

Feedback

May I heartily congratulate you on *English Today*. I thoroughly enjoy reading it. Carry on the good work!

○ Gerald Zwirn, Blairgowrie, South Africa

I look forward to my quarterly copy of *ET*, and do not begrudge the time spent poring over its treasure-laden pages. It is a wonderful package of entertaining information and informative entertainment.

○ Palmer Acheson, associate professor, TESL Centre, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

English Today was not only well received by members of the English Department of the Philological Faculty but very much *admired* by all my colleagues. A great achievement is that the most important linguistic problems are discussed in a vivid and appealing way. The material can be easily assimilated by both teachers and learners, which makes the journal invaluable for all those who claim membership of the EFL profession.

○ Dr Natalya Grishiani, University of Moscow, Lenin Hills, Moscow, USSR

May I compliment you on *ET*, which is just about right in its format, as far as I'm concerned.

○ Barry Roe, Wigston, Leicester, England

English Today makes exciting reading.

○ Daniel Thomières, Editor, *Les Langues Modernes*, Paris, France

Must certainly try harder

Like P T Cant (*ET6*) I've decided the price of a somewhat grudging subscription renewal is the indulgence in a grumbling letter!

Valerie Illingworth's 'Language of High Tech' (*ET3*) has been easily the worst article yet, being no more than a list of acronyms used by computer people and without the space to explain any of them. It couldn't have added anything to anyone's understanding. There have been a few such purely descriptive pieces, and none of them is worth the space allotted. By contrast David Crystal's article about teaching grammar (same issue) I found positively inspiring, and you can't ask for more than that! On the whole articles are maudlin, features are fascinating.

This year I see there is an English Language 'A' level for the first time – nothing about it in *ET*! And as a teacher I find *ET* very skimpy on the

perspective of English-as-taught. For example *ET6* considers 'had have' and 'had've'; but the writing I frequently find coming to me from comprehensive schools says 'I had of come' and 'I might of come'. If this is one of the ways by which language changes (and can you find a correct apostrophe in the High Street among Mr Jones potatoe's and tomatoe's?) i.e. by being badly taught, is it necessarily a way which adds to the clarity of communication?

○ Jon Miller, London, England

I am renewing my subscription, in the hope that the journal will grow up into something less self-satisfiedly superficial and second rate.

Mr F C Beswick may be interested to know that in the 1920s my younger sister (born and brought up in NW London) was being reprimanded for saying 'must of' (etc.) – a habit picked up from her school friends.

○ Christopher Taylor, Northwich, Cheshire, England

Who would of believed it?

I was intrigued by F C Beswick's observations (in *ET6*) regarding the appearance in East Manchester of a linguistic form that I had hitherto supposed was a product of our careless American speech habits. Beswick's working-class students substitute the word 'of' for 'have' in constructions requiring the auxiliary. What I find most interesting is that the students who use the replacement form come from one section of a city in which other people (including teachers, presumably) carefully enunciate the particular word.

My experience with this linguistic form has occurred in Washington DC, where I teach English in a predominantly Black university, whose students come from every corner of the United States as well as from a variety of Third World nations. In the speech of United States natives I hear what I at first assumed was the commonly-used contraction for phrases using the 'have' auxiliary – 'could've' and 'would've', for example, in place of 'could have' and 'would have'. Students from outside of the United States seem to enunciate this form clearly. Because the composition classes at our university discourage written contractions in formal essays many of the students who use these forms when speaking seem to discover, when they start to write, that they do not really know what it is that they have been saying. Consequently, they write 'would of' or 'could of', and so forth, apparently because this is the closest approximation that they can achieve in acceptable spelling. To spell 'əv', which is what most of them are

really saying, is impossible in the English orthographic system; 'uv' would be an illiteracy. In this case, at least, the problem would more than likely not be revealed if the students did not find occasion to include such forms in their written work. We would continue to suppose that they were repeating 'would've', etc., and they would probably continue to assume that the rest of us were saying something akin to 'woulduv'.

