

Eminent misuse

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A brief comment on Emily Dickinson might usefully supplement Donald Hook's fine article in *ET* 59 (Jul 99) on the use and misuse of the apostrophe. One of America's greatest poets was a hopelessly confirmed misuser who invariably (in hundreds of poems) added an apostrophe to *its*. 'Hypercorrection of possessive pronouns' is how Hook explains this phenomenon; Dickinson *never* did otherwise. Here is the opening stanza of one of her most famous poems:

Further in Summer than the
Birds
Pathetic from the Grass
A minor Nation celebrates
It's unobtrusive Mass
(J1068)

Since Thomas Johnson's groundbreaking edition (1955) and with Dickinson's ever-growing fame, these obtrusive apostrophes are being increasingly scattered far and worldwide.

The Pokemon phenomenon

From: Robert Craig
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I wonder if *ET* might consider the Japanese and now worldwide 'Pokemon' phenomenon, where *Pokémon*, the name of a Japanese game, is short for 'pocket monster'.

The phenomenon itself is coinages formed out of English elements, but minted outside the English-speaking world.

An early example is *unwell* (Ireland), and others are *walkabout* (New Guinea), *dreamtime* (Australia), *warpath* (U.S.A.), *cuppa*

(tea) (Australia). Now *walkman* and *gameboy* (Japan), and a possible new addition *handie* (German: mobile or cell phone).

Thinking about sex

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In an episode of the Oprah Winfrey Show in August 1999 on TV3 in New Zealand, Oprah advocates that one should heed her motherly instinct on potential danger in a vicinity. One of the cases discussed concerns a child who had been repeatedly abused sexually by a close family friend who was a respected paramedic at a fire station. Oprah notes that parents often have a misconception of sex abuse, associat-

A response to Modiano and Lilles

ANDREW DALBY writes in his column 'Notes in the Margin' in *The Linguist* (journal of the Society of Linguists, London) on two recent issues in *ET*, separately raised by Marko Modiano and Jaan Lilles (reproduced with the kind permission of the editor and the author)

English(es) 1

In the nicest possible way, Marko Modiano indulges in a little British-baiting in *English Today*, October 1999. I will not tell you the title of his paper, because it is too long. It is about pinning down the Standard English that textbooks are meant to be teaching people. When the textbooks are British, their English is sometimes –

from the US point of view – pretty bad. He gives examples, straight from these textbooks, that most US speakers would consider ungrammatical: 'I haven't got any'; 'I haven't got a bloody clue'. Here are three more examples: 'Helen's reading history at Oxford'; 'It would be a good idea if you sat it again' and 'Tuesdays and Wednesdays are given over to football and basketball respectively'. The special British uses of 'read', 'sit' and 'give over to' would make these sentences confusing or incomprehensible to US speakers, says Modiano.

He observes that there is a 'common core' of standard English, acceptable worldwide. He draws a Venn diagram, with an arrow pointing straight to the common core, and says we should teach it, rather than the British-slanted version of 'standard English'

that many teach now. Well, yes. But, to take one of his examples, 'I haven't got any' is OK in Britain, and 'I don't have any' is OK in the United States. The only thing available in the common core is the stilted 'I have none'. We cannot just teach that.

It may be true that too many British textbooks and British examiners assume without thinking that British English equals standard English: but students do not learn from just one textbook or one teacher. There is really no single standard English, and no reason to pretend, to students, teachers or examiners, that there is. But we are very lucky that the common core exists, because students who want a real command of English need it and as much as they can learn of the uncommon bits as well. From teachers like Modiano (author

ing it with horrible scenario of bruised body. The fact is that sex abuse could be a 'nice' experience to the child who does not know that s/he is being exploited. In other words, sex abuse need not be brutal nor violent.

What has it got to do with English in particular? I sense a Whorfian understanding in the perception of sex abuse. Due to the semantics of the word *abuse* which is associated with violence towards a person regarded as victim, which in turn entails physical and/or mental injuries, one's definition of *sex abuse* is evident from the victim rather than the victimisation. The term *abuse* results in a particular semantic idiosyncrasy (cf. Bauer 1983: 79) that influences one's conception of the reality. This is most unfortunate to the victim of child sex abuse, as a child might be victimised but fail to show signs of a victim. The child might remain as a transparent victim as s/he does not understand that what has happened is unacceptable.

If we value children's rights and

advocate the need to speak for children, our language should have a more transparent definition of sex abuse so much so that a higher degree of sensitivity on the subject matter is codified in the language. We might like to consider *sex offence* in place of *sex abuse* because the former means 'inappropriate sexual contacts' irrespective of any bodily harm. The word *offence* is not determined semantically by violence but can encompass violence in its sense. In contrast to *abuse*, *offence* has a wider semantic field. This will alleviate the level of awareness on issues of well being related to children and other persons.

While *sex offence* might not be a new term in English, it could be a practical usage reflecting the conviction of the speakers towards a safer future for children. This lexical choice can offer a glimpse of social psychology in English today.

Reference: Bauer, Laurie. 1993. *English Word-Formation*. Cambridge: University Press.

A half-mixed compound?

From: David Dean,
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Some lessons learnt during high school chemistry remain with me, none more so than the distinction between a mixture and a compound:

Mixture: a substance consisting of two or more substances mixed together without any chemical bonding between them.

Compound: a substance that contains atoms of two or more chemical elements held together by chemical bonds.

As a teenager I did not object to being termed *half caste*. For the past few years I have preferred, and asked others to use, *mixed race*. Lately, I have been aware of the inadequacies of this phrase, and now consider 'compound ethnicity' to be more appropriate.

My father is of Asian and my mother is of European ethnic origin. We do not, nor do the cultures

of *A mid-Atlantic handbook*, 1996, and of studies of euro-English) I am quite sure they will learn all of that.

English(es) 2

English Today, always worth reading, is (in April 2000) in a mood to question current assumptions on the nature of Englishes.

Jaan Lilles writes on 'The myth of Canadian English', arguing that there is no such entity. Admittedly any large-scale regional variety, so-called, of a language such as English is 'an abstraction, a fiction': John Algeo had already said exactly this in 1991. Some of them, however, are useful fictions. There is something real to describe, and to contrast with all other varieties, in (say) South African or Australian

English. Lilles proposes that 'Canadian English' is only supposed to exist because Canada exists, and perhaps because Canadian French exists. Actually, isoglosses do not follow but cross the US-Canadian border. Canadian English amounts to a fairly small number of special words and usages, plus a rather random choice between spelling and pronunciation variants that are standard either in the US or in Britain: in fact the three recent Canadian dictionaries tend to make different choices among these variants. It would not be the first time that dictionaries and grammars have set out to describe a non-existent linguistic unit: have the makers of the *Canadian Oxford dictionary* and its rivals done it again?

Meanwhile the debate begun by Marko Modiano, already mentioned in 'Notes in

the Margin', continues in *English Today*. His basic point is that teachers and examiners of English as a foreign language have tended to regard only Standard British English as correct, and they should long since have ceased to do this. Modiano's EIL, 'English as an International Language', will have its own norms, and since it is a lingua franca its L2 speakers will have just as much right to determine them as native speakers will.

This is all very well, but it's futuristic and slightly impractical. Paul Rastall brings the debate back to earth. The existing variation between current usage and the textbook rules already causes quite enough difficulties for teachers and examiners. 'Diversity, yes: but what is the English teacher to do?' □

