

## Themself

I am series editor of Pilgrims/Longman new series of teachers' resource books. In order to achieve a more readable style (though not always yet with perfectly unambiguous results) my Longman counterpart and I have decided to adopt singular *they*, *their*, etc. A couple of *themself*'s have quite deliberately been allowed in as well. At the moment I can't find any of them in the books that I have before me but they are in there somewhere. I will send along a highlighted specimen of one or two as they turn up. My view is that *themself* is just too useful not to be right.

Seth Lindstromberg,  
Canterbury, Kent,  
England

## Fracturing English

The following item came in the mail the other day: "We take pleasure of writing to you in hopes that to introduce our new computer accessories to you.

"Since 1982, hundreds of wooden plants have come and gone. As a manufacturer and exporter, T-Best has come through with its position of leadership stronger than even in sales, in performances, in prestige. Because of we always devoted exclusively to design and make newest computer furniture & Accessories.

"Nowadays, personal computer was grown up not only in the passed time, but also in the future. Doubtless, computer accessories demand will be getting increasingly. It just can be offered as a promotion item and also can be sold alone. There is nothing like beginning to do business with a new customer and we are sure your business will be more prosper with a

mutually favorable association with us.

"We shall appreciate your taking the time to study the enclosed sample and catalog. Your early and favorable response will be appreciated. With best regards for success in all your undertakings."

With the increasing importance of English as the language of international communication, I am often amused by instruction leaflets and directions written in English (?) and bearing such gems as: "take shelter from the freeze and heat" (warning in a booklet for a water softener – presumably to avoid extremes in temperature) or "be careful not to burn the beans" (on the label of a tin of green beans (I know the English do not have a brilliant reputation as cooks but . . .)).

Who writes (or translates) these things? Is there a name for them? Does anybody collect them?

Dr Alan Swan,  
Jouy-le-Moutier,  
France

## The linguistically bizarre

At a dinner party the other night, a few days before the 75th anniversary of Gallipoli, conversation turned to amusing and ambiguous headlines and diners began recalling some wartime classics.

At one, 'MacArthur Flies Back To Front', I couldn't help being reminded of the General's near-namesake, the editor of *ET*.

Others that we were able to recall included 'Eighth Army Push Bottles Up Germans', which reminds one of the forceful impact visual layout can have on initial comprehension of a text. (Try writing it with a line-break in different places and

you'll see what I mean!)

Another was the not only linguistically bizarre, but also (one would hope) attitudinally tongue-in-cheek 'Fog In Channel – Continent Isolated'.

I wonder whether any similar chestnuts spring to the minds of other readers of *ET*, relating also, of course, to other eras and subjects than the WW2. Perhaps they could be invited to send them in to you, providing material for an occasional, humorous corner to add to the already entertaining as well as edifying pages of the journal?

David A. Cervi,  
Gladesville,  
New South Wales,  
Australia

## Credit where it's due

In Louis Alexander's recent piece on ELT methods and trends, he refers with enthusiasm to *From Writing to Composing*. However, he has only credited one author, and the full credit should be to Beverly Ingram and Carol King.

Peter Donovan,  
Cambridge University Press,  
Cambridge, England

## Mammal or Mammals?

I took the liberty of writing to you and asking for your advice in the following matter. In early 50s the Polish name of our Institute was translated into English as "Mammals Research Institute". Recently we were told that the correct name should be "Mammal Research Institute". The Polish name – Zakład Badania Ssaków – means the Institute that conducts Research on Mammals. Would you please explain which form is correct and why?

Thank you very much in advance.

Dr Bogumiła Jędrzejewska,  
Mammal/s/ Research Institute,  
Polish Academy of Sciences,  
17–230 Białowieża, Poland

● *Editor* I replied that the correct form is indeed the singular, the norm for compounds and most attributive forms, as in *flower pot* ‘a pot for flowers’ and *toothbrush* ‘a brush for one’s teeth’.

## Encyclop(a)edias

Four minor points regarding David Crystal’s stimulating article “The encyclop(a)edic word game” (*ET22*):

(1) The author “do[es] not feel happy about dropping the -e-[sic, in *encyclopaedia*] when referring to, say, Diderot, or in talking about Ephraim Chambers’ original work. Chambers wrote an *encyclopaedia*, not an *encyclopedia*.” Would Mr. Crystal hesitate to modernize Shakespeare’s [Shakspere’s?] spelling? For that matter, Diderot actually wrote an *encyclopédie*!

(2) Crystal asks whether *Munich* is [ˈmju:nɪk] or [ˈmju:nɪx]. In this case, the latter would be hypercorrect, as this is an English word, borrowed from French, the German name being *München*.

