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# The English languages?

*In recent years there have been suggestions that English could break up into mutually unintelligible languages, much as Latin once did. Could such a break-up occur, or are we in need of a new appreciation of the nature of World English?*

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When Winston Churchill wrote *The History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (1956–8), the language that these peoples shared was widely perceived as an emanation from England and the peoples themselves, however varied, as in some sense offspring of ‘the mother country’.

However, in the years since that history appeared, both the world and the attitudes of the English-speaking peoples have changed. The roots of the language remain unaffected; they are in an island off the west coast of Europe. But the centre of gravity of English, in terms of population and economics, is now in North America, and the varieties of English around the world are legion. As a result, linguists and other commentators are compelled by circumstances to seek for greater accuracy and sensitivity in their descriptions of English. This is necessary for many reasons, not the least of which is the anxiety among many that the great historical monolith of the English language has begun to crack.

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## The Latin analogy

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In January 1985, in the first issue of *ET*, Alan Maley called English ‘the most chameleon of languages’. In pointing to this versatility, however, he felt the need to consider one possible future for this chameleon, that ‘English as an international language . . . will succumb to the same fate as Latin’.

About the same time that Maley made this point, Randolph Quirk observed that in recent years there has been ‘fresh talk of the diaspora of English into several mutually incomprehensible languages. The fate of Latin after the fall of the Roman Empire presents us with such distinct languages today as French, Spanish, Romanian, and Italian. With the growth of national separatism in the English-speaking countries, linguistically endorsed not least by the active encouragement of the anti-standard ethos . . . , many foresee a similar fissiparous future for English.’

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## TOM McARTHUR

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This quotation is from *English in the World*, edited by Quirk and Widdowson, and published in 1985 by Cambridge University Press for the British Council. It consists of papers read at a conference in 1984, held in London to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the British Council. The book’s subtitle is ‘teaching and learning the language and literatures’. This mix of singular and plural hints

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‘ If there are now English literatures, can the English languages be far behind? ’

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at a direction: If there are now ‘English literatures’ (by 1987 a well-established phrase), can the ‘English languages’ be far behind?

Finally, in the fourth and last volume of the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, Robert Burchfield notes in the preface that present-day *OED* editors do not have the freedom and right (as James Murray may have believed he had, a century ago) to fend off overseas items of English not yet canonized into British usage. ‘At a time when,’ he says, ‘the English language seems to be breaking up into innumerable clearly distinguishable varieties, it seemed to me important to abandon Murray’s insular policy and go out and find what was happening to the language elsewhere’ (written in 1985, published in 1986).

The doyen of the historical and descriptive lexicographers of English made the right choice. His aim in doing so may well, however, have been underpinned by a desire to see the centre hold against all the centrifugal tendencies at work, but by means of the intriguing device of re-locating the centre somewhere beyond Britain. In the process, an *Oxford* dictionary of the English language shifts away from parochialism – however justifiable in terms of past states of affairs – towards

globalism. By doing this, it suggests that any discussion of whether there is one ‘English language’ or many ‘English languages’ is not a question so much of British English against the rest, as of a re-examination of what we believe the entity called ‘English’ really is.

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## The Latin fallacy

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Between a thousand and two thousand years ago the language of the Romans was certainly central in the development of the entities we now call ‘the Romance languages’. In some important sense, Latin drifted among the Lusitani into ‘Portuguese’, among the Dacians into ‘Romanian’, among the Gauls and Franks into ‘French’, and so on. It is certainly seductive, therefore, to wonder whether American English might become simply ‘American’, and be, as Burchfield has suggested, an entirely distinct language in a century’s time from British English.

There is only one problem. The language used as a communicative bond among the citizens of the Roman Empire was not the Latin recorded in the scrolls and codices of the time. The masses used ‘popular’ (or ‘vulgar’) Latin, and were apparently extremely diverse in their use of it, intermingled with a wide range of other vernaculars. The Romance languages derive, not from the gracious tongue of such *litterati* as Cicero and Virgil, but from the multifarious usages of a population most of whom were *illiterati*.

‘Classical’ Latin had quite a different history from the people’s Latin. It did not break up at all, but as a language standardized by manuscript evolved in a fairly stately fashion into the ecclesiastical and technical medium of the Middle Ages, sometimes known as ‘Neo-Latin’. As Walter Ong has pointed out in *Orality and Literacy* (1982), this ‘Learned Latin’ survived as a monolith through sheer necessity, because Europe was ‘a morass of hundreds of languages and dialects, most of them never written to this day’. Learned

Latin derived its power and authority from *not* being an ordinary language. 'Devoid of baby talk' and 'a first language to none of its users', it was 'pronounced across Europe in often mutually unintelligible ways *but always written the same way*' (my italics).

