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Dear friends

After sailing through the doldrums of the first quarter this year, I am happy to say sales are at last beginning to pick up. However, capacity far outstrips demand, so perhaps it is time to take a leaf out of the sales rhetoric of the supermarket: *Special offer! Top quality proofreading, copy-editing and translation work. While stocks last! Rush your work to English support NOW!* ☺

A perennial problem: simple or continuous?

Non-native speakers of English often have a lot of trouble deciding which form of the verb to use. This month we are going to take quick look at the contrasting usage of the simple and continuous (or progressive) forms of the verb: when do you say *I do* and when do you say *I am doing*?

The basic contrast

Space only allows us to make a few basic points on this rather large topic of English grammar, but the simple forms are used for general fact statements, while the continuous forms are used for activity extended over time and taking place at a specific time (e.g. now):

Simple: ***Do you speak Danish? I do not speak Hungarian. The sun rises in the East.***

Continuous: ***I am writing my newsletter (right now). You are reading it. The sun is shining.***

Note that the use of continuous form focuses on the fact that the activity is *extended over a period of time*, something the subject can be *in the process* of doing at the particular time. It is not used where the meaning of the verb is static: ***Do you believe her? He does not know where to look.***

Where the focus is not on the *extended-in-time* nature of the activity, we usually use the simple form. Contrast a typical way of starting a letter: ***I am writing ...***, with the verbs that might be used to introduce statements in it: ***We advise, apologise, recommend, suggest,*** etc.

Three situations where the continuous form is used:

1. Activity going on at a specific point in time: ***I am writing my newsletter (right now).***
2. Activity of a temporary nature: ***I am staying at the Hilton (at the moment).***
3. Future actions which have already (now) been decided upon: ***I am teaching next week.***

Note that the same forms can be used in the past tense: ***I was writing my newsletter (right then), I was staying at the Hilton (during that period), and I was teaching next week, but now I can't.***

No one could claim that the above rules are comprehensive, but *limiting* your use of the continuous forms to these three cases will cover most situations met in business contexts.

They also have the advantage of being relatively simple to remember.

From the workshop...

Wordy phrases

There are a lot of words and phrases that many non-native speakers seem to like and therefore use too much: *regarding, concerning, according to, in accordance with, in order to* – to name but a few. There is nothing wrong with any of them, but in the context some shorter way of expressing the same idea often can (and should) be used.

Danish translators sometimes say that a text expands some 5%, 10%, even 15% when translated into English. Hmm! That's why you need a good native-speaker proofreader and copy-editor! Danish *is* a very compact language, but so (on a good day) is English! Texts vary, of course, but good English should not fill very much more than Danish and sometimes less. The word count will usually be higher though.

Do you 'solve tasks'?

You cannot 'solve a task' in English. You can solve a *problem* and you can carry out a *task*. Often the phrase wanted will be one of the following, depending on the context:

solve a problem
carry out a task or some kind of work
do a job (or a piece of work)
do an exercise (school)

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Person, persons and people

The usual plural word for *person* is *people*. The plural form, *persons*, is seldom used outside of official documents, police descriptions of crimes committed by 'a person or persons unknown', and so on. So if you have more than one *person*, the best choice is usually *people*. Use *persons* only in more formal contexts.

Youth, youths and young people

Non-native speakers of English also tend to use the words *youth* and *youths* too much. The word *youth* is used adjectivally (e.g. *youth club, youth hostel*), but very few modern English speakers would say 'He was a youth'. Instead they would say 'He was a young man'. The words *youth* and *youths* also associate more to young men than to young women. So here the recommendation is to use *young person* and *young people*. Tip: Avoid *the young ones* like the plague!

Feedback

If YOU have any language points you would like discussed in this newsletter, please get in touch!

Best wishes

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