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## Respectively

### 1 Introduction

In this technical English note, we will look at one of the most commonly misused and overused words in technical and legal documents.

According to *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage*<sup>1</sup>, “Legal writers tend to overuse these...terms...” and “Often, respectively is not needed at all...”

I'd like to give word of comfort to those reading this – as you might guess from the above comments, native speakers of English often misuse this word, so if you are unsure of the correct usage, don't worry because

- (a) you are in good company and
- (b) the consequences of using the word incorrectly are not *usually* serious<sup>2</sup>.

If, however, you would like to add a little extra polish to your writing, please read the rest of this note.

### 2 Respectively

Dictionaries are not usually very interesting books to read, but here I'll start with the dictionary definition from the Oxford English Dictionary.

Respectively

*Separately or individually and in the order already mentioned.* (Adverb)

So a typical example would be

*James and John are 7 and 10 years old, respectively.* (OK)

Or

*James and John are respectively 7 and 10 years old.* (OK)

1 “A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage”, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Bryan A. Garner; Oxford University Press 1995.

2 However, examiners do occasionally cite it as an informality in need of correction before the issue of a patent. For an example, see Section 5 of this document.

### 3 Basic meaning

Looking again at the previous example, the important point is that there are 2 lists, and the order of the 2 lists agrees.

*James and John are 7 and 10 years old respectively.* (OK)

But:

*They are 7 and 10 years old respectively.* (?)

In the later example, the problem with respectively is that in effect it is an 'empty word' – it does not help the sentence and conveys no extra information.

A word of caution though. I said that the second sentence is doubtful, marking it with a question mark. In fact, if there is a clearly understood order it could be correct. Here is a longer but correct example.

*James and John go to the same school. They are 7 and 10 years old respectively.* (OK)

Question: "How old are James and John?" (OK)

Answer: "They are 7 and 10 respectively."

Therefore if you can derive the order clearly from context, the sentence is in fact correct.

### 4 'Respectively' used to mean 'Separately'

Let's forget James and John for a moment, and use a more technical example.

*The sensors 10 and 11 are attached to the positive and negative terminals respectively.* (OK)

*The sensors are attached to the positive and negative terminals respectively.* (?)

Let's consider the second sentence here. I said in the previous section that respectively adds no new information and can be deleted. Let's look at such a sentence:

*The sensors are attached to the positive and negative terminals.* (?)

The sentence above is *grammatically* correct. However, it is ambiguous. I don't know if both sensors (we will assume there are two) are *both* attached to both terminals, or one sensor is attached to one terminal only, and the other sensor is attached to the other terminal only.

In fact, respectively is often used to indicate the latter meaning. However, while this is quite common, there are better ways of doing so.

Here are some examples to show possible ways of explaining these situations in writing using 'each' and 'separately'.

a) Both sensors are identical

(i) Attached to the same battery terminal

*The sensors are [both] attached to the same one of the battery terminals.* (OK)

*The sensors are [both] attached to the same battery terminal.* (OK)

*The sensors are [both] attached to the positive terminal.* (OK)

'Both' can be used to provide extra emphasis.

(ii) Attached to different terminals

*Each sensor is attached to a different battery terminal.* (OK)

*One sensor is attached to each battery terminal.* (OK)

b) The sensors are non-identical

In this case, we assume that for some reason we need or want to distinguish the sensors from each other. Remember that 'respectively' is used to say '...and in that order'.

(i) Attached to the same battery terminal

*The sensors 10 and 11 are [both] attached to the same [one of the] battery terminals.* (OK)

(ii) Attached to different terminals

*The sensors 10 and 11 are attached to separate battery terminals.* (OK)

*The sensors 10 and 11 are attached to different battery terminals.* (OK)

*The sensors 10 and 11 are attached to the positive and negative terminals respectively.* (OK)

## 5 Patent Problems

In the introduction to this document, I mentioned that misuse of *respectively* was not usually a serious problem. However, like any error, there is a risk that an examiner will object to misuse of the word. This is especially true if the error is contained in the claims of a patent.

As an example, here is an example taken from a claim in a real U.S. application:

*"...a coupling shaft mechanically and rotatably coupled with the axles respectively supporting the wheels..."*

The subsequent Office Action included the following as part of a 35 U.S.C. 112 Para. 2 rejection (quoted here selectively for brevity).

*"The term 'respectively' ... conveys that two or more series of items correspond by the sequential order of the individual elements that make up the series"*

...

*"It is unclear why a correspondence with the term 'respectively' would be needed."*

...

*"Because of the inability to determine what the term 'respectively' is conveying, the claim scope is indefinite as drafted".*

While one could say that the examiner was being more strict than usual in this case, and this was not the only point on which the claims were rejected, there is nevertheless a clear risk in misusing this word.

## 6 Respective

Surprisingly, *respective* is not exactly the adjective corresponding to *respectively*.

To say

*They both went home to their respective families.*

...is correct. In this case, it means "their own separate families".

## 7 Conclusions

There is no doubt that 'respectively' is over-used, especially in technical or legal documents. In many cases, as I hope I have shown above, it can simply be deleted.

In fact, over-use of the word is *very* common even among native speakers. This raises an interesting question: is it really a mistake to use *respectively* to mean *separately*?

On the one hand, when I was at University, around 20 years ago, this use of *respectively* would probably produce a line of red pen under the word 'respectively' from my tutor, along with a (sometimes sarcastic) note to check the dictionary in future. It was regarded as a clear error.

On the other hand, there is no accepted rule-making authority for English (unlike some other languages, for example German or French). In practice, correct English is defined by *usage*, not by *rule*. Therefore, if enough people use a word to mean something, that usage will become correct after a period of time. For this reason, I can't say with 100% certainty that using 'respectively' for 'separately' is incorrect. Even if it is incorrect now, it may become correct in 10 years or so.

If you understand these points about *respectively* and carefully select the language you use, it will at least give a more polished appearance to your emails and other documents *respectively*.