

Further feedback

ET is very, very good indeed. It has that rare quality not usually associated with academic-style magazines – general interest. It has the stamp of the relaxed perfectionist.

○ Elizabeth Kirkpatrick, editor-in-chief, *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary*, Edinburgh, Scotland

At last, my long and eagerly awaited Issue No. 1 of *English Today* has arrived and I hasten to let you know how pleased I am with it. It appears to be exactly what I have been waiting for for years and I am only sorry that it has come a bit late in the day for me, having retired some years ago after a life-time of teaching English to Arabs in Cairo and Tripoli, Libya, when I could well have done with such a magazine.

○ I: Noel Treavett, Wimbledon, England

Congratulations on a thought-provoking and excellent first issue of *English Today*. I liked it immensely.

○ James Y Dayananda, Professor of English, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

ET's interesting, *ET* fills a gap, keep *ET* up!

○ Dr R R K Hartmann, The Language Centre, The University of Exeter, England

Endangered languages

If the dominance of English (or indeed other major languages) results in the extinction of minority languages, should it not be a matter for a new world organization or national organizations to ensure the survival of a linguistic species as urgently as we secure the survival of a plant or animal species? If the Soviet Union seeks to impose Russian on Uzbeks (as it does) or Italy to impose Tuscan on Romagnoli or Friulani (as it does), can we not – by means more formal than the efforts of interested individuals – seek to protect the priceless linguistic and of course literary heritage which each language necessarily possesses as a characteristic of its survival so far?

I believe that your magazine has a duty to air this problem. While I was Director of the National Library Service of Indonesia in Jakarta, I collected as a matter of urgency a number of poems in regional languages in my book *Indonesian Traditional Poetry*. But I did this as an individual, and the Government of Indonesia has done nothing but bolster Bahasa Indonesia. I should hate to think that *English Today* will become a medium

for bolstering English at the expense of the Celtic languages, and indeed all the other languages now seen commercially – and even in some cases culturally! – as poor relations.

○ Philip Ward, The Oleander Press, Cambridge, England

This will not do!

Am I the only reader of *ET* old enough to have been taught that there is a difference in function between *shall* and *will*, between *should* and *would*? At least one of your contributors does not accept that there is a difference; I wonder whether he ever heard that there was. That slur is, of course, rank heresy: he is a professor of linguistic science.

I am interested in your insert on putative pronouns. Some fifty years ago I tried to persuade *John o' London's Weekly* that we might replace *his or her*, *he or she*, *her or him* by using *lis*, *lee*, *ler*; but, of course nothing came of it. What we must not do, it seems to me, is to accept the slovenliness of Jenny Cheshire's first sentence: 'Anyone who wants . . . must have *their* wits about them.' As our teachers used to say, 'This will not do.' It is ungrammatical, illogical, sloppy: quite unworthy of *ET*. Please don't allow it to happen again.

○ John E Brown, Winscombe, Avon, England

Oh yes it will!

I was delighted with the opening sentence of Jenny Cheshire's 'A Question of Masculine Bias' (undoubtedly because it takes the same approach I have used in a paper I've been desultorily working on over the past few years)! 'Aha!' I thought, another rare voice speaking up for the use of singular 'they.'

Unfortunately Cheshire drops the ball and echoes the all-too-usual advice of rewriting into the plural. And she seems to condone the absolutely awful usages of the combined pronoun (*s/he*) and the alternate pronouns.

The simplest solution – and one that a few logical textbook writers *are* advocating – is the singular 'they' as used in Cheshire's first sentence and as used (as she points out) by most people in speech and by many (Jane Austen for one) in writing over the centuries.

If Cheshire in her otherwise excellent

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.

coverage had only gone one bounce further to speak out for his usage, she would have given needed reinforcement to those of us who are teaching our students it's OK for them to write 'Everyone needs to be aware that their language reflects their attitudes.'

○ Ellen Tripp, Forsyth Technical College, Winston-Salem, North Carolina

A Way with Words

I am enjoying the Preview and First Issue of *English Today*. The item, 'A Way With Words', provided the 'lead' for one of my best lessons of the term. At least, I thought so!

○ John Humphries, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, England

The article on Burgessisms in *ET*1 is very interesting. I have often been tempted to do a bit of verbal inventing myself. Everybody knows 'couth'. Is there a case for 'biguous' as a term of approbation for the increasingly rare instances of non-ambiguous usage? What about 'pessimum' as the opposite of 'the best, taking into account many conflicting factors'?

○ E S Stockton, Sanday, Orkney

Videoprose

I am very impressed with the magazine *English Today*. However, I believe that there are two mistakes in 'Videoprose' (*ET*2:20). The 'overlay' referred to is probably a piece of plastic or card cut to fit over the somewhat abnormal keyboard of the Spectrum computer and inscribed with the uses of the keys for a particular game; this helps the player, since it is sometimes difficult to remember the uses of keys and takes too long to check the instructions during a game. The abbreviation 'M/C' means 'machine code'.

○ David Harris, Northwich, Cheshire, England

Rotwelsch and Inglish

Arising from the *ABC of World English*: The earliest that I became aware of the wider acceptance of the word 'Brit' was in reports from the EEC. This might be influenced by German 'ein Brit' [sic], 'die Briten'. I guess that the Irish have always used Brit, being a conservative people. When you come to discuss the word Welsh you might like to mention Rotwelsch – the criminal argot based on Yiddish.

Something about Yiddish itself would be interesting, comparing it with Inglish. Yiddish came about as a

balancing inventions from Britain:

• Ronald Gill of Derby wrote to say that he had been 'engaged ceaselessly for many years' in the quest for a new pronoun – 'and believe I have done it!' His choice is *hey*, which is 'they' without the initial *t*, 'which has a sort of logical aptness.' He has tried to circulate *hey*, *hey's* and *heysel* in at least two journals, but was neither printed nor acknowledged.

