

BBC pronunciation

I swear I heard a rather genteel announcer not long ago say: 'It's hah pah state. This is Ray-ee-oh 3, and hair is a summary of the knees.'

Paul Beal, Loughborough,
Leicestershire, England

BBC mispronunciation

While I very much enjoyed the article on *The BBC and English Pronunciation* (ET15), as an American who has lived in England for 30 years, I still wince when I hear the BBC standard mispronunciation of American place names. The three worst examples are Houston (Texas), which should be pronounced like 'Euston' station; Maryland, which is pronounced 'Mer-land' and Michigan, where the 'ch' should be pronounced as 'sh'. The BBC misrepresentations are as bad as the American mispronunciations that so irritate or amuse the English, such as Thames (with the Th pronounced as such), Leicester (with 3 syllables), Edinburgh (ending with a hard 'g) and Salisbury, with 4 distinct syllables. I wonder what explanation the Director of the BBC Pronunciation Unit will give. Many thanks for a stimulating journal.

Dr Alan C. Berson,
freelance translator,
London, England

Saying and going

Patricia Cleveland-Peck makes an interesting observation in her letter (ET15) about the use of 'go' instead of 'say'.

I think it really implies 'go on', since it frequently occurs in the second or later sentence of a conversation, when one of the speakers adds to what has been

said. This certainly applies in the instances quoted by Ms Cleveland-Peck. It can even occur in an opening sentence, implying that the speaker adds speech to an initial action or gesture, as in the quoted 'That big blond boy comes up to me and goes . . .'.

I came across it recently in Anna Neagle's autobiography, published in 1974: "'It's rather a long name, too," Mr Williams went tentatively.' (Or was this possibly a misprint for 'went on', as the speaker has already spoken?)

On the other hand, perhaps the usage is related to the sense of 'go' meaning 'make a sound', as in 'The ballon went pop', 'The duck goes quack'. Human speech, after all, is the characteristic sound made by humans!

Adrian Room,
Petersfield, Hampshire, England

We're polite too

I was both fascinated and disturbed by Kinosita Koreo's article (ET15). Are Western people really so direct – to the point of rudeness – as he describes? Then I was sent an invoice from a Christian magazine with this polite message on it:

'We apologise for yet another piece of paper, but we are required by HM Inland Revenue to obtain from you an invoice detailing services rendered, PRIOR to payment for those services. If you require payment, please submit this invoice within 30 days of receipt. Many thanks for your co-operation.'

It is not perhaps up to Japanese standards, but at least it proves that there are exceptions to the rule.

Nina Rye,
King's Lynn, Norfolk, England

Scientific abbreviations

The increase in acronyms and initialisms as jargon in many fields, which you noted in 'The Cult of Abbreviations' (ET15), may be a source of contention between authors and editors. Physicians and technicians, for example, are sometimes hard to convince that written matter, even for their peers, must be more formal than oral communication in the clinic or laboratory. Valid reasons for using the short form may be that the full term is long and unwieldy or that the entity is better known by the abbreviation than by the full name. While a few scientific journals allow no abbreviations except for measurement (ml, hr), publishers customarily accept a limited number and insist that the abbreviation be parenthetical after the full term on first mention.

Use of abbreviations can lead to inaccuracy, however. Depending on the dictionary, the initials may have several meanings. HLA, for example, is defined as human lymphocyte antigen(s), human leukocyte antigen, histocompatibility locus antigen, and homologous leukocyte antibody. Yet one often hears and even sees the term *HLA antigen* and finds the user unable to state which phrase the initials represent.

In addition to this kind of redundancy, the abbreviation may be monotonously repetitive when with small effort a more pleasing and precise reading could be achieved with synonyms and demonstrative pronouns – say, *the operation* or *this procedure* for a complicated surgical term fully established early in the paragraph.

The editor has two arguments for careful use of abbreviations: the paper may be read throughout the world, where the English

alphabet is unfamiliar and local initialisms differ; and the paper may be read in the future when technologies have changed and definitions for obsolete abbreviations may be unavailable. The implications are appealing to scientists and other writers.

