

A moratorium on authoritarians?

It is a pity that, after starting with a plea by the well-named Tony Fairman for the descriptive approach to language, *ET* 17 should end with a diatribe by your arch prescriptivist correspondent Professor O'Brien.

Such attempts by prescriptivists to impose rules of right and wrong are expressions of the intolerant attitude towards others shown by members of any fundamentalist priesthood, religious or in this case academic. One device by which priesthoods demonstrate their superiority to the laity is to use inflated language. That, I suppose, is why Professor O'Brien uses such phrases as 'I was mandating a moratorium on the word tremendous' instead of the straightforward 'I told students to stop saying tremendous'.

So far *ET* has in the main stood for (a) plain English, and (b) a tolerant, descriptive, civilised attitude. Please don't give encouragement to the enemies of those values by devoting more space to high-flown expressions of bigotry by authoritarians.

Alec Bristow
Thwaite, Eye, Suffolk, England

Baneful numbers

English is fortunate in its authorities: the *OED*, Fowler's *Usage*, Gower's *Plain Words*, Jespersen's grammars, Wodehouse's *Jeeves* . . .

Now, if I understand the descriptionists correctly, they would, in determining acceptable guidance standards by 'popular vote', allow these authorities and their successors only unit representation within the universal data from which they would form and endorse language models.

Therefore, as the elements comprising these envisioned data

would include the overwhelming numerical representation of the baneful carelessness, ignorance and mischief that find massive expression at most levels of society, it is clear – to me – that the beneficial influence of our established authorities will perform vitally fail. Silenced, as it were, by the countenanced volume of indiscriminating clamour.

Is not the descriptionists' resolve tantamount to that, say, which would deliberately weaken the standards of general music instruction because of the predominance of rock & roll?

Dick Ogden,
Sumas, Washington, USA

Accent matters

A recent television programme from Birmingham, devoted to the subject of accents, was ostensibly designed to give Professor John Honey a chance to talk about his new book *Does Accent Matter? The Pygmalion Factor*. I say ostensibly because the presenter of the programme and the studio audience soom combined forces to lay down a verbal barrage that left one in no doubt that Honey was the villain of the piece.

In his book Professor Honey reminds us with complete objectivity and pragmatism that the way we speak, the accent we use, governs to a very large extent the way we are perceived and, indeed, judged, by those round us: like it or not, all kinds of assumptions are made about personal attributes, and this can be very important when, for example we apply for a job. All this has been demonstrated over the many years by studies carried out by academics such as Howard Giles and others, and must be regarded as established fact. Yet when someone stands up in public and says so, he is greeted

with derision; and, tragically, many children are allowed to leave school to go in search of employment without having had it explained to them by their teachers that, to get a worthwhile job, they must be able to speak in the way their prospective employers require.

Isn't it high time our teacher training establishments were made to recognise these hard facts of life? No doubt teaching children to be able to speak in the manner of the stereotypical BBC newsreader conflicts with current notions concerning 'elitism', but does the educational establishment have the right to sacrifice our young people's chances of decent jobs on the altar of sociolinguistic egalitarianism?

Peter M Bassett,
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Pulborough,
W. Sussex, England.

Cohorts

For at least 40 years (in my own memory) one use of *cohort* has been as a humorous or playful expression meaning a sidekick or partner in mischief. It answers well to Paul Christophersen's 'group of people on the warpath together' (*ET*, Jan 89), with the polysemy of man and body of men no more impossible than it is in *guard*. It also answers well to a frequent sense of the Latin source word, *cohors*: 'the auxiliary forces of the allies, attached to the Roman legions.' (Satellite into sidekick.) In fact, such irregular forces are closer than Byron's to the earliest relevant sense of *cohors*: 'a barnyard, a muster of yokels.'

Lately the press, with little humor and less Greek, has begun to treat *cohort* as a mere synonym for 'companion or partner', a bland outcome, alas. Even so, the charming hue given this word

by Byron is not a patent, or Milton's lawyer would have us all on car.

