

Keep it up

I have read the first five issues (including the preview number) of *English Today* and have nothing but praise (and some suggestions) to offer. The magazine is well-balanced, informative, deep without being abstruse and engagingly presented both visually and stylistically. It has room to grow, no doubt, but what we have now is uniquely good in its own right.

I enjoyed tremendously the BBC flexidisc in *ET2* – and I'm sure many reader-listeners did too. So why not make the disc a regular feature? It could contain English samples from different countries, registers, times, social levels and so on. I would also like to suggest the creation of a section dedicated to answer readers' queries about pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, supra linguistic elements, etc., of the English language. To conclude, I just want to wish *ET* a deservedly enormous success. Keep up the good work!

○ Edson José Cortiano, Centro Internacional de Línguas, Paraná, Brazil

Congratulations on *ET*'s coverage, homey panache, and balanced polarity – too entertaining to be pretentiously academic and so professionally provocative that it is deservedly scholarly. That is what I call verve. Keep up the good work.

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

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on the great work you are doing by means of your magazine. I find the articles very interesting. Some of them deal with subjects I had never thought about before. A case in point is the question of the split infinitive. Till now I have studied up to A-Level English and I never bothered about this. As a matter of fact, I did not know what you meant by the phrase at first.

One of the subjects I find really interesting is the way English sometimes integrates with other languages. This may be because Maltese, my language, has been influenced too, especially during this century. To give you just one example, we translate the verb 'to park' as *ipparkja*.

I do not agree with Mr Culp from Canada, who wrote to the editor in *ET4* in 'simplified' English that spelling should be standardized. I think it would create more confusion than there is now.

○ Annemarie Farruigia, Gozo, Malta

I have enjoyed the first issues of *ET*, and my sister in Nepal is eagerly awaiting her first issue in 1986. No doubt many people, like myself, have had their interest in the English language rekindled and indeed intensified by *English Today*.

○ Colin Hawthorne, Belfast, Northern Ireland

Must do better

Unlike Mr Wood (*ET4*), I am renewing my subscription to *ET*, not because I feel that the journal is beyond reproach, but rather because I hope that it will improve with age. However, I feel obliged to echo Mr Wood's reservations, because I am convinced that he is essentially correct: Your readership is more mature – and more able to cope with substantial articles – than you give them credit for.

Although it is perhaps a little unfair to single out one article for criticism, I did feel that 'Salt on the Tongue' (*ET4*) epitomised what is wrong with the journal: Its superficial style was faintly reminiscent of a school magazine. Although an enthusiastic fourth-former would probably not have confused 'gamut' with 'gambit'!

On a more general note I was faintly surprised to note that the Cambridge University Press is now using the Reader's Digest as one of its authorities (*ET4*, p.10). A little incongruous I would have thought? On the subject of typography, why do we have to suffer the irritating device of highlighting key phrases on each page? In the latest edition almost 24 column inches (i.e. the best part of a full page) were lost in this manner. And on the subject of wasting valuable space, why a crossword? Surely the aficionado of these things can find much better examples in the daily press. The removal of this feature, together with solution, would give you yet another page, which you could then devote to items of interest to *all* your readers.

Finally it occurs to me that it might be instructive to compare *ET* with the weekly *New Scientist*. That magazine caters for the widest possible range of tastes by publishing a happy blend of technical and not-so-technical articles – In fact it covers the whole gamut(!) of scientific writing. Perhaps this is the sort of mix, at which *ET* should be aiming?

○ P T Cant, Oslo, Norway

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.

Some Scots confusage

I loyally and violently disagree with Franklyn T Wood's disagreeable letter, and enclose some items from my *An A to Z on Scotland* that I hope will raise a smile. The Scots, being perverse, take a delight in confusing the speaker of good English. Their use of simple words – indeed their pronunciation of them – leaves much to be desired. Here are, for example, some words and phrases in English followed by their meanings in Scots:

*Pliers*

English: a group of sportsmen in a team

Scots: a tool with movable jaws for gripping

*Weet*

English: 'the staff of life'

Scots: raining

*Mite*

English: a friend or boon companion

Scots: anything small; a child

*Cor*

English: an exclamation used by the lower class

Scots: a public vehicle, particularly in Glasgow until recent times

*Weel*

English: a useful circular piece of engineering

Scots: feeling healthy

○ John Mackay, Lauder, Berwickshire, Scotland

Unfair to Ezra Pound?