Alamada B-Barrett,
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Los Angeles, U.S.A.

Alpha-muesli

I enclose a photocopy of some text that I discovered on the front and back of a Co-op Muesli packet. I thought it may be of interest to you for your *ET* files or readers. Although I have been a contented consumer of the product for years I started to lose sleep when I noticed the letter 'A' in the italic script. As you will see, two versions of the letter are used, apparently at random.

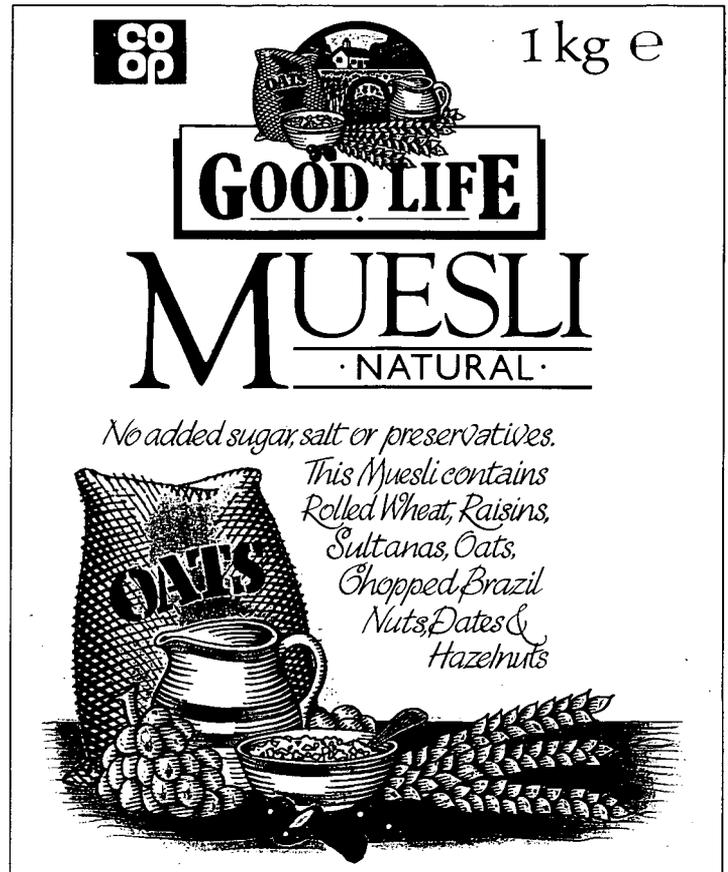
a	a
sugar	salt
raisins	wheat
sultanas	plain
teaspoon	teaspoon

In an attempt to find a satisfactory explanation I wrote to the Co-op. Their Chief of Graphic Design confessed to being equally puzzled by the lettering which he hadn't noticed until my letter pointed it out. Unfortunately the artist responsible for the lettering is now dead. The only explanation the Co-op could offer was that artists may choose to vary their lettering as a mark of originality, but even so, it does seem strange to vary the lettering within the same clause.

James Rye,
King's Lynn, Norfolk, England

Numerical precision in the language of scientists

David Crystal's article (*ET*15, Jul 88) on 'hedges', or numerical imprecisions, was most interesting, but his analysis of reasons



for their use in biomedical talks was only about somewhere in the region of half-baked! In both scientific and popular contexts, one should not imply greater accuracy than the data justify. Thus when there is doubt about the precise diagnosis of some complex condition, it is more honest (and even more accurate?) to state that 'there were about 1500 cases in 1986, than to put 'there were 1517 cases in 1986'. In David Crystal's quoted example, 'there are perhaps 1500 such cases a year', there is even less cause for criticism of the speaker because an average over several years is implied. It would be quite wrong to put 'there are 1500 cases a year', when the numbers recorded might be 1465, 1540 and 1505 in successive years. It is journalists who sometimes abuse averages by writing such apparently precise nonsense as 'Each and every one

of us consumes 35 litres of pure alcohol a year.'