○ Phyllis N Braxton, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Howard University, Washington DC, USA

On the increase?

The discussion of 'Tense Matters' in *ET6* is illuminating, and bears out my own sense that both usages are increasing, especially among younger native British speakers.

The substitution of the simple past for the present perfective is not yet widespread but is frequent enough to suggest something more than isolated idiolects. Traditionally of course the present perfective is associated with adverbs of indefinite time – 'Have you ever been there?' – 'I have often been there' – as distinct from the more precise location of the simple past. It also shows an action within a time-period regarded as still current, whether long or short – 'Have you read the paper this morning?' – 'He hasn't paid his subscription for this year'. Irish speakers quite often use the simple past and say, for example, 'Did you see her lately?', but their usage seems to co-exist happily with the present perfective. Since the time of the action with the present perfective is usually shown either adverbially or through context, it could be argued that the tense is not essential; but its loss would be regarded by many of us as an impoverishment.

I first heard the 'If I had have' form about forty years ago, when it was certainly thought to be substandard. It is difficult to justify logically, but I think that some speakers may regard the double auxiliary as more tentative and less committed – or perhaps more clearly unfulfilled – than the simpler form.

○ Raymond Chapman, Professor of English Studies, The London School of Economics, London, England

Taking a Liberty

In an article in *ET6* titled 'An Endangered Language?' David F Marshall commits a gaffe that is rather difficult to understand. The author is a Texan, in part educated in New York

City – at New York University, not far from where the Statue of Liberty holds aloft her torch – and is an associate professor of English in North Dakota. How, then, to explain his misplacement of Emma Lazarus' famous poem?

In his peroration, Marshall says of Miss Liberty that 'In her hand is the tablet, which reads: . . .' and then quotes the entire poem that contains the well known lines, 'Give me your tired, your poor, . . .' In fact, the Lazarus poem – written in 1883 for a fund-raiser for the Statue's pedestal, but not officially adopted until 1903 – is inscribed on a bronze plaque placed in the base of the statue.

In the Statue's left hand is the tablet of which Marshall speaks. It represents the law. On it is inscribed the United States of America's birthdate: JULY IV MDCCLXXVI.

○ George DeWan, *Newsday: the Long Island Newspaper*, Long Island, New York, USA

A French reaction to The French Reaction

Colin Boswell's well-documented study of French and *franglais* in *ET7* unfortunately ends with a sting in its tail, the comparison between the policy of the French government and 'the linguistic purism of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, being a gross caricature of reality. The fact is that purism can also flourish in a perfectly democratic system (the case of Iceland is remarkable) or, conversely, be utterly absent from undemocratic regimes. As far as German purism is concerned, it started most peacefully long before Germany was unified. Whatever the political regime, the language of any country can be affected by purism, and, though now the most international language, English has had its moments of purism too.

○ Jean-Marc Gachelin, *Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines, Université de Haute Normandie, Mont Saint Aignan, France*

Encountering literary bias

As a recent convert to *ET*, I was interested to read a letter (*ET5*) from Barrie Land, concerning the new London University A-Level syllabus in English Language Studies. I should like the opportunity of relating my own experiences of this course. After reading the syllabus I enrolled at The Working Mens College, Camden, London, for this subject. It was to be a five-term course that was to cover a wide field of spoken English including dialects, RP, language in the media, etc. It soon became obvious that the



"Good grief, just look at that! – a double negative!"

tutor was not versed in this field of study as she was 'literature based' (her description), she could not enthuse on the subject and consequently the class suffered.

At the last class of the first term, we students were told that the syllabus was 'too broad-based' and drastic changes were to be initiated at the beginning of the second term, with a possible refund for dissatisfied students. At this first class of the second term, the Dean of the College, Mr Levine, explained that the syllabus was 'a hotch-potch' and the course will be altered so as to be more 'literature based'. This entailed dropping two of the three papers and replacing them with papers of a clearly defined literature content.

