

An index of satisfaction

I was pleased to receive *ET*11 recently, and as usual found it stimulating. You deserve one plaudit in particular, and that is the amount of space you give over to your readers through Post & Mail. In response to your appeal for constructive suggestions: It seems to me that a practical aid for regular *ET* readers would be a comprehensive index of the features and areas covered, perhaps on an annual basis. This would make *ET* an invaluable long-term reference manual, long after the quarterly issue has been read and shelved.

W. Millis, London, England

I have not missed one issue of *ET*. I find the articles both instructive and entertaining. Moreover, sometimes I find them useful for my assignments. In fact, I find the three months' wait a bit long for each issue. So I like to dip in previous issues. However, when I want to look up some particular references I find it quite difficult. Do you think you can devise an index?

Annemarie Farrugia,
Victoria, Gozo, Malta

We would be glad to hear from other readers on this point. Ed.

Slow boats to Fiji

Do the majority of your overseas subscribers really get *ET* by airmail? Or is it just that few live in places to which surface mail takes as long as it does to Fiji? Anyway, I received *ET*10 on the 17 July, almost two months after the closing date for crossword entries. Five months from UK is normal, although it does take only six days by air.

I was very interested in Fraida Dubin's article on answering

machines. I've never experienced one. I still consider the telephone a good servant struggling to be master. So often at work it is an interruption. I have a very good example. Once I went to see a business-man in his office to ask permission for our department to drill on a property owned by his company. The explanation would be easier in person; besides, I thought it would be polite. This business took only five minutes – explanation and granting of permission. I was in his office for 25 minutes, thanks to about four telephone calls. It always annoys me, too, when I have a visitor and our talk is interrupted by the telephone. A case for an answering machine?

Dr Dubin says in one place, 'My data confirms this as the number of null calls . . . on the machine I have monitored have decreased over the years.' My comment is – if it have, I suppose they does.

Peter Rodda,
Mineral Resources Division,
Suva, Fiji

Worth emulating?

Write you (Comment, *ET* No 11, July 1987): 'Writes Paul Thompson of Shrewsbury, England: 'Magazines . . . (etc.)'. Think I: 'Is Dr McArthur an influential, knowledgeable person! Emulate him shall I!' Quoth my wife: 'Prithee no, sirrah! Desist!' Yet understands she my quandary. You too do?

David Hohnen, Copenhagen,
Denmark

Replies the Editor: The last person I recall using this particular transpositional style was the hermit Yoda, in *The Return of the Jedi* – but the force was with *him*! My own usage, for good or ill, is mundane journalese. David Hohnen's letter arrived in the mail alongside that week's *Time*

and *Newsweek*. A quick scan through these produced:

- conventionally placed, but with a traditionally inverted verb/subject style: '“No vision, no specialty store,” says Banana Republic's co-founder, Mel Ziegler.' (*Newsweek*, 28 Sep 87, p. 46)

- verb/subject construction placed first: 'Says his sister Maryanne Trump-Barry, a federal district judge in New Jersey: “Success brings success . . .”' (p. 37)

- 'Says Karen Monaco, a program manager at the American Lung Association: “Anything that you light up and inhale . . .”' (*Time*, same date, p. 41)

- 'Says Togo's Finance Minister Komlan Alipui: “STS is an example . . .”' (p. 42)

- 'Says Dr. Mark Siegler, director of the University of Chicago's Center for Clinical Medical Ethics: “Inappropriate guarantees . . .”' (p. 44)

These excerpts were embedded in paragraphs, whereas my verb/subject construction came right at the start of a paragraph at the beginning of an editorial. That of course highlighted it, and may have led to a certain unease. Notes *English Today's* Consulting Editor, David Crystal: It should be noted that this kind of construction is highly restricted in its use in present-day English. Only verbs of verbal expression are affected, such as 'say', 'laugh', 'growl', 'opine', and then usually only in the simple past tense. It is thus a stylistically-motivated idiomatic construction, and doesn't reflect a productive rule in the language as a whole. We cannot say '*Jumped Dr Smith . . .', '*Slept the man', and so on. What is interesting is whether the limits of this rule are shifting

at all. David Hohnen's letter contains some examples that make their humorous effect because they are closely related to verbal expression – 'think', 'emulate', 'understand'. They are not as clearly unacceptable as the cases of 'jump', etc. above.

