

FORMAL AND INFORMAL VERBS IN WRITTEN ENGLISH

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Both native writers and ESL writers of English can improve their semiformal writing by emphasizing the Latin verbs and omitting the Anglo-Saxon verb forms based on the *verb-to-be*. This weak verb (*be*) reduces the formality level to the colloquial, impedes clear communication, and often produces ambiguous, unclear, and unemphatic sentences. As this essay will attempt to demonstrate, we should reserve the *verb-to-be* (weak verb) for conversation and emphasize the strong, Latinate verbs in written communication.

Historically, the two verb forms emerged from different cultures, the weak verb originating from the Anglo Saxon culture and the Latinate verbs from the Roman culture. In the 6th Century, the Romans brought Latin to Northern England, and, in time, the treasury of Latin verbs merged with the colloquial verb (*be*) to form the English verb system. Consequently, while the common people—the farmers and merchants among others—continued to speak Anglo-Saxon, the kings, queens, nobles, members of the court, priests, and others spoke and wrote Latin for official business.

This tradition of using Anglo Saxon for colloquial conversation and Latin for written communication continues even today. Latin, the language of ancient scholars, comprises a vast treasury of powerful, active verbs which provide clarity, precision, specificity, logic, and conciseness to communication, verbs such as *establish*, *provide*, *distinguish*, *discourage*, *refuse*, *ascertain*, *mobilize*, *scrutinize*, and thousands more. No doubt, because this category of strong verbs helps writers produce clear, logical, concise prose, English evolved into the international language and the language of science in the Twentieth Century.

On the other hand, the colloquial language component of English based on Anglo-Saxon lacks the qualities of clarity, precision, specificity, logic, and conciseness precisely because it relies almost exclusively on the weak verb *be*: *is*, *was*, *are*, *were*, *am*, *been*. In modern, colloquial speech, native speakers of English use this weak verb several thousand times every day. Clearly, *be* functions as the foundation of mundane sentence construction and basic oral communication: typical examples include "it is true," "this is a pen," "she was generous," "there are too many bosses," and so on. Because facial expressions, gestures, emotional states, and other physical features play such an important role in conversation, nobody really protests about the lack of clarity, precision, or logic. Listeners simply ask "what" or "what do you mean?" when they do not understand the speaker's statements.

Be derives from the Anglo-Saxon word *bheu* and has undergone many morphological changes and variations since the time of the Anglo-Saxons. Modern English contains

6 such variations: *is*, *was*, *are*, *were*, *am*, and *been*. Moreover, *be* serves at least five functions in contemporary communication; some of these uses can be replaced by strong verbs and some cannot.

1. it forms the *progressive tense* (*was doing*)
2. it forms the *passive voice* (*was done*)
3. it indicates the existence of something
4. it indicates the location of something
5. it links two ideas together

Obviously, we cannot replace one and two, the progressive tense and passive voice, with strong, Latinate verbs, for they represent essential forms of grammar and communication.

Form (3) indicates the *existence* of something, and even the most talented of writers will struggle to avoid the inevitable *there is/there are* construction in some instances. Note also that *there is* serves two distinct functions in English, one being *intransitive* and the other *transitive*. The intransitive *there is* indicates *existence* (the transitive version will be discussed later). Consider the following example which expresses the *existence* of castle ruins:

- (a) There are *the ruins of an old castle in this village*
(emphasizes *existence*).
- (b) *The ruins of an old castle* are *in this village*
(emphasizes *location*).
- この村には城跡がある。

When the writer wishes to *state* the case that something *exists*, then the weak verb seems inevitable. Some alternative possibilities include:

- (a) *The village* contains *the ruins of an old castle*.
- (b) *The ruins of an old castle* stand *in this village*.
- (c) *Old castle ruins* lie *in this village*.

But generally these three versions sound quite poetic and slightly awkward to the native ear in this context. Consequently, the weak verb seems indispensable when stating the *existence* of something. But how often do any of us need to state that something does in fact exist? Most written communication does not require an inordinate number of statements indicating the existence of something, and hence most books, essays, and articles require only a few such examples.

In addition to the existence of something, (4) the *location of something* qualifies as another category in which the weak verb seems unavoidable. Once again, the English language does not provide an abundance of grammatical forms that can convey the concept of location, so most writers simply write that *something* is *somewhere*.