I was particularly saddened to see Douglas Pickett writing off Ezra Pound as a literary snob, and the more so as Pound spent a great deal of time stressing the very issues in the article, and urging the merits, against the then establishment, of writers such as Eliot and Joyce. Of course, if his search for excellence – and this over no narrow field – opens him to the charge of 'elitism', then he was certainly guilty.

Would that we had more such guilty men among us today. Recently, on a BBC radio book programme, I heard the introducer stating with some sort of mild astonishment, that he had never heretofore come across the names of Karen Blixen and Cornwell Woolrich. Both of these writers are in the class of those whom people actually do read: I have no hesitation whatsoever in stating that they are what people ought to read. Had the announcer in question had the benefit of an 'elitist' education, he might have been spared the ignominy of showing his ignorance of two authors who – in very different ways – gave joy and instruction to an enormous number of readers.

○ George Hay, The English Language Society, London, England

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### Just a touch of hypocrisy?

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I should like to congratulate you on this new type of periodical, scholarly and entertaining at the same time, less stiff and formal and not so boring as linguistic periodicals almost notoriously are, yet combining the straightening out of details with real overview articles. I was pleased too that the diachronic aspect of language is not forgotten, as in McArthur's gazetteer and Jenny Cheshire's article.

Certainly the periodical is written for native speakers of English or those for whom English is already the second language. Yet, read with the eyes of a European, I at least felt that certain articles express a certain, let's call it, self-pride in what Joshua Fishman calls that 'powerhouse' of a language with its tendency to become stronger and stronger every day, so that the news item 'Requiem for a small language' (*ET*1, p. 34) has almost a touch of hypocrisy.

○ Dr Werner Bleyhl, Esslingen, West Germany

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### The essence of 'naff'

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In reference to the word 'naff' (*ET*4, Oct 85), I want to draw your attention to *The Complete Naff Guide* by K Bryson, S Fitzherbert & J Legris (1983), which is 'a definitive handbook for the socially aware.' 'Naff' (adjective) is defined as 'What old SRs call "poll". They don't know what naff means exactly but they use it of clothes etc that look wrong, unfashionable, dear' in *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook* by A Barr & P York (1982).

○ Masanori Toyota, Toyonaka-shi, Osaka-fu, Japan

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### Thoroughly clued up

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I was delighted to see Paul Beale's comments on *naff* in the October issue, and hope you will also review the second edition of Partridge's *Dictionary of Catch Phrases* that he has completely overhauled and updated. Further on dictionaries – one that you did not mention in relation to British and American English was Rudolf Flesch, *Look it up: a deskbook of American spelling and style* (Routledge, 1977). I have found it comprehensive, concise and accurate.

Vernon Noble is splendid. More, please? So is 'Salt on the Tongue', but Bill Beavis could have included the most obvious, both 'plain sailing' and 'clued up' (from clewing up a sail and apparently not connected with 'I haven't a clue' – the detective sense).

○ Mrs C J Raab, London, England

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### Brits among the Expats

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With reference to your 'ABC of World English', and the discussion of *Brit*, in *Partridge's Dictionary of Slang* (7th edition, Vol. 1), at *Brit(t)*, sense 2, you will find:

'(As *Brit.*) A Briton: colloquial: C20.'

For the 8th edition of the Dictionary I added the gloss, 'In widespread use, especially outside the UK'. It never occurred to me, I must confess, that Partridge had in mind any definition other than that of your *Brit*<sup>2</sup>. This was because I have known the term in this sense for at least 20 years. I was in the Army in Hong Kong for most of the 1960s; we had Australian servicemen in our unit, and of course I was in contact with many expats of various nationalities, and the term was in common use amongst us, usually – though by no means always – in a slightly pejorative or derogatory way. But it could be, and was, equally well used quite neutrally. I always thought – and this is purely subjective – that it was a shortening of *British*, rather than *Briton*, as in the passport entry at 'Nationality: Brit/Eng', or, because used by English-speakers from outside the UK, of *Britisher*. May I congratulate you on producing a most interesting magazine; the breadth of cover and wide range of the articles is admirable, and I do hope you will achieve the international success *ET* surely deserves.