Another situation requiring a degree of imprecision is extrapolation from a necessarily small experimental sample (especially in biomedical research) to the general population. For example, a colleague who works on blood pressure had great difficulty in getting even 50 volunteers willing to give up a whole morning for electrocardiograms and blood-flow tests. If he found that 3 out of 50 had a particular condition, he could say that 6% of his sample were affected, but it would be unwise when extrapolating that finding to be more precise than putting 'about 2% to 15% of Britons may have this condition'.

Caution is needed because one expects statistical fluctuations between different samples, and one's samples may not be fully representative. Medical volun-

teers are not a random sample, being over-represented in public-spirited idealists, in general hypochondriacs, and in people who suspect that they may have the condition being investigated and wish to be tested by experts. It would be most interesting to know whether the 'non-hedgers' in Dubois' study were talking only about their samples, and if the 'hedgers' were extrapolating to the general population.

In a scientific context, one would normally give the appropriate estimates of variation, such as standard deviations or confidence limits, and might show them on slides during a talk, but they are difficult to take in if given verbally. Some degree of apparent imprecision is often the most honest, and most valid course in presenting experimental findings; it is not necessarily a fault, or caused by fear of questions, and can only be judged in context. Both unwarranted precision and unwarranted imprecision are likely to be criticised by a knowledgeable audience!

Dr. Bernard Lamb,
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Maori usage

Gerry Abbott (*ET*14, Apr 88) wonders if he should write *muumuued women*, *muumu-u-ed women*, or *muumu'u'd women*, in his article about the spelling of words from other languages, incorporated into English. I cannot answer for the Hawaiian situation, but had he chosen that other East Polynesian language which is having an impact on English, Maori, the answer would be 'none of the above'.

When New Zealand English borrows a Maori word sometimes it also borrows elements of Maori grammar, and this would be one of those examples. New Zealand English has incorporated the Maori word *piupiu* (a garment worn like a skirt) but New



'Sorry. He's got the wrong accent'

Zealanders don't talk about piupiu-ed women performing action songs. They say something like *the women wore piupiu* instead. Notice that in doing so speakers of New Zealand English tend not to pluralize Maori words by adding *s*. It has become increasingly uncommon to hear *Maoris*; and to write *Maoris* has now generally come to be regarded as ungrammatical. Polynesian languages don't form plurals in this way and Polynesian consonants are always followed by vowels. Increasingly, speakers and writers of New Zealand English seem to be acting as if such rules still applied, even in English language contexts.

This is all the more interesting because there seems to be no reciprocal flow in the other direction. When Maori borrows English words it changes them. No English grammar gets brought aboard as excess baggage. Thus we have *August* becoming *Akuhata*, *hammer* emerging as *hama*, and *milk* appearing as *miraka*.

Gerry Abbott's concluding fantasy of being fed '*pureéd fruit by a muumuued beauty*' would single him out as a visitor, the moment he uttered it in New Zealand (or just possibly as a New Zealander of a certain generation).

When New Zealand English reaches beyond Māori to other

Polynesian languages the sense of wrongness weakens. New Zealanders talk about *fales* (Samoan *fale* means building) but not *whares*. They get *tattooed* (Tahitian [?]) but not *mokoed*. Even Williams' *Dictionary of the Maori Language* defines *moko* as '*tattoing*'.

Is New Zealand English the only branch of English which has started to observe another language's grammatical conventions (to the extent of not altering words even to obey its own rules)? What, in fact, is happening to American English at that other point on the Polynesian triangle?

Don Long
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Wellington, New Zealand

Spelling reform and verbal humour

In discussions on spelling reform (*ET*'s 14 and 15) reference is rarely if ever made to the effect its adoption would have on verbal humour in which English is particularly rich. Does not much of its power stem from the number of homophones the language possesses, with their wide variety of spellings, and uni-spelled words with multi-form pronunciation and their delicious double and triple meanings?

