

Feedback

I hope *ET* continues to go from strength to strength. There seems to be no shortage of first rate material and I am enjoying each issue.

○ William T McLeod, Managing Editor, Collins English Dictionaries, Glasgow, Scotland

I re-iterate most of the eulogy so far published, adding only that I find *ET* most interesting and valuable for my personal study and expect it to be an indispensable teaching aid, especially for the new London University A-Level syllabus in English Language Studies.

○ Barrie Land, Sir William Turner's Sixth-Form College, Redcar, Cleveland, England

I have received *ET3* today. It annoys me. I have learned to regard magazines as things to be skimmed through; in the evening of my days (I was born in 1908) even *The Listener* and *The Spectator* receive this treatment. But *English Today* deserves and needs to be read. When you come to retire, you will realise that life is too short for this kind of self-indulgence. Still – thank you very much.

○ John E Brown, Winscombe, Avon, England

A view from the other side

In *ET3*, Michael Swan quotes Lord Airedale without comment as claiming that Americans 'always prefer the longer word to the shorter'. Perhaps I might be allowed to examine this all-too-frequent assertion. It is true that we prefer *apartment* and *elevator* to *flat* and *lift*, but we don't really say *automobile* or *motion picture* in ordinary speech any more than you normally talk about *turf accountants* – be fair now!

More tellingly, there is no shortage of examples in the opposite direction. In the States, unfortunate workers are *laid off*; here in Britain they are *made redundant*. Our expressways have *medians* and are full of *semis*; your motorways are blessed with *central reservations* and plagued by *articulated lorries*. American drivers are instructed to *keep left*; British ones must *keep to the nearside lane*. We pay *dues*; you have to cough up *subscriptions*. Our *doormen* are your *commissionaires*; our *farmhands* are your *agricultural labourers*; our *subway* is your *underground*. Our *cookbooks* are your *cookery books*; our *salesclerks* are your *shop assistants*; our *crosswalks* are your *pelican crossings*. And, while our weathermen forecast *clouds*, yours will only admit to *sunny intervals*!

A few of your less succinct terms are enough to make us choke on our hamburgers: our exams are *proctored*, while yours must be *invigilated*; our suspected malefactors are merely *questioned*, while yours are obliged to *help the police with their enquiries*; we can speak breezily of *colleges*, while you are forced to invoke the full sombre majesty of *institutions of higher and further education*. I wonder if his lordship would like to reconsider his position.

○ R L Trask, School of Modern Languages, University of Liverpool, England

Getting it right about Canada

Much as I enjoy *ET*, I do have some reservations about your treatment of Canada. Firstly, in *ET2*, there is your explanation that 'Canada' is derived from *Kanata*, 'which may have been the name of a nearby Iroquois village'. May I refer you to the eminently respectable Gage Canadian Dictionary, which offers a very definite statement that *Kanata* is, in fact, the Iroquoian word for 'village' or 'community'. As it happens, *Kanata* is now the name of a town situated very close to Ottawa.

Secondly, your comment that 'Canadians by and large are ambivalent about their links with the United States'. One example given of this ambivalence appears to be *TIME*'s reference to Canada as 'America's Attic' rather than Richler's 'North American Attic'. I would suggest that this shows more about the U.S. attitude toward Canada than Canada's feelings about its place in the world.

Thirdly, your comment in *ET3* that 'Responses have been coming in from all over the UK and US, from Western Europe and . . .' Does this mean you had *no* response from Canada or does *ET*, too, consider us part of the US?

○ Michelle Albagli, Communications Officer, Social Science Federation of Canada, Ottawa

Many thanks for strengthening the *Kanata* argument – yes, you're right about America's Attic – no, there were no letters whatever from Canada at the time of writing. *Ed*.

Scots is a language

ET3 appeals much more than the April number, in which I found the articles by Taylor, House and Parlee too long, but I am a practical linguist little interested in theoretical discussions. That's probably why I also found the reviews boring. 'An ABC of World English' is very valuable indeed, the

kind of surveys that we need – basic knowledge.

In the July number I first looked at 'Is Scots a Language?' by A J Aitken – after all, I am a Scots patriot since 1948, when a family in northeastern Scotland taught me some Scots. I was horrified to read that Scots has been called a *Halbsprache* in German: *Halvspråk* in Swedish is worse than 'half a language'! *Halvfigur* in Swedish is a contemptible person who pretends to be something but is nothing, *Halbstarke* in German are Teddy Boys who are not even 'half strong' – only braggarts.

