

## Bring back the missing sections

I'm one of the ones who read your editorial in the April issue but was too lazy to send you a response. Your comment in July, particularly the quote from Karen Kreibohm, prompts me to add my voice to hers to say how much I miss the *Kaleidoscope* and *Post & Mail* sections.

I read the journal for several reasons: as a linguist and a native speaker of English, I'm interested in learning more in what's happening with the language; as one with responsibility to assist publishing several different versions of the Bible in English (among many other languages) for distribution in all corners of the world, I find this an invaluable source of information; as a frequent traveller, I find it fun to compare the articles with my own experiences. But I always found that there was as much relevant and interesting material in those two now missing sections as there was in the articles. So I do miss them.

I'm with Ms Kreibohm: 'Fewer and/or shorter articles and more reader-friendly layout.'

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## Signs

The April 97 issue struck me as a particularly good edition of *ET*. I enjoyed all of the contributions, but was most interested in the ones on Indian Pidgin English and on English in street signs. Naturally enough, as I have just arrived in Japan where many of the phenomena noted in the article are prominent. The use of English for adding a certain cachet is seen everywhere here. Occasionally, there are somewhat surprising results. One cafe near my flat is called "A Rose" and has the slogan, "with a rose in your side" prominently displayed. I've

heard of a thorn in your side! One girl was wearing a teshirt with the words "I really need to go!" on it. I felt like directing her to the nearest public conveniences. And finally there is a (rather respectable looking) block of flats nearby called (I think) "A moral", but the rather ambiguous spacing makes it look like "Amoral". Another block is called "New Alone" for reasons I cannot explain. It does not seem a particularly welcoming name!

On the positive side, one reason for the use of English in signs not mentioned in the article was courteous helpfulness (for which the Japanese are so well known). Many road signs here in Nagoya as well as signs on public transport and in gardens and places of special interest are in English (in addition to the well known services offered by Information Offices and the Japan Travel Bureau). Many cash dispensers have "English guidance". There are even English language voice recordings on the subway trains and some buses. No doubt, they are for the benefit of the relatively small numbers of foreigners (especially outside the town centre) visiting, or living in, Nagoya and district and they are greatly appreciated.

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## Say 'Trentatré'!

I am terribly intrigued with the fact that Italian doctors have their patients say 'trentatré' repeatedly, in order to obtain empirical diagnostic basic signs of some trouble (e.g. bronchitis, etc) or other; whilst their English (or American) colleagues – given the very same circumstances – have them say 'ninety-nine'.

I should feel obliged to honour you with any amount of money

which the research of scientific (both phonological and medical) material(s) may entail. May I stress the word 'scientific'.

The problem stays put in complete darkness; at least for me. I am a teacher of English language and literature. Graduated from Nottingham and Leeds universities (Contemporary English Literature, and Linguistics) aged 65.

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## Bulley: Not a serious contribution

I am rather surprised that *ET* should publish Michael Bulley's 'A wild gene chase'. It is a rather misguided article, characterized both by ignorance and by prejudice against scientific investigation and explanation (in the widest sense of the term 'scientific'). For a journal of *ET*'s standard to accept this seems to me like *Nature* accepting an article supporting Creationism.

Most of the paper is concerned with Chomsky's 'fundamental concept of Universal Grammar as a property of the human mind, consisting of the universal principles of language'. Now I myself have never been persuaded by Chomsky's arguments, and have considerable sympathy with Bulley's remarks that 'Grammar is not a real thing; it does not exist in language; it does not shape language in any way at all. It is just a way of talking about it from a particular standpoint'. Yet I am dismayed by the article, for it makes no real contribution to the debate, and would (quite deservedly) be dismissed out of hand by Chomsky and his supporters as not worthy of rebuttal, and perhaps it might even be used as evidence of the wilful refusal of their opponents to understand their ideas and to treat them seriously.