○ Paul Beale, Loughborough, Leicestershire, England

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### A helix mes

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I was intrigued by Ted W Culp's letter in *ET*4 (Oct). English spelling has plagued me for years. I always make elementary mistakes, so since I was a child I have been playing with phonetic spellings and new alphabets. I enclose a type-out of Mr Culp's letter in my latest preferred form:

Nou let us dèl widh dhe gràtest lingwistic crym in western sivilyzàxon, Inglix speling. Û aulredi nò dhat our speling iz outràjusli eratic and iraxonali inconsistent. Ar ù aulsò awàr dhat in èch Inglix-spèking cuntri dhàr iz a larj persentej ov dhe populàxon (20% in Canada) dhat iz funcxonali iliterat? Our edùcàxonal sistemz ar gwd or eccelent. Dhe problem iz Inglix speling, which iz dhe sòl cauz for tenz ov milionz ov Inglix spèkerz bèing iliterat around dhe wurd. Speling reformàxon and raxonalizàxon iz bòth inevitabl and desperatli nèded nou.

Wè nèd tw start dhi internaxonal discuxon ov speling reformàxon and tw encurej aul pèpl tw ùz simplifid speling at aul tymz. Wè must not

forget dhat curent Inglix speling iz nou such a helix mes dhat it canot bè reformd in wun step; ràdher, several faziz wil bè nesereri.

○ Ian C Semple, Haifa, Israel

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### The choice and miztron spirits of our age?

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As the word 'master' has at present no precise feminine counterpart, it is used in contexts relating to both sexes and thus exemplifies masculine bias. Note two examples of this: 'A Master of Arts degree for women', and 'She masterminded the Women of the Year luncheon'. My suggestion for overcoming this problem is firstly to re-spell the feminist title *Ms* as *miz*; secondly, as the *-tron* of 'electron' is used as a scientific suffix, so also the *-tron* of 'matron' be employed in a similar way as a feminine suffix; and thirdly, these two elements should be combined to form the term 'miztron'.

Copying the suffixes added to 'master', we may also produce 'miztronful', 'miztronly', and 'miztrony'. These coinages will, I hope, stimulate other persons to improve on them.

A L Rowse, the Oxford don and Shakespearian scholar, is half way through the task of modernizing this dramatist's plays for The University Press of America Inc. His undertaking is to substitute *you* and *your* for 'thou', 'thee' and 'thy', and to replace obsolete words by their contemporary equivalents. There is obviously great prejudice against any such project. However, an article by him on this subject in *ET* would, I imagine, arouse great interest.

○ George Wardell, Reading, England

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### Jewish English

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I would like to comment on the passages of Jewish interest in *ET*3, July 1985.

● Rotwelsch is not 'based on Yiddish' (*Post & Mail*, p. 3). Although it has borrowed many vocabulary items from Yiddish, it is a variety of German. It is also not quite accurate to characterize Yiddish as having come about when 'a Semitic peopl first adopted romance, then High German, and mixt the language with Russian, Polish, Hebrew and Aramaic' (p. 4). A more correct description of the beginnings of Yiddish is found on p. 77 of volume 4 of the *Jewish Language Review* (1984). It is best to avoid the characterization 'Semitic people'. Even if Jews were once all Semites (and this remains to be proven), by the time Yiddish began developing (about a thousand years ago)

the Jewish people was far from being of a single stock.

• In connection with 'An ABC of World English' (p. 27ff.), your readers might be interested to learn that in Israel *Anglo-Saxon* has acquired the meaning 'Jew from an English-speaking country', and is also used in the sense of 'Israeli English'. A notice in the *Jerusalem Post* for 20 June 1980, for example, announced: 'We offer full board and private room to student of Anglo-Saxon origin in return for tutoring.'

