

Bouquet

Many thanks for all the interest and enjoyment that *ET* provides.

Nigel J. Ross,
Milan, Italy

Book reviews

I rate your *Recent titles* section as invaluable, but recognise the impossibility of total coverage. Would it be feasible to abandon or reduce the vain attempt to deal with purely literary titles, of which there are far too many? Perhaps the familiar device of listing 'Books Received' would suffice, *faute de mieux*?

Many of the language books will of course be reviewed in other periodicals. Would timing allow of mere cross-referencing to notices in the standard publications: *Essays & Studies*, *College English*, *English Studies*, *Language*, *Lingua*, *Modern Languages*, etc.?

I welcomed Keith Davidson's article 'Double standards' (*ET*38, Apr 94). It favours my own bias towards education and educational linguistics – and inevitably the current fuss in England about National Curriculum English.

William H. Mittins,
Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England

So?

I find that in spite of the vast area of comment and criticism that your journal does succeed in covering, there is one very unpleasant change in the common language that has come to Britain in the last 20 years, and contributors have not found room for it ever in the past. I am referring to the "truncated conjunction introducing dependent clauses of purpose or intention", as an amateur grammarian like myself might describe it.

Three examples might suffice (the first two connected, the third recalled from a radio news report some years ago):

(1) "I advise you to wear gloves when you move the cooking pan so you do not scold your hands."

(2) "I have told (so-and-so) that there will be dancing in the ballroom after the main business of the evening so we can count on his coming to our AGM."

(3) (Labour dispute). "The two sides in the negotiations met once again this morning, and there is hope of a speedy settlement so the men can report back to work this coming Monday."

Are there not readers of *English Today* who still notice the jar given to the attention by cutting out a *that* which would have been regular after *so* until it seems about the early 1970s, whenever *purpose* or *intention* is meant by the clause? Those that agree might also have noticed other examples such as these where not the present but the *past tense* is used in the whole sentence, making the verb in the clause an apparent *statement of outcome* rather than a hope or possibility. ("The farmers sprayed their crop with a chemical so the rodents of the previous year did not breed again." Based on an actual news item in a technical journal.)

One is very hard put to find anything but purely extempore comment on this changed usage: in fact it is only from four selected correspondents that I have met with that much interest. "There is really no ambiguity over what is *meant*" is the usual escape from discussion that I have met.

Is not the phenomenon worth discussion, comment, and criticism?

Alan Heard,
Chichester, West Sussex,
England

The estuary of English

At last actors are admitting that they do not understand what Shakespeare wrote. Sir John Gielgud has said as much.

It is time to accept that Shake-

spearean English is an alien language. It is alien in the way that Kingis Scottis Inglis is alien, as the English of Beowulf is alien, and as the early Neo-English of Chaucer is alien.

By the twelfth century, English had been largely replaced by Neo-English; at the end of the twentieth century, Neo-English is being replaced by a new thoroughly international medium for which the name English is no longer appropriate.

We are now dealing with a common language, distinguished by a pooled lexicon, which draws on all languages for its vocabulary, and increasingly for its grammar. If the twelfth century saw the change from English into early Neo-English, the 20th century has seen late Neo-English giving way to something new.

The stage has to adapt to the change and either perform Shakespeare in the accents of 17th century Neo-English for a select class of academics, or present it in translation, in the new language which is emerging today.

The practice of actors reciting a partially understood language in R.P. accents and representing it as high culture must be ended.

If professional actors cannot understand it, what hope is there for school children? They must, of course, study it in translation, as they would Chaucer.

As regards David Rosewarne's article (*ET*37, Jan 94), if we think of language as an ever-flowing river, then "Estuary" could be seen as a most appropriate term at the point where the river of English becomes an ocean.

We could carry the analogy further and think of a number of rivers and streams called English

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 subjected to editorial adaptation in order to make the most effective use of both the letters and the space available.

flowing into that same ocean from North America, India, Australasia, Africa and so on (and others from Russia, China, Germany, France, Spain, etc., etc.)