The Latin analogy as a basis for predicting one possible future for English is not therefore very useful, if the assumption is that once upon a time Latin was a mighty monolith that cracked because people did not take proper care of it. That is fallacious. Interestingly enough, however, a Latin analogy might serve us quite well if we develop the idea of a people's Latin that was never at any time particularly homogeneous, together with a text-bound learned Latin that became and remained something of a monolith because European society needed it that way.

### One language or many languages?

In talking about any speech system there is always a risk that we might close off further thought by deciding that it is definitely 'a language' or categorically 'a dialect'. The simple act of saying 'the English language' predisposes us to think no further, and perhaps to feel unsettled if the stability of the phrase and the language is threatened.

For centuries, though, people talking about English have lived comfortably with the phrase 'the English dialects' (however they have chosen to interpret the word *dialect*). They have also generally been aware that under certain conditions a 'dialect' can be elevated into a 'language'. The conditions under which this may happen relate to power politics, the existence of an orthography (and perhaps a set of

scriptures), and the development of an educational system couched in that dialect.

What follows from this 'elevation' can however be ambiguous. Everyone, for example, agrees that present-day Standard English developed historically from the courtly, scholarly and literary aspect of a dialect used at one time in the south-east of England. Insofar as Standard English is non-accentual (and to exist as a worldwide medium it must, apparently, be unbounded by any particular accent), it is a system of grammar and vocabulary well established in text, a state of affairs that makes it suspiciously similar to Ong's Learned Latin. The ambiguity arises when we can all say, at one and the same time, that 'proper' English is enshrined in the standard, while such other varieties as Brooklynese, Texian, Jamaican Creole, Perthshire Scots, Black English Vernacular and Indian English are not. Yet they all belong within the ambit of something that correlates quite well with the popular forms of Latin in the Roman Empire long ago.

### One language and many languages

If a standard language can emerge from one of a number of dialects (all in some sense 'English') on *one* occasion, another standard language can emerge from another dialect (or creole, or hybrid form) on another occasion. This nearly happened with the King's Scots in the 16th century, but was socioculturally aborted when the King of Scots became in 1603 the King of England too. To a limited degree it happened after 1776, when the American colonists broke away from Britain. By that time, however, the text-linked standard language was well established and widely distri-

buted among educated people, and so the distinctness of American Standard English from British Standard English is, though significant, hardly a question of non-intelligibility.

At the present time, various other 'Englishes' are developing such institutions as their own dictionaries and grammars, powerful markers of autonomy. Some, like Canadian and Australian English, share in the common text-linked tradition of a standard; others, like Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea and Krio in Sierra Leone are bafflingly far removed from the standard language, and are most patently distinct languages.