Yodaspeak was distinctive partly because it didn't restrict itself to this rule. But a greater measure of its distinctiveness was the way it transposed syntactic objects and complements to initial position in sentences: 'Sick I've become', 'Your father he is'. Incidentally, the rarity of this kind of construction isn't restricted to English. Hardly any of the languages of the world go in for an Object-Subject-Verb order of elements. Just a few have been found, in the Amazonian region.

More head-butting

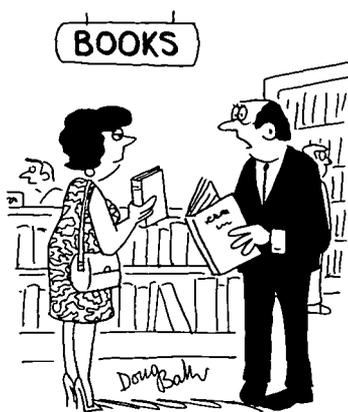
Your correspondent Michael Harmer (*ET*10, April 1987) might be interested to know that 'head-butt' has been around for a good many years as part of the lexicon of professional wrestling. (I seem to remember that Mr Johnny Kwango was a notable exponent of the manoeuvre in Britain in the 1960s.) Whether this suffices to make the word 'respectable' is, of course, another matter.

Dr Steven Botterill,
Department of Italian,
University of California,
Berkeley, USA

Furnishing evidence of confusion

Do you have the same reaction I do on receiving a written communication from a piece of furniture?

Imagine you had a friend named Jim Jones. You receive an informal, unsigned, handwritten note on which is printed 'From the desk of Jim Jones'. The note begins, 'Dear Tom, as you know, I am the Chair of our committee'.



"This book entitled 'Perfect Grammar' – they've revised it."

What salutation do you use in your reply? 'Dear Jim' is obviously impossible. 'Dear Desk'? 'Dear Chair'?

We are dealing here, I believe, with an indirect out-growth of the feminists' abhorrence of 'sexist' words. Caught on the trilemma of Chairman versus Chairwoman versus Chairperson, they cop out by turning the presiding officer into a chair. From there, it is but a short step to turning a noun, *chair*, into a transitive verb, so that our committees are now chaired rather than headed, and our meetings are now chaired rather than presided over.

Albert Kreindler,
Riverdale,
Bronx, New York, USA

A linguistic spoof?

Could you please resolve the dispute that has arisen between my wife and myself over the letter in *ET*10 from Prof Dr Charles-James N Bailey (no less). I maintain that it is a spoof on linguisticians who devise contorted hypotheses to explain usages which really have a very simple explanation namely that the persons guilty of them cannot speak or write English correctly. My wife, on the other hand thinks the letter – and therefore

its author – is perfectly serious. Which of us is right? If my wife, what on earth is Herr Professor Bailey on about?

Steven S Cooper,
Flueh, Switzerland

Turbulent trash

In *ET*11, Vernon Noble's letter bemoans the use of 'rubbish' as a verb in the UK. Here in the United States, the word 'trash' is becoming widely used in the same manner, as in, 'The burglars trashed out my bookshelves last night.' Note the fact that 'trash' and 'trash out' are synonymous in this usage. The purist in me screams in agony, but since English is probably the most living of any living language, isn't it exciting watching that turbulent life?

Brian Ward,
Albuquerque,
New Mexico, USA

Singularity

I enjoyed D Crystal's 'Safety in numbers?' (*ET* April, 1987:41). It may be of some interest to note that most of the points Crystal makes concerning *there's* and *there was* are also independently made by me in 'Even dialectologists get the blues' (*Papiere zur Linguistik* 35:7, 37 [1986]) and 'Marginalia on singulars and plurals in English' (*Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 12:10 [1987]). I also make mention of North American and British *How's tricks?* The explanations offered by Crystal and me are similar. The second of the articles just cited also refers to the singular status of measurements, but fails (as I believe Crystal also does) to distinguish between *five pounds IS a lot* and *the FIRST five pounds ARE the most important*.