At another level, the American docking of 'u' from the '-our' words, reversing '-re' to '-er' or using the single 'l' where BrE would normally have two, are probably innocuous. But if one of the functions of language is continually to enhance our ability to conceptualise, and enlarge our over-all area of knowledge (and we coin neologisms to that end) is this purpose not frustrated by narrowing the range of the visual verbal imagery available to us? Is anyone ultimately helped to appreciate our humour, much less our rich literary inheritance, by reducing (say)

To, too, two, tutu/for, fore, four/rose, roes, rows/one, won/mail,

male/wind, wined/rough, ruff/
moan, mown/loan, lone/place,
plaice/bold, boled, bowled/
chews, choose/mews, muse/
phlox, flocks/toxin, tocsin/bite,
bight/dam, damn/die, dye/
course, coarse/curb, kerb/claws,
clause/waist, waste/corral, chora-
le/a raid, arrayed/berth, birth/
hayload, haloed/a tissue, atishoo/
way, weigh/night, knight/inner
tension, inattention/ time, thyme

to some common, uniform sym-
bols, when it is the visual distinc-
tion itself that tells us what we
need to know?

Are verbal archaeology and
fossil history to be considered
less valuable and exciting than
any other kind? Are not 'etymol-
ogy unknown' words and 'lost'
languages the sunken treasure
ships of the linguistic seas?

Harry Morgan,
Morden, Surrey, England

RP and class

I find it regrettable that Paul
Christopherson (*ET15*) should
reply to my criticisms of his
advocacy of RP as a 'standard'
without addressing seriously any
of the specific points which I
made. I can only assume that he
accepts the validity of the (stan-
dard) distinction between accent
and dialect which I appeal to and
as a corollary finds himself
unable to refute my arguments.

Instead, he chooses to imply
(erroneously, as it happens) that
the tone of my letter was highly
emotive and subjective, in con-
trast to his own approach which
is 'possibly' 'more detached'. If
by 'detached' he means 'objec-
tive' then he is 'quite simply
wrong and perusal of some of the
relevant sociolinguistic literature
might serve to convince him of,
for instance, the fact that there
are sound reasons why in general
a descriptivist approach to
linguistic varieties has super-
seded positions considerably less
radically prescriptive than his
own. He might also be stimu-
lated to give serious consider-

ation to the facts that not only do
the vast majority of those who
leave public schools speaking RP
do so because they spoke it when
they arrived there, but that also a
by no means uncommon
phenomenon exists whereby
'native speakers' of RP con-
sciously develop broad versions
of 'low status' accents while
attending prestigious schools.
The end of 'class war and
dissension' which Professor
Christophersen purports to
advocate is difficult to reconcile
with his eagerness to perpetuate
the spurious, unscientific myth
of the superiority of one particu-
lar accent.

By the way, it is surely rather
hard to envisage the phenom-
enon of 'greater uniformity of
accent *by consent*' (my italics). I
trust that 'consent' here is not an
Orwellian euphemism for
'reward' or 'coercion'.

David Atkinson,
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Restoring respect for the language

Misspellings on billboard adver-
tisements. Grammatical mistakes
in letters of application, news-
paper columns, even legal docu-
ments and Ph.D. theses. Banal
phrasing in the supermarket
'have a nice day', and 'bureau-
cratese' in a stump speech. The
English language is slowly – not
so slowly – being reduced to the
nadir of slovenliness and imprec-
ision, and, in my opinion,
language pollution should be
considered as serious a problem
as pollution of the environment.

There are, it seems to me,
several factors currently con-
tributing to this 'defilement'.
One aspect of particular concern
to the English teacher like
myself, since he encounters it so
frequently in his students, is *the*
approximate use of language,
summed up in the often heard

undergraduate remark, 'I know
what I mean, but I can't express
it.' With this feeble excuse, he
assumes that he is explaining the
faulty passages in bluebooks and
papers, passages which are
vague, even incoherent.

In the case of so many people –
surely not just students – approx-
imation of meaning is, unfortu-
nately, the norm. Often the
uncertainty stems from an in-
appropriate choice of words, a
circumstance attributable in
large part to an individual's
having to rely on an inadequate
vocabulary. One needs a sizable
vocabulary, not, of course, so
that he can reel off big words in a
pompous fashion, but so that he
may have the right word at his
command for the right situation,
avoiding, e.g., reliance on a
'blanket' adjective like 'nice'.
Words are important for their
connotations as well as their
denotations, too, witness the
difference between 'cheap' and
'frugal', 'plowhorse' and
'courser'. Nor should the ability
to recognize foreign phrases be
overlooked, for occasionally such
a phrase says it better than our
own language can do ('*déjà vu*',
'*Weltschmerz*').