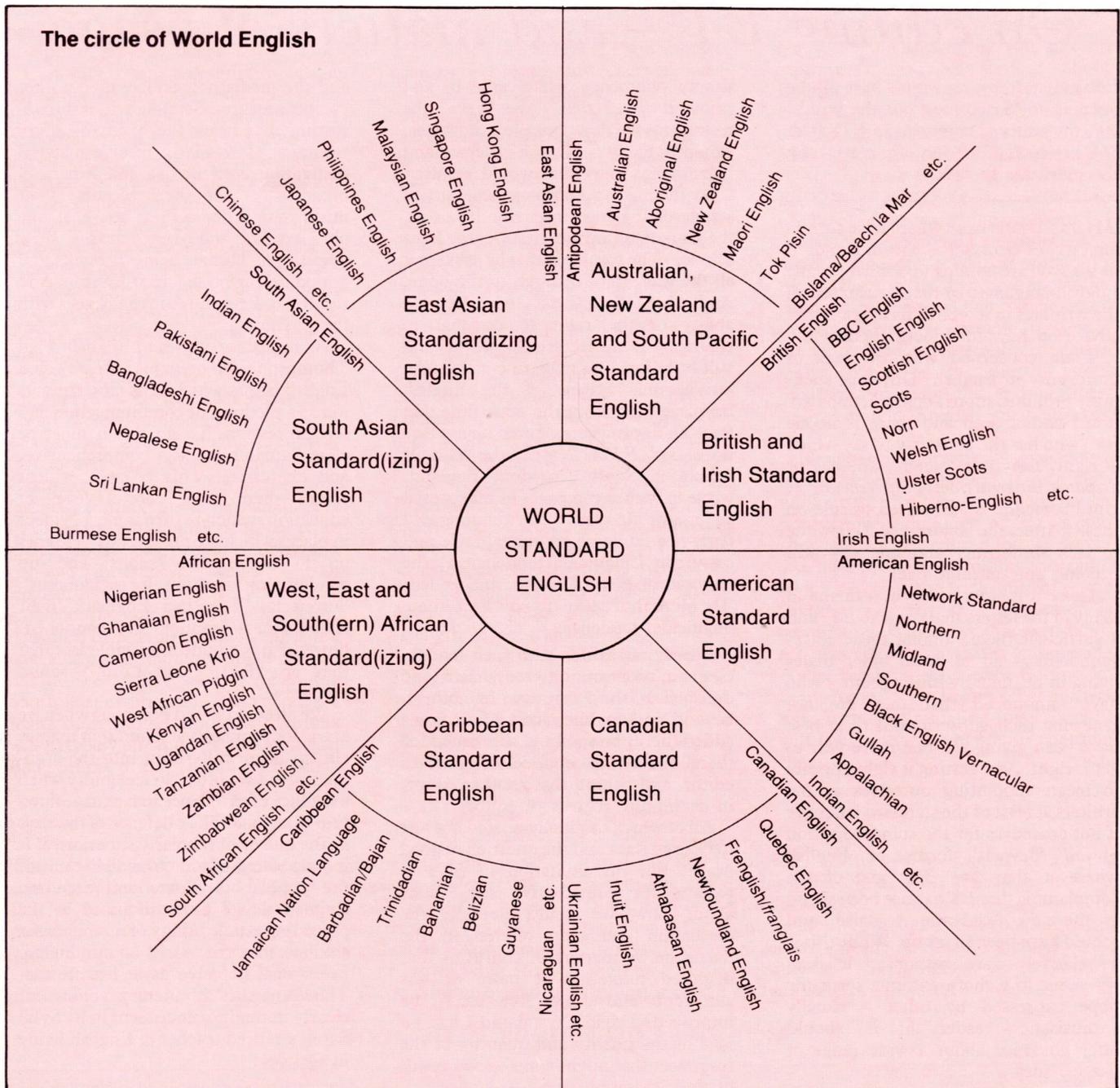
We do not know the details of the 'Latins' of the Roman Empire, but we do have before us the living laboratory of World English. In the accompanying panel is a possible model for the diversity of World English, but no model can do justice to the personal variations among around a billion native and other users of the total complex.

Within such a model, we can talk about a more or less 'monolithic' core, a text-linked World Standard negotiated among a variety of more or less established national standards. Beyond the minority area of the interlinked standards, however, are the innumerable non-standard forms – the majority now as in Roman times, with all sorts of reasons for being unintelligible to each other. There is nothing new in this, and it is a state of affairs that is unlikely to change in the short or even the medium term. In the distinctness of Scots from Black English Vernacular, Cockney from Krio, and Texian from Taglish, we have all the age-old criteria for talking about mutually unintelligible languages. Nonetheless, all such largely oral forms share in the totality of World English, and can be shown to share in it, however bafflingly different they may be. This is a paradox, but it is also a fact.

Many of us operate along continuums from a viable standard to fluent non-standard kinds of English, code-switching or style-drifting according to circumstances. Educational systems can either live with, encourage and gain from such flexibility, or can be so organized as to make it seem shameful. Whatever they do, they cannot alter the demographic realities of the popular Englishes on one side and the core of negotiable standards on the other. Those realities are as relevant today as they were in the Rome of the Caesars.



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There can be many quibbles (even quarrels) about the precise arrangement and content of a model like this. We could, for example, argue about whether the expression 'English English' makes sense, about whether it is likely that a uniform standard will emerge for English in East Asia, or assert that Canadian English is not sufficiently distinct from 'American' English to merit a separate section. Because of such likely disputes, and because of the fluidity and fuzziness wherever the language is used, the demarcation lines are all discontinuous, and at the outer limits of the 'circle' the circumference is open to intermingling with other languages in the Spanglish/Janglish/Hindlish phenomenon.

The purpose of the model is to highlight the broad three-part spectrum that ranges from the 'innumerable' popular Englishes through the various national and regional standards to the remarkably homogeneous but negotiable 'common core' of World Standard English.