Robert L Moore,
New York City, New York, USA

Getting sectioned

Pam Peters (ET17) submits that 'Caesarean' in the obstetric sense is probably derived not as is widely held from the legend of Julius Caesar's birth but from 'caes-(cut) and -arian(associated with)'. The *Shorter* and *Concise Oxford* dictionaries still pay tribute to Caesar but Collins and Chambers English and Butterworth's and Dorland's medical dictionaries give support to her argument, and that makes 'caesarian/caesarean section' tautological. All is not lost: in its colloquial form a woman 'gets sectioned'. (Alternatively, she 'has a Caesar'.)

W F Kerr,
Cringelford, Norwich, England

Whosebury?

Dr Alan C Berson has puzzled me, and I wish he would enlighten me, about the pronunciation of 'Maryland'. If, as he suggests, it is to be said 'Merland' why is it put to the same tune and metre as the three syllables of 'Tannenbaum', 'Christmas Tree', and 'People's Flag'?

He should live where I live! There are three distinct pronunciations of 'Shrewsbury'. Firstly, it is known widely throughout Britain as 'Shroze-b'ry', which is closest to its original saxon name. Second, locals pronounce it 'Shrooz-b'ry'. Thirdly, some locals including the announcer at the railway station, say 'Shooz-b'ry', although many consider that a slovenly pronunciation.

Rumour has it that the Normans called it 'Salop' because it was a bitch to pronounce!

Paul Thompson,
Shrewsbury, England



'For instance, sir, you must have spent hours of frustrating indecision wondering if the verb "be" is anomalous.'

Going on

I am a charter subscriber. In our household, we throw out *National Geographic* and save *ET*. In response to Patricia Cleveland-Park's request (ET15, July 1988), the alternative to the verb 'to say' is, I fear, definitely American. I am so sad to learn that it has leaked out to the Mother Country. My memory tells me that I first heard the usage in the mid-1960's when my sons began to bring it home. When they would mumble to me, as is the wont of 14-year-olds, I would ask, 'What did you go?' That usually got their attention but did nothing to deter their use of 'go/goes?' for 'say/says'. The usage continues unabated among young Americans, but I have yet to hear it expressed in the past tense. Such attacks on the native tongue drove me to teaching English as a Second Language about twelve years ago. I tired of trying to teach EFL (English as a First Language) to *Homo Erectus Americanus* who believes that to have a thought is to be, like man, like a twarfy dweeb, like, man, like a nerd (and I could say on, and say on, and say on).

To Philip C Stine (same edition), the hyphen is an endan-

gered species in the States. Signs order us to do unlawful and impossible tasks, eg, 'drive in window', 'carry out counter', and 'check out counter'. I found the ultimate example in a headline in a weekly newspaper years ago: GRANDMOTHER OF EIGHT SHOOTS HOLE IN ONE. It makes for lively discussion when I suggest that the lady was either a member of the National Rifle Association or the Ladies Professional Golfers Association. (And the latter group title exemplifies why the apostrophe showing profession is also in rapid decline in the colonies.)

Robert G Carey,
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Potpourri

I found many interesting things in ET17, and would like to comment on four of them. First, I have some difficulty with Tony Fairman's 'Angles of Vision' piece in which he asserts that 'standard' is a prescriptive and not a descriptive term, when it is generally meant and understood as the latter - even by grammarians, I would guess, who surely do not simply fall back upon the *OED* sense Fairman quotes. He also claims that its use implies that all other varieties are 'non/standard', thus confounding two terms which linguists have tried to disconnect and one of which ('substandard') they have tried to erase. 'Nonstandard' is not, of course, considered as 'not worth serious attention because... incorrect.' Fairman's suggestion that we drop the term 'standard' is not likely to be acted upon, nor would many sociolinguists subscribe to the view that children's literacy is impaired by having to learn to read and write Standard English at school. To add to the muddle, Fairman feels that terms like 'Scouse' and 'Cockney' are descriptive when in fact, in a variety of English-speaking con-

texts, they evoke some rather interesting evaluative reactions.

