

There is no reason why infinitives cannot be split

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk



■ To boldly go... nothing wrong with that, says Peter Trudgill.

English forms like to sleep, to run, to read are called infinitives. In the sentence “I want to go”, to go is an infinitive. Infinitives can also occur without the to – in “you can go”, go is an infinitive.

When we talk about English verbs, we normally use the infinitive, as in “the verb to go is irregular”.

Many languages don't have infinitives – modern Greek, for example. But in languages which do have them, they often consist of a single word: the French for ‘to go’ is aller, the German is gehen, and the Latin is ire. The Scandinavian languages, on the other hand, have two-word infinitives like in English: to go in Norwegian is å gå.

I have written before in these columns about non-existent “rules” of English grammar which pedants have invented, such as the particularly daft “you mustn't end a sentence with a preposition”.

Sometime we actually know when and where such “rules” were made up. One of these concerns infinitives: it was invented in 1834. We don't know who the inventor was, but we know that they were, predictably, American. (A majority of Americans are descended from people who weren't native speakers of English, and they have

always been more worried about “correct” English than we have.)

The rule which this person came up with was: “The particle ‘to’ which comes before the verb in the infinitive must not be separated from it by the intervention of an adverb or any other word or phrase”.

This is where some people have got the idea from that it is wrong to “split” an infinitive, as in “to boldly go where no man has gone before”. It is not clear why this anonymous American came to think this about infinitives, but the rule became very popular, not least with schoolteachers facing the problem of finding something to

talk about when teaching children a language they already knew, and with pedants generally. Maybe the fact that infinitives are single words in Latin had something to do with it.

Anyway, please don't worry: the rule is complete nonsense, and we can ignore it (just as the Norwegians do – they have never even heard of it). As our famous poets and writers have demonstrated, there is nothing wrong about saying or writing things like: “attempts to completely and utterly remove split infinitives from the English language are bound to fail”.