The decision to do this was taken by academics who showed not the slightest appreciation of language in use, and had no intention of accommodating their students by getting a suitable tutor. Even sadder was the response I encountered by the representative of the London University GCE Examination Board, who I spoke to on the telephone. There was a complete lack of concern over the course alteration and no help whatsoever in advising me on any alternative English Language Studies course in London that I might attend. I encountered a wall of indifference from the literati, and am now attending a course of phonetics at the Polytechnic of Central London. Do other readers of *ET* have any similar tales to tell?

○ William Millis, London, England

Travelling hopefully

I have been considering the use of the word 'hopefully', to which many people seem to object. As I had a good education at a British grammar school (not to be confused with a school of grammar), I am surprised to find that I can't see the objectors' point. In a sentence such as: 'Hopefully there will

be eggs for lunch', I can see evidence for an accusation of laziness, at worst, in leaving out commonly understood words which would only be a waste of breath, thus: '(I express the wish) hopefully (that) there will be eggs for lunch.' If we say it another way, such as: 'I hope there will be eggs for lunch', we save only a little more breath, and neither sentence is particularly ugly. The meaning is unambiguous too. Please would an objector take a moment's rest from objecting, and simply *explain*.

○ Paul Thompson, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England

Keeping an eye on AmE and BrE

As manuscript editor for an international journal for electrophysiology of vision I was vindicated by the *ET4* article on American and British English. Since our publisher is in Amsterdam, some Empire authors get testy at not appearing in English English (not Irish or Scottish – see *ET5*, *shall* and *will*). But the medical doctor editor and I feel incompetent to edit in that language, and have received permission to use American.

Our experience supports the importance of the translator being familiar with the subject. Ours is so specialized that issue editors must assist in particular areas of this general method for diagnosing eye disorders before they become clinically evident. One Japanese manuscript recently stated that 'earth was placed on the forehead'. A ritual burial and the patient isn't even dying? It took some time to recognize that the authors were talking about the ground electrode. All honor to these achievements in a second language, nevertheless.

○ Ms Alamada B Barrett, Scientific Editor, Jules Stein Eye Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, California, USA

English by 2000 AD

I am anxious to solicit ideas from *ET* readers about the way(s) in which they think the English language will have changed by 2000 AD, as part of the material for a book on this subject. Please supply details of sex, occupation and approximate age when writing to me. In addition, any references to writers in the past who have attempted to foretell developments in English would be most welcome. Please write direct to:

○ Katie Wales, Department of English, University of London, Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, Egham Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX, England

Full of force and yet going a speaking

The article 'Is English killing off other languages?', in your April edition suggests that Manx Gaelic no longer exists. Although it is now a minority language, it is still spoken by an estimated 300 enthusiasts, with varying degrees of fluency, albeit as a second language. Although the last native speaker died in 1974, its use has been continuous. *Ta lane fys ayn dy row eh screeuit 'syn Lioar Recoyrtysyn Mac Aoiinghusa, by dooar ee baase 'sy vlein 1974* (There is full knowledge at me that it was written in the Book of the Records of the son of Guinness that she found death in the year 1974). *Hie mee dys oanluckey Ned Maddrell as va ram sleih ayn er shen as Gaelg oc* (I went to the burial of Ned Maddrell and there was a multitude of people in, and Manks at them). *Cha nel ee marroo, cha nel ee ching eddyr. T'ee foast lane dy vree as foast goll y loaryt* (She is not dead, she is not sick at all. She is still full of force and yet going a speaking)!

○ Cristl Jerry, Secretary, Celtic League, Mannin Branch, Peel, Ellan Vannin/Isle of Mann [sic]

Horse Protestants and hoarse Catholics?

Loreto Todd's Gaelic examples in *ET6* (Apr 86, p. 8) would indicate that she is not very familiar with the language or that the proofs of the original issue of *English Worldwide* from which you quote were not corrected. Three mistakes in a sentence of five words; perhaps she got someone to give Gaelic versions of local English in Northern Ireland.