• George Wardell of Reading suggests *mef*, a combination of 'm' for male and 'f' for female: 'As a person matures, *mef* comes to understand *mefself* better.' Alongside *mef*, he proposes that 'the proper study of humankind is *hume*', and that *telephones* are better 'humed' by both women and men rather than 'manned' by either.

• Don Manley of Oxford proposes the 'half-way sound' *ze* ('inventing words is a fun game, so may I be allowed to play?'). The object form would be *zon*, possessive *zons*, reflexive *zonsel*. 'There is of course a serious side to all this,' he adds, 'as your article rightly suggests. I am in the business of editing school textbooks. Woe betide if half the children illustrated in the physics experiments are not girls! I personally hate the "he (or she)" and "she (or he)" solutions; and "s/he" is horrible. And if I add a note in the preface saying that "he" means "he or she", an angry female might tell me that I am reducing half the population to a footnote! There is no easy answer.'

It is easy to dismiss these neo-pronouns as a joke, and the earnestness with which they are often coined as misguided. Dr John B Sykes, editor of both the prestigious *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and *The Incorporated Linguist* (a journal for translators and other linguists published in London), wrote to us, enclosing 'a recent effort of my own along these lines – which has met with no response! It does puzzle me that no one has managed to launch some solution to this problem so generally recognized as tedious.' In the May issue of the magazine *MENSA*, Dr Sykes proposed 'the single letter "w" (pronounced as the vowel in "put" or "good") for the subject case, "wm" for the object case, "ws" . . . for the possessive, and "wself" for the reflexive/emphatic. This is at least distinctive.'

It is; indeed, most of them are. Like the other creators and adapters, however, even someone as well placed as Dr Sykes has met with little or no response. *ET* has however responded by bringing this fascinating, funny, frustrating and yet serious matter out of the closet for open discussion.

The English Empire

Dedicated to Rudyard Kipling and Gunga Din, whose modern counterparts RK and GD address each other as follows . . .

GD Your empire, when the Raj
Was its jewel, was so large
That the sun always shone upon a part
of it –
Till August '47
When, shining down from heaven,
It saw the British break the very heart
of it.

RK We British as a race
Lost quite a lot of face
In Calcutta, Rawalpindi and Lahore;
But even when we'd gone
Our language carried on –
A phenomenon you utterly deplore.

GD Yes, the Briton was a rogue
Yet his language was in vogue:
What irony! A most annoying oddity!
Meanwhile, the British Isles
Were suddenly all smiles:
Your language was a saleable commodity!

RK So now I am a rajah
In an empire even larger,
Where my language keeps repelling all
marauders

And in true imperial style
Stirs up a lot of bile
By disregarding international borders.

GD This English Empire spread
Though the British one was dead,
And it's made a pretty profit, not a
doubt of it.
But in spite of what you've taught us
What good has English brought us?
I want to know what benefits come out
of it.

RK Well, there's ESP.
You want our electronic wizardry.
Though Science, like a vulture,
Should gut your very culture,
You'd love to have a VCR, like me!

CHORUS: MASSED VOICES OF
ELT IMPERIALISTS

Yes, it's E-L-T!
Learn English if you want to live like
me!
Though your mother tongues are dying
Can't you hear your children crying,
'It's a better tongue than ours appears
to be' . . . ?

○ Gerry Abbott, Bamenda, Cameroon

A few ill-chosen words

My friend Azimuth is a precisionist. He pronounces the *p* in 'raspberry'. He refers to peroxide, correctly, as 'hydrogen peroxide'. I can't go that far with him. Still, . . .

'We used to play pingpong,' he said recently, 'and shoot each other with pistols. Now, alas, we play table tennis and shoot each other with handguns.'

'If I had to be shot,' I said, 'I'd rather be shot skillfully, with a pistol, . . .'

'Or a revolver or an automatic,' he said, . . .

' . . . than unskillfully, with a handgun,' I said.

'Naturally,' he said. 'That's why we arm our policemen with service revolvers, not with service handguns.'

'And that,' I said, 'is why our legislators find it hard to take anti-handgun bills seriously.'

'Can you imagine,' he said, singing,

'Lay that handgun down, Babe,
Lay that handgun down!
Handgun-packin' Mama,
Lay that handgun down!' . . . ?

'But we haven't lost all our verve,' I said. "'Table tennis" does sound rather sedate, but we still play the game with pingpong balls, because we know intuitively that they have more bounce than table tennis balls could.'

'That depends on who's playing,' he said. 'The members of the White House staff play table tennis with table tennis balls. You know they do.'

'They could hardly do otherwise,' I said. 'They speak in the Federal monotone.'

'The what?'

'The Federal monotone. The tone of an official spokesman telling the reporters nothing.'

'Wrong. They don't talk to the reporters. They access the media.'

'They impact them.'

'Right. They interface with them.'
'With it, you mean. The media is singular. Like the data.'

'To read their prose, you'd think they weren't much smarter than educationists.'

'I know what you mean. For them too the problem of education is how to achieve excellence without actually teaching the kids to read.'

'They opt for implementation of the same methodology, too.'

'Which is . . . ?'

'To prioritize upgrading the students' peer-group communication skills in the affective domain and impact them to goals-oriented behaviors through letting them access experiential dynamics of interaction in a hands-on learning situation via optimal-maximal utilization of equipment such as electronic table-tennis modules for hand-eye coordination anecsetra.'

○ J Mitchell Morse, Emeritus Professor of English, Temple University, Pennsylvania, U.S.A.