



# ELECTRONOTES

WEBNOTE 33

3/15/2016

ENWN-33

## PET PEEVES

-by Bernie Hutchins, March 2016

I wanted a “pet peeve” from the moment I first heard the term – probably when I was about six. I had no idea what one might look like, but assumed (I seem to recall) it was a cross between a bunny rabbit and a puppy. I later found it was a type of personal annoyance. Usually something other people do that seems irrational to YOU. Others may not share your opinion – else presumably, they would not initiate the annoyance. I guess, having one or more pet peeves is a pet peeve in itself. To the extent that these are not major issues, but nonetheless distract you each and every time you encounter them, they constitute a fault. I have at least three pet peeves. They all involve language.

## DATA

My annoyance in this first case is the assumed plurality of the word data. The word “data” are plural! In this case, it is the word “word” that is singular but the word “word” is further particularized as being a specific word called “data”. So, officially, we learn that “data” is a plural form of the singular word “datum”. Got it. The peeve is actually an annoyance with anyone who cares about this to excess. A peeve about a peeve.

I have no problem at all with a sentence such as: “The data is not supportive of the proposed hypothesis.” In such a case, I feel there is the implication of a set (or a collection) of data points and that it is the set or collection that is singular. Saying instead: “The data are not supportive of the proposed hypothesis”, also sounds just fine.

What is not fine is a claim that, in the case where a proponent of a particular viewpoint misuses (grammatically, officially) the singularity or the plurality of the word “data”, that the associated statement is thereby falsified. Too lame for words.

## TEN ITEMS OR FEWER

Why does it bother me so much to get into a checkout line that says “ten items or less”? It’s not just that the person ahead of me likely has 22 items! Well, I should not care, but “items” are countable (1,2,3,...) so we should use “fewer” and not less. This check-out specification is a particularly common and egregious example.

Does your coffee need more sugar or is it perhaps already too sweet? If it’s too sweet, then you should have put in less sugar (perhaps pouring from a restaurant dispenser). Or perhaps, you should have added fewer packets (like two instead of four). (Let’s not worry about the fact that sugar is ultimately discrete as crystals or even as molecules.) The use of less implies, perhaps, that we do not care to count, or it’s not practical to do so. Perhaps this is the problem in the check-out line.

Some cases are not clear and I think the ear just smoothly passes the usages. For example, a farm field may be deemed to be dryer because of fewer rainstorms or of less rainfall. That’s clear enough. But what happens when we start using units such as a forecast of a “total snowfall accumulation of 3 inches or less”? Is this countable? I don’t think so, because we might well expect 1.2244 inches or 2.1234 inches, not just 0, 1, 2, or 3.

So back to coffee. What if you spoon in the sugar from a bowl (not a stream cascading from a dispenser, or emptied from prepared packets). Clearly you can spoon in more sugar or less sugar. You are adept at, perhaps, handling half a spoonful more if that is all you suppose is needed. Here the obvious units, if any are used, is “spoonfuls”. So the use of the spoon makes sugar countable, but only roughly, and secondarily to the task of getting it into your cup. So the use of “less” even for things in countable units is perfectly all right in this case, the units serving as a fiducial reference; a scale for measuring.

But for items on a check-out line, it’s FEWER.

## BEGGING THE QUESTION

Likely the fight against the misuse of the term “**begs the question**” is lost. Whenever I hear it, it gets my attention as I want to analyze the surrounding conversation to see if, by some miracle, someone has used the term correctly. Unless someone says “he is (or you are, etc.) begging the question”, accusatory, with reference to making a faulty argument, it is probably used incorrectly. The common phrase “it begs the question” is likely intended to mean something more like “it begs us to ask the question” or to “raise the question” as a more or less mechanical follow-up to a statement proffered.

As I say, the misuse of “begs the question” is probably too widespread to turn back, and may well (as it perhaps should) be accepted into the vernacular. BUT technically it originated as, and continues to be the result of something entirely different from just a follow-up request: the logical fallacy of “begging the question”, a flawed form of circular logic in which the conclusion is directly or indirectly, and often not too subtly, assumed.

Good examples of “begging the question” are not that readily available. So let’s stick first with the definition that it is the logical fallacy of including, directly or indirectly, your conclusion as one of your premises. Here is a made-up example:

- (1) All things that grow on trees are good for you.
- (2) Nuts grow on trees.
- (3) Nuts are good for you.

This is logically valid. But - nothing prevents this from being wrong if it has a faulty premise: in this case there are likely things that grow on trees that are not good for us (even poisons). But what is “begging the question” here is that (1) is a premise that includes nuts already as being good. Thus the conclusion is being assumed, a bit indirectly. Consider the alternative claims:

- (1) All things that grow on trees are alive.
- (2) Nuts grow on trees.
- (3) Nuts are alive.

Again this is logically valid, and the premise (1) seems correct (one can always quibble). But it is still “begging the question”.

A classic example, which is as much “circular logic” as it is “begging the question” is:

- (1) God is real.
- (2) How do you know that?
- (3) Because the Bible says so.
- (4) How do you know the Bible is right?
- (5) Because God wrote it.

Virtually any fallacy can get by many people. Particularly so if one does not pay close attention, and is not one to question. It is not so important that one can name and debunk in detail a fallacy offered. Just that one has a BS detector hard-wired ON.

In any case, let’s avoid the word “begs” when we simply are pointing out that a “follow-up” question is obviously required.