Universitätsprofessor Dr Dr
Charles-James N Bailey,
Technische Universität Berlin,
Institut für Linguistik

May day

Thanks to S. F. Whitaker (*ET11*, pp. 35–6) for putting up the storm signals about *may have* and *might have*, possibility and counterfactuality. Alas, what can we do when the usage is destined to be part of the king's own English? Here is Prince Charles in 1981, commenting on his visit to Washington during the Nixon administration: 'At that time they were in the business of trying to marry me off to Miss Tricia Nixon. That, as you see, didn't work. It may have been a jolly good thing if I had. It may have improved the trans-Atlantic Alliance. We shall never know.' (Times Tribune news service)

When did this get started? Philip Howard took it up in *Verbatim* (Autumn 1981), with speculations on what caused the confusion (he attributed it to the virtual interchangeability of *may* and *might* in the present tense), but did not date his citations. My earliest is 1968, several passages from William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (London: Cox and Wyman Panther Book), which are especially interesting because Styron seems to have tried hard to reproduce the formal written style of the 1830's and yet fell into this obvious (?) anachronism. An instance (p. 193): 'I am in no way blaming you for lacking the presence of mind to come to me earlier when I may have been able to do something about it.' Styron of course was an American, born in 1925, which raises the possibility that the mixup started over here.

My other citations are from 1970 on. Underscoring what Whitaker says about the potential seriousness of competition between *may* and *might* I cite these:

'My own guess is that many of those who said that they would shoot unarmed civilians under orders would not have done what Calley did at My Lai (although they may have done what the enlisted men under Calley did).' (1972)

Reason enough

"*The Undistributed Middle* is a fallacy in Logic. The middle must be distributed at least once in the premises."

– from *Essentials of Logic* by Prof. R. W. Sellers.

We rock away two weeks
with pay,
And yawn, with thumbs
a-twiddle,
On staid verandahs, where
we park
Our undistributed
middles

We chat with plump old
couples
And ruefully agree
That an undistributed
middle
Is indeed a fallacy.

Alma Denny,
New York

'It was "fortunate" that they did not succeed [in restarting the reactor] since the salty water may have cracked the reactor vessel. This could have led to a catastrophic release of radioactivity into the New York air.' (1981)

And herewith reports of unconfirmed death, amnesia, and resurrection:

'Without the operation the boy may have died.' (1973)

'If I'd known better I may have gone to UCLA.' (1979)

'Quick action may have saved the lives of the pair aboard the plane. They lived for a day or two after the May 23 crash.' (1977)

A 1970 letter from Richard Nixon supports Howard's contention that the confusion may stem from the present tense: 'I hope that the great insights of social anthropology that you have brought to your studies might serve in this moment to help you understand this tragedy.' One feels that he is hoarding his sympathies.

More than *can*, *may*, and *might*

is involved in the change that, according to Whitaker, Michael Swan predicted. The entire modal system is affected. The latest *Heritage* poll worries about *need* and *dare*. A *would* in a conditional or after *wish* no longer need imply willingness: 'I wish you wouldn't have to leave' (1964). The speaker would probably have felt that a *didn't* here would refer to past time, and that is another result of the push-chain – simple past replaces past perfect as a counterfactual in past time: 'who knows what this broadcast might have been if the CIA didn't stonewall it' (1975).

I have no proof, but I suspect that with the support of *well*, *may* may not yet have gone bankrupt: 'Without the operation the boy may well have died' I suspect for most is still unambiguously 'Since the boy did not have the operation, for all we know he died.'

Might, for today's speaker and writer, appears too contingent, too uncertain: we want a brighter look even to our counterfactuals, and that can be supplied by a present *may* or an intensifier *well*. If even this rescue fails, *mayday*, *mayday*.

Professor Dwight Bolinger,
Palo Alto, California, USA

A place for parsing

I applaud nearly the whole of Godfrey Talbot's sensible and spirited article 'Protecting the Queen's English' (*ET11*), but I must spring to the defence of parsing, which he a little 'shies from'.

Mr Talbot says that he has had to explain the meaning of the word 'parsing' to teachers: however, he 'strongly believes in sentence-analysis'. I must point out that he could easily have referred the teachers to any English dictionary – even the most recent and the least expensive – for the meaning of parsing, whereas no dictionary that I have found gives a definition of

'sentence-analysis'. In consequence, I am not at all clear what 'sentence-analysis' comprehends, whereas 'parsing' admits of no doubt. The simplest and best definition of it, to my mind, is in *Chambers' Essential English Dictionary*, edited by A. M. Macdonald (Pan Reference books paperback), which gives: 'parse, *v. t.* to name the parts of speech of (words in a sentence) and say how the words are connected with each other'. I do not see how 'sentence-analysis' could do more, nor, for that matter, how it could be of any use if it did less.

