

In Defense of “Hopefully”

The Demonization of a Sentence Adverb

by Jack Ognistoff

Poor, beleaguered “hopefully.” I read recently that the last two usage panels (1992, 2000) of The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language have yet again overwhelmingly rejected the use of “hopefully” to mean “I hope that...” or “It is to be hoped that....” Apparently, you can be thankful, regretful, frank, serious or happy about a proposition and express it by the addition of a single -ly suffix without incurring anyone’s ire; but if you say, “Hopefully, the next time the AHD panel convenes, they’ll finally lighten up about ‘hopefully,’” someone will be all over you like a schoolmarm on a split infinitive.

The unabating controversy over “hopefully” boils down to this. Language mavens and fastidious speakers of English believe that this adverb can only properly modify a verb (e.g., “The starving man looked hopefully at the steak”) and that it is a barbarism when used to modify a sentence (e.g. “Hopefully, the poor guy will get his steak”). It is as a sentence adverb (SA for short), though, that the vast majority of speakers most often employ “hopefully.” What, then, are we then to make of this discrepancy between English as it is actually used and English as “experts” would have us use it?

Well, in this case, it is the masses who are indeed the experts and the mavens who are out to lunch. The unrepentant “misuse” of “hopefully” underscores a grammatical tendency which in fact has been gathering steam since at least 1644, when an instance of an SA (“seriously”) was first recorded. By the mid-twentieth century, SA’s were suddenly proliferating, and we were witness to an emerging grammatical rule. (I say “emerging” because the rule is not, as linguists say, “fully productive.” In other words, it can’t be automatically applied across the board—an inconsistency which might be the real, underlying irritant to “hopefully”’s detractors. While one can say, “Luckily, there were enough steaks to go round,” one couldn’t say “Ecstatically, there were enough steaks to go round.)

Failing to see that adverbs can and do modify sentences, prescriptivists have singled out for criticism the use of one solitary word as an SA, while ignoring a slew of other words commonly used for the same purpose: Interestingly enough, “interestingly (enough)” has emerged unscathed, along with “sadly,” “surprisingly,” “actually,” and many others. The prescriptive edict against “hopefully” thus seems to have no basis in our speech patterns. As Steven Pinker says in “The Language Instinct,” “The very fact that [*rules such as this*] have to be drilled shows that they are alien to the natural workings of the language system.”

Unlike most of the objectors, language critic John Simon is at least consistent in applying his rationale. He would banish all –fully (as opposed to –ly) SA’s on the grounds that they presuppose “a human agent” that is often nowhere to be found in the sentence they modify. In other words, who and where is the hope-filled person in “Hopefully, it won’t rain tomorrow”? This argument doesn’t really hold water, however, as there are a number of –ly sentence adverbs that function in exactly the same way: For example, in “Frankly, the party was a disaster,” the person being frank is nowhere mentioned in the sentence.

The flimsiness of these arguments exposed, this still leaves us with the question of *why* the AHD panel, a gathering of America’s best, brightest and most influential—educators, writers, critics, jurists, scientists and so on—would so vehemently and gratuitously reject “hopefully”? Perhaps simply to show that they were the best and brightest, that they belong to that circle of people who are in the know. Or, if not to flaunt their superiority, at least to save themselves from embarrassment, for according to Fowler, “...round about the end of the 1960s, and with unprecedented venom, a dunce’s cap was placed on the head of anyone who used...*hopefully*...as a sentence adverb.” Given the social stigma attached, asking a panel of the elite their opinion of “hopefully” is akin to asking if they are racist: Even if they were, they wouldn’t admit it. Thus, the idea of the SA “hopefully” being a solecism has attained unassailable-truth status without its truth-value ever having been examined. It’s the type of automatic agreement accorded, say, “Finnegan’s Wake,” which, I must admit, really is a great book—everyone says so.

In the end, despite all my protestations, stigma might be a good enough, albeit politic, reason for an editor to back off from “hopefully” as an SA. Use it and you run the risk of being perceived as sloppy, or worse, ignorant.