

This Next Last Essay
by Stephen M. Golden
Copyright © 19 November 1989
Revised 19 May 2018

English is a constantly changing language, and with your help, we can eliminate it
in our lifetime. - Hände

We Americans have created a problem. By abusing the English language, it is becoming more ambiguous, and imprecise with each passing day. We are not concerned with proper use of the language, but only that the person to whom we are speaking at the time understands us. Unfortunately, as the language becomes less precise and more ambiguous, we increase the likelihood of hidden misunderstanding. In other words, we think the other person understands us, the other person thinks he understands us, but in reality, he has entirely misunderstood us.

A specific outgrowth of this abuse is the muddy distinction between the concepts embodied by the adjectives THIS, NEXT, and LAST. Often when the problem arises, instead of resolving it we circumvent it; blaming the confusion on the other person's inability to understand "plain English", or on the language itself.

What is the proper distinction between THIS and NEXT? Consider the following: This week vs. Next week. Here the distinction seems clear. This week is the present one, next week is the one to follow. But change the referent: This Friday vs. Next Friday. If we are to be consistent, this Friday is the nearest one to occur beyond the current moment, and next Friday would be the Friday after this Friday.

Let's look at it from another point of usage: Chances. We often say, "The next chance I get." What about THIS chance? Do we forgo THIS chance? Do we assume we have already used THIS chance? If that were the case, wouldn't it properly be called LAST chance? But if the chance already used is LAST chance, what is the referent for THIS chance? Does it not exist?

You might say, "Yeah, but I never have any trouble with this." Ah! Let me show you where the confusion arises. Let's say it's Sunday. Amy thinks of NEXT as the nearest entity, Lora thinks of THIS as the nearest. Amy says to Lora, "Are you going to Janie's party next Friday?" Lora responds, "Oh, I thought it was this Friday!" "Yeah, this Friday. That's what I meant. The one at the end of this week." This is a simple example in which the confusion is quickly resolved, but sometimes the misunderstanding is not so evident.

If NEXT Friday is the nearest one (as Amy has used it), what happened to THIS Friday? The whole problem centers around an ambiguity on our assignment of these words to a consistent reference in time. When does NEXT become THIS? When does THIS become LAST?

The American Heritage Dictionary (which in my opinion is somewhat corrupted with connotative meanings although it is still useful in most cases if one can distinguish the denotations from the connotations) defines THIS and NEXT as follows:

this adj. 1. being just mentioned or present in space, time, or thought. 2. Being nearer than another or compared with another: "this side and that."

next adj. 1. Nearest in space; adjacent: "the next room. 2. Coming directly after in time or sequence; immediately succeeding: "next Monday; the next President".

As you can see, this dictionary is as guilty of creating the ambiguity as most people are. A clear distinction between THIS and NEXT is not made. There is no assignment in time. For THIS (adj.), it says "being nearer than another." For NEXT (adj.), it says "immediately succeeding." And we have our ambiguity staring us in the face. If we use "being nearer than another" for THIS, we could say: THIS Friday is

nearer than NEXT Friday. If we use "immediately succeeding" for NEXT, we could say NEXT Friday is the immediately succeeding one after today.

We need to establish a convention. Let us use the second definition for THIS (adj.), "being nearer than another." Let us now take the literal meaning of the second definition for NEXT: "coming directly after in time or sequence." We can use this definition to formulate a consistent meaning for NEXT. If we are referring to weeks, we will consider them to be weeks in sequence, if we are referring to Fridays, we will consider them to be Fridays in sequence. With this as our convention, we can assign them consistently with respect to time, and our problem of ambiguity can be solved.

The assignment would be as follows: LAST is that which has already occurred, THIS is that which is imminent, nearer than another, or at the present time, and NEXT is the one which follows THIS. Here is a diagram that will map our definition:

LAST -----X----- THIS ----- NEXT

As events pass us, we are always at position X. THIS is the imminent event until the precise moment of its passing, at which time it becomes LAST. NEXT always follows THIS, and becomes THIS when THIS becomes LAST. Here we have a convention that is consistent with respect to the passage of time.

But with this definition, despite its consistency and clarity, an anomaly develops because of the common inconsistency already in use. On the American Interstate Highway System, the little green signs typically say an item of information followed by "NEXT EXIT." Now, if the sign were to be placed just before the exit you're approaching, it would follow the convention correctly, as long as it refers to the exit after this one. But the signs are always placed before an approaching exit. As such, it is ambiguous as to whether it means THIS exit, or the one following THIS exit. Even if the sign is placed shortly after the exit we just passed, the convention would refer to the

second exit down the road, NOT the exit after the one we just passed. The exit we just passed became LAST when we passed it.

Unfortunately, the Interstate System uses THIS EXIT and NEXT EXIT synonymously. For most Americans, this rarely causes a problem because we are accustomed to the inconsistency—most of us use it ourselves! For someone who is not an American, this can be quite confusing, as a distinction between THIS and NEXT has not been made. Technically, signs referring to NEXT EXIT should immediately precede THIS exit, and signs referring to THIS EXIT should say THIS EXIT. This would be confusing however, to those already accustomed to the inconsistent use. It is my belief that the confusion in this case could be eliminated if THIS EXIT were used exclusively, and NEXT EXIT were never used.