Second, I was happy to achieve full marks on Ruth Wajnryb's 'Way with Words' quiz. However, while acknowledging that 'obfuscate' means to darken, obscure, etc. (answer *d*), I think a case could easily be made for answer *b* as well – to render more difficult. The possibility that multiple-choice quizzes provide more than one 'right' or 'reasonable' answer is a serious topic in light of the extensive use of these noxious testing instruments (see Banesh Hoffmann's excellent and witty *The Tyranny of Testing* for a thorough examination – and condemnation – of such devices).

Third, it is interesting that, in his letter, Don Long reports that Maori words (including *Maori* itself) are no longer commonly pluralised by adding *s*, and that to write *Maoris* is now seen as ungrammatical by New Zealand English speakers – this is the same issue in which Robert Burchfield *does* use *Maoris* in his article.

Fourth, Adrian Room adds to the discussion of the use of 'go' for 'say' in his letter, suggesting that here 'go' implies 'go on'. In this part of Canada, at least, 'go' seems simply a replacement for 'say' in the conversation of many youngsters and adolescents. Thus a child may describe to parents a conversation he or she has had that day at school in which the form 'I said . . . He said . . . I said . . . She said . . . etc' is replaced with 'I go . . . He goes . . . I go . . . She goes . . . etc'

John Edwards,
Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada

The future in English

The view that English has no future tense is not a 'progressive' idea hit upon by Charles Fries 'over fifty years ago' and subsequently adopted by 'that great guru Randolph Quirk' (strongly implies in Sylvia Chalker's

review of the *Longman English Grammar*, ET17). The idea is as old as English itself, for the language never has had a 'future tense', in the sense that Latin had a future tense. Here is the great Finnish scholar Tauno F Mustanoja on the subject in his *A Middle English Syntax*, page 489 (Helsinki 1960):

FUTURE TENSE = PERIPHRASTIC FUTURE – In Old English the idea of futurity is normally conveyed by the present tense. Periphrases with *sculan*, *willan*, *magan* and *motan* are also used to express futurity, usually with a strong modal colour. The development of *sculan* and *willan* into auxiliaries of the future and the numerous problems connected with the development have occupied the minds of many grammarians. Originally, of course, both verbs have independent meanings, expressing obligation and volition. Used in conjunction with other verbs they are gradually reduced to mere modal auxiliaries. Eventually the idea of futurity latent in the notions of obligation and volition becomes predominant, with the result that *sculan* and *willan* become auxiliaries expressing pure futurity.

One of the grammarians whose mind this development occupied was John Wallis (1616–1703). In his *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* (1653) he was probably the first to point out that English has only two tenses: present and past (*love/loved*).

Wallis's definition of 'tense' is very narrow. It is based on the idea that the form of the verb also indicates time, so that *love* automatically indicates present time and *loved*, past time. On this basis, only dead languages would seem to have a future tense (as Latin: *amabo*, *amabios*, *amabit*; *regam*, *reges*, *reget*, etc.) To the best of my knowledge (perhaps your readers can enlighten us) all modern European languages have no future tense and have

had to invent one. German uses *werde*; modern Greek (unlike its ancient counterpart) uses a future marker, *tha* + present; Romance languages combine *have* with the base form of the verb. So, in French, the present of the verb *avoir* is stuck on the end of verbs to form a future (*serai*, *seras*, *sera*; *arriverai*, *arriveras*, *arrivera*). Compare eg Spanish: *vivire*, *vivieras*, *vivira* (to live); Portuguese: *virei*, *viras*, *vira* (to come); Italian: *vendero*, *venderai*, *vendera* (to sell).

Likewise, English has had to invent a way of talking about the future and it uses *shall* and *will*. The question is, are we entitled to call this 'a future tense'? The key lies in the observation by Mustanoja: when the idea of futurity becomes predominant *shall* and *will* 'become auxiliaries expressing pure futurity'. He doesn't hesitate to call such combinations in Old English a 'future tense'. In other words, if we are talking about simple prediction, we are entitled to talk about a future tense. All other modern European languages don't hesitate to do so. Why should we?

