Popular vs. Exact Usage

in

Each Other and One Another

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“In formal English, the expression ‘each other’ is used when two persons are involved; and the expression ‘one another’ is used when three or more persons are involved.

Questionable: The six students were conversing excitedly with each other.
Better: The six students were conversing excitedly with one another.

Questionable: The couple spoke to one another earnestly.
Better: The couple spoke to each other earnestly.”

These are typical examples of usage among very diverse interpretations of the synonymy of each other and one another. This pattern seems to be based on Nesfield’s 1898 English Grammar Past and Present which was widely read in Japan. Therefore, it can be said that Japanese teachers as well as students observe this strict rule. The idea comes from the old usage of each. In Old English each was very close to every (= ever each). The only difference was that each was also used to distinguish between two quantities. In Modern English there is not much difference between each and every, but every cannot usually be used in the sense of two while each can.

However, Nesfield is not the first advocate. Before him there was Goold Brown who in 1851 cited the rule with approval. The grammarian quoted by Goold Brown was T.O. Churchill who wrote A New Grammar of the English Language in 1823.

This group of grammarians is followed by a second that believed: “The one-time ‘rule’ that each other can refer only to two, and that for more than two one another must be used, is no longer strictly observed. The three men distrusted each other is now accepted as correct.” The basis for this theory is supported by Fowler’s remark: “This
differentiation is neither of present utility nor based on historical usage." The OED shows that there is no evidence for the restriction.

A third interpretation is halfway between the first two; it gives a condition: "There is, however, a stylistic difference between the two reciprocals in that each other is more common in informal style and one another in more formal contexts." This astute observation holds true especially in speech because each other is shorter than the mouthful one another. A modern light novel Terms of Endearment, however, has no each other and 42 one anothers which are used of two people and things 35 times. In a semiformal book, Intimate Behaviour by Desmond Morris, one another is seen 54 times and each other is used only twice. Moreover, the latter usage is quoted from another book: "To give one example, on an occasion when two medieval monarchs met, it is recorded that they 'took each other by the hand, when the king of France led the king of England to his tent; the four dukes took each other by the hand and followed them.' " Many other casually written novels make one wonder if this is a matter of formality; one another for formal, each other for informal. However, The Grammar of English Dialect, for instance, writes about the dialect of Yorkshire: "—the absence of the reciprocal pronoun each other, one another being used in all instances." Since it gives no further explanation, here are some suppositions:

1) People in Yorkshire must have simplified these two compound reciprocal pronouns into one assuming that one another would cover any number more than two.

2) Phonetically, one another sounds more attractive than each other. They must have liked the sound of one another and stuck to it as the uneducated tend to be conservative in speech whereas the educated are less hidebound.

Furthermore, the OED explains that the first appearance of each other is in 1000 A.D. and that of one another is in 1340 A.D. This provides little justification for restricting the range of the two phrases.

The general view of these three group theories is reflected in the
survey by Bryant\(^8\) : 57.4% of each other is used when two elements are being discussed, and 42.6% is used for more than two elements. Whatever may be said for and against the rule, it must be acknowledged that many writers do not draw such a distinction. The use of each other for more than two quantities is not common; more prevalent is the use of one another for only two as seen in Partridge’s comment: “It is odd to find so fine a writer as Paul Horgan saying, ‘The train and the town were moving towards one another; the train, across distance; the town, across time.’”\(^9\)

However, some writers have good reasons to use the seemingly mistaken pronouns.

(1) To avoid repetition

He says that many know each other and really express joy at seeing one another again.\(^{10}\)

The old are modest, said Philip. They tend not to outlive one another. (p.11)
He means the old are modest. They tend not to outlive each other by too much. (p.12)\(^{11}\)

He’s got Charlie Dobbs and Henry Fosse in it. Stark naked. Dumped on top of one another. Upside down. They didn’t like each other, Leander. They never even spoke to one another.\(^{12}\)

(2) Using each other to make two parties contrastive

The boys wear coats with tails, the teachers are called beaks, and both parties greet one another on the street by simply raising a single index finger.\(^{13}\)

The four regarded each other. Then as if jerked from above by pieces of wire the two boys sprang to their feet.\(^{14}\)

Even though the people involved in the first quotation number far more than two, it is clear that they are being discussed in terms of two
groups. In the second example, too, two teachers and two students are confronting each other.

(3) Using *each other* to describe people in a group more clearly as if they were singular

Tom ran out of doors. The company looked at *each other* with a perplexed interest, and inquiringly at Huck, who was tongue-tied.\(^{15}\)

The writer presumably wants to depict each person vividly. Compare the following two quotations from one of Iris Murdoch’s works.

