




Trains of Thought?

It wasn't until I became a medical editor, in my forties, that I first saw a construction like this:

"closed head injury postcoma patients".

"Word salad," I thought, and blamed the author's computer. I know better now. The practice of piling up several adjectives and nouns to modify a single noun is not limited to medical writing, but afflicts other types of technical writing as well. It has been called polymerization, lamination, and agglutination, and the resulting strings of modifiers have been termed headline or telegram compounds, modifier stacks, and Germanisms. I call them freight-car modifiers, and I'd like to see them all derailed.

"attending physician routine hospital visit costs"



The devisers of these Chinese puzzles rarely provide hyphens as clues to their meaning. I suppose that would defeat the purpose, which is apparently to baffle the innocent reader. It falls to the editor, then, to solve the riddle, supplying the missing prepositions and other relational words needed to convey some semblance of meaning. No easy task. How, for example, would you translate this article title (cited by Edith Schwager in *Medical Usage and Abuse*):

"Chlorpromazine Mild to Moderate Psychosis Progress Report No. 3"?

Such a bizarre usage can't have sprung full-grown from the pen of a single, Frankensteinian author, but must have evolved gradually. I suspect it began with the use of such phrases as "disease onset" for "the onset of disease" and "patient characteristics" for "the characteristics of the patients". Once those slightly wooden phrases began to sound normal, it was a small step to slightly longer ones—"renal transplant recipients" and "diabetes risk factors", for example. Great trains from little freight cars grow; before you knew where you were, you had

"acute ischemic heart disease predictive instrument development".

(I'm not making these up.)

Obviously, no self-respecting publisher would allow such a monstrosity in the pages of its journal or textbook—right? Well, all I know is that the authors of that last example argued that they couldn't possibly allow me to deconstruct it for the *New England Journal*, since they had already published several articles elsewhere using exactly that language and readers would fail to recognize the subject if it were described in different terms (an

argument, I need hardly say, that fell on deaf—but not tin—ears).

For a while, years ago, I collected these things. This was the jewel of my collection:

"1978 South Carolina resident live birth-infant death cohort data".

I swear.

Have you seen any memorable freight-car modifiers lately? Send me your best (that is, worst) specimen, and if I get a few good (bad) ones, I'll publish them in a future column. Or try your hand at making one up, preferably to describe some simple, nontechnical aspect of daily life, and send it to me. For example, according to the rules of freight-car-modifier construction, what I am now writing might be termed a "*CBE Views* freight car modifier criticism *WordWatcher* column." But you can do better than that.

The *WordWatcher* welcomes your comments and suggestions. You can reach her by mail: Lorraine Loviglio, The *WordWatcher*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 10 Shattuck St, Boston MA 02115; fax: 617-739-0723; or e-mail: lloviglio@nejm.org