L G Alexander,
Haslemere, Surrey, England

In praise of the passive

Dennis Baron makes a well-documented defence of the passive voice, citing a remarkable number of objections from writers on style, few of which seem justifiable (ET17). The passive is often of great service in English and the subjective argument of clumsiness must sometimes yield to the practical one of utility:

1 The word which would normally be the object of the verb may be the real topic of the sentence and can receive the prominence of what is normally the subject position: *Columbus crossed the Atlantic* is primarily a statement about Columbus, but *The Atlantic was crossed by Col-*

umbus is primarily a statement about the Atlantic.

2 The main verb may make overt statement of the subject redundant: *The Conservative candidate was elected* is simpler than something like *Those qualified and voting in the constituency elected the Conservative candidate*.

3 The active subject may be uncertain and unimportant: *The village is supplied with electricity*. By the national grid, the local power station, nuclear power? It doesn't usually matter.

4 The subject may be unknown and the interest concentrated on the action itself: *A window was broken soon after midnight*.

5 Most important of all, the passive gets us out of a difficulty through the lack of a good impersonal pronoun in English. Expressions like *One says that* . . . are awkward and lead to a series of *one* and *one's* or the current embarrassment about gender pronouns. *They say* . . . is fine in speech with stress on *say*, but the difference from the personal cannot be clearly shown in writing, so *it is said* . . . provides the way out. Similarly, *How is this word pronounced?* avoids the ambiguity of *How do you pronounce this word?* or the stilted *How does one pronounce this word?* Of course it is also possible to say *What is the pronunciation?* English very often provides an entrance through the side door if the front seems to be shut.

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Shall and will

In *ET17* (Jan 89), there is an extract on page 54, which I take to be a copy of page 178 of *Longman's English Grammar*. This is not what we were taught at school and I don't know which is right.

We were taught that the simple future of shall/will is 'shall'

for the first person, and 'will' for the other two, and that the definite future is will for the first person and shall for the others.

This doesn't seem to make much sense but we were made to remember it by the sentences 'I shall drown, no-one will save me' for the indefinite future, and conversely 'I will drown, no-one shall save me' for the definite future. This makes it seem much more sensible and I have used this means ever since.

AD Denton,
Littlehampton, West Sussex,
England

Out of patience

Here in North America, we are subject to many influences and a permissive society when it comes to its language. It's the history, changes in and the nuts and bolts of language which interest me mostly, so I may become more 'regular' by commenting on more examples to you as I record some of the patterns. Here is a construction which has appeared and grown over the last few years.

I believe it first appeared in speech rather than the written word and I think it probably started in sports commentaries on American (gridiron) football (a veritable manure heap of new hipspeak). The game is largely made up of ex college players, so any reference to the latter came to be followed by ' . . . out of Notre Dame, or out of USC, or out of Michigan State'. It would have been just as easy to continue saying ' . . . from', but you know what sports reporters are for generating new language. I remember David Coleman and Eddie Waring well. Over here of course there was the master, Howard Cosell, fortunately now retired.

The usage seemed to spread not only to denote the player's alma mater, but also then to point out the individual's place of origin. It then became useful in other sports, as that in a sport with a mostly non-university

background like baseball, a player could be said to be " . . . out of Elbow Bend, Ontario".

It really began to annoy me a couple of years ago when I heard of a young local driver who had moved west, to Calgary I believe, to be nearer to the best diving coaching. A radio sports report said that he had left Nepean, Ontario to move west and "was now diving out of Calgary". It would have to be quite a dive.

The epidemic has spread though. It is no longer confined to a sports context and can be heard and read in all forms of journalism. As I said, most of the references are in verbal reporting, but here are two which appeared in print on the same day, from the *Ottawa Citizen* of November 30th, 1988.

