GUIDE FOR TABLE V: ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS

In conception, adjectives and adverbs are not very hard to tell apart. Sometimes in the heat of writing, however, or (yet more commonly) in speaking, people get them mixed up.

Just remember that adjectives can modify only nouns. Consider the word “good” in the following sentence:

Tom was a good man.

Here we have an attributive adjective of a fairly normal form. Adjectives may sometimes be treated as nouns themselves—but that’s going to be where there is an unexpressed noun (usually of a fairly general sort—“things” or “people”) to which they apply:

The good die young.

Here we are understanding the unexpressed referent, “people”: it means “the good [people] die young.” We call this “substantivizing” the adjective. That’s a big fancy word for something you probably do without thinking all the time.

What we can’t do in proper English is to use the adjective as an adverb:

He ran good.

That’s considered an error (though there are other languages much more tolerant of such things). Here we need rather the adverb corresponding to “good”, namely “well”:

He ran well.

Complicating all this is the fact that in English, “well” may function as an adjective too—with the peculiar result that people occasionally correct what they think to be a mistake, thereby generating a new one:

I am well.

is a perfectly legitimate thing to say; here “well” is an adjective, meaning “free of disease” or the like. The sentence with the form that is just the adjective:

I am good.

is a perfectly legitimate sentence, too, but it does not mean the same thing at all—it’s a claim to peculiar expertise or moral superiority—goodness and wellness are not quite the same thing in our lexicon. It’s worth noting that if you can attach “-ness” to a word and have the result be a noun (like “goodness” or “wellness”), the word itself must be an adjective.

Adverbs are more liberally applicable, though they are not able to modify

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nouns directly. They can modify adjectives that are modifying nouns, as well as verbs and other adverbs. Adverbs are commonly thought of as the “-ly” words, and certainly many adjectives can be turned into adverbs by the addition of “-ly” — for example, “quick”, “quickly”; “smart”, “smartly”. It’s not universal, however, and there are many adverbs that do not have a “-ly” at the end.

Sample Drill Questions:

In the sentence... The mountain erupted more violently than it had in centuries...’more’ modifies:
[fill in the blank with the correct word]

Answer: "violently"

In the sentence... Aeneas fled quite epically...’epically’ modifies:
[fill in the blank with the correct word]

Answer: “fled”

Select the correct part of speech for the underlined word:

Run for the shore—it’s our only chance!
   a. noun
   b. verb
   c. adjective
   d. adverb
   e. pronoun
   f. preposition
   g. conjunction
   h. interjection

Answer: c. adjective

“When we work too fast, it ruins the artifacts,” Hacklesworth cautioned.
   a. noun
   b. verb
   c. adjective
   d. adverb
   e. pronoun
   f. preposition
   g. conjunction
   h. interjection

Answer: d. adverb

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