

Bouquets and brickbat

I find *English Today* to be a magazine that conforms exactly to my idea of fulfilling-a-need in the field of language study. Congratulations on your fine new publication.

○ Professor Dwight Bolinger, Palo Alto, California

I want to congratulate you on the first two numbers of *English Today*. I think this is the best publication of its kind which has come my way in a very long experience of teaching and organising courses on English as a second language. It certainly supplies a need at a time when the question of English as a world language is becoming increasingly important, and I hope that you will continue successfully for a long time.

○ Professor Raymond Chapman, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London

It looks as if *English Today* will prove a very useful venture, and I particularly like your editorial hope for a publication which will appeal to both amateurs and professionals concerned with English.

○ John Edwards, St Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada

I have gone through the first two issues and found them very interesting and educational. I admire your concern and concept of a whole new English speaking world, and also like the catholicity of selection – a marvellously refreshingly new approach.

○ Balwant Naik, Teacher of English, London Borough of Ealing

I recently received my copy of the maiden issue of *English Today*. It's an impressive beginning. Congratulations on a job well done!

○ Ron Eckart, Book Review Editor, TESOL Newsletter, Western Kentucky University, USA

I like the magazine style with photos and illustrations and variations in layout: it's contemporary and eye-catching without being slick. You have also done a fine job varying the length, topics, and technicality of the pieces. Surely any educated reader would find something appealing in *ET*!

Three weeks ago I attended the annual conference of the Southeastern Conference on Linguistics, a professional association of about two hundred members who teach linguistics of some sort (usually applied) in colleges and universities in the southern part of the USA. I was amazed at how

many people there had seen *ET*! Their comments were all complimentary. I hope that you and the people who work so hard on the idea and the reality of *English Today* are pleased with its reception. I add my congratulations to the many others you have undoubtedly received.

○ Connie C Eble, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

I wish to cancel my subscription to *English Today* after the introductory offer runs out. My reasons are that I find review inadequate and disappointing. In fact, I find it depressingly second-rate – all the moreso since it stems from so fine a publishing house. In detail: The articles 'An ABC of World English' seem to set the style of the publication and I find them condescending, glib and vapid. Had they one tenth the wit, style and pace of, say a Phillip Howard, or even an Auberon Waugh, they might just escape from being as tedious as they are.

In Senator Mondale's phrase: 'Where's the meat?' The disturbing question raised after two issues is whether the academics and pundits writing for the magazine actually have anything to say. If they have, why don't they say it? The articles published so far seem to be packed with anything but fact and information. They are waffle – red-brick university waffle – and their purpose seems to be self-advertisement. I welcomed the introduction of this review and looked forward eagerly to its publication. I am still convinced that if it were better done it could serve a useful purpose. But I feel that you need a professional editor and some literary talent among your contributors before you can hope to achieve success.

○ Franklyn T Wood, Holland on Sea, Essex, England

The plupluperfect?

Please comment – however briefly – on the proliferation of the use of the plupluperfect tense (I cannot think what else to call it). An example is: 'If he had have gone . . .', almost invariably contracted to 'If he had've gone . . .' The latest transgressor among people who should know better is Mr Jim Prior [the Conservative politician] who, on BBC's Radio Four *Any Questions?* (3 May) said, 'If I

Readers' letters are welcomed. *ET* policy is to publish as representative and informative a selection as possible in each issue. Such correspondence, however, may be subject to editorial adaptation in order to make the most effective use of both the letters and the space available.

had've been there . . .' I have even heard the use in Radio and Television drama and in the narrative of news bulletins, where it would by no means have been in the script, since the form is never written, only spoken.

○ Ian H Watson, Haddon on the Wall, Newcastle upon Tyne, England

We are working on it. *Ed.*

The past and present of the present-future

In the Post & Mail of the April issue, Mr R. Dallas Brett says he finds 'the use of the present tense for the future the most irritating of all the numerous misuses of the English language.' My response to this is taken from the greatest of all English grammars, Jespersen's *Modern English Grammar*, Vol. IV, Sec. 2.4(1): 'The present tense may be used in speaking of some future time. This was a regular practice in Old English, even in some connexions where it would seem necessary to express the distinction between present and future.' There follows a quotation from John 14:12 which is in Latin and Anglo-Saxon, and so I cannot reproduce it here. But Jespersen's own explanation follows: 'In using the present tense in speaking of a future tense one disregards, as it were, the uncertainty always connected with prophesying, and speaks of something not indeed as really taking place now, but simply as certain.' After speaking of Middle English, Jespersen gives further examples from Shakespeare to Shaw covering, it seems to me, just about every possible and actual use of present-future, including the colloquial. I think Mr Brett would be persuaded that his taste has misled him in this matter.