Instead of being in their offices doctors work out of their offices and another chap operates his business out of his address. I always thought that we worked IN our offices or AT our addresses. A friend of mine runs a sideline business out of her basement at home. Funny, she is always IN her basement when I see her working. So the normal meaning attributed to the words has been turned 180 degrees and we are expected to understand exactly the opposite now.

Arthur Grainge,
Kanata, Ontario, Canada.

What new pronunciations lose

Many people object to new pronunciations for subjective, aesthetic reasons, which they find hard to substantiate. But some new pronunciations mean that word-play and rhyme disappear and this loss is surely to be deplored. Here are a few examples of what I mean.

In *The Pirates of Penzance*, Act 1, Gilbert's comic exploitation of the confusion between "orphan" and "often" which used to be pronounced identically, may puzzle modern readers or lis-

teners. In order to clear up the misunderstandings, Major-General Stanley asks the Pirate King the following question: "When you said 'orphan', did you mean 'orphan' – a person who has lost his parents, or 'often' – frequently?"

I keep hearing people say "tortoise" to rhyme with "boys". So perhaps another well-known pun may also soon be lost: "We called him Tortoise because he taught us," said the Mock Turtle angrily" (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, ch 9).

Then what about "Sun-day", "Mon-day", and so on? The verse, "Solomon Grundy, Born on a Monday . . . will jar on our ears. Similarly, "one" pronounced with the same vowel sound as "on" will ruin some rhymes, as in Feste's closing song in *Twelfth Night*: "But that's all one, our play is done" (assuming that "done" retains its present pronunciation!)

In this way, we are losing verbal harmonies and comedy as surely as we are losing refinements of meaning through the spread of malapropisms.

Donald Hawes,
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English Verbal Humour and Spelling

"We are glad that our lecturer will be speaking shortly . . ." Almost all verbal humour is oral – including puns. How important then is Harry Morgan's query (ET17) that an improved spelling might cause of loss of 'power' for English verbal humour? He thinks that much of this power stems from homophones with a wide variety of spellings and their 'delicious double and triple meanings'.

The quick answer to this is to look up a book of puns or other jokes. Most wordplay jokes can be – and are – spoken aloud, and most of them use homographs. Most of our words with multiple

The Now Generation

The possible effect of radiation upon heredity is being studied by The National Academy of Sciences – News Report.

Now, when our children
kick up a fuss,
Please don't wiggle a finger
at us.

Realize behaviour that's
unattractive

Means they're possibly
radioactive!

Alma Denny,
New York

meanings have single spellings – in Morgan's letter alone there were: *humour, rare, ower, stem, wide, form, level, deck, coin, end, range, image, common, uniform, tell, excite, kind*, (17) plus another dozen multiple shades of meaning, and as well as the heterographic homophones *would not, two, one all, we, our, by, some, symbol, need, know, be, seas* (14). (And most of the new words now entering the English language by the hundred are old words or combinations being given new meanings – but not new spellings.)

If 'one of the functions of language is to enhance our ability to conceptualise', then we should be doing all we can to help others beside the élite to have access to written language for this enhancement, not trying to maintain its difficulties for our own amusement. There is moderation needed in all things; some of our English homophones or possible homophones could well be confusing and might better remain distinguished by spelling, or changed in pronunciation – e.g. *letter, to, for* – but our local newspaper has a regular column for current language abuse, and it is mostly for popular confusion of heterographs. Even *there/their/they're* and *its/it's* are never learnt by probably 60%

of the population after years of school drills.

Henry Morgan might make up a list of jokes that depend upon the spelling of the heterographic words that he listed – there may be twenty? Even in a different spelling the fun would remain in "Can you canu? No, I cannot . . ." "If the 2.2 to Tooting wer tu soon to tool" and the limerick about the young girl in the choir whose voice rose hoir and hoir until it was found in the spoir. The only jokes that I think would be spoiled would be the limericks that depend on duplicate English place-names such as Sarum/Salisbury or Hampshire/Hants.