• Ronald Sutherland writes (p. 40) that 'it is intriguing to note that the many fine Jewish writers of Canada, much as American Jewish writers in their respective context, often seem to be archetypically Canadian. The Old Testament flavour of the Calvinist-Jansenist tradition probably accounts considerably for this phenomenon, but one also suspects an interconnection with both the "exile" and "nature" attitudinal characteristics of Canadian literature. Certainly the latter tends to reinforce the notion of the insignificance of the individual, faced with either the frigid, wind-swept elements or the Old Testament God.' This passage contains a number of

unproved assumptions, unproved conclusions, and generalizations of questionable value.

• Your editorial 'Comment' ends with, 'Enjoy, as they say in Manhattan Yinglish' (p. 2). The preferred name for the variety of English you are referring to is *Ashkenazic English* (See 'Names for Jewish English and Some of Its Varieties', *American Speech*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 1985, pp. 185-7). The absolute imperative *Enjoy!* is found in varieties of Ashkenazic English all over the world and is not limited to Manhattan. There is also a stronger form *Enjoy! Enjoy!*, and both forms are being adopted by speakers of other varieties of English, including (as your use illustrates) some non-Jews.

○ David L Gold, Director of the Yiddish Studies Program, University of Haifa, Israel

### They could of got it right

For eight years I have been teaching English in an East Manchester comprehensive school set in a stable, working class district where many of the families have lived for several

generations. In this area a linguistic form occurs that is found in no other part of the city. This is the use of 'must of' and 'would of' (etc.) instead of 'must have' and 'would have' (etc.) The auxiliary following a modal drops the aspirated 'a' and is replaced by 'o' as in the stressed form of 'of'. Interestingly, this replacement sometimes occurs in the pronunciation of girls' names, Gina being pronounced Gino. This sound pattern does not occur in the suburbs and the overspill council estates formed by slum clearances, in which the population is drawn from different parts of the city. In such areas the aspirated 'a' is simply dropped and replaced by a weak vowel. This leads me to ask whether this sound pattern is more likely to occur in stable communities than in fluid, mixed communities.

I am also interested in the overall linguistic implications of this usage. The weakness in the use of the auxiliary 'have' seems to reflect a general inadequacy in understanding the use of the auxiliary in its other forms. Far too few children are prepared to use the completed past 'had' as part of a narrative, preferring the use of the simple past. A proportion

## Salt on whose tongue?

Intrigued by the title of Bill Beavis' article in *ET4* ('Salt on the tongue'), I began to read his paper in sympathetic mood. After reading *gambit* for *gamut*, hackles tickled ominously, and before long I had out my not very large selection of word books – to find that seemingly only a handful of the author's claims could pass the test of Occam's razor: *doldrums*, *headway*, *wind out of one's sails*, *taken aback*, *three sheets in the wind*, *half slewed*, *brace yourself* (perhaps), *strike* (ditto), *aloof*, *too close to the wind*, and *the cut of his jib*. I list the remaining examples, varying from dubious to downright unrelated:

**Out of the blue** The *Shorter Oxford* (1964) says 'sky or sea', so why nautical? Compare it with *a bolt from the blue*.

**Let fly** The *SO* has first 'to discharge (missiles)', then the nautical 'to allow (a sail or sheet) to fly loose'. Hence it would more probably come from loosing an arrow from the bow. Cf. *SO*, *loose*, 'to let fly (an arrow)'.

**Listless** The *SO*, 'destitute of relish', clearly comes from the same root as *lust*, not *lean*; the nautical connotations seem to have come secondarily into association with it.

**Get cracking** The *SO* has no direct references to origin, but several suggesting briskness – nautical origin therefore laboured?

**Crack on** Partridge's *History of Slang*:

'Make great speed' (1541).

**On the make** The *SO*, 'intent on profit or advancement (U.S.)' makes no reference to the sea.

**Bring up short** A rather obvious derivation from 'stop short'; I suggest that the nautical use is derived from it (perhaps via 'bring to').

**All square** The *SO*'s references to 'just', etc., (1591) have nothing to do with nautical uses, which come later (1625), under the verb.