The Edwards article is a fair summary of the Irish situation, but Todd's material only proves the obvious – that there are two separate cultural communities in the six North-eastern counties of Ireland, and that 'cultural' includes language. The same applies to the rest of Ireland. One can usually recognize religion by accent and idiom. Perhaps your readers are not familiar with the word 'horse Protestant' – a loud-voiced self-confident arrogant 'prancing' person (the female of the species speaks with a male voice) – mainly found among the 'gentleman' farmer class. On the other side there is the clearly recognizable rural Catholic who whispers in public places, in case the neighbours could learn his 'business'.

○ Tomás de Bhaldraithe, Ollamh le Canúineolaíocht na Gaeilge, Baile Átha Cliath/Dublin, Éire

Our quotations were indeed as given in *English Worldwide*. Ed.



"I told him to spell 'phonetically' and he said 'F-O-N-E-T-I-C-L-E-E'"

The unparalleled harassment of double letters

An attempt in the United Kingdom to reform our chaotic spelling was last made in parliament in 1953. It was rejected because that ex-schoolmaster, ex-Home Secretary Mr Chuter Ede did not like the spelling *telefoen* which was proposed. I am expecting India or Japan to raise the question again soon because the BBC operates a total boycott of discussion of it. Experience as a schoolmaster made me realise that it's not the *ough* and *over* words that cause most trouble but double letters; e.g. harass, accommodation, unparalleled. These hardly exist in Spanish and could be quickly dispensed with while we reform spelling in stages. Alert readers will know that Neutral *er* is a problem, but I do not favour a new alphabet.

○ Samuel Beer, London, England

Simplified spelling

It was good to read Ted Culp of the Simplified Spelling Society of Canada in *ET4*. The corresponding organization in this country, the Simplified Spelling Society has been active since the beginning of the century in its belief that a reformed spelling could be more effective and more efficient.

Needless to say the barriers to change are high and the society's New Spelling (developed in 1948, but based on an earlier version by Daniel Jones and Howard Orton) was a scholarly scheme but achieved no public acceptance.

The benefits of reform are clearer to see following the initial teaching alphabet experiments of the 1960's when children learning with the reformed alphabet, learned to read, write, and express their thoughts, at an

earlier age. However any reformed spelling needs close continuity with traditional orthography to overcome the problems of unfamiliarity, and the learning needed for its use.

It is with today's requirements in mind that the society is now up-dating its New Spelling of 1948. A whole range of new factors are being taken into account: information theory and the psychology of reading and writing; the need for a world orthography rather than a transcription of BBC newsreaders' English; the relationship between English and other languages; and maximum ease and efficiency in learning and in everyday use, to save time, money and resources.

The Simplified Spelling Society is at present small but stretches round the globe, with links in North America, Australia, Japan, India, the Soviet Union and Western Europe. It is anxious to expand its membership, widen participation in its debates, and involve more people in its activities. Membership, with 3 Newsletters per year, costs £5, payable to the Treasurer, Laurence Fennelly, 1 Old Farm Drive, Southampton SO2 2PX.

○ C J H Jolly, Chairman, London, England

Quotes and allusions

The first adornments to our speech were probably devised by the skalds and jongleurs of the tribe, and begat the metaphors, similes, and other devices that enrich all languages. The Bible and Homer, the Crusades, sea-faring, warfare, stage and screen have all given us terms and expressions like 'the good Samaritan', 'Achilles' heel', 'alchemy', 'between the devil and the deep blue sea', 'hoist with his own petard', 'to upstage someone' and so forth. Now comes the question: How did these quips and sayings in the past infiltrate into our tongue?