(3) He also asks if one should recommend *Barrault* [ˈbarou] or [baˈrou]. This depends on your market. British English tends to “anglicize” the stress of French names and words by stressing the first syllable – and may do the same with non-French names such as *Hassan*. American English tends to “preserve” the final stress that is commonly observed in a French breath group – and even carries this habit over to non-French names that did not originally have final strong stress, such as *Opel* and *Wiesel*. The simplest solution with a name like *Barrault* would be to indicate no stress at all, and

## Life’s little battlers

### I.

Here’s to Harolld  
Llewellyn Wels  
Who, asked his name, not  
only tells  
But immediately spells and  
spells  
Preserving those ancestral  
“L’s”.

### II.

Here’s to Marigold Henacy  
A doughty lass. “Look  
Here,” says she,  
“If the Hennessey you  
want is me,  
You’d better spell it with  
A and C.”

Alma Denny,  
New York

this would best reflect the French pronunciation, but an English speaker wants a primary stress.

In regard to initial capitals, American usage clearly favors *the Bible* but *the moon* (and *the sun*).

Sheldon Wise,  
American Language Academy,  
Rockville, Maryland, USA

## Picky?

David Crystal’s article (*ET22*) on editing a new major encyclopaedia was interesting, but I have to say that I hope the specimen entry quoted on Alistair Maclean (p.10) is not typical.

First, it is out of date. Maclean died three years ago, so his dates should read ‘1922–87’. A new encyclopaedia should surely be as up to date as reasonably possible. Second, it is not clear from the text whether *H M S Ulysses*, his first novel, was published in 1954 or later. It actually appeared in 1955. Also, is it not important to state that this novel resulted directly from his experience in the

Royal Navy in World War II? Third, there is an uneasy blend of elliptical and non-elliptical styles. The second and fourth sentences contain the pronoun ‘he’, but the third omits it (‘In 1954, while a teacher, won a short story competition’). Fourth, might not a pronunciation guide to his surname have been helpful, as ‘Maclean’ can be pronounced both ‘Maklane’ and ‘Makleen’?

Sorry to appear picky, but I think such things matter in an important new reference work, which may well be consulted by non-native English speakers, as well as natives.

Adrian Room,  
Stamford, Lincolnshire,  
England

## Description and prescription

I read with great interest about the debate on description and prescription, and the standard language.

(1) I agree with John Lyons that the linguist’s first task is to describe the way people actually speak (and write) their language, not to prescribe how they ought to speak and write. I would like, however, to add that, if the linguists really describe the way people actually speak (and write), they will surely be able to see how they ought to speak and write. A prescription is good and useful as far as it is descriptive-based. I don’t know why the term prescription should always be pejorative.

(2) I think the efforts valuable made by those linguists to try to describe all the varieties of English. They will certainly help the grammarian in describing the ‘common core’ that makes the numerous varieties of English mutually intelligible. They will also contribute to developing, so to say, a variety-consciousness in the learner of English.

(3) It is understandable for countries like Canada and Australia to

assert their linguistic independence as equal partners in the English-using world. This makes people think of the great surge of linguistic patriotism caused by the Declaration of Independence over 200 years ago, when Noah Webster declared: 'as an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as in government'. Unfortunately and fortunately, American English today remains an English rather than the American language. As a tool for communication, language serves all people alike, female and male, rich and poor, colonialists and their victims. I believe that responsible language planners in countries where English is an official or a second language will also keep this in mind.

(4) Here in China English is used as an international language in diplomacy, trade, science and tourism, to communicate with non-native speakers as well as native speakers. So the convenience of having a standard of English is obvious. I suggest, therefore, that the grammarian go on describing the Standard language.

Wanfang Zhang,  
Associate Professor of English,  
Hangzhou University,  
Zhejiang, China

## Due to

This phrase is much used in the sense of 'because of' or 'owing to'. No doubt the influence of a growing number of speakers, both educated and not-so-educated, will ultimately prevail and the phrase will come to be 'officially' sanctioned by custom and usage as standard. Those who oppose its use in these senses probably belong to an older generation who wish to preserve the usage of their upbringing. There is certainly no intrinsic reason why 'due to' should not be regarded as meaning anything that anyone wants it to mean,

and in theory there is no reason why any other word or phrase may not change both its meaning and usage in time – the process is, of course, going on continuously. However, one argument in favour of attempting to at least oppose this shift is that the question of meaning is involved.

