English Corner 12: positive and negative

Style rather than grammar dictates that different words are used in positive and negative contexts. The major groups of alternative words that require thought before use in these situations are listed below.

Either and neither, each, both, as well

- **Either and neither.** The most familiar example is the difference between *Either ... or* and *neither ... nor,* with the former used for **positive contexts** [After this treatment the transport of *either* carnitine or *inositol should change*] but the latter for **negative contexts** [After this treatment the transport of *neither* carnitine *nor* inositol *was changed*]. In both these cases the verbs are *positive* and the **negative sense** is provided by the negation of the subject (neither means *not either*) and the **positive sense** by either. When a **negative** verb is used, however, *either* can express the **negative** condition; for example, when the positive sense is given by each, both or as well.

- **Either and each.** When the **positive sense** is given by a **positive** verb and each [Ligation *affects each* parameter] or each of [Ligation *affects each of* them], the **negative sense** is created by a **negative** verb and *either,* not each [Ligation *does not affect either* parameter. Ligation *does not affect either of* them]. When the subject rather than the verb is negated by *neither* or *neither of,* a **positive** verb is used for the **negative context** [Ligation *affects neither* parameter. Ligation *affects neither of* them].

- **Either and both.** When a **positive sense** is given by both of [It *affects both of* them] or *both ... and* [Sperm motility *was affected* by both quinine and verapamil], *either of* or *either ... or* is used, not *both,* to create the opposite sense with a **negative** verb [It *does not affect either of* them. Sperm motility *was not affected* by either quinine or verapamil]. A **positive** verb is used when the subject rather than verb is negated by *neither of* [It *affects neither of* them] or *neither ... nor* [Sperm motility *was affected* by neither quinine *nor* verapamil].

- **Either and as well.** A response in agreement with a **positive** statement in a question [I *can see* the cytoplasmic droplets, can you?] will employ **as well** (meaning **as well as you can**) with a **positive** verb [Yes, I *can see* the cytoplasmic droplets **as well**], but a response agreeing with a **negative** statement [I *can’t see* the cytoplasmic droplets, can you?] *either,* not **as well,** is used [No, I *can’t see* the cytoplasmic droplets *either*].

Any and some

- **any** is used in **negative** contexts [I *did not find any* hydrogen peroxide. If there *aren’t any,* he won’t find them] and **some** is used in the corresponding **positive** contexts [She *found some* hydrogen peroxide. If there *are some,* she’ll find them].

- **any** is used in **negative** answers [No I *don’t have any* paperclips] and **some** is used in **positive** answers [Yes, I *have some* paperclips].

- **any** is used in questions [Do you have **any** scissors?] where there is **doubt** as to whether there are scissors at all, but **some** is used in questions [May I borrow **some** paperclips?] where there is no doubt that paper clips are available.
• any is used in conditional clauses [If you have read any of his articles, you would know his style] and some is used in main clauses [You have read some of his articles and know his style].

All of, everyone, someone and no one
• When no one or none (meaning not any) is used as a negative subject with a positive verb [No one wants to do it. No one is obliged to turn up on Saturday. None of the patients have cryptorchidism] the opposite context also employs a positive verb but no one or none is replaced with someone [Someone wants to do it], everyone [Everyone is requested to turn up on Saturday] or all of [All of the patients have cryptorchidism].

No and yes
• The use of a yes or no for answering questions stated in the positive [Q: Are you coming?] is comprehensible since these words are consistent with the nature of the reply, either positive [A: Yes, I am] or negative [A: No, I am not]. However, the negative (no), rather the positive (yes) that may be expected in a confirmatory remark, is used for an expected agreement with a question that is negative [Q: You won’t be coming will you? A: No, I won’t], but this apparently illogical device similarly emphasises the negative response.

And and or
• Whereas and is used in positive statements [Both eating and drinking are allowed in the social room], nor should be used for negative statements [Neither eating nor drinking is permitted in the laboratory].
• In the former, the sense is that each activity linked by the coordinate conjunction is permitted individually (Eating is allowed. Drinking is allowed. Both eating is allowed and drinking is allowed, followed by ellipsis of the repeated is allowed, and conversion to the plural following and: both eating and drinking are allowed).
• In the latter, again each activity is forbidden on its own (Eating is not permitted. Drinking is not permitted) but the negatives are linked with or with a negative verb [Eating or drinking is not permitted in the laboratory] or with a positive verb and a negation of the subject by no [No eating or drinking is permitted in the laboratory] or neither ... nor [Neither eating nor drinking is permitted in the laboratory].

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