You cannot explain to a child why 'they was' is grammatically incorrect unless he or she knows that the word 'they' is a plural pronoun and 'was' a singular verb. It is no more offensive to explain the impersonal rules of grammar than it is to explain the impersonal rules of mathematics or any other science. Indeed, without a command of the rules of grammar neither the rules of mathematics nor the rules of any other science *can* be explained effectively. Learning grammar is a valuable training in abstract thought: those who have no respect for grammar are, in the last analysis, hostile to impersonal reasoning and clear thought.

June Bassett,
Arundel, West Sussex, England

He may not have protected the language

In his article 'Might may be right' (*ET*11) Sidney Whitaker condemns the use of *may have* in place of *might have* in such cases as 'Even if things had not gone awry, it may not have provided much insurance'. I agree with him that *may* sounds odd here since it is clear that things did go awry and the question whether or not insurance was provided did not arise. I should like, however, to make three points.

● The first concerns the two headlines quoted: POLICE 'MAY HAVE SAVED POPE'S LIFE', and DRUGS MAY HAVE KEPT BABY ALIVE. Mr Whitaker comments: 'Is it conceivable that the newspapers were deliberately sowing doubt as to whether the pope and the baby were still alive?' This puzzles me. I would have expected him to argue rather that the choice of *may* implies that both *are* still alive, whereas *might* would have implied that they were not. He then tells us that the baby did actually die. If so, then only this second headline and not the first one illustrates his point about *may* being misleading. (Knowing that the baby was dead, I would interpret *may* as implying that it was perhaps only the drugs that kept it alive previously.)

● My second point is a more general one. If it is the case that *may* is beginning to encroach in this way on the legitimate territory of *might* (and the same phenomenon has been noticed in America by Dwight Bolinger), who are we to protest? Who is likely to take any notice of old fellows like Mr Whitaker and myself? Serious foreign students will certainly be interested since they are keen to use English 'correctly'. But native speakers? Only a tiny minority. And of that tiny minority only those infinitesimal few who actually hesitate themselves between *may* and *might* in such cases are likely to be influenced by us in any way whatever. The huge majority of native speakers will continue to follow their own intuitions as they have always done, and it is they in the long run who will decide what is current English and what is not.

● This brings me to my third and final point. What is the function of prescriptive grammarians? If they have any function at all it is merely to try to reflect the general judgment of educated native speakers on what is formal, informal, old-fashioned, dialectal, slang, sub-

standard, obscene, and so on, while recognizing that English, like every other living language, is constantly developing, and that any such judgment must be subject to periodic revision. Even Vaugelas, the 17th-century French grammarian ridiculed by Molière, recognised that his judgments might be out of date in twenty-five to thirty years. The *main* job of the grammarian is simply to observe, report, and formulate rules to cover the language actually in use. For example, in order to cover the use of *may* in such cases as 'Even if things had not gone awry, it *may/might* not have provided much insurance', one could explain that whereas *might* implies 'this *would* possibly have been the case', *may* implies 'it is possibly the case that this would have happened', and is therefore more vivid.

These remarks have been prompted mainly by Sidney Whitaker's thoughtful article: how much more obviously do they apply to Godfrey Talbot's self-indulgent piece 'Protecting the Queen's English' in the same issue! I applaud your decision, Sir, to allow space for this entertaining firework, in the hope that it will be obvious to most of your readers how woolly-minded it really is. It will no doubt comfort the equally woolly-minded, but the rest of us will easily see through its narrowness and pomposity and recognize how untenable is its main thesis. No one can 'protect' a language.

Philip Tregidgo,
Petersfield, Hampshire,
England.