The ship is *in the harbor*.
その船は港にいる。

No doubt, we can imagine some alternatives, but none will sound very idiomatic: *The*

ship rests in the harbor, The ship lies in the harbor. Moreover, the passive voice works idiomatically but emphasizes an action or activity other than location: *The ship is moored in the harbor.* Consequently, the weak verb seems necessary to express location in most cases.

However, unlike the previous four categories of the verb *to be*, the *linking* function of *be* represents the most common use and abuse of this weak verb in writing. As mentioned earlier, the weak verb simply connects two items without expressing the dynamics between them. In the case of the simplest linking function, typical examples state that (a) *something* is *something* or (b) *something* is *good/bad* as opposed to the Latinate verbs which provide intransitive and transitive action: (a) *something* does *something* or (b) *something does something to something*. In writing, these strong verbs (*provide, escalate, dominate, and so on*) breathe life into the sentence while enhancing the clarity, logic, and precision of the ideas being stated, qualities more necessary in writing than in colloquial speech.

The linking function of *be* falls conveniently into two groups of frequency in contemporary writing. Group one includes grammatical forms that appear in print only on occasion: (a) *noun be infinitive* (b) *noun be past participle* and (c) *noun be prepositional phrase*. As the high frequency group, the second category consists of (a) *there is* (b) *it is* (c) *noun be noun*, and finally (d) *noun be adjective*, the most frequently used and abused *be* verb form in writing. The following examples will demonstrate how easily we can revise weak-verb sentences; we begin with the *be plus infinitive*. Spoken: *His ambition* is *to gain power over others* (8 words).

彼の野望は権力を手に入れることだ。

We increase the emphasis and reduce the wordiness by simply adding the appropriate subject and a strong verb: He seeks *power over others* (5 words). Similarly, in cases of the past participle, the same rule holds. Notice how the participle form resembles the passive voice:

Spoken: *This book* is concerned *chiefly with the effects of secondhand smoke* (11 words).

この本は主に二次喫煙の影響について書いてある。

Written: *This book* addresses *the effects of secondhand smoke* (8 words).

In such cases, usually a number of verbs will serve the purpose. For example, we could easily phrase the idea in a variety of ways:

This book describes, discusses, analyzes, presents the effects of secondhand smoke, (and many more possibilities).

A final example of *be* with a negative past participle follows.

Spoken: *I* was determined *not to give in to temptation* (9 words).

私は誘惑にまけまいと決心していた。

Written: *I* resolved *not to yield to temptation* (7 words).

Similarly, *when weak verbs plus prepositional phrases* appear in writing, the sentences

will generally lack vitality and precision. Remember that *be* indicates a static state of existence, location, or linking. The following example fails to state that somebody checked a book out of the library or actually used the book at all; instead, it merely indicates that the book *was* in the library.

Spoken: *Because the book was in the library, I did not have to buy it* (14 words).

図書館に本があったので、買わないで済みました。

Written: *Because I borrowed the book from the library, I did not have to buy it* (15 words).

I borrowed the book from the library and did not have to buy it (14 words).

Although we did not achieve a decrease in the number of words, we improved the clarity of the sentence by stating that someone did something: *borrowed a book* as opposed to the original which merely indicated the location of the book.

In the second group of the linking function of *be* in writing, the forms appear with considerable frequency. The *there is* and *it is* forms prove quite convenient in conversation—especially when speakers prefer not to offer complete details or even specify a subject, the doer of the action. But in writing, they reduce the level of precision and clarity—thereby reducing the effectiveness of the communication. As discussed earlier, the intransitive version of *there is* cannot easily be replaced by strong verbs; however, not so with the transitive version. We simply reverse the subject and object to create a perfectly dynamic sentence packed with strong-verb power.

Spoken: *At the beginning of the semester, there are so many things to buy besides textbooks* (16 words).

学期の初めは、教科書以外にいろいろ買うものがある。

Typically, three grammatical variations of the transitive form of *there is* sentences appear in writing. The first lacks a subject as in the above example. Notice how by adding a subject we improve the readability of the sentence.

Written: *At the beginning of the semester, students must buy many things besides textbooks* (13 words).

Usually, the second form includes a subject, and the *there is* construction simply indicates that the subject exists:

Spoken: *There are many students who work part time these days* (10 words).

