

A call for 'Common English'

From: Robert Craig,
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It is not at all easy to come up with a way of referring to English in the world today. Acronyms such as ISE (International Standard English), EIL (English as an International Language), and EPIC (English for the Purpose of International Communication) all fail to hit the target. David Crystal's 'Global English' is not entirely suitable either.

'Common English' or 'General English' looks like the most appropriate way of identifying the phenomenon which has been a major concern of *ET* over the years.

Common English has features which mark it out from traditional forms of English. It is characterised by a preference for such forms as *Beijing*, *Basel*, *Mallorca*, over *Peking*, *Basle*, *Majorca*. It is more tolerant of variety in grammar, as in 'I am here since three days', 'If it would be that...', 'There are four luggages on the platform'; also in pronunciation, 'Iranian' or 'Iraynian', 'patent' or 'paytent'; 'data' or 'dayta', 'Arabiya' or 'Araybia', and *te*, *de*, *ze*, or *ðe* and *tink*, *sink*, *fink*, *θink*.

The variety poses a problem for teachers of English. Most people worldwide wish to acquire English for reasons of advancement; they have no desire to sound like the Queen or Bill Clinton. What they want is a knowledge of Common English – not British or American English. The trouble is that, while most forms of English have been described, textbooks still deal with British or American English. Textbooks describing Common English are a pressing need.

English has given the world a shared language, and it is a language which the world on the whole is happy with. However, English could be riding for a fall. In the U.S.A. the flow of Spanish

speakers is undiminished. In the British Isles, earlier languages are making a comeback as a reaction to globalisation. (There is even a movement to restore West Saxon as the language of England). Common English might be the only hope for preserving the language's pre-eminent position.

Staggering confidence, swaggering arrogance

From: Paul Rastall
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I came across this the other day and, as the advert goes, 'thought of you'. The quote is rather long, but it dates from 1848 and is remarkable both for its prediction of the expansion of English as a world language and in identifying the major reasons for that expansion. It is also remarkable for the confusion of the factual importance of English as a means of communication with its supposed superiority – along with the supposedly superior concomitant culture. The confusion extends to the sense of moral purpose (even to the extent of it being ordained by God as an instrument of world communication and the spread of the Christian religion – in its Anglican form). That, however, was certainly an influential consideration among Victorians. The confusion spreads to an identification of English with England and to an association of English with the 'Anglo-Saxon race'. All of this is said with staggering confidence, swaggering arrogance and the certainty of ignorance.

I am sure that the confusion of all of these issues has permeated attitudes and debates ever since. Even if this particular text is not solely responsible, it is an early expression of typical attitudes of the Victorian period (at least, and perhaps extending to the present day). It may also throw light on

some of the discussions around English as a World Language and English as an International Language. The quote is:

This language of ours stands pre-eminent, even among the languages of the west. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest which Greece has bequeathed to us; with models of every species of eloquence; with historical compositions which, considered as vehicles of ethical and political instruction, have never been equalled; with just and lively representations of human nature; with the most profound speculations on metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, trade; with full and correct information respecting every experimental science, which tends to preserve the health, to increase the comfort, or to enlarge the intellect of man.

It was proposed, in the seventeenth century, to invent a philosophical language for universal adoption, with a view to facilitate communication amongst learned men of all nations. This project engaged some attention, but it was soon felt to be impracticable, and the thought was consequently abandoned. The present age has witnessed the efforts of a few ardent spirits to break down the existing barriers to national intercommunication by the formation of a universal written language. This ingenious attempt is likely to prove a failure. Christian and philanthropic men look, however, with hope to the wider diffusion of the English language as the ordained means, in the hand of God, of extending the blessings of civilisation and of Christianity with unparalleled rapidity among the nations of the earth.

Never, perhaps, were the prospects of a rapid extension of our language so hopeful as at the present eventful period of

time. The competitors for the extension of any one language are now greatly diminished. There is no longer a conflict between the living and the dead tongues. Latin and Greek have been superseded by English, German and French. Sanscrit and Arabic are supplanted by oral vernaculars. The Spanish and Portuguese are gradually retreating to the provinces of their own peninsula [sic!]. The German language has acquired no permanent usage in the new world; and in Europe its extension is limited to scholars and to men of science, though it is studied to some extent by commercial men as a spoken language. The Italian has never been an imperial tongue. The only European languages now extensively propagating themselves in the world are the French and the English; and the latter is rapidly outstretching the former.

In politics, philosophy and religion, England has now the pre-eminence. The overthrow of the French empire checked the progress of its language [This predates some of the French colonial expansion in Africa], and the consolidation of the

Anglo-Saxon power on the American continent is extending ours. In trade, dominion, and international ascendancy, France cannot cope with Britain. The literary treasures of England surpass those of France.

The English press is free, the French press till recently was under the manipulation of a censor. The colonies of France have annually been decreasing; the colonial possessions of England are rapidly extending themselves over the face of the earth.

The population which is daily increasing in the United States of America is the Anglo-Saxon race, speaking English. In South Africa and New Holland... in the isles of the west, and in Canada, to the arctic circle, this language is advancing, not by the imperial authority of princes, but by its own nature, in the hands of the most intelligent colonists of the earth. Even in India it is spoken by the higher classes of natives at the seats of government, and is likely to become the language of commerce throughout the seas of the east. In proportion as it obtains access to the mar-

kets and the schools of those regions, it will conduct, in its train, that knowledge and truth, which alone can bless and dignify the nations of the earth.

(Anonymous, *The Origin and Progress of Language*, Religious Tract Society, London, 1848, pp. 189–191.)

It seems to me that there is some contradiction with an earlier section of the same tract (pp. 149–58) on God's confounding the ungodly planners of the tower of Babel by the confusion of tongues. If God had wanted the peoples of the earth to speak different languages, it seems impious to suggest that English should replace the supposed single original tongue of the earth as a world language. However, I am not a theologian.

Editor This is certainly a striking piece. Its note of triumphalism continues to be sounded today in some British newspapers and, notably, the emphasis on Anglo-Saxon power on both sides of the Atlantic bears a marked resemblance to some of the cultural and linguistic doubts and fears currently expressed in France. □

CROSSWORD

ET65 Crossword solution

1	P	I	N	A	F	O	R	E	5	M	I	K	A	D	O		
I		E		A		H		A			M		M		P		
10	R	E	A	D	I	N	E	S	S		11	P	L	U	M	P	
A		T		R		T					A		S			O	
12	T	A	H	R		15	G	O	N	D	O	L	I	E	R	S	
E		E			14	O		R		E		E				E	
15	S	E	R	A	P	H	I	M		16	S	M	I	17	L	E	R
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19	R	E	S	O	R	T			20	S	P	I	N	E	T	21	T
U									22	M		E		T			P
23	B	A	24	C	K	S	T	A	I	R	S		25	P	E	R	I
B		A		S				N		E		26	E		R		C
27	E	N	N	U	I			28	G	E	T	A	T	A	B	L	E
R		O		V				O		T		U		I			N
29	Y	E	O	M	E	N			30	P	A	T	I	E	N	C	E

ET64 Crossword winners

The winners of *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, Bryan A. Garner, 2000, Oxford University Press New York, the prize for our October 2000 crossword, are:

R. Hall, Escrick, York, England
 Kelley Hayden, Coralville, Indiana, USA
 M. Rutman, Pfaffikon, Switzerland
 Ronald Sutherland, North Hatley, Quebec, Canada
 Ean Taylor, Sprotsbrough, Doncaster, England

