POST & MAIL

Creative words and gay metaphors

In the July 1993 issue, Dale Roberts lists [KALEIDOSCOPE, 22] a few of his favorite 'creative words' from Jack Hitt's book, *In A Word: A Dictionary of Words That Don't Exist, But Ought To* (Dell, New York, 1992). The book, unlike its predecessors (e.g., the "Sniglets" series that preceded it by several years (Macmillan, New York, 198-?), which are the products of a sole, though (facetiously) fertile mind, collects words and definitions coined by others. Roberts' selection is excellent and inspires two addenda:

chronocentrism – add: 3: obsessive concern about one's (advancing) age, often reflected by men approaching 70 and women past 40. See also, **midlife crisis**.

add new entry:

mediocracy – noun – [blend of *medio(cre)* + *-cracy* 'government, rule'] Government by the mediocre, as politicians, self-styled statesmen, or the like.

Barry Zeve's "The Queen's English: Metaphor in Gay Speech" [ibid., p. 3] tells it straight (not to put too fine a point on it), but I am struck by the contrast between the tone of his commentary and the bitter cynicism reflected in his Gay Glossary [p. 9]. Zeve might add one more to the three questions that conclude his article: What effect do gay metaphors have on gays' opinions of themselves?

Laurence Urdang,
Editor, *Verbatim*,
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Proximity concord or simply mistakes?

The following is a comment on David Taylor's *A Question of Con-* *cord* in *ET* 35 (Jul 93), pp. 10–17. It may be that 'English speakers are often rather uncertain about the rules of concord ...', and the 52 sentences which David Taylor has collected 'from recent academic writing' certainly bear out that statement, but instead of concluding, as he does, that this is an on-going change in contemporary English 'which could lead to an eventual loss of the singular/plural distinction', he might have confronted the writers with their sentences and asked them if perhaps they would say that, on second thoughts, they had made mistakes.

It is, I believe, useful to distinguish between genuine uncertainty about concord, which is the area where change takes place (good examples are '(n)either' or 'none' and indeed some of the sentences quoted by Taylor), and genuine mistakes. The assumption that the competence of native academic writers implies grammaticality at all times, or at least conscious ambivalence, requires verification. In this case, it seems to me, such verification could easily have been made. In fact, I would suggest, it still can.

Dik Brummel,
The Hague, The Netherlands

Chutzpah and syntactic discord

Unless I missed something, Lillian Mermin Feinsilver's excellent article, in your most recent issue, on the yiddish word "chutzpah" did not indicate the pronunciation of this word is KHOOTS-pah. This pronunciation is given in a book which Ms. Feinsilver overlooked, Jackie Mason's *How to Talk Jewish* (N.Y.: St. Martin's, 1990). Mason's definition is also funnier than anything Ms. Feinsilver mentions. "A guy with *chutzpah* takes out a gun and shoots you in the heart and then blames you for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. If not for you, he wouldn't be charged with murder. You had the gall to drop dead after he shot you. If you hadn't done that to him, he'd be a man without problems."

Chutzpah also appears in the article "A question of concord" by David S. Taylor. He seeks to show that, in certain situations, concord between subject and verb are not predictable, and that this thereby demonstrates "a change in contemporary English, as English users become less sensitive to traditional grammatical constraints" (17). However, nearly all of the specimen sentences that he quotes to sustain his thesis are fine examples of either academic or bureaucratic English. For example, number 23 is "In particular, as we have seen, the analogy to pidginization and decreolization have been helpful in illuminating the transition from an internal norm to an external norm as second-language learners switch from reliance on simplification and reduction to replacement and restructuring strategies." The author, I believe, wishes to say that when people learn a second language, their sentences increase in complexity in the same way that, with each following generation, pidgins and creoles develop into languages. But why isn't the analogy instead to the way many people, once they have been trained to be academics, become no longer capable of writing a sentence without resorting to superfluous complexity? As the sentence itself, with its overload of "replacement and restructuring strategies," indicates, there are different orders of

complexity, and there are also different kinds of "second-language-learners."

Unfortunately, such issues pass Mr. Taylor right by. Nearly all of his specimens come from such academic "second-language-learners." This particular specimen duplicates perfectly his own assumption that languages change and that complexity can be taken as a sign of some sort of a change in their governing norms. There is no room in this kind of analysis for degrees and different kinds of complexity – just lots and lots of sentences loaded with fuzz and guaranteed to make your brain gasp for breath. Why only this tripe? Because academics, and especially language professionals, think that they themselves embody the standards for the language. What journalists might say, for example, doesn't count. Meanwhile the English language gets shot in the heart. What the language is doing explains why Mr. Taylor shouldn't be charged with murder.

Let's not carry over principles appropriate for the spoken language into formal written English. Failures of concord in atrocious prose prove nothing except that grammar can and will reflect it when people fail to develop clear ideas, sort them out, and know what it is that they are writing about.

James Drake,
San Bruno, California, USA

Chootspers

May I offer a note to supplement my article "A Lot of Chutzpah" in *ET*35 (Jul 93):

In the usage of British Jews, an extension of form and meaning occurs in the plural noun *chutzpas*, 'rowdies'. This appeared in a 1984 ad of a kosher hotel in Worthing, Sussex: "We don't take chutzpas ..." as cited by David L. Gold in *Jewish Language Review* 6 (1986, p. 152). Such use of the term goes back more than 150 years, having shown up in a

Cockney spelling, *chootspers* – in the line "NO CHOOTSPERS ALLOWED" – on an 1839 poster for a social-cultural event in Stepney planned to mark the end of the spring festival of Shevuoth. (The poster was pictured in Nathan Ausubel, *Pictorial History of the Jewish People* [New York: Crown, 1953, p. 186] and in John Geipel, *Mame Loshn; the Making of Yiddish* [London: Journeyman, 1982].) The 1839 attestation antedates by over half a century the first entry for *chutzpah* in the *OED*, Second Edition (1989), from London-born Israel Zangwill, 1892 (spelled *Chutzbah*).