My German university friends assure me that if Low German is a language (and who denies that?), then Scots is bound to be a language. They can't understand why Scots shouldn't be allowed to be called a language, just like Luxemburgish, which is not taught in the schools of Luxembourg as a German dialect but as a language. In my *Geolinguistic Handbook*, Scots will remain a language.

○ Erik Gunnemark, Edet, Sweden

The Argentine Connection

Very good first issues. Congratulations. I hope by next year you can become a monthly; as a quarterly it will take until next century to cover English as spoken at present throughout the world. I would welcome an article on English as spoken by the largest British community outside the Commonwealth, a million strong in Argentina. I was part of that community till I left in 1957, so would be curious about recent developments. It's about time that this community be properly studied.

○ M J Nash, West Hampstead, London, England

Leave 'em laughing

Having read the first two issues of *ET*, I picked up issue 3 with pleasure, looking forward to more of the same clever blend of information, education and entertainment. Little did I suspect that the entertainment would go as far as it did, leaving me giggling helplessly over your wonderful reminder of the subtleties of Glaswegian dialect. In fact, I found the whole of A J Aitken's article fascinating, but working on the old show-biz principle of leave-them-laughing, finishing with *Whorzyurwallizwulli?* was a masterful stroke. I can only hope that the rest of the English-speaking readership enjoyed it as much as I did, as a Scot.

What about an article on Yiddish, or at least some of the loanwords in English which have come from this

source? Any dialect which can produce words like *farblondjet* and *kibbutznik* has to be worth looking at.

○ Elma Grey, Kinghorn, Fife, Scotland

Glad you liked the Parliamento Glasgow insert. Yiddish is on our list, but it's a lo-o-ng list. *Ed.*

Polyglot Vanuatu

I am writing to offer my congratulations on the birth of an absorbing publication, which I have read quite literally from cover to cover. One small correction – in your article 'An ABC of World English' (*ET1*) you mention 'the islands now known as the New Hebrides.' In fact, since 1980 these islands have made up the independent nation of Vanuatu. You might be interested to know that the root word *vanua* ('land') is found in languages all over the Pacific. Citizens are referred to as *ni-Vanuatu* in either the singular or the collective forms. The 'land of the Holy Spirit' survives in the name of one of the major islands, Espiritu Santu.

I have taken the trouble to write, not merely to indulge the universal urge to edit, but because Vanuatu provides some fascinating examples of language use which your readers might find interesting. A colonial heritage which can only be described as bizarre has left a tiny population with three officially recognized second languages: English, French, and Bislama, a Neo-Melanesian pidgin. The place of English in this wonderfully polyglot nation would make an interesting article, I think. However, a topic of wider interest would no doubt be the relationship of the various pidgins to our concept of a World English. Looking forward to the next issue of *English Today*.

○ Heidi Taylor, English Language Training Unit, Bank of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario

The role of missionaries

Thank you for three very readable and enjoyable editions of *ET!* A misconception appeared in the very first article of the very first issue, Richard Bailey's 'The Idea of World English', that missionaries are most likely to 'urge the adoption of English abroad'. No, on the contrary, missionaries are most likely to encourage translation of the Bible into the vernaculars of the world – as they have been doing since Jerome translated it into Latin. John Wycliffe translated it into the vernacular of his own people, and a great company of missionary linguists have been attempting to perform a similar task throughout the world today, e.g. the Summer Institute of

Linguistics, Bible Societies, etc.

It is true that a lot of theological training is conducted in English, as specialist training in other fields is, but *mission* work is about communicating the Gospel in the language of the people. Generally speaking, missionaries do not contribute to the 'dominance of English' but help, in fact, to identify 'linguistic species', as Philip Ward calls them (Post & Mail, *ET3*). Ninety percent of Christian worship in Nigeria, for example, is conducted in their indigenous languages, despite the national status of English.