A second imperative is the
avoidance of the cliché, the tired,
the trite, the hackneyed. At the
present time such public figures
as television and radio an-
nouncers offend regularly in this
regard, picking up on every
phrase that comes along ('bottom
line', 'playing hard ball') and
riding each one to death in short
order. Happy inventions of new
words or slang give us useful syn-
onyms, to be sure, but so often
they are perishable, and caution
should be exercised in the adop-
tion of such coinages. Alas, our
ears have become so insensitive
that we see nothing wrong with
the current buzzwords, even
when they are both cacophonous
and imprecise.

Jargon should be eschewed as
assiduously as the hackneyed
expression, e.g., the use of the
pseudo-scientific which can give

false value to ideas that are really very simple, the dressing up with 'isms' and statistics of a subject which is quite self-evident in nature. When the school library has become the 'Instruction Resource Center', when janitors have become 'Directors of Custodial Services' – ah, pretension! – it is clearly time to draw a halt.

As such over-use of the circumlocutory and turgid suggests, effort should be directed toward encouraging in individuals a sensitivity to tone. Surely one's students *might* recognize that it is hardly in keeping to say that Hamlet sees King Claudius 'kneeling down for an easy kill'. Surely they, and others, might find in a neologism like 'prioritize' a word not only ugly in sound but also so stiff as to reflect the opposite of the speed that priority presumably is meant to encourage. The natural felicity of the English language is so often jeopardized by these inventions.

It is indeed distressing to note that the glaring denigration of language, so apparent in the late 60s and early 70s when the substitution of feeling for articulation brought only the gibberish of 'you know', 'like I mean', 'man, it's mind-blowing', and 'oh, wow', (along with tangled syntax, illiterate spelling and massacred punctuation – say farewell to the apostrophe!), has continued in the present decade. A sorry illustration is provided by the feminists and others in their misguided attack on the generic use of 'man' (as in 'mankind'), a thoroughly understood, long accepted, and certainly not debasing usage. Women have never been debased by this custom, but its renunciation has most clearly debased

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.

Party line

(Special Release to all telephone operators for Dec. 31st)

Ja-nu-ary One, One Ni-yen
Eight Ni-yen
Will be an overloaded party
li-yen,
So do your best to make
our wires shi-yen
With telephonic Auld Lang
Sy-yen!

Alma Denny,
New York

our language. 'Chairperson' is disgusting, and its temporizing replacement, 'chair', sounds 'like a fossilized metaphor or metonymy not worth preserving'. Should we eliminate 'tomboy' and 'old wives' tale'? Should we 'man and woman the lifeboats'? Must a 'manhole cover' become a 'utility hole cover'? Must we, in short, really force upon ourselves extremely awkward linguistic changes in order to change attitudes with regard to women?

Added to the afflictions of the pretentious and the 'mystical' and the 'sexist' are those derived from the unappealing euphemism ('senior citizen' – and 'Golden Ager' is worse), or from the special interest usage ('gay' can no longer be used in its legitimate sense). Language should, of course, remain flexible, words coming in, words going out, but such flexibility need not rule out a standard English, one that can be pure and remain so without at the same time becoming petrified.

One can only hope that many, many people – surely not just the teachers of English – will accept the responsibility of restoring respect for the language, of putting down 'gender-speak' and gobbledegook and triteness, of reducing the verbal incompetency of students and bureaucrats and politicians and advertisers and announcers.

Words still count with me – and I trust with us all!

W. Gordon Milne,
Rye Beach, New Hampshire,
U.S.A

Restoring the value of words

Once just after reading a number of essays by college students, I entered the classroom and announced that I was mandating a moratorium on the word 'tremendous'. Students are greatly enamoured with the word and employ it freely to describe anything of which they heartily approve. Thus I soon found myself on the defense beleaguered by a veritable legion of aspiring writers convinced that my ban was a calculated scheme to cripple originality. Desperately I tried to parry their thrusts.