○ Bert Lippman, Coram, New York, USA

A journalistic misnomer?

Come over here where the compiler of 'An ABC of World English' can't hear us. Shame on him! Why give *Indian* the stigma of that terrible psychosis formerly known as dementia praecox? The word *Indian* is no more 'schizophrenic' than the name of your editor-compiler. *ET*, of all publications, should ban this journalistic misnomer, often indeed misused for 'dual-personality' or 'dual-standard'. *Indian* is an ambiguous word, a dual-meaning word, even a many-meaning or plurisignificant word: it is NOT a 'schizophrenic' word, much less a 'truly schizophrenic word'. Leave this term to the psychiatrists and other medics and to the inferior press.

○ David I Masson, Leeds, England

Numbers in Nigeria

I welcome the publication of *English Today* and have asked our University Library to subscribe to it. I was interested in the article 'How Many Millions' in *ET1*, which lists the first and second language speakers of English in bulk figures, to note that Nigeria was not included. There has been no census in Nigeria for a number of years, I know, but guesses put the total population somewhere near 100 million people and a fair percentage of those would use English as a second language. I wonder if you have figures which for some reason were not included in the total and if I might know them. Good luck in this important new venture.

○ G D Killam, Editor, *World Literature Written in English*, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada

David Crystal: There's many a glitch between disk and print. My thanks for pointing to this omission. I had it on my original list on disk, but where it went between there and the copy sent to press only the Great Word Processor knows. For the record, my figures were 90 millions for 'official' second-language speakers, based on recent population estimates, and a question mark for first-language (undoubtedly a very small figure). Estimates vary as to the 'real' use of standard (as opposed to pidgin) English in the country, with different degrees of proficiency, from 5 to 30 per cent of the population.

Brits or not?

As you yourself are clearly well aware (ABC of World English, *ET2*), Scots object to being called 'English' and to the use of England meaning Britain. As a frequent visitor to France, I endlessly try to explain and encourage the use of Britain and British. Sometimes it seems like a losing battle!

However, the other day I chanced to meet some American tourists in the centre of Edinburgh. After admiring this beautiful city and its climate, they admitted to having just driven up through rain-soaked England, and then informed me that a lot of *Brits* were thinking of holidaying in Scotland this year! Perhaps the Scots are no longer British; perhaps independence is round the corner? Given the pejorative overtones which 'Brit' frequently has in the mouths of Australians, Americans, Canadians, et al., perhaps the Scots should be pleased that the term no longer applies to them. The wheel seems to have gone full circle: Brit (*pej.*) = English.

○ Dr Joyce A Hutchinson, Edinburgh, Scotland

A Britisher at home

Noticed that Professor Strevens used 'Britisher' on page 7 of *ET2*. Hmmm. Or, Hmmm. Congratulations on the first two issues.

○ Dr D Stevenson, Universität Essen, West Germany

A helish mess

Now let us deal with the greatest linguistic crime in western civilization, English spelling. You already know that our spelling is outrageously erratic and irrationally inconsistent. Are you also aware that in each English-speaking country there is a large percentage of the population (20% in Canada) that is functionally illiterate. Our educational systems are good or excellent. The problem is English spelling, which is the sole cause for tens of millions of English speakers being illiterate around the world. Spelling reformation and rationalization is both inevitable and desperately needed now.

We need to start the international discussion of spelling reformation and to encourage all people to use simplified spelling at all times. We must not forget that current English spelling is now such a helish mess that it can not be reformed in one step; rather, several phases will be necessary.

○ Ted W Culp, The Simplified Spelling Society of Canada, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Technospeak

As Valerie Illingworth demonstrates in 'The Language of High Technology', the computer scene is redolent with its own distinct form of jargon and with everyday words that no longer mean what they used to. In computer sales and marketing, a new buzzword-ridden language has come into existence with the specific purpose of stunning the buyer so that he is open to a quick sell.

Common hyperbolic forms include *total* as in 'total system concept', *fast* as in 'fast response time', and *high* as in '-resolution', '-speed' and '-technology'. It is simply not possible to define 'fast response time', for example; depending on context, it could be a millisecond or two days. 'A high degree of compatibility' could be praise or condemnation, depending on whether you might have expected less or will only settle for perfection.

On the lighter side, many computer terms have been adopted by the public and it is possible to hear people talk of 'enjoying the down-time' when they are having a break, or 'coming on-line' when they start a conversation. In the near future conversations could run like

this:

'My marriage is a real giga-flop. Jim and I are only on-line together on Sunday nights. There must be a compatible interface mode for two people running at our baud rate.'

'That's really bad data, Anne. One or two more headcrashes and you two could be in for a total system collapse.'