The fact that in many London schools in excess of 50 languages are spoken is clearly having an effect on *this* Estuary English. The accents and languages of India are probably more influential than Cockney when it comes to the modern speech of London (and let us not forget the Caribbean varieties of English in use in London).

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

Spelling failure

With English so dominant in the world, it is all too easy to assume that what is true of English is true of languages generally. More seriously, we may wrongly imagine English is somehow 'normal', when comparison with other languages shows it is highly abnormal, indeed damagingly defective.

A case in point is Robert Gorrell's remark in *ET* 39 (Jul 94: p42) that: "Conscious efforts to effect change [in language] rarely succeed. Even in relatively minor mat-

ters like spelling reform, attempts from Thomas Mulcaster to George Bernard Shaw have failed. Noah Webster's success in the United States with a few spellings is an exception."

The factual errors here may be symptomatic of the wider misunderstanding. *Richard* Mulcaster, who is presumably meant, opposed spelling reform, but we owe him a debt for encouraging regularization of the orthographic disorder of 16th century English. And Shaw did not 'attempt' to reform English spelling - he left money for the design of a new alphabet.

The wider misunderstanding is the idea that spelling reforms normally 'fail'. Writing reform has had significant success this century in at least Afrikaans, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, German, Greek, Japanese, Malaysian/Indonesian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish. Whether the 1990 deletion of most circumflex accents from French catches on remains to be seen.

A key reason why English-speaking countries underperform in the international education league is that failure to modernize English spelling makes English-speakers less literate. Even the well-educated

misspell and mispronounce. If we have any care for educational standards, we should not dismiss spelling reform as "a relatively minor matter" - it is a precondition for optimizing educational standards, and a normal and necessary procedure which English neglects to its cost. Why cling to notoriously unfriendly spellings, when we modernize everything else?

Robert Gorrell is not alone in his anglocentrism. Sycologists are especially prone to it when they use their travails of begins in English as evidence for how 'people' in general learn to read and write. Literacy acquisition in, say, Italian is by contrast quite untraumatic.

Robert Gorrell may otherwise be right to say "conscious efforts to effect change [in language] rarely succeed", but we must recognize that riting conventions are open to direct control. Education authorities determine the spelling of future generations, and if it were decided that GH should be banned from literacy classes tomorrow, then in a few decades only old people would write it, and in due course it would pass out of use.

As it is to have done centuries ago.

Christopher Upward,
Simplified Spelling Society,
Birmingham, England

CROSSWORD

ET 39 Crossword answer

K	I	N	G	C	R	A	F	T	J	A	C	K	S
I	O	H	I	O	O	R	O						
T	I	N	E	A	R	E	P	R	E	H	E	N	D
T	E	M	P	S	Y	D	A						
E	N	N	E	A	G	O	N	A	L	F	O	A	L
N	T	E	R	I	O								
P	I	G	L	E	T	L	E	V	E	R	E	T	
A	T	E											
D	A	Y	L	O	N	G	S	T	R	A	T	A	
U													C
L	A	M	B	E	S	P	E	C	I	A	L	L	Y
A	A	F	L	C	D	I	G						
T	I	M	P	A	N	I	S	T	D	R	A	I	N
E	B	W	N	R	E	T	E						
S	P	A	I	N	G	R	E	E	N	B	E	L	T

ET 38 Crossword winners

The winners of the *Longman Language Activator*, eds. Della Summers and Michael Rundell, the prize for our April 1994 crossword, are:

- Leslie I. Brezak, Kyoto, Japan
- Steve Coffey, Pistoia, Italy
- Valerie High, Ware, Hertfordshire, England
- George Hunt, University of Reading, Reading, Berkshire, England
- Gibb Webber, Anderson University, Anderson, Indiana, USA