"Are verbal archaeology and fossil history to be considered less valuable and exciting than any other kind?" Frankly, yes, for our public of TV watchers. And no archaeologists insist that we should live in what they uncover, and historians have never been the ones to want cars to remain looking like horseless carriages. 'Sunken treasure ships' are cleared off shipping lanes. The 'linguistic seas' are dangerous enough for learners even without so much precious debris. We have libraries, dictionaries, museums and academic departments for our literary archeology and fossilising. We have also a population of over fifty million; about five million are more or less illiterate, and, of all the six hundred million-plus users of English in the world, at the most 50,000 who enjoy etymological games without using dictionaries to play them. But my guess is that this curious élite is probably no more than 250 in the whole world. What a price is paid for their amusement.

We live in times when lack of literacy is a menace to our civilisation – contributing to the risk of loss of a civilised sense of humour. Comic strips and TV over the past three decades have been moving away from verbal wit to aggression as funny. If a character makes a witty remark, or even does some clever trick, the

riposte to get the laugh will show him being flattened or otherwise damaged. TV comic slapstick may rely too much on rocks falling on people's heads, or forms of violence that are far from soft custard-pies. There are even writers, including writers of comedy for the public, who will insist today that *all* humour is cruel, and laughter is only at someone else's harm. Reading is a way to find out that this has never been so in past civilisations – even our own.

The humour we must try to keep sparking is the generous, kindly and witty humour that everyone and every class can enjoy – couthy and music-hall as well as dry, subtle and academic. There is more need for passion here than in trying to find more heterographs for the multiple meanings of “light” or getting upset because Milne's letter in the same issue of *ET* pointed to the real language disaster that is occurring in English today, in the growing trend to the *approximate use* of English vocabulary, so that meanings become vague, and thinking loses all precision.

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Skriptage

I welcome the tone of Tony Fairman's article, but I believe he falls into error, because he fails to make the distinction between language and skriptage. Language is spoken and can only be observed as behaviour. To observe and describe language is the job of the linguist. Skriptage on the other hand has to be formulated. That is the job of the grammarian and the lexicographer. The difference between linguistics and grammar is that between pure science and applied technology. By its nature therefore grammar is prescriptive where linguistics is descriptive.

Grammarians and lexicographers have always been language planners, or more korrekty, skriptage planners, since their efforts have their effect on language through the medium of skriptage. The grammarians' attack on the double negative in skriptage has had an effect on language. The double negative is a feature of natural language, but grammarians, influenced by mathematics and formal logic, have waged war on it for centuries.

Lexicographers also seek to, and often succeed in influencing language through their tinkering with skriptage. Examples of this phenomenon are where *parfait* was respelled perfect and we actually say that today, also where *b* is introduced into the spelling of *det* and *dout*, so that people who learn the skriptage before the language often pronounce these words with a *b*.

Tony Fairman is korrekty when he says that there is no standard language. What is normally regarded as the standard language is nothing more than the dialect of an elite group in society. On the other hand, there is a standard skriptage simply because grammarians and lexicographers over the centuries have spent their lives defining the standard skriptage.

Robert Craig,
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England

PS I thought that W Gordon Milne and Francis W O'Brien (Post and Mail) were awful.

Playing about with English

Writing in the *Sunday Times* recently a French woman language teacher deplored the English people's ignorance of grammar. One of her complaints was that her pupils did not understand the difference between “*who*” and “*whom*”.

Her article illustrated in a

striking manner one of the basic differences between the French and the English attitudes to grammar in particular and language in general. It may not be easy for a French teacher to accept, but the fact is that the word “whom” has practically disappeared from the language, and the reason for its disappearance is simply that so few English people now use it. No matter what the purists or pedants say, or how they may complain, when a word or a construction ceases to be used by the majority of English people, that word or construction becomes obsolete.