Ultimately totalitarian

When Paul Christophersen (*ET* July 1987) complains of being described as a fascist by "a language teacher" (read 'loony lefty descriptivist?'), I find it rather hard to sympathise. One scarcely needs to be a Trotskyist

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L'ACADEMIE DES ENFANTS



LISTE DES MOTS PRIMÉS PAR L'ACADÉMIE DES ENFANTS

To the barricades

I enclose a sample of French 'de-anglification' from *Le Français dans le Monde*, Jan 87, which eloquently demonstrates children's ingenuity in creating new words, but also the atavistic attitude of the French authorities towards language in general – the idea of awarding children *swords* for purging their language of foreign elements seems positively sinister. At its most harmless, it reminds one of the efforts of William Barnes, described in *ET10* – perhaps it'll be about as successful in the long run. It's interesting to see how much longer the new French coinages are in general than the English ones – the 34 English words have altogether 67 syllables, the 34 French ones (not counting alternatives) have 95, or almost a third as many again. Since prizes were awarded for two alternative translations of 'walkman' (*flanophone* and

AUTOMAISON
BAGUISSON
BERCEUR
BRAISIER
CHANSONNEUR
FLANOPHONE
GRILLOTIN
MACHOUILLON
MINIFROC
MOUSLAIT
RADIOPHONE
RESTAPOUCE
SAUCIPAIN
SOUFLETTE
VOLANT-VOLE

camping-car
sandwich
rocking-chair
barbecue
juke-box
walkman
toast
chewing-gum
short
milk-shake
walkman
fast-food
hot-dog
pop-corn
badminton

Anne Freyburger (5 ans 1/2)
Sébastien Radic (8 ans)
Carole Flanders
Françoise David (12 ans)
Antoine Vaché (9 ans)
Ophélie Bruneau (7 ans)
Wilfried Pagan (11 ans)
Sébastien Robin (8 ans)
Gilles Paret (12 ans)
Cécile Moyons (8 ans)
Christophe Guillot (7 ans)
Sandrine Batifoulrier (11 ans)
Morgane Dietrich (6 ans)
Floriane Freville (8 ans)
Sybille Ricard

radiophone), one presumes that the Academy would have to make an official ruling on which one should become part of French law. The whole exercise seems counterproductive – first, the sudden profusion of new French words is surely less conducive to good communication than the existence of established English ones, and secondly it all demonstrates the attractiveness of the English words

to French speakers – they appear to have been known and understood by quite young children (or if not, then the competition may well have had the effect of imprinting them indelibly on the children's memory). One can't help feeling the French have gone seriously wrong somewhere.

Graham Pascoe,
Ottenhofen, West Germany

to feel that some of the ideas promulgated in his article are indeed potentially fascistic in their implications.

Some terms need to be defined. Professor Christophersen fails to make explicit the important distinction (see e.g. Quirk et al 1972) between standard English as a *dialect* of which there are many varieties, as in 'standard Edinburgh', 'standard West Indian' etc. and RP as one of a multitude of *accents*, each of which is characterised principally by its phonological, phonetic and prosodic features. However, despite his confusing use of the word 'standard' he does seem to consider RP to be an accent and it is precisely this which is most worrying. His arguments are not thus a contribution to the ongoing debate about the status of dialects which are distinct from standard English (such as, for example, Anglo-Jamaican patois or Black Vernacular English). Rather he is advocating the supremacy in public life of a particular accent, a position rarely encountered in recent years. Indeed, the fact that he laments the increasing use of /ɒ/ over /ʌ/ in words such as 'one' and 'nothing' suggests that the 'standard' he would like to see established is not that of the now very common speech of 'demotic' RP (i.e. RP except for the odd 'deviant' sound, as in the case of some newscasters) but instead that of pure, unadulterated 'ur-RP' (as it were).

Having indicated what I understand the term RP to mean in this context, I would like to make three points concerning Professor Christophersen's arguments. First of all, RP has not 'ceased to be neutral' in recent years; it was never neutral in the first place. BBC announcers used all to speak RP not because of an interest in neutrality, but because RP was seen to be the prestigious preserve of the social elite of British society and as such the only accent suitable for the dissemination of news in the



"If that is correct English grammar I are baffled."

national spoken media. The statement that the accent 'had a practical value in affirming the nation's cohesion' is simplistic and certainly arguable. RP has always had powerful social connotations.

Secondly, the suggestion that RP could complement standard written English makes little sense. There is indeed a 'common core' of written English (see again Quirk et al 1972), but beyond that features such as punctuation and spelling, and to an extent lexis and syntax, vary considerably. And in general this does not impede comprehension any more than do the different accents which exist among speakers of standard English! RP is not necessary for mutual intelligibility.