○ Paul Tench, Lecturer, Department of English, UWIST, Cardiff, Wales

Epicene pronouns

I was very pleased to see the reaction to Jenny Cheshire's article, and to your sidebar in *ET1* on epicene or common-gender pronouns. For the past few years I have been researching proposals for such pronouns, and I have so far collected over eighty paradigms, going back to the mid-19th century. I have added the proposals printed in your July issue to my list, and have written, care of *English Today*, to John E Brown, to get a more exact reference to his 50-year-old proposal.

You will be interested to know that the results of my study of epicene pronouns, together with a(n) historical treatment of other matters relating to language and sex, will appear in my new book, *Grammar and Gender*, to be published early next spring by the Yale University Press. If you receive additional epicene pronoun proposals that will not be published in *ET*, may I ask that you forward copies of them to me so that they may be included in my record of the long and fruitless battle for the adoption of sex-neutral pronouns?

○ Professor Dennis Baron, Department of English, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, USA

A few years ago I submitted to the copy editing department of the book publisher for which I work a plan for the elimination of sexist pronouns. It was at least taken seriously by the staff, but unfortunately the copy chief found it merely amusing. Here it is.

The use of 'they' for 'he' or 'she' is not logical, which is enough to disqualify it in the eyes (or ears?) of many. But, as has been pointed out in the pages of *ET*, that solution is by no means the only possible one; some radically different pronouns have been proposed, which may be the major difficulty as regards acceptance: they're too different. What we need to do is slightly alter the words we already use – slightly both in pronunciation and in

spelling – invent compromise formations rather than completely new words. I suggest the following:

he or she: se (Se marks the fall of the sparrow.)

his or her: hir (To each hir own.)

him or her: hir (Let hir cast the first stone.)

○ Frank Hoffman, New York City, USA

She's a beaut: Ask anyone, they'll tell you

I note with interest that the new revised *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* repeats the assertion made in 1972 that in Australian English the feminine pronoun can be used to refer to an inanimate noun, as in: 'The job's still not done; I'll finish her this arvo . . .' and impersonally for 'things in general': 'She'll be Jake', meaning 'everything will be fine.' In addition, it is also noted in the section on gender that, in non-standard and Australian English, as well as suggesting affection towards objects with which we may have a close or intense relationship (e.g., 'ship'), *she* can also suggest 'antipathy', as in: 'She's an absolute bastard, this truck' (Cf. 5.111).

I would be very interested indeed to have any examples from any variety of English of the uses of *she* with inanimate reference, and comments on its emotive implications. I feel sure that it is a usage not only typical of Australian English.

Separately, as regards the question of gender and the third person pronoun, I feel sure that *they* with singular reference will become increasingly popular during the last years of this century.

○ Katie Wales, Royal Holloway College, Egham, Surrey, England

A minority person learning English themselves

In July's Post & Mail John E Brown says that the use of *they* as a singular is ungrammatical, illogical, and sloppy. I wonder how he feels about the use of *you* as a singular. *They* has followed you down the road to singularity. The only form missing is *themselves* to parallel *yourself*, e.g. 'The person can do it themselves.'

Philip Ward's fears that English poses a threat to minority languages can be allayed. The spread of English means that national languages such as French, Russian, Bahasa Indonesia, Spanish and Hindi have themselves become minority languages. As a result, national languages pose less of a threat than they would without English. This is

recognized in India where speakers of minority languages insist on using English in preference to Hindi.

○ Robert Craig, Weston-super-Mare, Avon, England

Two kinds of coinage

Of the two coinages we commonly exchange and which are liable to debasement, language is far more damaging than money. Yet, and here is a curious thing, we unhesitatingly accept the words printed on our paper money which say – on our shortly to disappear pound note – that the Chief Cashier of the Bank of England, on behalf of the Governor and the Company, promises ‘to pay the bearer on demand the sum of one pound’. Interested in this promise, I sent a £1 note to the Governor of the Bank of England and asked him to fulfil the promise made on the accompanying note. I was not sure what I would get in return – a tiny flake of gold perhaps, a pound of potatoes, possibly a book token to the value of £1.

What came back through the post was another £1 note, with the Bank’s compliments. My next step surely is to take the Bank of England before the courts under the Trades’ Description Act, because the unfulfillable promise is a lie which is at the heart of government.

Our coinage can soar or plummet against the coinages of other countries, but our language will only retain its true value if we value our words truly, guarding against devaluation at the hands of governments, bureaucrats and journalists, not to say politicians and soldiers, particularly those in charge of nuclear weapons and defence policies that end up – quite rightly – under the acronym of MAD [Mutually Assured Destruction].

