



EDITORIAL

Sea Level: To Hyphenate or Not?

As someone who has long been interested in the rise and fall of the mean level of our terrestrial hydrosphere, I (apologies: the writer) have long been delighted by a classical typo "SEAL LEVEL". Clearly, this is the level to which seals rise when they want to breathe. That's exactly what I had in mind.

I was stimulated to pen these lines (yes, I am an old fuddy-duddy, and write with a pen) by a column in the *New York Times Magazine*, a weekly feature created by William Safire, who is not, by the way, a creationist. This week, Bill has a crack at hyphenation: "You can't have it both ways without being two-faced."

Well, what about sea level? Grammarians will tell you straight away that "level" is a noun and this is modified by an adjective, "sea". NO HYPHEN is needed. SEA-LEVEL is out. Taboo! In this case, sea is an adjective, although the same word can serve as a noun, e.g. the Black Sea (both capitalized when it refers to a specific example). Sometimes you can find an adjectival word, like "oceanic" or "maritime", but neither of these is quite appropriate, so we are stuck with "sea" as an adjective.

With the currently fashionable topic of global warming on the lips of all dedicated environmentalists, the question of a rise in sea level springs to mind. To put it briefly, and as Shakespeare insisted, "Brevity is the soul of wit", we can say sea-level rise. Yes, this is where you use the dreaded hyphen: SEA-LEVEL RISE. The first two words comprise a *compound adjective* and need to be linked. In scientific theories, linkage is everything. If you are tempted to introduce two compound adjectives, as in "greenish-colored, coarse-textured glauconitic sand", the best thing is to separate them with an "of", thus . . . "sand of a distinctive greenish color".

I feel rather sensitive about this whole question because, after an expedition to the coast of Brazil a few years ago, I came home and wrote a rather well-received article for *Science* on "shellfish eating Indians" and their *sambaqui* or

midden mounds. But some of my erstwhile friends pointed out gleefully that the title was ambiguous: were the shellfish really eating the Indians? Clearly, a little hyphen would have saved my red ears.

Then there's the question of the adverb. Safire, quoting the *New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* (yes, they sell it), gives the example of the "happily married couple". Here the word "happily" is an adverb clearly distinguished by a suffix "ly" from the adjective "happy". No hyphen. But what about a "gravelly-voiced statesman"? Here, we are back again at the compound adjective. You can't have a "voiced statesman". You must have that hyphenated modifier. Which reminds me of groundwater and ground pepper, but that's another story.

Ancient Sea Level

Talking of oceans brings us to another problem: PALEOCEANOGRAPHY. This by consensus is fine, and even has its own journal, an excellent one too. A couple of decades ago, however, the term got off to a rough start, with several horrors, notably one "palaeo-oceanography"; happily, it died in infancy. It serves, however, to illustrate a principle in word evolution: when a concept or phrase is new or unfamiliar, it can be made palatable with a hyphen or two. But then, when our public gets used to it, we can skip the hyphen and merge the whole thing as one word. That is the history of "ground water", "ground-water study" and finally "groundwater" (both noun and adjective).

This familiarity principle can be employed with ancient sea levels (one word now!). We often see "paleo-sea level" which is not only awkward, it mixes Germanic and Classical roots. It is now sufficiently familiar, is it not, to allow PALEO-SEALEVEL all in one word?

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