Until Caxton started the popular press only clerics, scholars and some of the nobility could read. They would incorporate literary and other allusions into their talk. Could it be that these gems percolated to the masses via valets, footmen and servants who heard their masters talking? The quotes from the Bible are easy to trace. Every Sunday captive audiences sat in the pews and heard Holy Writ thundered from the pulpits so that 'Am I my brother's keeper?' and 'lilies of the field' would become part of life and language. And did the reverse happen? Many of our quotes come from sources like cloth-making ('tenter-hooks'), corn-sieving ('set the Thames – i.e. temes – on fire'), astrology ('under an evil star') and the like, but these trades and professions were localised and their jargon would be limited – so how were

they disseminated? What was the osmosis, like a sap creeping up a tree, that caused the contents of *Brewer* and those other books of quotations to come into existence? Any suggestions?

o Noel Scott, Birchington, Kent, England

For starters, try Margot Lawrence's article in this issue. We have an article on etymology in mind and would like to deal with literary allusions too, in due course. Other readers' comments would be welcome, to help us judge how much interest there is in these areas of the language. *Ed.*

Centring on usage

Concerning *The usage industry (ET7)*: so sorry, I did not know that anyone classed Elizabeth Kirkpatrick as 'socially weak, linguistically substandard, ethnically wrong footed, and generally part of the educated white man's burden'. I don't; but Fowler/Gowers unequivocally support my position on 'centres round'.

Your arguments for toleration here are easily refuted. 'Aren't I' became common English usage through the difficulty of saying 'Amn't I'. It has

Fine old name

Summonses for Parkers on Avenues –
Headline, *N.Y. Times*

Can aught be done to rid and relieve us
Of names but fashioned to kid and deceive us?

A girl named Dolores isn't sad,
And Ira's not always an angry lad.
Barbara isn't savage at all.
The Pacific's the scene of many a squall.
Nobody bowls on Bowling Green.
A buff'lo in Buffalo's never seen.
But meet the champ of names that offend!
Just park too long on Park Avenue, friend.

o Alma Denny, New York

been standard English throughout my life and probably well before it. You had to cast your net rather wide to include some of the snide remarks listed in Panel 2. They could be construed as insulting to the majority of our fellow countrymen and countrywomen.

'Raining cats and dogs' and 'flying into a temper (usually rage)' are delightfully vivid expressions that had innovators who must have originally

thought of them. The general public obviously approved, so that they are examples of good creative language that should be encouraged. 'Centres round' adds nothing to the glory of our language and is just one of many examples of not thinking carefully about what one is saying, writing, typing, etc., and hence is sloppy use of English.

I am a tolerant man – I have had to be in the many jobs I have held down. However, I still wince on hearing 'I was sat', 'He done it', etc.; but realise that the perpetrators know no better because they did not get a good education and are just following the herd. They have my sympathy, not reproof, and I would do anything in my power to help them.

Is mass-usage to be the criterion of good usage, even when something is demonstrably bad? Are the majority always right? Are all standards to be subject to erosion?

Elsewhere in *ET7* Elizabeth Kirkpatrick is quoted thus about *ET*: 'It has the stamp of the relaxed perfectionist.' Now that would make many people uneasy, including me. Do you propose to 'correct' Elizabeth Kirkpatrick or to tolerate this label – with all that it implies?

I am merely pleading that more

Reassessing 'America'

I have only recently subscribed to *English Today*, so I hope you will excuse me referring to items appearing in Issue No 1. Before I do, I would like to compliment you on *English Today*. English is for me a hobby so I particularly appreciate the fact that your contents do not have an academic bias. I do have a professional interest in the subject and will be enthusiastically recommending *English Today* to the 105 members of the Book Publishers' Association of New Zealand of which I am Director.