**Cock-up** The *SO*'s third verbal definition: 'to stick up' (e.g. ears: 1629) is 'from the name of the fowl'. Cocking up the ends of yards could be derived from this.

**Footloose** Brewer has 'footloose and fancy-free' – surely from the medieval practice of fettering the feet? Nautical use derived from that.

**Shakes** 'Two shakes of a lamb's tail' is U.S., early C19, with U.K. 'A brace of shakes' in 1816. 'Two shakes of a duck's bottom' (1940s) may be the nautical source!

**Go like the clappers** I first met this as 'go-like the clappers of hell', which refers to the clanging tongues of Hell's bells. The only nautical link here is Davy Jones' Locker!

**Press on/ahead** *Ahead* is certainly of nautical origin, but *press* isn't, and *pressing on* has no necessary nautical sense.

**Scant** The *SO* has six entries on general connotations of 'inadequate',

then a seventh entry labelled nautical and applied to the wind.

**Slant** The *SO* has general adjective and adverb 'sloping' (1495) and the nautical usage for a slight breeze (1596).

**In a flap** The *SO* has 'a state of agitation'. A nautical derivation would imply that sails are the only physical objects that flap agitatedly.

**Won't wear it** Attributing this to the 'wear' of a ship is pure assertion. There is no reason why the phrase should not relate to clothes.

**Under the weather** The *SO* has it as U.S., 'indisposed'.

**Bearing up** The *SO* has two usages, 'keeping up spirits' and 'putting helm up so as to put the ship before the wind.' No relation, chronological or other, is shown between the two.

**Bear down** The *SO* has a Middle English 'overthrow, vanquish', then in 1593 'sail with the wind', hence derived.

**Overbear** The *SO* has it as Middle English; no nautical references.

**Touch-and-go** There is a general dictionary connotation of touching and quitting immediately, hence the *SO*'s 'risky . . . state of things'. Nothing nautical mentioned.

Is 'scraping the bottom of the barrel' of nautical derivation?

○ Bill B Broughton, Colchester, England

of children – not only the less able – seem confused over the form ‘had had’. The usage seems resistant to correction, but the teaching of the apostrophised form in conjunction with a specification of its use in dialogue seems to have been effective with 11 year olds of mixed ability. It is made clear that the only use of that sound is in transcriptions of speech, whereas the full form must be used in other cases.

○ F C Beswick, Stretford, England

### Parsing and complex sentence structure

I was very interested in David Crystal’s article on English parsing in *ET3*, but would disagree that average 5-year-olds ‘have learned all the basic sentence patterns . . . and have learned most of the more “complex” patterns of co-ordination and subordination’. With the 16–18 year-old apprentices that I have

been teaching, I have found a distinct lack of familiarity with most types of subordination other than *if*, *when* or *because* clauses, and a confusion over the structural constraints imposed by such different parts of speech as *however* and *although*. I found little use of the ‘more advanced patterns of sentence connection’ that Mr Crystal mentions as missing from most 5-year-olds’ speech (and that he implies are a part of an adult’s vocabulary).

I think several factors come in here. In the first place, *actually*, *however*, and *as a matter of fact* (the three examples given) are perhaps more a feature of ‘middle class’ than ‘working class’ speech (I use inverted commas to indicate my awareness of the dangers of making assumptions about class). Secondly, some sentence connectors (as with some types of subordination) are much more associated with the written than the spoken language. Anyone not in the habit or under the necessity of

producing bits of continuous prose may be expected to be unfamiliar with the rhetorical devices that are characteristic of such writing. All good wishes for the future of *English Today*.

○ Margaret Locke, Northampton College of Education, England

### Love for men and women

Twenty years ago ‘love’ was used in Sheffield as a mode of address even between adult males. I don’t know if it still is. It is certainly of greater currency than Peter Royle opines in his letter (*ET4*). Separately, has Robert Ilson noticed that even in ‘AmE’ a vowel between the ‘c’ and ‘r’ of ‘acre’ would soften the ‘c’ to /s/. This is presumably the reason for ‘cre’ spellings. The magazine is top notch.

○ Derek Shields, Widnes, Cheshire, England.