I have just used a 'split' infinitive; my reason for doing so is based on the question of meaning – to relate the adverbial phrase 'at least' as closely as possible to its verb 'oppose'. Any other position for the phrase is, I believe, both more cumbersome and slightly less clear. The same principle cannot be said to apply to 'due to'.

In the sentence, 'Mr Tulliver was unable to pay the money due to his creditors,' 'due' relates to a noun ('money') and is therefore adjectival; it is intended to have the sense: 'which ought to be paid or given'. Since, however, the sense, 'because of' has now become attached to the meaning of 'due to', this sense provokes ambiguity. A person habitually using 'due to' in the sense 'because of' now wonders whether the sentence means: 'Mr Tulliver was unable to pay the money because of his creditors' – i.e. because they in some way were preventing him from paying! Thus the misuse (unfashionable term!) of 'due to' begins to blur a distinction quite "unnecessarily" – unnecessarily, I mean, in that there are perfectly acceptable alternatives which do not offend the custom of verbs requiring adverbials, not adjectives, to qualify them.

I make this plea on behalf of 'because of' etc., since I believe that the process of grammatical change seems to be too rapid.

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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.

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Since such rapid change can ultimately lead to further linguistic confusion and the loss of those distinctions by which refinement of thinking and discussion can take place, it becomes ever more urgent that some check on these losses be attempted.

My examples no doubt seem trivial, and perhaps they are, in themselves. But if there were greater agreement on the principle that while vocabulary may quite happily expand to infinity as life itself expands, the linguistic structures which govern sentences should be regarded as much more stable, we might be able to improve or at least conserve the great mainstream of English which now is becoming muddied by indifference to usage.

Teachers and all others who are in a position to use English publicly – especially politicians, actors, broadcasters and journalists for example, – and who therefore influence the population as a whole – ought not to be afraid of attempting to assert standard usages wherever they can be seen to preserve clarity of thinking and communication.

R.P. Barton,  
Head of English, Claremont Fan  
Court School,  
Esher, Surrey,  
England

## Vistas and views

I decided, rather late in life, to try to learn a second language, and I chose Portuguese. There were a number of considerations . . . 1992 and all that; being a Scot encouraged me to choose a language that a people subject to 'similar' influences might speak; the position of Portuguese as an important root of much pidgin; and my great admiration for some of those most effective writers whose native tongue was not English, but whose command of our language, as their second, third, or fourth, has given their writings

an edge which those whose only language is English cannot match. I am thinking of Nabokov for his vital descriptive, and of Koestler for his freshness.

I do not aspire to be a Great Writer, but I am fascinated by what I regard as any language's principal job – to be the medium through which ideas are passed, or are hoped to be passed, from one to another.

My slight contact and struggle with Portuguese has provoked much. Let me sight only one example: in English, *interview* means that one party will be the subject of another party's scrutiny. But, being presented in an elementary translation with the Portuguese word *entrevista*, it was not at all clear to me what was meant, since my notion was a 'shared view', in direct transla-

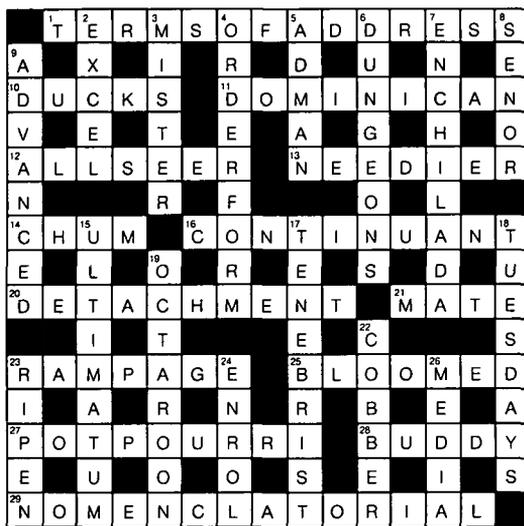
tion; I did not connect the two ideas.

I do not expect to master Portuguese, or English, but I expect that neither will be damaged in the process, and that my efforts will broaden my understanding, and help me to make myself clear.

A.A. Rae,  
Greenock, Scotland

## CROSSWORD

### ET23 CrossworLd Solution



### ET22 CrossworLd Winners

The winners of the *Concise Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (Routledge), the prize for our October 1989 crossword, are:

R. Hutchinson, Dundee, Scotland  
O.E. Lahr, London, England  
Martin Miller, The British Embassy,  
Antananarivo, Madagascar  
Colin Neiland, Belfast, Northern Ireland  
Ronald Sutherland, North Hatley, Quebec,  
Canada

## ETYMORPHS

Answers: 1b, 2d, 3c, 4a, 5b, 6c, 7b, 8d.



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