In 1973 I attended an international conference in Rome. When one speaker used the phrase 'We Americans', a Central American challenged him. The speaker then corrected himself and referred to 'We North Americans'. At this a Canadian objected that the speaker was not representing him. Ever since I have been conscious of the absence of a collective noun for the citizens of the United States of America. (And, as 'An ABC of World English' points out, conscious that 'United States' was also ambiguous). Over these last 13 years I have become aware that the appropriation of the word 'America' and its derivatives to refer to only one country has enormous consequences. Just as far-sighted feminists recognised a long time ago that the use of masculine language at best justified and at worst caused

discrimination in our society (see 'A question of Masculine Bias' in the same issue), so other citizens of the Americas are starting to recognise the harm which arises from allowing one country to monopolise this word. There is no doubt that, notwithstanding the political concept of a 'sphere of influence' the ambiguity in the word 'America' allows the citizens of the United States of America to be persuaded that they have an interest which justifies their political and military interference in the countries south of their own.

Just as the only practical solution to the masculine bias in English is care in the selection of terms and the avoidance of those which present problems, so should be the solution to this dilemma. I advocate that we reject the use of the terms 'America' and 'American' when referring to the United States of America and its citizens. However they should perceive themselves, the rest of the world should insist that they qualify these terms to distinguish themselves from all other people who rightly claim the same description. Initially, of course, there will be a little bewilderment. However, I have found most people quickly take the point.

o Gerard E Reid, Auckland, New Zealand

In *ET1*, I mentioned that William Safire of the *New York Times* invited his readers to send in suggestions for a name that would serve United States citizens more accurately than 'Americans'. After more than a year he had culled 280 submissions, and published his findings in June 86. The general tone of his review, however, does not match the seriousness of your letter, suggesting that while Safire is aware of the problem, he is not too worried by it. His respondents appear to have varied in the degree of their sincerity and sensitivity too, as the list of suggestions indicates: *Usans*, *Usanians*, *Usatians*, *Usasians*, *Usonian*, *Usonans*, *Usofans*, *Usofams*, *Usoans*, *USAmericans*, *USAers*, *Ussins* (as opposed to *Themins*), *Ussies*, *Users* (which Safire calls 'subversive', along with 'Usurers', sent in from a debtor nation), *Usams*, *Uncles*, *Samians*, *Samites* (allowing for 'anti-Samitism'), *Uniteds* (on the model of 'Soviets'), *Units* (on the model of 'Brits'), and *United Statistics* (with Orwellian connotations). Safire concludes: 'Perhaps it is wiser to rely on the perceptiveness of our neighbors to the south and stick with Americans as the name for the people from the United States, no colossusism intended. Our diplomats can point out it is short for United States of American, which is a mouthful.' *Ed.*

should be done to persuade people to think more carefully before they express themselves. What is wrong with that attitude? According to Elizabeth Kirkpatrick you already do this – it is your forte. I hope we can find common ground to pursue this objective.

P.S.: Tribute where tribute is due: I have found much of interest and enjoyment in *ET* since my recent subscription to it and receipt of back numbers.

○ John Garrity, South Croydon, Surrey, England

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.

In defence of Fowler

It is fair enough to attempt a demolition job on Fowler; but it is both unfair and perfectly ridiculous to attempt it on the level of dubious snide sociological generalisation; as if any book written by the recipient of a traditional public school and university education is, *ipso facto*, to be automatically denigrated. The basic, valid objection to Fowler is raised by Gowers himself in his preface to the revised edition: H.W.F. was essentially a 'prescriptive' grammarian; but, ultimately, the rules follow usage, and not *vice versa*.

However, I suppose it is largely a question of where one starts from and what one is aiming at. I myself would start from Iris Murdoch's lapidary assertion: 'The careful responsible

skilful use of words is our highest instrument of thought and one of our highest modes of being'; and my attitude to Fowler is one of simple gratitude for his help in guiding me at least some way along this difficult path. You, sir, apparently start from what is or is not supposed to be acceptable to the 'socially weak, linguistically "substandard" (or) ethnically wrong-footed'. This, I suggest, does credit to your heart, but hardly to your head.

PS. A great deal of interest in the July issue. Congratulations.