○ George St. Clare, University of Qatar, Doha, Qatar

It isn't sexist really, is it, love?

Jenny Cheshire (*ET*, January) writes about sexist overtones in the use of words like 'love' or 'ducks' when men address women. 'Ducks' of course is regional, and regional variations add a third factor to the sexist and social aspects: 'going out with' 'lads' suggests a closeness among these 'lads', and the possibility that the evening will include some revelry. When addressing a group of (usually married) ladies as 'girls', one is introducing a similar slight element of mischief. One member of such a group might say 'come on, girls' to the rest of the group, confirming a sense of camaraderie.

The use of 'lads', not necessarily regional this time, can also imply a special relationship or attitude: for instance, a teacher would say, 'I am teaching these boys French' (contractual, formal), but 'I'm taking these lads rock-climbing' (voluntary); teachers in special schools seem more likely to speak of their charges as 'lads'. Actually, teachers' modes of address to their pupils might repay study: a male teacher will call a girl pupil 'love', but would expect a few looks if he addressed a boy thus! But then 'love' (this may be north-west England again) is a fairly usual mode of address between two people of different sexes (or between two females) in adult-to-adult or adult-to-child situations, but not in child-to-adult or child-to-child situations.

○ Peter Royle, Bolton, Lancashire, England

Language: his and hers

I have a unique solution to the pronoun problem discussed in Jenny Cheshire's 'A Question of Masculine Bias'. Being a man, I would say, 'Anyone who wants to write non-sexist English will need to have his wits about him.' If, however, I were a woman, I would say, 'Anyone who wants to write non-sexist English will need to have her wits about her.' Not only does this obviate the necessity of introducing awkward neologisms, but it also identifies the sex of the writer!

○ Boman Desai, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Brave new language

It is doubly fitting that 'A Question of Masculine Bias' (ET1) should be followed by David Crystal's feature on usage and the tenacity of prescriptive sentiments. Firstly, Jenny Cheshire's account contains a number of essentially authoritarian pronouncements as to what we ought to be saying but actually don't (yet). Secondly, she appears to be unaware of the decades of struggle against Victorian-style prescriptivism waged by linguists, many teachers and millions of speakers who have voted with their tongues and pens – the kind of people for whom *they* following *someone*, for instance, may have long been standard usage, and not because of anything to do with sex or dogma.

Such misleading statements as 'grammarians have insisted since the 16th century that the masculine gender is "the more worthy gender"' do little more than promote the right background myths for a Holy War.

The old prescriptivists made much of logic, implying that correct usage as judged by this touchstone would somehow contribute to the well-being

of the language and even of society in general. However, most of their energy went into preaching fiery sermons against a ragbag of supposed mistakes such as 'It wasn't me', mistakes which proved difficult to eradicate in the converted, not to mention the lower orders. What they undoubtedly left behind was a large red herring obstructing the path of free communication – and a legacy of self-righteousness, guilt and prejudice. Nor did they, as we thankfully believed for some time, die childless.

For one group of their descendants, the magic strainer through which long-suffering language is to be poured is the supposedly sociopolitical criterion of 'sexism'. 'Logic' is at it again, producing for new mistresses such curiosities as: if X is mentioned before Y, then X has higher status than Y. Well, do you experience a tiny rise in socio-sexual awareness each time you say *girls and boys*, or *gentlemen and ladies*? Have you heard of hundreds of successful A A Aardvaarks?

If we are to say *mother and father* at least half the time, and *father and*

mother the other half, how is this to be monitored? It would be even more difficult to check that we are using, say, each of the combinations of *Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England* 4.2% of the time. And what are we to make, psycholinguistically and sociopolitically, of such common orderings as *forks and spoons, black and white, ducks and drakes, and Camden and Westminster*?

Each of us probably has pet hates in the usage field. Personally, I can't stand references to size, and strongly suspect that a ban on these would increase my stature. I am at present 5 ft 6½ in tall (in the old currency and on rising ground), a fact for which I hold sociopolitical forces responsible. It all goes back to the Irish Parsnip Famine, the 119th Polish Uprising and the hijacking of language by persons of above-average height, soon after the Beginning of Time. Oh, and the Bible. It follows that I am keenly interested in the interaction between language and perceptions of size – particularly from a woman's point of view.

○ Hal (Tallboy) Stuart, London, England

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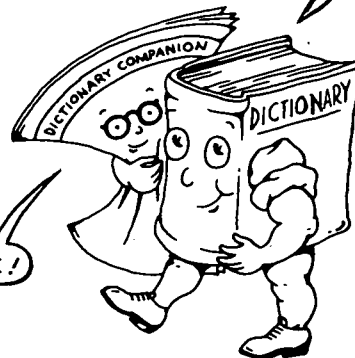
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