## An ear off the ground?

What a wealth of material in *ET4*! Needless to say, I was particularly drawn to Bob Ilson’s article, ‘Diversity in Unity,’ and to David Crystal’s ‘Language, life, the universe,’ which would seem to cover it all.

In his comments on grammar, Ilson writes ‘. . . Americans are more likely to say *The committee has issued their report* than *The committee have issued their report*.’ To be sure, the first is heard, and there is no denying that American speakers tend to consider collectives as singular rather than plural; but the example as given would be considered a solecism (even) in AmE, where the preferred form would be *The committee has issued its report*. (To avoid sexism in language, Americans now tend to prefer the plural pronouns of reference in contexts like *Everyone must do their duty*. But that is to avoid the awkward *his or her duty* and is, nonetheless, considered nonstandard. I haven’t noticed the same aversion to ‘sexist’ language in BrE, but Americans get all bent out of shape trying to avoid masculine pronouns substituting for people whose sex is not discriminated. But see, page 38, same issue, David Crystal’s ‘. . . anyone who is forced to do something unpleasant will either rebel (and take the consequences) or will rearrange their value systems. . . .’ Americans, unfortunately, seem unable to distinguish between *sex* and *gender*, but that is another problem.)

Turning to the sidebar, ‘A British–American Glossary’, whoever compiled *The Right Word at the Right Time* for Reader’s Digest had, to

fracture an idiom, his ear off the ground:

*bird* (BrE) is used in AmE.

*biscuit* (BrE) is used in AmE, where it usually means a cracker; a *cookie* (AmE) is usually a *sweet biscuit* in BrE.

*camp bed* is widely used in AmE to mean ‘cot.’

*catalogue*, *dialogue*, *analogue*, and other *-logue/-log* words are spelt either way in AmE.

*chest of drawers* (or just *chest*) is AmE. *estate agent*: The term *Realtor* is a registered trademark of the Real estate Board (or something like that); it is not generic.

*flat* is widely used in AmE, though, till about 20 years ago, it was considered old-fashioned.

*fortnight* is certainly known in AmE, but is far less common than in BrE.

*frying pan*: *skillet* is a less common (dialectal) variant of *frying pan* in AmE. But AmE (now) has *fry pan* (or *frypan*, or *fry-pan*), usually encountered in advertisements for electrical versions.

*garden party* and *lawn party* are equal variants in AmE.

*gents* is common in AmE; perhaps the compiler meant to indicate that while *men’s room* is a free variant in AmE, it is rarer in BrE, but I find that hard to believe.

*glasses W* – *eyeglasses*: These are free variants in AmE; my comment would be that BrE *spectacles* is known in AmE as old-fashioned or provincial in AmE.

*jug* and *pitcher* are free variants in AmE, though the former would usually be used of something rather squat and made of pottery or glass

(that is, rarely metal).

*launderette* and *laundromat* are free variants in AmE: *Laundromat* was once a trademark, but I don’t know its present status.

*lavatory* and *washroom* are free variants in AmE.

*leader* (orchestra) – concertmaster??

The second is far, far rarer in AmE.

*pelmet* – *valence*: The spelling is *valance* in this sense; *valence* is a term in chemistry.

*practise* (v) – *practice* are free variants in AmE.

*railway* – *railroad*: This perpetuates a difference that seems to be a favorite of British commentators: it is totally untrue that *railway* is not frequent in AmE, though *railroad* might have the edge.

*reverse charge(s)* – *collect*: These are variants in AmE: *I’d like to reverse the charges/I’d like to call collect*; as can be seen, the grammar is different.

*rowlock* – *oarlock*: The second is more common, but the first is widely known and used (pronounced /rolik/) in AmE.

*sanatorium* – *sanitarium* are, in some senses, free variants in AmE.

*skirting board* – *baseboard*: The first is more often used by AmE builders and other tradesman/craftsmen; the second is the more common AmE term used by ‘real’ people.

*tie* (clothing) – *necktie*: If what is meant is that both are free variants in AmE but that *necktie* is rare or unknown in BrE, I have no criticism; but I doubt the latter.

The most provocative issue yet of *ET*.

○ Laurence Urdang, *Verbatim*, Essex, Connecticut, USA