The present model may serve as a basis for further refinements in depicting the complex web of relationships among the elements of World English. In addition to the three areas of contention mentioned in the first paragraph, it is possible to look for further fine-tuning in the following areas:

- Within the circle of British English, the English of Scotland might be separated out as having its own 'national' standard, comparable to the Irish Republic. In relation to this standard, such forms as the traditional Scots dialects, the 'Norn' dialects of Orkney and Shetland, Glaswegian and Highland English are all variably non-standard.

- In Papua-New Guinea, it might be reasonable to assert that Tok Pisin (or Melanesian Pidgin English) is so distant from the root stock of English as to constitute an entirely distinct language to be listed (if listed at all) on the outermost fringes of the circle of World English.

- With regard to the relationship between English and other languages, it might be best to create a separate category for the continuum of other languages influenced by English, and kinds of English influenced by other languages. For Puerto Rico, Rose Nash has drawn attention to a continuum with English at one end, then Spanglish, then *englañol*, then *español* (Spanish). In Quebec, I have myself worked on an English/Frenghish/*franglais/français* continuum, and another such range has been confirmed by Isagani Cruz in the Philippines: English/Taglish/Engalog/Tagalog.

# On editing *ET* – and matters of usage

Let me start by repeating part of the opening to 'Smoothing out the wrinkles', my editorial comment in *ET* 8 (Oct 86), in which a London subscriber took the magazine to task:

'My impression from what I have seen so far,' writes George Racz from London, 'is that you are holding up a mirror to the English language, so that we can see all the wrinkles in it – but I have not found advice on how to smooth them out.'

'I am concerned with the lack of uniformity in English: Different spellings, pronunciations, constructions are heard and/or seen and there is no one [sic] who has the authority to say which is right, *inquire* or *enquire*, *dispatch* or *despatch*, *different from* or *different to* . . . Until someone is authorised to rule on these matters the language will continue to lack uniformity and one day will become unteachable [sic].'

There it is, in a nutshell, a theme in many of the letters that come to *ET*, and a particular theme among those correspondents – all of them older males living in or linked with England – who have announced that they are not renewing their subscriptions or at best have been giving *ET* one more year to get it right. And getting it right appears to mean appointing ourselves as the arbiters at least of the standard language if not crusaders for the standardization of all 'deviant' forms of English wherever they are. The gist of the complaint is that *ET* has not been set up as the new Académie Anglaise, and should have been so set up. While this is a relatively rare response, it does represent in a more extreme form the hope expressed by other – usually enthusiastic – readers that *ET* should offer guidance about a wide range of usage issues.

Not long after the publication of *ET* 8, Paul Thompson of Shrewsbury in England wrote: 'I always feel that it is a little unfair of editors to add "sic" after obvious slips of the pen in correspondents' letters, as if to say: "Get a load of the live one we've got here!" Doubly so in the case of the quotations from George Racz's letter . . . , as the letter is a plea for uniformity in English!'

Quite so. In my own experience, when editors use 'sic' it is largely defensive, so that other writers won't accuse them of perpetrating the offences in question. It is a distancing technique as much as a highlighting technique. In this particular instance, it was necessarily both. As editor of *ET*, I walk a fine line between leaving contributors to be themselves in their idiosyncrasies and applying an editorial yardstick. To get the language in the raw, one would

simply photocopy what came in and print it like that (We have the technology). Few people, however, would be likely to buy the inelegant and inconsistent mass that would result.

So there is an enormous amount of standardizing in a magazine like this, the kind of uniformity that George Racz asks for. The trouble is that he asks for it all the way, right through to the bone. And what editor exists who has the ability or the right to do that to contributors, to lecture the world, and still be editor of a magazine called 'the international review of the English language'? At about the same time that Paul Thompson commented on my rare use of 'sic', F H G Percy of the Whitgift School in South Croydon, England, wrote in with seven pages of magisterial comment. In them he enumerated *thirty-two* faults of grammar, style and culture in 'Linguicidal tendencies?', the editorial of *ET* 6 (Apr 86), and ended: 'Dr McArthur, *why* do you have these linguicidal tendencies?'

Clearly, an editor with such tendencies is in no position to reorganize (and debauch?) the writings of others, beyond perhaps the nicety of a comma added here, a spelling slip amended there. Indeed, such an editor needs an editor, and behind that another editor, in an infinite regress of editors . . .