The voice ceased and the crowd started out of their immobility. In a murmur which rose to a roar and re-echoed from the façades of the artificial city they clapped and shouted, rustling and swaying and turning to *one another*. (p.143)

Goldhawk Road was hideous. The traffic made a continual jagged uproar and the pavements were crowded with people jostling past *each other* in front of shop windows full of cheap crockery and tin cans. (p.202)\(^{16}\)

Although they are both scenes on the street, people panic more in the second context jostling shoulder to shoulder. Thus readers can feel each person’s action.

(4) In a collocation

Sally and her young man were *leaning up against one another*, slumbering quite peacefully.\(^{17}\)

He and she stood *leaning against one another*, silent, afraid, their bodies touching all along.\(^{18}\)

In the whole book of *Sons and Lovers*, 35 *each others* used for 2 people can be seen and only 4 *one anothers* are used for 2 people; 2 of which are used for two people, supposedly to avoid the same diction in a single sentence. This quotation is one of the two exceptions. The
last exception is as follows:

‘Why, we’re not better than one another, are we?’ he replied.\(^{19}\)

Whether or not the phrase better than one another is set, and better than each other is not, is still a question.

(5) To be subjective or objective

Michael Swan writes in Practical English Usage: “This ‘rule’ does not reflect actual usage: there is little or no difference of meaning between the two expressions. If there is any difference, it seems to be that we prefer one another (like one) when we are making very general statements, and not talking about particular people.”\(^{20}\) The OED shows that each other originally was a phrase construed as each being the subject, and other being governed in accusative, genitive, or dative by a verb, preposition, or substantive. Therefore, the sentence They liked each other might be the same as (They) each liked the other, or the sentence might have been, formerly, They liked each the other. The definite article ‘the’ seems to be implied in each other, subjectively. However, as for one another, one is the grammatical subject, and another the object as in They spoke one to another which is now to one another. It should be pointed out here that in the 16th-17th centuries this was also to one the other. Perhaps this is the point where the confusing element started: each the other on the one hand and one the other on the other. The presence of the indefinite article ‘an’ seems to suggest less definite, uninvolved elements, objectively.

This idea is found in the book Words written by The Observer’s ‘Words’ columnist. This is a quotation from Jean Aitchison’s paperback Language Change: Progress or Decay.

Disruption and therapy seem to balance one another, in a perpetual stalemate.\(^{21}\)

In one of John Updike’s novels a similar usage is observed where he writes about a couple.
Even from a distance they smiled to see one another. (p.118)
The twenty years were by, when it would have been convenient to love one another. (p.119)

However, the seemingly-correct-rule is not followed everywhere: *each other*, subjective, we vs. *one another*, objective, they.

We came back to the chairs now and then and sang hesitant, clever, nervous, gentle dithyrambs about how we were beginning to feel towards one another.

The sense of my own destiny, which had so curiously deserted me during the days when I had been lying on Dave's camp-bed, had now returned, and I felt sure that whatever god had arranged for me and Hugo to have deeply to do with one another would not leave his work unfinished.

In this book *Under the Net*, *each other* is used 40 times whereas *one another* is used only twice, one of which has already been pointed out in this paper.

(6) Using *one another* to speak of an ordered series of events

*The American Heritage Dictionary* limits the usage of an ordered series of events or stages. For the limitation only *one another* can be used. The dictionary gives an example: "The Caesars exceeded one another in cruelty." This means that each Caesar was crueler than the last. The above-mentioned history of both pronouns leads easily to this logic: one by one or one to next.

(7) Simultaneous or consecutive

We three practical men looked at *each other.*

Between two people things could happen simultaneously, reciprocally, so to speak, looking, kissing, kicking, complimenting, hugging, and many other reactions. Among more than two people it might not
be simultaneous, but consecutive. By using *each other* writers can illustrate that each person did do things in turn. Compare:

It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see *one another*. (p.42)

Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea. Besides holding our hearts together through long periods of separation, it had the effect of making us tolerant of *each other’s* yarns—and even convictions. (p.2)\(^{26}\)

In both cases there are four people. In the former it is not important whether each of four can see others whereas in the latter each person’s action is significant. Note also that the preposition *between* is used in this context, not *among*.

(8) Promiscuous or popular usage

Saul Bellow uses *each other* constantly for two people throughout *Seize the Day*. But for only two people, Laurie Colwin uses *each other* and *one another* 8 times respectively, in her book *Another Marvelous Thing*. There seems to be no coherence at all. Does she believe in the interchangeability of the usage?

Though most of dictionaries, and books about usage are roughly divided into the above-mentioned three groups and they suggest that the rule be observed in a formal context, one may come to a conclusion that it is not so simple after some study. As is analysed through the eight categories, each usage by most professional writers seems to have a meaning. Therefore, one must be careful not to call it a mistake single-mindedly.

We all know of course that many of our words and phrases have changed meaning in the natural course of history. Despite the protests of the purists and careful writers, these changes are still going on in both the spoken and written language.
Notes

19) Ibid., p.329.

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