

## THE IMPERATIVE OF ‘ELEGANCE’

The term 'elegant', prominent principally in maths and physics but relevant to all scientific discourse, means something like "pleasingly simple and straightforward, and with a minimum of provisos, and maximal concision".

It has been a fundamental principle of occidental scholarship since the early Renaissance where it was first formulated, under the name of ‘Occam’s Razor’, as *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* (entities must not be multiplied unnecessarily).

It was also subsequently presented as *pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate* (plurality must not be postulated where there is no need for it).

In practice, this means that even when competing hypotheses do conform to the evidence and appear equal in other respects, the hypothesis that introduces the fewest assumptions and postulates the fewest entities while still sufficiently answering the question is to be selected.

Following this principle Isaac Newton commented of his own field that "*we are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances. Therefore, to the same natural effects we must, so far as possible, assign the same causes.*"

Newton is an example to us of the scholarship of *elegance* in action:

- he did not build on or take the opinions and utterings of others as fact, however respected and powerful they may have been;
- instead he tested and verified their postulations against rigorously assembled evidence;
- he looked beyond superficial appearances and, by applying the imperative of elegance, achieved a concise statement that conformed to, and was entirely consistent with, the entire body of the evidence that was at his disposal, thus accomplishing a giant leap forward in human understanding of the structural cohesion of the universe.

As an example of the application of the principle of *elegance* to orthography itself, consider the rejection of the term ‘combining form’ not only on the grounds that it is incoherent and misleading, but also because it is unnecessary and very *inelegant*. Any proposed ‘combining form’ is already completely explicable in terms of base elements and structural connecting vowel letters.

Linguistics, like every science, works to establish the deepest general structure that can account for the widest range of examples.

I impose the imperative of scholarly ‘elegance’ on my own work, and whenever I discover (or, more usually, am helped by students to identify) instances of inelegance in my own work I celebrate and acknowledge it.

I expect the same proper scholarly rigour from dialogue with others. Spelling is part of orthography; orthography is a dimension of linguistics; linguistics is a science and, as such, demands the intellectual and conceptual rigour that any science requires. Opinion or abject kowtowing to an ideology can not be allowed to parade as or, worse, justify fact.

## The litmus test of ‘exceptions’

Elegance can not be completely achieved if ‘exceptions’ need to be postulated. Put another way, a principal aim of an ‘elegant’ formulation is to allow of no ‘exception’.

Faced with a ‘rule’ or formulation to which there appear to be ‘exceptions’, proper scholarship rejects such eules and formulations either as false, or as needing re-examination of the evidence leading to rethinking, refinement and rewording.

The notion of the ‘exception’ is ubiquitous in the eduspeak of orthography where the term is never properly and rigorously defined. Falling back on the ‘exception’ is always a sign of the mindset that convinces its victims that if they, or the ideology they submit to, can not explain a spelling then there is no possible explanation!

To use a Johnsonian expression, postulating an exception for what we cannot explain is the last refuge of the orthographic scoundrel.

Many of those who are stricken with this delusion attempt to give the specious illusion of validity to their intellectual poltroonery by trotting out, “the exception proves the rule,” a particularly unhappy – and very partial – translation, disguised as a maxim, of the Roman legal statement, “*exceptio probat regulam*”.

It is even possible to hear the provers-by-exception-mongers implying or actually stating that because a ‘rule’ has exceptions it must be true – it’s ‘proved’ to be true because it has exceptions! This is a preposterous and invalid subversion of the notion of ‘regularity’.

This is not the place for a full examination of Cicero’s legal maxim *exceptio probat regulam in casibus non exceptis* (Pro Balbo 12:32). Suffice it to say that it certainly does not have the eduspeak sense attributed to it. But even if we do take at its face value the statement that “the exception proves the rule”, it still does not actually mean what those who trot it out want it to mean.

- The denotation of the term ‘prove’ is *test and verify the validity of something* – like the legal process of *proving* a will and testament.
- If we are postulating that some statement is a ‘rule’, then it needs to be tested by the evidence.
- If the supposed ‘rule’ does not conform to the evidence, then that evidence has ‘proved’ the ‘rule’ to be incomplete, imprecise, or simply false.

Seekers after elegance will be particularly conscious of ‘exceptions’ (either in the denotatory but now obsolete sense, or in the Modern English sense of the term).

**The greater the number of such ‘exceptions’ needing to be accepted, the less elegant and, therefore, less rigorous or reliable, the formulation.**

ἔλεγε δὲ καὶ ἓν μόνον ἀγαθὸν εἶναι, τὴν ἐπιστήμην, καὶ ἓν μόνον κακόν, τὴν ἀμαθίαν

[Socrates] said that there is only one good: knowledge (‘epistēmē’), and only one evil: ignorance (‘amathia’).

Xenophon ‘Symposium’: !v.44  
(cited in Diogenes Laertius)