All of which originally related not just to George Racz and the question of good usage, but my invitation in *ET* 8 to readers for constructive suggestions about how we could develop the discussion and help offered in the magazine on matters of confusing and disputed usage. Is it more or less sufficient, and if not how can it be improved? David Crystal and I had no idea of the quality and quantity of the responses that might come in as a result of that invitation.

As it happened, in relation to the large mail that comes to *ET* from all over the world, there was almost no response at all. Ten letters came in relating to the invitation (often among other things); of these, nine came from addresses in the United Kingdom, and one from a Briton in Germany. Of these, only one contained a practical suggestion for the magazine. This, out of the 10,000-plus people who read *ET* each quarter. One in a thousand.

It is clear, however, from these and other letters that the editorial style of *ET*, and the techniques as well as the messages in its features, interest readers just as much as usage at large. In fact, the one cannot be separated from the other, because *ET* is part of the phenomenon (or the problem, if you believe the language is going to the dogs, and that linguistic scholars have shares in dog-food). *ET* is part of the media,

and the media notoriously do/does not escape censure. Although it is broadcasting that bears the brunt of angry comment (I regularly receive material castigating both British and American broadcasters for their accents, their mispronunciations, their abuse of fine old words, and very nearly their qualities as human beings), books and periodicals are in the front-line too. And rightly so. Being an Aunt Sally goes with the territory.

As regards attitudes to English, Paul Thompson went on in his letters: 'Good English is that which does efficiently its job as a medium of communication and self-expression. To do this it must be clear, unambiguous, comprehensive, and expressive. This is most evident where there is a certain level of education, which in turn is most evident in places which are prosperous.' He goes on to argue that 'snobs' end up condemning anything else as 'ignorant', 'lower-class', or 'bad English'; 'their snobbishness cannot be condoned, however it is an uncomfortable fact that they are right! Good Lord I sound pompous!'

We often do sound pompous when we argue for standards and find that there is elitism historically built into the argument. And we often do feel guilty when a defence of excellence in language flows into what looks like a defence of the class status quo or of scholarly superiority. It is a problem built into the dichotomy of the popular Englishes and Standard English that I have discussed in the preceding article. Many of us are indeed anxious that the world of our literate peers shall perceive us as literate too. This centrality of literacy comes out clearly in reminiscences sent in by Sybil Sarel, a retired teacher of English living in Orkney:

"What made you good at English?" I asked myself, thinking about *ET* articles and the current agonisings over the teaching of English. In the first place, before school-days, I had learnt to read from *Chick's Own* comics, which had the words under the pictures split into syllables. I learnt to write cursorily, before I learnt to print. My mother taught me. I was fascinated by printing on specially-lined pages, when I went to school at five, and saved my "other writing" for home use. I was bored by the cards matching pictures, because I could already read well. At Prep. school we learnt Grammar, and lots of poetry-by-heart. I loved that, being a quick memoriser. Repetition of well-strung words is very beneficial. There was plenty of written work in other subjects, including French, which was taught the traditional way, even to 9/10 year-olds, verbs, etc. No "audio-visual" aids, 1925–30! Only very good, edu-

cated speech by our teachers, with plenty of old-fashioned courtesy and discipline. *No bad thing.*'

Certainly, this is a description of the adventure of language, but it is other and more than that. With its depiction of a world in which sound and letters are interlaced, with emphasis on the letters, it is also, like Godfrey Talbot's following article, an apologia for a certain kind of civilization. The language is not just a language; it is a vehicle of high culture, a protection against Outer Darkness. We all need such protections, and it would be as well to appreciate how deeply the idea of a 'standard' language is linked with the idea of a bearable life.

Here, Sandra Slade from Sussex in England adds: 'George Racz's Orwellian vision of total uniformity I find very unattractive, a sort of linguistic equivalent to everyone being forced to wear Chairman Mao suits. One of the most fascinating things about our language is its diversity. An English deprived of its dialect words, local pronunciations, and regional differences, would be an English deprived of its vitality. Unfortunately for the supporters of an Académie Anglaise, Britons do not all belong to the educated upper middle or upper classes, nor do we all live somewhere in the South East of England. A language is a living thing; no self-appointed arbiters will have any effect on its development. Bad spelling of the "Krankies Elektro-

nik Komik" kind, deliberately perpetrated by those who know better, is deplorable. The efforts of Plain English campaigners to simplify otherwise nonsensical official jargon are to be commended. But heaven forbid that we should reach the stage of trying to dictate to people the way they should use their native tongue. What's wrong with a bit of individuality anyway?'