○ Martin Green, Penzance, Cornwall

In praise of enthusiasm

As I am a new subscriber, it is only recently that I have seen your January issue and specifically the feature ‘A Way with Words’. Whether it was due to a misprint, or was a deliberate mistake, your dozen words seem to have become the proverbial baker’s dozen on p. 48. The word EUTHUSIAST is too serendipitous a coinage to be lost to the language, so perhaps your readers would like to suggest a definition to enshrine its usage.

The context in which it was used in the explanation of TRIBBLE might suggest a variant of the earlier usage of *enthusiast*: being happily possessed by extra-terrestrial pre-occupation. This

has the advantage of being explainable etymologically through the Greek combining prefix EU-. However, it could also be useful as a description of those who are proponents of a United States of Europe. Congratulations – a Burgessism in the first issue!

○ P J Keen, Ickenham, Middlesex, England

Factors that may diminish English

I note that a forthcoming feature of *ET* is entitled ‘Does English kill off other languages?’ May I suggest a companion piece on the lines of ‘Are other languages diminishing the influence of English?’ This might cover the policy of the French government towards increasing the use of French internationally, the impact of Russian ‘advisors’ wherever they may be found, the steadily increasing number of Esperanto speakers throughout the world, and the effects of African nationalism on the use of English in

The passive is said to be alive and well

A letter from my building society and an advertising card from a department store reminded me that passive verbs were alive and well and continuing to weigh down the language.

‘This matter is being dealt with by Miss Jones,’ said the building society.

The store was promoting a family insurance scheme. ‘This special voucher may be used by you to cover the cost of the first monthly premium,’ said the enclosed card.

Logical, I suppose, if the matter is more important than Miss Jones and the voucher is more important than the person who uses it. That’s what commerce does to clear thinking.

But it isn’t only in the business world that you find these sentences in which, instead of somebody doing something to somebody else, somebody else has something done to him by somebody. You find them in newspapers, magazines, radio news bulletins, even the occasional novel. That infernal preposition ‘by’, which becomes necessary as soon as the subject and object are switched, appears often enough to warrant being called a nuisance.

Here’s an example from a newspaper report about John Miller, the ex-mercenary who claimed he had found Lord Lucan: ‘Miller said he had been taken to see Lord Lucan, in a South American country, by a man he met in a Los Angeles bar.’

What this means, in active English, is that the man Miller met in a Los Angeles bar took him to see Lord Lucan. Practise

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.

former colonies, to list just a few topics which immediately come to mind. I would be most interested to learn about the other side of the story.

○ Sandra Slade, East Grinstead, Sussex, England

To further split

David Crystal has this bee in his bonnet about split infinitives’ being okay. Plato would have said: ‘Ambiguity of words causes difficulty and obscurity’ (Laws VIII 837), and I submit that we should apply this to ‘split’ uns!’ Can David Crystal sort this sentence out? – ‘Mark Thatcher travelled abroad to further cement trading relations.’

○ Paul Thompson, Southport, Merseyside, England

this sort of interpretation a few times and you may become hooked. Passive verbs will make you chuckle, or grimace, depending on how daft they sound.

You may even find two in one sentence, as in this introduction to the history of banking: ‘It is widely believed that we owe our present use of the word “bank” to the benches (banchi) set up by the Lombards in the medieval period.’ (*UK Press Gazette*, Money matters No 2, 1985).

Perhaps the passive is too deeply ingrained, in our speech as well as in our writing, for us to resist it. Instead of saying, ‘I paid the bill’, we prefer to say, ‘The bill’s been paid’. Or ‘The court’s booked’ rather than ‘I’ve booked the court’.

Radio news writers resort to the passive when they cannot attribute actions to anyone. ‘It has been reported’ makes a conveniently vague introduction to stories which no one has verified. The writer avoids specifying who is doing the reporting and avoids committing himself or the station in case the report turns out to be false.

But there is more at stake in our language than the occasional evasion of responsibility. There is the use of words to express clear thinking. Could it be that passive prose reflects the times we live in; that we are all accustomed to having things done to us, or for us, rather than doing things ourselves?

○ Ron Scott, Carshalton, Surrey, England