I am a teacher of English to foreign students, many of whom (!) come from France and from other Western European countries whose language, like the French, is largely derived from Latin. One of their difficulties is that, ironically, they often speak and write too grammatically. We have developed the phrase, “Good English, but bad grammar”, not an easy concept for many foreign learners.

In a reputable magazine the other day I saw a short paragraph by a respected journalist concerning a television programme and it contained two grammatical mistakes. First, the writer used a plural verb to follow the singular pronoun “everyone”; and secondly he used the preposition “like” when he should have used the conjunction “as”. And yet I wondered how many readers noticed them. And how should a writer deal with this problem: “Everybody must do . . . best”? If he writes “Everybody must do *his* best”, he will be accused of sexism. If, on the other hand, he were to write “Everybody must do *his or her* best”, he would face the accusation of pedantry. So what does he do? He says “To hell with the rules of agreement, I'm going to write, “Everybody must do *their* best”.

This is the only one of the many examples of usage taking precedence over grammar. The

truth is, and it is difficult for foreign students to accept it, that grammar in English is descriptive not prescriptive. It describes and codifies what is said and written by the majority of English people; it does not set out rules which must be obeyed. There is in Britain no written constitution, no criminal code and no equivalent to the French Académie. There is, in other words no final authority. When a new word of a new usage becomes customary among the users of the language, that word or usage automatically becomes "correct" and accepted by all but a tiny majority of purists. To many foreign learners this seems like anarchy.

One reason is a purely linguistic one. It is true that about 50% of the English vocabulary is of classical origin, but the structure of the language is firmly rooted in Old English. Grammar, by and large means Latin grammar (grammar schools of the past were so called because they taught mainly Latin). The terminology of grammar is Latin, and so are its methods of analysis. A supple and subtle language like English cannot bear the restraints of such a rigid system. When, about fifty years ago, children were taught formal grammar, they were taught to classify sentences into "simple", "compound" and "complex". A sentence such as, "Having finished her homework, Julie, a short dark-haired student from France, set out to meet her friend, a handsome, blond student from Sweden" would have to be classified as simple, whereas "I know what you mean" would be labelled as complex, because it has two finite verbs. Could anything be more absurd? A modern linguist would refer to the clause "what you mean" as the object of the verb "know".

Some years ago the American linguist Edward Sapir wrote, "Anyone who takes the trouble to examine it (the English lan-



"When you say "How", is it a greeting meaning "How do you do" or an adverb with the definition "in what way or manner"?"

guage) carefully will see that behind its superficial appearance of simplicity there is concealed a perfect hornet's nest of arbitrary and bizarre usages". Perhaps some of these arbitrary and bizarre usages are what students from overseas should be thinking about and which could form the basis of their work. An intelligent Swiss student in my class once looked up from her work, with an expression of sudden delight and enlightenment and said, "You can play about with English, can't you?" Exactly.

Joan Butler,
Crediton, Devon,
England

The English subjunctive?

It was probably inevitable that the relatively harmless article by John Peters about the subjunctive (ET12) should lead to the controversy that culminated in the rather unfortunate 'pot-calling-the-kettle-black' letter of David Wiard (ET14). Unfortunately, both David Crystal's comments in ET13 and the reply by Peters (ET14) muddy the waters.

Basically, there are three issues. (1) Some speakers and

writers use the 'simple form' of the present (with no -s, or the form *be*) in certain types of subordinate clause such as those with *lest* or those preceded by verbs such as *demand*, and this is what Peters calls the subjunctive. Crystal points out that many people do not consistently use this form – and I am one. Peters would tell me that I am being ungrammatical, because I have lost a potential distinction; but that is, of course, a bogus, though standard, argument of the normative grammarian, as Greenbaum points out in his *Good English and the Grammarian*. (2) The simple form is also used in *Come what may*, *Heaven forbid*, etc. This Crystal considers to be another use of the subjunctive, but Peters considers it to be the infinitive (with no explanation why, and ignoring the fact that the subjunctive would be used in the translational equivalents in Latin). (3) *Were* is used instead of *was* in *If I were . . . I wish I were . . .* etc., though again Crystal notes that this is not necessarily so in informal speech. These Peters calls the 'conditional' and the 'optative' respectively, while Crystal calls both the 'past subjunctive'.

