

# NEWS

## No 17 Gough Square, London

Samuel Johnson compiled his Dictionary (1755) at the above address, and the above address still stands. Thousands of tourists visit it every year, most of whom appear to be Americans, and it must be one of the very few shrines to lexicography in the world at large, leave alone in the English-using world.

It is in need of repair, however. Its last major renovation was in 1911,

since when it was damaged on three separate occasions by enemy action during World War Two. An appeal has now been launched for a minimum of £150,000 necessary to restore and maintain this historic spot. Donations can be sent to: The Doctor Johnson's House Appeal Fund, 1 Dean Farrar Street, Westminster, London SW1H 0DH, England.

## Requiem for a Small Language

On 13 July 84, the *International Herald Tribune* reported efforts by scholars to record a Caucasian language on the edge of oblivion. Only one man, now 82 and living near Istanbul in Turkey, still understands Oubykh, whose speakers once numbered 50,000. Oubykh's decline began after 1864, when Muslim herders and farmers left Russia in the wake of the Crimean War and moved into Turkey. In due course the Turkish language began to crowd out the older language among the tribesfolk, until today only one elder can speak it in full. When Tefvik Esenc dies, Oubykh dies with him.

Linguists from Paris and Oslo have been working with him, however, to record as much as they can before that happens. They are particularly fas-

cinated by the extreme variety of sounds in Oubykh, with 82 consonants and only 3 vowels. Notes John-Thor Dahlburg in the *IHT*: 'Transcribers have had to use both Latin and Greek letters, plus some signs of their own, to capture the wealth of sounds.'

Georges Dumézil, a member of the Académie Française, has laboured long and hard to create an archive of Oubykh. He has spent 20 summers in Turkey, compiling a grammar and dictionary and transcribing Oubykh folk tales. Dumézil observed to Dahlburg: 'The younger people there don't understand why anybody would waste his time learning the language. They told me: "You'd be spending your time better learning English".'

## Properly Constituted English

There is a movement underway for the defence of English in the United States. A lobbying group that calls itself 'U.S. English' claims the support of such opinion-formers as Saul Bellow, Norman Cousins and Alistair Cooke, and wants English enshrined in the Constitution as the official language of the U.S.A. to safeguard it against multilingual fragmentation on the one hand and the advance of Spanish on the other (reports Francis X. Clines, *New York Times*, 3 June 84).

The group claims to favour all kinds of *second* languages, but nevertheless insists that an amendment to the Constitution is necessary 'to stop the erosion of the traditional method by which immigrants are assimilated through the need to learn English'. Its opponents, however, label the movement as silly, 'another of the crazy California movements,' as Robert Garcia puts it. Garcia is head of the Hispanic Caucus and considers the proposed amendment (in Clines' words) 'an elitist symptom of prejudice against politically rising ethnic groups'.

The founder of U.S. English is the Californian Republican and U.S. senator S. I. Hayakawa, who also happens to be a well-known semantacist. His view is that Americans 'can speak any language we want at the dinner table, but English is the language of public discourse, of the marketplace and of the voting booth.'

## Snupius Strikes Back

Latin and the classics may be coming back, according to two separate reports in the *International Herald Tribune* (28-29 July and 8 June 84). For the first time in 20 years, the numbers of U.S. high-school students enrolling for Latin have gone up, and universities 'are reporting a doubling and tripling of the numbers of students in classics classes'. In addition, the American Classical League has reported a five-fold increase since 1978 in students taking the National Latin Exam. It is all, so it seems, part of a back-to-the-basics surge across the nation.

Elsewhere, Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck have been enlisted in an even more ambitious revival – as Michael Musculus and Donaldus

Anas respectively in full-length Latin translations. And if Disney is part of the renaissance, Schultz cannot be far behind. In his case, the comic-book translations do not try to translate 'Peanuts' but put the cartoon strips under the banner of one 'Snupius'.

It is all, says the *Trib*, 'the product of months of scholarly research by a group of scholars who hope to revive Latin as the universal language of Europe and possibly the world.' Snupius *et alii* are published in Italy by the Rev. Lamberto Pignini: 'We think the language of the future in Europe must necessarily be Latin. English won't do, because the French would never accept it, nor would the rest of Europe, because a language inevitably brings with it the culture

and traditions of its own country. Europe would become Americanized in a generation and the European languages would become disappearing dialects along with the traditions and cultures of the countries of Europe.'

Michael, Donaldus and Snupius are doing well in their new guise. The sales are good in Europe, and a breakthrough has been achieved in the United States and even as far afield as China. One translator was the 72-year-old Spanish scholar the Rev. José Maria Mir, for whom the work was something of an education in itself. Before he started on the comic books, he had never heard of Mickey, Donald or Snoopy.