○ John Valder, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, England

We would be glad to hear from other readers who have strong opinions either way about the tradition of English-language usage books in general and the works of Henry Fowler in particular. *Ed.*

Anglo-Arabesques

In the weekly *The Middle East* (No 11, Jan 84), a western interlocutor was looking for a satisfactory definition of the term 'Islamic', and inquired about it among some craftsmen:

'Islamic art is nonrepresentational art,' Mustapha replied with hesitation.

'Does that make abstract western art Islamic?'

'No. Islamic drawings and paintings also follow a rule that their lines are straight, curved, or calligraphic,' Mustapha replied.

'But all lines are straight or curved. . .'

'Well, yes, but all lines are not Islamic.'

The interlocutor asks another craftsman about the composition of his designs, and gets the response:

'It is easy. There are definite shapes to follow and I put them together.'

'But the result could be horrible. . . . How do you decide which ones to use?'

'I just copy another tray.'

'Which tray did you copy first?'

'There isn't one. I never make two trays the same.'

'Is it an Islamic design?'

'You know it is Islamic. I know it is Islamic, so why do you ask how I know?'

The above sounds like a scene from an absurd play. The situation, however, is far from absurd, for it delineates an encounter between different minds, languages and cultures, Islamic-Arabic and English in our case. The western interlocutor and his eastern respondents presumably communicated in English, but they could not comprehend each other because they were reared in different cultures and different environments.

Consider the primeval, natural environment of Britain and Arabia, the

birthplaces of English and Arabic respectively. The first is well-punctuated and diverse: plains, hills, mountains, rivers, dales, valleys, etc. The second is monotonous: infinite stretches of sand-dunes, one like the other, the beginning of one the end of another ad infinitum. That is to say, the desert is a natural arabesque. The first is well-defined and concrete, the mountains and rivers natural markers that stress territorial integrity and individuality. The second is indeterminate and undifferentiating due to the absence of fixities, something which encourages conspicuity, impulsiveness, tribalism, communality. The first is earthly and specific, the second abstract and unspecific. The first enhances consciousness of time and place; the second emaciates that consciousness.

English as the language of expository writing accentuates clarity, concreteness and brevity. Arabic is mystical and stresses connotations, flowery expressions, circumlocutions, clichés and abstract diction. English compared with Arabic is referential and serves better as a tool of persuasion and science; Arabic is emotive and is a better tool for rhetoric and sensationalism. English is earthly, being the language of Man. Arabic, being the language of Allah, is heavenly.

Punctuation marks do exist in Arabic, but nobody among the literati seems to heed that existence. Punctuating in Arabic does not have standardized rules and the use of punctuation marks is not mandatory. Every writer – student or professional – is to his own discretion, and no two punctuate the same sentence or paragraph the same. Punctuation is a matter of taste, as a professor of Arabic

once told me. However, as punctuation marks attest syntax and semantics, their absence confuses the Arabic text and the Arab reader as well, and makes communicating similar to that between the western interlocutor and his subjects in the dialogues above. Arabic text comprehensibility is particularly difficult for readers accustomed to using English punctuation, and if one makes the mistake of applying English punctuation to an Arabic text he would end up with a rigmale of fragments, misplaced and dangling modifiers and the like.

Tense in Arabic is like an arabesque, in the sense that its discernible points are transmutable: the past could mean present or future, and the future present or past.

The motherland of Arabic could not bequeath to its people what it did not possess – the specificity and concreteness of the motherland of English. Instead of sea, mountain and river, which impelled people to stop, change course, and make new plans, the landscape of Arabia bestowed upon Arabic users some of its characteristics – monotony, mutability, redundancy, mysticism and randomness. All these characteristics are more or less identifications of the Arab as an individual and mind. Islam changed all of these idiosyncrasies for the better, but that change did not endure. Islam could take the Arab out of the desert but could not take the desert out of the Arab. The shortest possible distance between two points is still the curved line.

○ Ahmed K Ardat, Associate Professor of English, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

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