

The Death of “Whom”

According to Megan Garber in this *Atlantic* article, *whom*, America’s least favorite pronoun, is inexorably falling into disuse. It’s used less and less frequently in books, magazines, and newspapers in recent decades – and, she notes, the slogan in *Ghostbusters* didn’t read, “Whom you gonna call?”

Why is this word dying? Has it outlived its ability to clarify and specify? Is the subject/object distinction that it makes confusing? Or is the cost of using *whom* correctly greater than the benefit? “Correctness is significantly less appealing,” says Garber, “when its price is the appearance of being – as an editor at *The Guardian* wrote – a ‘pompous twerp.’” This might be why language guru William Safire advised, “Whenever *whom* is required, recast the sentence.”

The gradual demise of *whom* is also part of a broader trend toward written communication adopting a casual, conversational tone. “In a culture that values collegiality above so much else,” says Garber, “the ability to communicate casually and convivially and non-twerpily is its own kind of capital.” E-mails salutations are “Hi...” or “Hey...” Infinitives are split. Sentences end in prepositions. “We break the old rules, then, because new rules are, effectively, replacing them,” she concludes. “We type with our telephones and we chat with our keyboards and we write, increasingly, as we talk. And – to whom it may concern – our words rise, and fall, accordingly.”

“For Whom the Bell Tolls: The Inexorable Decline of America’s Least Favorite Pronoun” by Megan Garber in *The Atlantic*, April 2013 (Vol. 311, #3, p. 18), no e-link available