Finally, the fact that most pupils at public schools enter them at the age of 13 and leave speaking RP is adduced as evidence to support the idea that 'where there is the will there is no age limit'. The professor appears to forget that the majority of those educated at public schools begin to speak RP at the age of one and a half or two. More importantly, he claims that a 'linguistic standard', presumably RP, 'indicates willingness to accept a norm that transcends the boundaries of one's local community'. The implications of this

seemingly bland statement are truly alarming. In order to learn to use RP in public life, the unlucky 96% would have to master the ability to eradicate at will all traces of their regional background from their speech; this would amount to an invasion of an important aspect of the individual's identity by social forces, and quite unnecessarily. It is perhaps preferable not even to try and imagine a situation today in which RP were demanded and rewarded as the norm in schools.

Professor Christophersen is surely wrong. The post-war decline in the status of RP was inextricably linked with a movement in society towards greater equality and away from hereditary privilege and any attempt to artificially resuscitate RP would be superfluous, painful and ultimately totalitarian.

David Atkinson,
The British Institute,
Palma de Mallorca, Spain

The age of living literatures

Mr Ó Coileáin's Hibernian enthusiasm for Irish literature has prompted him to exaggerate both the antiquity and the comparative age of Irish literature in *ET11*. It is not two millennia old. Its first writer, Dallan Forgaill, flourished about 600 and his only work, the *Amra Choluim Chille*, was written shortly after St Columba's death in June 597.

His contention that, because Irish is older than English in respect of literature, it has a better chance of survival than English is utter rubbish. Egyptian died out in the 17th century after a literary history of well nigh 4,000 years whilst Aramaic, the language of our Lord, became extinct about 1950 after a literary tradition exceeding 2,500 years. English is not 1,500 years younger than Irish, but only about half a century younger! Its

Just a joke, eh?

Hi just received my first copy of *ET*.(10) and much enjoyed it. First as I read and in my recent viewing of 'the Story of English' a recent series on how it took form and since fan out to all over the Globe with each locale adopting and adapting to a set of native Ideals Which may well be the dawn of some day forming and evolving into another body of languages all stemming from an English which on the other hand becomes formally frozen as Latin once was.

Still I am a wonder at when we will stop in consideration of those who have great difficulty with any written words. Like I Wonder when we will come to see it as we have done lefthandedness or colour blindness – and make allowances and through the use of videos and tapes has us graduate beyond the need to read and write. Certainly – we do not expect all people to be musically inclined or mechanically able – how then is it our right to expect we can all read – and make those who cannot hide in shame instead of our mind our manners and ever come to the aid and find ways to bypass their handy caps. The world does not end like you make out because I

have different skills than you. Come – let the deaf work in the noisy places, the blind where their fingers and ears Can tap and tune into skills and the sound of our being has us find ways to circumvent the need to read. Bards reciting poetry from memory – Oral traditions we'd all do well to open our minds to.

Let us be oPen to the uSage that Pleasure our world with Parle A meant airy reforms. My own miss-taken opportunity arises from a pick up on the Rivers of Babbble on – the incongruity of using the word Mean to express our likes. Riddle the language with 'musts' shoulds – have to's – orders – all of which tend to have us shrink back from want to do's which'd give birth to our questation of earth and Would have us grace and tactfully state our wishes, wants and like to do's. Like stop for a moment and toy with the word response ability like don't it differ from responsibility.

In being the ornery cuss I am in my enJoycean world. On reading Eoghan MacCormaic's letter, I penned him a note. He penned back, stating I have an advantage as he hadn't seen the article [A copy of *ET*10 had long since been mailed to him. *Ed*]. Which he feels strange – as his letter to

ET was let out, but the Published version not let back in. His letter I note (how can I miss) is stamped by a letter censor. What a gross invasion of privacy. Guess freedom of speech hasn't happened there yet. But then, where has it. Like unless one publishes their own work, it usually stops at the Editors desk – if it gets that far. Which obviously has on yours. Sure wish I could read his Irish though. Maybe some day. Guess I need me a Celtic and Gaelic dictionary as well as my French, Spanish, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese and Latin ones. Plus Naturally My Ran Dumb House Bibel (is that with a y) Sorry – I play with language so much I forget which is proper. Though I'll admit, at never having been schooled in English, I still run up (oft after I've used it many a time) against words which I've been spelling wrong all along. But then, who truly has the authority – to state as to whether – this or that is rite opps right. I by the way – am officially and functionally illiterate – like I couldn't fill a resume out if I wanted to.