このごろはアルバイトをする学生が多いです。

Written: *Many students work part time these days* (7 words).

The third form reverses the subject and object.

Reversal: *There are seven continents on the earth* (7 words).

地球上には7つの大陸がある。

Revision: *The earth contains seven continents* (5 words).

Finally, notice how both the intransitive and transitive *there is* constructions cannot convey images of action.

Spoken: *There was a large crowd in the hall* (8 words).

ホールには聴衆が大勢いた。

No doubt, the above sentences simply states a fact about the number of people in a hall, and many writers would leave it at that. However, we will now generate some dynamics in the sentence by adding the strong verb:

(a) *A large crowd mingled through the hall* (7 words).

(b) *A large crowd gathered in the hall* (7 words).

The *it is* construction in English plays a similar role to that of *there is*. A convenient and socially-acceptable form in spoken English, the *it is* proves too wordy and unemphatic for semiformal writing in most cases. Because this construction can precede the subject, it often replaces the actual subject of the sentence, thereby creating vagueness. In the following sentence, the reader will inevitably ask *who estimated?*

Spoken: *It is estimated that his debts will amount to a considerable sum* (12 words).

彼の負債は相当の額に達するだろうと見積もられている。

Now, we need to add a phrase that identifies the estimator:

Written: (a) *The accountant says that Ted's debts will amount to a considerable sum* (12 words).

(b) *The accountant says that Ted accrued serious debts* (8 words).

(c) *According to his accountant, Ted accrued serious debts* (8 words).

Like the *there is* and *it is* forms, the *noun be noun* construction in writing conveys meaning unemphatically and uneconomically. The following sentence essentially states that *sleeping is best the thing*; however, the revised version specifies clearly and directly how a person should treat an illness.

Spoken: *When you are sick, sleeping is the best thing to do* (11 words)

病気の時は寝るに越したことはない。

Written: *When you feel ill, you should sleep* (7 words).

As our final and most frequently used and abused category, the *noun-be-adjective* generally produces wordy, colloquial sentences. To increase the level of formality appropriate for writing, we revise using strong verbs.

Spoken: *The noise level at rock concerts is equal to the volume of a jet engine* (15 words).

ロックコンサートでの音の高さは、ジェットエンジンの音量に等しい。

Written: *The noise level at rock concerts equals the level of a jet engine* (13 words).

In the next example, the strong verb *satisfies* can replace an entire clause:

Spoken: *Her salary is fairly high, and so it is adequate for her needs* (13 words).

彼女の給料はかなり高いので、十分たりています。

Written: *She earns a fairly high salary, which satisfies her needs* (10 words).

In the next example, we move the adjective *noisy* in front of the noun, *television*, and add a more powerful verb: *prevented*.

Spoken: *The television was so noisy that I could not concentrate on my reading*
(13 words).

テレビがあまりにもうるさくて、私は読書に集中できなかった。

Written: *The noisy television prevented me from concentrating on my reading*
(10 words).

As this brief article has attempted to demonstrate, ESL writers of English can improve their written communication dramatically by reducing the number of weak verbs in their sentences. The dynamics of written English require strong, Latinate verbs to convey the meaning clearly and unambiguously. Languages in general are categorized as either principally nominal or verbal, and English developed as a verb language based on the thousands of Latin verbs while Japanese is generally regarded as a noun language. This dichotomy helps explain the difficulty in translating ideas, and typically, Japanese writers of English tend to favor the noun construction because of the strong Japanese influence. But as the final example illustrates, writers of English can choose from a variety of strong verbs in most situations.

Spoken: *Because the uncouth guide did not wash and devoured his meat raw, the young actress was upset while filming in the jungle*
(23 words).

ジャングルで映画を撮っていた時に、その下品なガイドが全く体を洗いもせず、生肉をむさぼり食うので、その映画女優はとても怒ってしまいました。

Written: *By refusing to wash and devouring his meat raw, the uncouth guide irritated the young movie star while filming in the jungle*
(22 words).

Instead of stating that she *was upset*, numerous other strong-verb synonyms exist in the English Language; the most useful include: *irritated her, upset her, annoyed her, angered her, outraged her, incensed her, aggravated her, miffed her, vexed her, infuriated her, enraged her, insulted her, alienated her, and disturbed her.*