Lillian Mermin
Feinsilver, Easton, Pennsylvania,
USA

Welcome(d)

This is with reference to Sarah Montoya's letter "Welcome or welcomed?" and your response to it, both published in *ET*33 (Jan 93). My purpose is not to say who is right, Sarah Montoya or you. To me both of you make your distinct points: Montoya highlights the common usage, which is "welcome" rather than "welcomed" in the context, and you want to stick to your particular "way". Montoya seems to carp at nobody getting anything "right" these days whereas you are happy at your freedom (although small) to use the language differently.

Montoya is correct when she says that "[y]our usage carries a more active connotation" (although her description of the verb being in the past tense is wrong; it is neither in the past tense nor in the present but is a past participial form) and you are correct when you say that it is "simply the passive of 'We welcome readers' letters' ".

Herein lies the point I want to make: your particular way of doing it seems to have been motivated by a desire to be much more warm than the expression "Readers' letters are welcome" would connote, and in the process you have come up with a

passive, which, I would say, is a sort of compromise between academic coldness and personal warmth – a compromise between "Readers' letters are welcome" and "We welcome readers' letters." The pressure of an institutionalized format did not probably permit you to go beyond a limit – I mean psychoanalytically. The grammar of a language has its crust as well as underbelly – hence the need to turn it upside down from time to time!

Professor K. V. Tirumalesh,
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Pedants versus parents

I wonder if those superior people who complain at the use of what they call 'incorrect' English realise that they are advocating deviance of the fifth commandment, the one that says 'Honour thy father and mother'.

Suppose that your parents, like millions of others, belong to the linguistic group of people who, like the French with their *ne* and *pas*, need to use two separate negative indicators in order to make a negative statement. Trustingly following their example you soon learn to say such things as "We didn't have no rain last night'.

Everything is fine until you find yourself picked on by teachers who tell you that your grammar is incorrect and that you ought to say 'We didn't have any rain last night'. How do you respond? If you refuse to change your way of speaking you show disrespect to the teacher. If, however, you do as you are told and change the way you speak, you show disrespect to your parents by accepting the assertion that what they say is 'incorrect'.

How can that possibly be squared with the commandment to honour thy father and mother?

Alec Bristow,
Thwaite, Eye, Suffolk, England

A Singlish stereotype?

We would like to question Duncan Forbes' (*ET*34) claim that "Singlish is general English usage in Singapore". It is strange that he claims to have heard his examples while interviewing students in a formal setting (to the extent that his examples are believable). His examples appear to be the kind of English associated with either very informal speech or the speech of those with extremely limited proficiency in English (who are now very much a minority in Singapore). Some of his examples seem stereotypical rather than based on real usage. For example, "flied lice" is an ancient stereotype of Chinese people speaking English – very rare for Singapore. Perhaps he has been confused by hearing jokes or comic songs. There has been a great deal of usage-based research on Singapore English which Mr Forbes would do well to read. We would be more than glad to meet him on his next visit to Singapore and introduce him to the actual "general English usage in Singapore". To use a form of Singapore English that Mr Forbes is very well acquainted with: *"Why you so like dat one?"*

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Singlish: the author's reply

It was rewarding to see that my article on a variety of English spoken in Singapore has attracted enough attention there for thirty-six members of the National University to feel moved to write to you about it.

I think I should first make it clear that Trinity College examiners are required to award separate grades for English language pronunciation and usage, and consequently develop very discerning ears for both.

In a short article it was not possible for me to provide a full data base for my observations. But it must be clear that the evidence is to be found in the streets, the shops, the restaurants, the offices and the Chinese schools rather than in Raffles College or the University. Surely "flied lice" is a stereotype precisely because it is (or my critics may say, was) so commonly heard – no better or worse than the Cockney's "arf a mo" for "half a moment" i.e. "Wait a minute".

I certainly stand by all I have said about the dialectal features of Singlish. (Why should there be a word for it if it didn't exist?) But I bow to the superior knowledge of my critics if they say that its currency is diminishing. Cockney, too, has been diminishing and fading into what is now known, alas, as Estuary English.

Your correspondents mention jokes. Perhaps they have heard this one. A lovely lady recently said to me at the races, "Shall we go to be'?" Which did she mean – bed or bet?

Duncan Forbes,
Hythe, Kent, England

Themself

On the progress of "themself", you might find the enclosed cutting from the *Observer* (11 Jul 93) interesting. At what stage does a usage such as singular 'they' become standard English? Recently, I saw a British language [Welsh] dictionary which marked obsolescent words with an asterisk. Should English language dictionaries do likewise? Perhaps an asterisk for words on the way in, and a dagger for those on the way out.

Robert Craig,
Weston-super-Mare, Avon,
England

Ed: The *Observer* paragraph to which Robert Craig refers is in the column *Words* by John Silverlight, quoting Godfrey Howard, author of *The Good English Guide,* and runs: 'Recently, I had to translate *Sauve qui peut!* The classic translation is "Every man for himself". To sidestep the masculine bias, it is sometimes translated as "Everyone for him or herself", which not only loses the urgency but sounds silly. I translated it as "Everyone for themself".' □