Miss Amum, alias Joke,
short for Johanna Kostelyk,
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

literature is generally regarded by the most competent authorities as having commenced about 650, though a fifty years difference on either side is possible. This means it could be as old as Irish!

Irish literature is not the oldest living European literature, but the third oldest. Its older sisters are Greek, which commenced with Homer about 800–750 BC, and Welsh, which commenced with Taliesin whose floruit was c. AD 550, some fifty years

before Irish. If we look beyond Europe, there are of course older literatures, such as Hebrew and Chinese. I am leaving oral tradition out of the discussion, as it is impossible to prove no matter what unreasonable sentimentalists may contend. A language's age is not reckoned as being older than writing in that language. No non-literary Irish writing antedates Dallan Forgaill.

Gordon Palit, Birmingham,
England

Spelling and continuity

An 'Open' Letter to *English Today*, the Queen's English Society, and the Simplified Spelling Society.

The Problem English spelling is chaotic and 'un-phonetic' because the language has so many words of Latin and Old French origin and because quite a number of these, once modified by time, underwent a reversion

to their Latin forms; also, because our Great Vowel Shift seems to have caught orthographers on the hop in Britain. So our spelling, despite some false etymologies, is quasi-etymological, and thus has advantages to offset its grave disadvantages. A really radical reform into 'morpho-phonemic' or phonemic spelling would cut us off from our past, be incredibly expensive for publications, and blind us to both diachronic and synchronic relations with other languages, blacking out, for one thing, the classical sources of our meanings: it would turn us into relationless barbarians. Moreover, it would freeze the language in a particular form in space, time and social convention, neglecting the world diversity of its dialects and the whole of its future evolution.

Possible Compromise Solution I suggest that during (and only during) a certain stage in the learning of English both as one's own language and as a secondary one, all words be written and printed in simultaneous dual-text form: one form as now, the other in an agreed 'morpho-phonemic' convention. I am not myself competent to say exactly at what stage (and for how long) this duality should be adopted; nor to settle the level of precision or fix the symbolic conventions of the morphophonemic versions; however, these must be easy to master and not unsightly. But the principle is that learners of all kinds be taught, both our normal orthography, and a version which represents the received standard in a given world-region, while being flexible enough to accommodate some local accents.

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.

Example In Britain, 'The crowd paraded past the wheezing motor with anger and scorn' might (let us suppose) appear also as 'Dhe kraud pœreidid past dhə hwiyzing moutər with anggər and skorn'; and this, while it would direct foreigners and native children towards today's Received Standard, would give some freedom to Northerners and North Americans to say 'p-ass-t', Southerners to say 'paast', Scots and Americans to unvoice the w of 'wheezing' and, with West Country people, etc., to utter an r-sound in 'motor', ('anger') and 'scorn'; Scots to give tense, pure vowels to the 'long' ones in 'paraded', 'wheezing' and 'motor', Midlanders and others to say 'craywd', perighdud', 'weyzin', 'mouta'; and so on; and everyone to reduce the vowel of 'and' to a murmur or even to replace it with a vocalic n. Whether different sets of conventions would be needed for North America, Africa, Australasia, etc., I leave undecided. But for each world region and each age (every so many generations) a two-way 'dictionary', without definitions or etymologies, etc., should be published or at least retrievable by computer.

David I Masson,
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More About Anglo-

First, let me thank Eoghan MacCormaic and Pdraig O'Conchuir for their interest in my introductory (and necessarily generalised) article on the contribution of Anglo-Irish writing to English literature as a whole. There are a few points I would like to add to the general discussion of the topic and I only summarise them here.

● The hybrid is always excluded from any concept of 'pure' National writing. Surely the question of the *material* as opposed to the linguistic or cultural authenticity must be a

factor to be settled. I would argue that both style and material, life-experience and cultural perspective give all the Anglo-writers much of their individuality. Style is difference. It is unfortunate however, that such a definition has always had a sentimental element in its literary expression. Writers *will* use stereotypes and simplify complex issues for the sake of narrative and effect.