One essayist had written that the 'movie Camelot was tremendous'. I asked if he had left the cinema trembling. Of course not, but the word comes from the Latin verb *tremere* which means 'to tremble', so I stoutly suggested that 'tremendous' should be reserved for describing avalanches in the Alps or eruptions like those at Oregon's Mt. St. Helen's. There must be exceptions; indeed, Pavarotti's explosive voice can best be described only as tremendous. Ask a student his judgment of Marx – Karl or Groucho – and he'll probably reply that both were fantastic or fabulous. If the examinee is an etymologist, he'll be perfectly correct about Karl's writings. But usually he'll betray his total ignorance and lack of sophistication upon further questioning by waffling as he contends that the socialist economist was tremendous.

Another glowing young journalist in my class avowed that a speech by Mr. Albert Gore was 'terrific'. I enquired if the address had filled him with terror. He emphatically denied the insinuation but fell silent when I men-

tioned that 'terrific' derives from the Latin verb *terrere*, meaning 'to frighten'. *Dracula* for most people would be terrific, *Camelot* enchanting or fascinating, and Gore provocative. Actually 'terrific' must be used with considerable circumspection. 'Terrible' also comes from the Latin verb *terrere* ('to terrify') yet in common parlance it is used to refer to something people deem 'very bad' or unpleasant. The same can be said for 'awful' which basically indicates an object or person inspiring profound awe or reverence; but according to conventional wisdom it is used for movies, books, or hats or anything else with which we are profoundly unhappy.

The list of words overworked or misused – and not by students alone – is inexhaustible. A political speech with which a person disagrees is 'incredible' or 'unbelievable'. Not a very perceptible or penetrating analysis, indeed. And to add to the confusion, the same critic is quite prepared to state that the downhill performance of an Olympic skier was simply 'incredible'. Skating artists he catalogues as either 'nice' or 'lousy'.

I believe that in general most students are literary paupers and lack any sense of discrimination in the use of their mother tongue. Oral exams in colleges are given partly to measure the ability to speak accurately and gracefully. Most students really fail miserably. But a grunt is usually an acceptable negative and an 'aha' is



'Two charges of stealing English grammar books? Then I shall give you two simple sentences forming one compound sentence.'

recorded as an affirmation. So if the teacher is not intent on additional probing and unconcerned with more precise and elegant expression, the student receives a grade of A which means superior or excellent.

To eradicate this literary impoverishment, young people must read the very best literature from the earliest grades and should be instructed in the use of an unabridged dictionary. The study of foreign languages would also be most rewarding: French, German, Spanish, Latin or Greek. And frequent exercise in composition under a teacher able and willing to correct unsparingly errors in grammar and faults in the use of words.

But students are molded

largely by what they hear. If a foreigner goes to France to study French law, he is almost guaranteed that the lecturer will speak French well, grammatically and eloquently. In British schools the instructors nearly always help students to improve their grasp of the English language. In America teachers should likewise be selected on their ability to use English properly as well as for their knowledge for their particular disciplines.

In the musical, *My Fair Lady*, Henry Higgins portrays himself as the ideal professor. Speaking to the disheveled Eliza Doolittle in Act I, he says; 'Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech; that your native language is the language of Milton and Shakespeare and the Bible. . . . Look at her, prisoner of all the gutters, condemned by every syllable she utters. By right she should be taken out and hung for the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue.'

Teachers who are not as artful as the skilled Higgins must be satisfied with transformation less total than the one he effected with Eliza. But even if they got students only to curtail their use of tremendous, wouldn't it be lovely. Indeed, terrific, fantastic, fabulous.

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RELC seminar

The 24th seminar of the Regional Language Centre (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) will be held on 10–14 April 1989 in Singapore. Subject: 'Language Teaching Methodology for the 90s'. Emphasis: 'hands-on'

experience rather than theoretical exposition. Information: Chairman, Seminar Committee, SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 30 Orange Grove Road, Singapore 1025. Tel (65) 7379044. Fax (65) 7342753. Telex RS 55598 RELC. Cable RELCENTRE SINGAPORE.