There are, in fact, only two forms to be explained, both of them either optional or marginal in English – the simple form and *were*. Since they are different in function as well as form it is probably best not to give them the same name, and for that reason Peter may be justified in refusing to call them both 'subjunctive'. But there is no argument for distinguishing two grammatical categories for *were* ('conditional' and 'optative'): both involve an idiosyncratic past

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.

tense form of the verb 'to be', found with singular subjects instead of *was* and used for 'unreal' ('irrealis') conditionals and wishes (all other verbs have a single past tense form, and so are incapable of making a distinction). It may be a little less obvious that there is similarly no strong argument for distinguishing the two uses of the simple form as two different categories (or even for distinguishing both of them from the infinitive), but is there any real difficulty in simply saying that the simple form (essentially the uninflected, and

so tenseless, form) is used instead of the *-s* form in certain types of subordinate clause, in the infinitive 'proper' (which also typically marks a kind of subordination) and in a few fixed expressions? And would it be so terrible if ALL of them were labelled 'infinitive', or even 'subjunctive'?

What should be avoided is the assumption that grammatical categories such as 'subjunctive' are somehow IN the language, as a matter of discoverable fact. Peters ought not to talk about 'trying to explain something as

the subjunctive when it is something else' (my italics). There are no absolute or agreed criteria for what *is* or *is not* the subjunctive. If that is understood, it is reasonable to use traditional terminology, but I am reminded that when J. R. Firth was asked questions such as 'Is this the subjunctive?', he would reply 'You can call it "tomato sauce" if you like'.

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ROUNDUP

Jottings of a grammaholic

SYLVIA CHALKER

Professor may well despair. In *ET* 13 (Jan 88) Professor Bolinger voiced the hope that although 'may have DONE' is often confused with 'might have DONE', perhaps 'may well have DONE' remains unambiguous. I am afraid I have bad news for him. My first quotation (from the *Daily Telegraph*, 16 Nov 83) concerns an argument between two solicitors and West Yorkshire council over some fees the council had agreed to pay, but which later turned out to be much higher than they had expected:

'I regret Mr Gill did not insist, as he could have done, that these solicitors entered into a relationship with the council as paymasters . . .' Cllr Gunnell said. *'This action alone may well have kept the expenses to the original estimate.'*

The same usage appeared in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 15 Jun 86: *Zola learns from experience. Had she spent six of the last 12 months in this country denying herself the benefits of prolonged training at 4,500 feet in Bloemfontein, she may well have suffered the same loss of form which relegated her to seventh in Los Angeles.*

Another idea about *I*. David Crystal (*ET* 17 Jan 89) in his piece about subject and object pronouns, suggests that the overuse of subject pronouns may be due to anxieties about

correctness, while the reverse phenomenon (John and me went home) can be explained as colloquial rather than formal. I think this point can be taken further. It may not be merely a desire for linguistic correctness, but self-importance, the desire for a masterful public persona, that helps explain these subject pronouns in the wrong place. I suggest the users instinctively feel that a subject is dominant, an active doer in control of the action – while an object is vulnerable, someone who gets 'acted upon', to whom things are done.

Certainly Neil Kinnock is not the only politician fond of *I*. Dr Owen, for example, in the old Alliance days used to say things like *'That is an issue best left to David Steel and I'* (*Daily Telegraph* 9 Sep 85). Other people in the public eye who want to present a 'one-of-us' image go for object pronouns – as did the Duchess of York's stepmother commenting on the skiing disaster involving friends:

We are awaiting anxiously to hear how serious Patti's injuries are. Both her and Charles went out to join the royal skiing party. (*The Times*, 11 Mar 88.)

Admittedly these pronoun usages are more likely when the pronoun is joined to a noun, and that 'educated' speakers are unlikely in