

Increasing numbers of non-native speakers and writers find it next to impossible to remember when to use which. The reason, of course, is faulty teaching of grammar. I use the following simple method. Before deciding, one asks three questions: (i) Is the noun singular? (ii) Is it countable as 'one, two, three, ...'? (iii) Is it definite? The answer to any of these questions is either 'Yes' or 'No'. There are then several combinations of the answers, like 'Yes, Yes, Yes', 'Yes, No, Yes', etc. A straightforward table is drawn to indicate when to use which article. The basis of the solution to the articles-problem is thus number, countability and definiteness of nouns. This is understood, hence remembered, especially when practised contextually. It is not necessary to

keep hundreds of examples at the back of the mind. Did not *GmM/r*² replace all those cycles and epicycles of pre-Newton astronomers?

Returning to the split infinitives: The taboo on them, now well entrenched justifiably, came from the 17th and 18th century 'English' English grammarians. Latin, like Sanskrit, does not use 'to' to indicate an infinitive (that is, the unconjugated verb), but English developed differently. So they decreed that 'to' must remain with the verb.

These are but a few examples of the laws of grammar which impart to the writing (and speaking) an elegance otherwise unattainable. Indeed such presentation of grammar to learners is very effective. My generation was brought up on

British writing almost entirely. The major Indian writer we read was Gandhiji whose English writing remains today the simplest and most elegant. I ask my trainees to read him and learn automatically.

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2004, **86**, 239–240.
2. Website of an International Conference on the teaching of the English language.

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Phytochemical variability

Sangwan *et al.*¹ point out the wide variation in the constituents found in ten different commercially available preparations marketed as Ashwagandha. Of the 10 samples tried, only two are monoherbal extracts (presumably of Ashwagandha alone) while the rest are polyherbal mixtures.

We have been working in our laboratory with a standardized monoherbal extract provided to us by Kottakkal Arya Vaidyasala, Kerala, to assess the antioxidant, cytoprotective and cataractostatic ability of Ashwagandha². In light of the report by Sangwan *et al.*¹, we undertook a comparison of the antioxidant properties of three other commercially available products with 'standardized' extract (called A). Equal concentrations of the four products were taken and their antioxidant abilities compared under identical conditions, using the ABTS assay method³. Figure 1 compares their abilities at a representative concentration (4 mg/ml). Product B displays the best antioxidant ability and would therefore seem to be the best of use; however, it is a polyherbal mixture¹. Of the others,

which are all claimed to be monoherbal, product H displays the best antioxidant property. These differences are perhaps due to the phytochemical variability referred to above¹, and lend support to the suggestion that such variations might

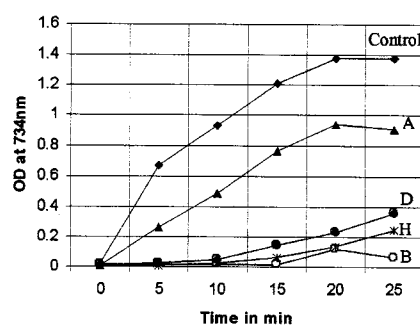


Figure 1. Comparison of the antioxidant abilities of four samples of Ashwagandha, monitored by the ABTS assay. Ashwagandha samples were 4 mg/ml in water; 1 mM H₂O₂ in water, 0.15 mM ABTS and 2.5 μM metmyoglobin in pH 7.5, 50 mM phosphate buffer. The change in absorbance of ABTS at 734 nm was monitored over time, as per ref. 3.

arise from locale-dependent physiological and ecological variations in plantations, harvest and post-harvest operations, and the processing and manufacturing methods. Thus the need for uniformity and standardization guidelines in regulatory frameworks that are in vogue or contemplated in natural health products.

1. Sangwan, R. S. *et al.*, *Curr. Sci.*, 2004, **86**, 461–465.
2. Thiagarajan, G., Venu, T. and Balasubramanian, D., *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **85**, 1065–1071.
3. Miller, N. J., Rice-Evans, C., Davies, M. J., Gopinathan, V. and Milner, A., *Clin. Sci.*, 1993, **84**, 407–412.

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