Bulley uses two quotations, which, admittedly, would be

meaningless to anyone who read none of the relevant literature, and the main line of argument seems to be 'Look at this – it is all very abstruse and complicated, so it cannot possibly account for the way we speak'. So he tells readers not to worry about 'this sort of thing', appeals to their instincts, invites them to consider whether or not it is 'complete drivell' and says that those instincts are correct in holding that 'this sort of analysis cannot possibly have anything to do with a toddler standing with a drooping sock and earth-stained fingers in the middle of the kitchen trying to work out what "Give the worms to Daddy" might mean'. This is not a serious contribution to the debate. It is the kind of deliberately coloured language that one expects from the tabloid newspapers, when they are peddling some potentially popular view against all the evidence. It is on a level too with arguments of the Flat Earth Society – 'Of course the earth is flat: your instincts tell you that, and anyway you can see it with your own eyes'.

Why does he conclude that these quotations can have nothing to do with a toddler trying to understand speech? We are, I suppose, intended to think what is proposed by Chomsky and his associates is far too abstruse and complicated for the obviously (??) simple (??) facts of speech. Yet it should be obvious that whatever turns out to be the correct account of the way we produce and understand speech, it *will be* immensely complicated, involving incredibly complex brain operations, almost certainly far more complex than anything proposed by the Chomskyans.

Consider what happens with sight. The child's brain has suc-

ceeded in interpreting a random set of light waves into a picture of a three dimensional world, and can cope with different lighting conditions etc., *a year or so before* he/she learns to speak. It is a reasonable assumption the brain functions for speech are quite as complex as those for sight.

Or consider the fact that no computer program has come near to managing speech with any degree of efficiency (and Bulley thinks no computer ever will – *ET20*). Yet there would be little difficulty in computerizing a Chomskyan account. If a computer can handle Chomsky's grammar, surely the brain could.

More significantly, perhaps, does Bulley think that physics, (or chemistry or any other natural science) is equally nonsense because of the apparently abstruse formulations involved, or because our instincts tell us the world is not 'like that' – 'Einstein must have been wrong – the theory of relativity doesn't make sense'?

Indeed, reading on, I can see that Bulley is primarily motivated by antagonism towards science, or any kind of systematic approach. He objects to the terms 'competence', 'grammaticality' and 'acceptability' being used in a technical sense, 'twisted away from everyday use' (though I wonder if the last two really do have an everyday use!). Yet this is a characteristic of all science – 'mass' in physics and 'cell' in biology do not have the meanings they have in everyday speech. The same is true of many technical terms. For ease of exposition familiar terms are chosen, but they are quite deliberately given precise meanings to avoid the ambiguities and vagueness of ordinary speech.

However, as the title shows, the essential aim of this paper is to reject the view that there is anything like a 'language gene'. Now, if the geneticists are right in believing that physical characteristics and behaviour are to some degree dependent on genes, I can see no reason to doubt that

language too is dependent on genes, and I suspect that it will not be long before it is shown that, as defective genes can cause illnesses such as spina bifida, so defective genes will be shown to be responsible for language disorders. I agree with Bulley in not believing that genes will contain a Chomskyan Universal Grammar, but it does not follow that 'biologists should be dissuaded from looking for a language gene'.

How far Bulley has failed to understand Chomsky is apparent in the last paragraph but one, where he reminisces that he once understood a child's utterance 'because of who I was and where I was and not because I had some language genes inside me. Moreover, children's linguistic progress has always seemed to me to be consistent with their social and intellectual development and there is no need to think it is in the grip of some subconscious genetic determinant'. I do not think Chomsky would disagree, and, indeed, the second excerpt quoted by Bulley was intended (in admittedly pretentious formalization) to deal with the problem of speech acquisition. It should be obvious to anyone that Chomsky has never claimed that language (together with its acquisition) is simply and totally determined genetically, for otherwise all languages would be the same.

Reading this article, I am reminded of a professor in Reading, now dead, who used to get very cross in Faculty meetings when computers were mentioned – 'What is all this nonsense about hardware and software?'. He was one who told me that he had voted against setting up the Department of Linguistic Science, because language couldn't (or shouldn't?) be subjected to 'scientific' investigation.

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(Further response to Bulley's article in the next issue.)

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