Fred Parrott, also of Sussex, adds: 'Much of what used to incense and now incenses purists is marginal to effective language. The obstacles to good communication lie much deeper and require for their removal the kinds of self-knowledge and language sensitivity which are not obtained by focussing on lists of common errors. What is fascinating about the common-errors lists which I as an English teacher purveyed in the 1950s (having adopted them from my own teachers in the 1930s) is not that forty years later a few elderly people are excessively bothered by certain kinds of "abusage", but that so many expressions which were condemned authoritatively as proven errors have since gone from strength to strength in general usage.'

What, finally, of the single practical suggestion for an international review with limited resources but considerable reach? It comes from Mrs M F Cannell of Midlothian in Scotland:

'Have a look, if you will, at the *Anna*

knitting and needlecrafts magazine (Verlag Aenna Burda, West Germany). No, I am not suggesting you take up knitting instead of writing about English, but in there you will find in the centre a course for a particular craft. Could you not do the same in *ET*, and use a middle section like that (four pages or so) to give the latest position on English usage? These pages could be lifted out of the main magazine without damaging it and could be collected to form a kind of "reference work" for those who use English and encounter practical problems. The problems I am thinking of are, for example, the use of the apostrophe, where to close quotation marks (before or after the full stop), breaking words at the end of lines, American and English spelling, etc.'

Now *that* is a practical suggestion: a serialized usage book. It is, alas, unlikely that the economics and current production techniques of *ET* would allow such a procedure, and we would also have problems in finding the 'right' people to cover the 'right' topics in the 'right' way, but the suggestion is stimulating. We believe that as it stands *ET* as a whole is just such an on-going guide, but in a less specific do-this/do-that kind of way. If any other readers have further stimulating suggestions, I will [sic] always be happy to entertain them. **ET**

## FROM OUR FILES

**The statistics of book publication** Below we reproduce, courtesy of the *International Publishers Association Bulletin* (Vol. III, No 1, published in Switzerland), a table indicating book publications in 15 non-Communist countries from 1983 to 1985. The grand total for the three English-using nations – Australia, Great Britain and the United States – is 102,851 titles, while the grand total for the 12 other nations is 235,570, making an overall

total for the 15 of 338,421 titles. The English-nation total represents 30% of the whole, while US publications make up some 45% of the English-nation totals, and around 20% of the total for all the countries listed. Although not all books published in a country are necessarily in the dominant language of that country, most probably are. Such figures are a powerful indicator of the current state of affairs throughout the world.

### BOOK TITLE PRODUCTION 1983 - 1985

Titles	New Titles				New Editions & Reprints				Final Total	% Change
	1983	1984	1985	% Change	1983	1984	1985	% Change		
Years	1983	1984	1985	% Change	1983	1984	1985	% Change	1985	1984-85
Australia	2,323	2,417	2,725	+12.7	2,659	2,830	2,869	+1.4	5,594	+6.6
Austria	7,638	8,093	7,525	-7.0	908	1,040	973	-6.4	8,498	-6.95
Brazil	—	—	4,963	+2.75*	—	—	7,378	+27.2*	12,341	+16.1*
Denmark	7,985	10,660	8,217	-23.0	1,475	1,596	1,337	-16.2	9,544	-22.2
France	11,823	12,100	13,080	+8.1	15,525	16,874	15,988	-5.3	29,068	+0.3
Germany (F.R.)	47,980	39,978	45,000	+12.6	12,618	11,755	12,623	+7.4	57,623	+11.3
Great Britain	38,980	40,246	41,254	+2.5	12,091	11,309	11,740	+3.8	52,994	+2.8
Italy	11,809	12,576	13,476	+7.15	9,106	8,487	9,207	+8.5	22,683	+7.7
Korea	18,588	—	20,502	+10.3**	14,733	—	13,987	-5.1**	34,489	+3.5**
Netherlands	7,647	9,329	9,219	-1.2	4,499	3,880	3,410	-12.2	12,629	-4.4
Norway	2,226	2,159	2,231	+3.3	1,203	1,261	1,420	+12.6	3,651	+6.75
Spain	21,482	22,394	24,742	+10.5	8,002	8,360	10,010	+19.7	34,752	+13.0
Sweden	7,418	9,173	7,956	-13.3	979	1,200	1,576	+31.3	9,532	-8.1
Switzerland	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	8,409	-0.3
U.S.A.	42,236	40,564	39,753	-2.0	7,309	6,691	6,510	-2.8	46,263	-2.1

\* % Change from 1982 to 1985

\*\* % Change from 1983 to 1985