English Corner 3: due to and owing to

The phrases due to and owing to are often used interchangeably, and making any distinction between the two is considered by some to be pointless. Confusion about the use of these phrases is compounded by the other grammatical functions that each word has on its own. Due can be an adverb meaning directly, exactly (Travel due North), a noun meaning that which is owed (Give the man his due) and an adjective meaning payable (The bill is now due); owing is an adjective meaning due to be paid (Your subscription is still owing).

Due to and owing to have different meanings

- When due and owing are coupled to prepositions the phrases have different grammatical functions; due to is an adjective meaning attributable to, caused by, resulting from [His infertility was due to his high scrotal temperature] whereas owing to is a prepositional phrase meaning as a result of, because of, on account of [He was infertile owing to his high scrotal temperature].
- Maintaining a distinction between the phrases is useful because due to (as an adjective) can describe nouns, pronouns and noun phrases (but not verbs) whereas owing to (a prepositional phrase) can describe verbs.
- Because of this grammatical reality, in [The seminar was cancelled due to a transport strike], due to does not describe the verb (as presumably intended by the writer) but as an adjective can only describe the nearest noun, which is seminar. This gives the meaning that the seminar was caused by the transport strike, when in reality it was the cancellation of the seminar that was.
- As prepositional phrases can describe verbs [here was cancelled], the use of owing to here is correct [The seminar was cancelled owing to a transport strike]. An alternative way of writing this, which retains the phrase due to, is to provide a noun for this adjective to define [The cancellation of the seminar was due to a transport strike].

Due to following a passive verb

- The tell-tale sign of incorrect usage is when due to immediately follows a verb, which an adjective cannot define. In [She was sacked due to incompetence], the only noun available for due to to modify is she, but she was not caused by incompetence, it was her incompetence that made her unfit for the job. In other words, her sacking was as a result of, or because of, her incompetence and so using a prepositional phrase is correct [She was sacked owing to incompetence].

Unintended duplication

- A rare error stems from the use of words that are implied in the phrase used. Because due to means caused by it is good to avoid the use of cause in the same sentence. [The cause of the fault was due to over-heating] introduces tautology (the use of an unnecessary word whose meaning is repeated in a different word in the same phrase) because this means [The cause of the fault was caused by over-heating]. This can be avoided by using one of the meanings, not both: either [The cause of the fault was over-heating] or [The fault was due to over-heating].
Using alternative phrases

- The use of due to and owing to is not compulsory, and it is worth considering using their synonyms, which sometimes sound better [His infertility was caused by his high scrotal temperature. The cancellation of the seminar was caused by a transport strike. The seminar was cancelled because of a transport strike. She was sacked because of incompetence].
- Sometimes they are not necessary at all [He was cured because of the medicines he took] is shorter and equally explanatory when because of is omitted [He was cured by the medicines he took].

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