● Saunders Lewis in Wales dismissed the notion of 'Anglo-Welsh' literature and yet numerous writers whose work appears in *The Anglo-Welsh Review* and in *Planet* write about Welsh experience and history with 'inside knowledge' so to speak, despite their inability to write in Welsh. I spent three years in Wales but my efforts to write about the Welsh people or regions would always be a secondary view to any Anglo-Welsh one. I could be factual but not instinctive.

● I would contend that a comparison with dialect writing is helpful here also. Consider the writers of Yorkshire dialect poetry and prose: Fred Brown, John Hartley, D. U. Ratcliffe etc. Their work is almost entirely in the dialect and therefore they consciously limited their readership in order to be true to a supposedly valid and authentic literary medium. Do we then exclude, for instance Emily Bronte from the ranks of 'True Yorkshire Writers' because she chose to write her novel in 99% Standard English? Do we laugh at Joseph as a Cardboard Stereotype Tyke in the same way that we dismiss the Stage Irishman or the Crafty Welshman? The aspects of nationalism with regard to literature are as narrow as this artificial Localism with regard to literature and tend to be well-intentioned but detrimental to the corpus of a creative artist's work. The outlook created in such critical perspectives often involves a defensive and distorted criterion of excel-

lence or of worth, 'puffing' literary reputations out of all fair proportion.

● Finally, is it *such* a problem that there are Irish or Welsh or Scottish writers whose work is best classified as work that is 'Anglo-' literature? One thinks of, say, J. G. Farrell's outstanding novel, *The Siege of Krishnapur*: in no sense could this be labelled 'Anglo-Irish' writing simply because of the writer's nationality. However, who would deny that there are identifiable Anglo-Irish qualities of outlook, style and intention in, say, *Dubliners*? The 'Anglo' prefix began as a term that differentiated an identifiable trend or group but implied a commonly regarded material and experi-

ence. Certainly, an English critic derives certain insights and delights from acquiring a reading knowledge of Welsh or Irish, and this will aid his evaluation of original works, but if he chooses to write in Welsh or Irish or even poeticise a vaguely 'Celtic' myth, then our literary problems begin, and I agree that much harm has been done by the Celtic myth-makers, but surely, we must not ignore the profound, highly individual and often universally important writing that has come from Irish, Welsh and Scottish writers who have not chosen, or not been able to write in their mother-tongue. Perhaps Pearse would have been another Yeats or Kavanagh, or perhaps some young Welsh poet writing now may be the next Dylan Thomas. What we need is a proper critical approach to a differentiated body of writing within English literature, or to forget the Anglo-entirely. The Professors will no doubt sort it all out in time.

Dr Stephen Wade,
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English, England, Europe and the World

I take issue with the statement in 'The English languages?' (*ET*11, July 87) that the roots of English are in an island off the west coast of Europe. English was imposed upon the British people, as it was later imposed upon the Irish people, and can hardly be said to have its roots here. The roots of English were actually in continental Europe; one great tap-root goes back to Angeln in Schleswig, Northern Germany, and the other to Rome.

Anyone who cares for the future of English must be concerned that it does not remain overly identified with England; the idea that English is of England is a belief which has outlived its usefulness. The language has always been mixed. Much of this mixing may have been done in England, but the ingredients came from Germany and France, from Scandinavia, and from Greece and Rome; increasingly nowadays the mixture is being made beyond these shores. In addition, although it is a less serious matter, we do not want people going away with the idea that standard English is based on a southern dialect in England, when it actually came from a midland dialect, and Northumbrian English was long established outside England, in Scotland.

In the past, languages were associated with nations. However, languages are not units; they tend not to recognize territorial boundaries – they interpenetrate. Although English combines Germanic and French dialects and is therefore thought to be 'newer' by most people, should we regard French and German as dialects that are, as it were, bridged by English? We are talking of a phenomenon of the world in which geography has been confounded. Ideas like English being 'of England' and those which follow from them (e.g., 'we' should be proud of 'our' English language) are incomprehensible in a world of jet travel and global communications.

Robert Craig,
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England

Help wanted with neat, nice and nasty words

I would very much like to know if any *ET* readers have come across any surveys of:

- people's favourite words or expressions (e.g. *summer afternoon*)
- words that 'sound nice' (e.g. perhaps *smuggle*)
- words that 'sound horrible' (e.g. perhaps *Neasden*)

If you have, could you write direct to: Martin Manser, Reference Book Editor, 102 Northern Road, Aylesbury, Bucks, HP19 3QY, England.