relate to another central concern: the need to make an English sentence clear and logical.

The faults we shall consider in Part Two are, in general, harder to identify and harder to remedy than those we studied in Part One. But by the same token, they are more interesting. And once we have named and analyzed these mistakes, you will be able to recognize and correct them, just as you have learned to recognize and correct unnecessary words.

1 The Noun Plague

Plain English is a language based on verbs. It is simple, concise, vigorous and, above all, clear. Chinglish is a language based on nouns — vague, general, abstract nouns. It is complicated, long winded, ponderous, and obscure.

As we saw in Chapter I, Chinglish contains many nouns that are unnecessary. We examined three types that contribute nothing to the meaning of a sentence and can simply be eliminated:

- redundant nouns (“to accelerate the pace of economic reform” = “to accelerate economic reform”; “there have been good harvests in agriculture” = “there have been good harvests ”)
- empty nouns (“following the realization of mechanization ” = “ following the mechanization”; “we must pay attention to promotion” = “we must promotee”)
- category nouns (“opposing the practice of extravagance ” = “opposing extravagance ”; “to archive the objective of clarity” = “ to be clear”)

At the same time, we looked at two groups of nouns that do carry necessary meaning but that drag unnecessary words along them. To express their meaning more concisely, we changed them to verbs:

- nouns in the construction unnec. verb + noun (“to make an improvement in ” = “to improve”)
- “third word” nouns in the construction unnec. verb + unnec. noun + third word (“to reach the goal of modernization” = “to modernize”)

There are also many constructions involving nouns like “improvement” and “modernization” that we did not discuss in Chapter I because they do not include unnecessary words. Yet those too should be edited out wherever possible, simply because the nouns are abstract.

In this chapter we shall consider abstract nouns as a class and see both why and how to avoid them.

1.1 Perils of using abstract nouns

Authorities on English consistently condemn the use of abstract language. The consensus is perhaps best summed up by the American scholar Jacques Barzun, a master of the crafts of writing and translation. In his guide for writers, significantly entitled Simple and Direct, he makes this recommendation:

Prefer the concrete word to the abstract. Follow that advice and you will see your prose gain in lucidity and force. Unnecessary abstraction is one of the worst faults of modern writing — the string of nouns held together by prepositions and relying on the passive voice to convey the enfeebled sense

In the same way, Ernest Gowers, addressing British civil servants, singles out the preference for the abstract word as “the greatest vice of present-day writing.” He warns in particular the “an excessive reliance on the noun at the expense of the verb will ... insensibly induce a habit of abstraction, generalisation and vagueness.”

The authors of books on writing often use metaphors comparing the use of abstract noun to infection. Fowler calls it “disease” or “abstractitis.” William Zinsser speaks of “dead” sentences and the blight of “creeping nounism”. And Wilson Follet, whose Modern American Usage is as much a classic as Fowler’s Dictionary of Modern English Usage, urges writers to “avoid abstract nouns like the plague.”

1.1.1 Sentences based on abstract nouns

To see how abstract nouns undermine straightforward communication we have only to look at the following example, in which the same idea is expressed in two different ways:

- A: The prolongation of the existence of this temple is due to the solidity of its construction.
- B: This temple has endured because it was solidly built.

The first version contain four abstract nouns, while the successive has none. Not only do the nouns make the statement nearly twice as long, but they also make it pretentious, wooden, and hard to understand.

Chinglish abounds in sentences that rely chiefly on nouns to express their meaning. Here are three examples taken from draft translations: