

Brouhaha

Amanda Martin asks (*ET27*) if *brouhaha* is turning from singular to plural as *agenda*, *data*, and *media* have moved from plural to singular. Her quotation from *The Listener* is “the brouhaha about the Government’s view on impartiality were an unplanned extra layer of controversy”. Here I believe the writer had simply lost track of the real subject (*brouhaha*) and was influenced by the plural noun *views*, which is closer to the verb *were*. Without the intervening prepositional phrases, the writer would almost certainly not have produced “the brouhaha were”. This agreement with an intervening plural is a very common phenomenon in unedited spoken English, though rarer in print. Incidentally, *phenomena* and *criteria* are now almost universally used as singulars in the U.S.

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Sick to what?

Professor Dick Bailey’s article on Canadian English dialects (*ET27*) interests me. However, his remarks about *sick at the stomach* and his claim that *sick to the stomach* is “the most common expression across Canada as might be predicted from the kinship of Canadian English to the northern dialect of American English” puzzle me. I think the idiom is “sick to *one’s* stomach”, as shown by the following citations from the database of Canada’s “national newspaper”, the *Toronto Globe and Mail*:

“Mr Ryan, ATV’s New Brunswick news director, had said earlier that the judge’s remarks had left him feeling *sick to his stomach*.” (*Canadian Press* news-wire, 2 Feb. 1985, p. P1). “The irrationality of the attack made

me sick to my stomach.” (Paul Taylor, *Toronto*, 4 May 1985, p. M1). “They teach a moral fable . . . they make us *sick to our stomachs* . . .” (Ray Conlogue, *New York*, 9 May 1985, p. E6).

In fact, in all of the 1985 editions of the newspaper I checked as a random sample, there was not one instance of either *sick at or to the stomach* from anywhere in North America. The testimony of a few unilingual anglophones I asked and the entries given in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* and the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Directory* seem to confirm my evidence.

I enjoyed Robert Allen’s review of Ronald McIntosh’s *Hyphenation* in the same issue.

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Canadian, eh?

Having lived in Toronto, Montreal and Calgary and often travelled to the Arctic, I was naturally fascinated by Richard Bailey’s article, “Dialects of Canadian English” (*ET27*). Some of it seemed arcane to me but, rather than argue about his examples, I’d like to contribute a few of my own.

In Arctic Canada, when an airplane breaks down it is said to have “gone mechanical”. Also, as I learned in Inuvik last January, nobody bothers to say “minus” or “below zero” when giving a wintertime temperature. (What else could it be?) And men (always men and usually from Scotland) who first went North with the Hudson’s Bay Company but have since settled there are known as “Bay Boys”.

As a transplanted easterner in Calgary, Alberta, I had to learn to talk like a westerner. The little wild animal pronounced “coy-o-

tee” back East is there called a “coy-ote”. Indeed, what’s West and what’s East is variable. To a Torontonion (or Anglo-Montrealer), “West” means anywhere from the Ontario/Manitoba border to the Pacific Ocean; “East” means the Atlantic provinces. To an Albertan, “West” means Alberta; “East” means Ontario and Quebec (“Prairies” means Manitoba and Saskatchewan; “the Interior” or “the Coast” means British Columbia, depending on which part you’re referring to; and “maritimes” means the Atlantic provinces). Edmonton, as Bailey notes, has a large population of Ukrainian descent; he should have added that the favourite nickname for Edmonton is therefore “Edmonchuk”. Finally, “chaps” – the leather coveralls worn by cowboys over their jeans – are pronounced “shaps”, not à la P.G. Wodehouse.

Central Canada (Ontario/Quebec) contributed “hydro” to the vocabulary, meaning, the electric power utility (as in, hydro-electric power). The word is bilingual: we have Ontario Hydro, and Hydro-Québec. French does indeed seep into Montreal English, but MNA (Member of the National Assembly) is not a good example. Provincial/territorial legislatures go by various names, and the abbreviation reflect the name in each case (Ontario has MPPs, or Members of the Provincial Parliament; Alberta has MLAs, or Members of the Legislative Assembly; and on it goes). Still, Quebec French has given us “anglophone”, “francophone” and (new, but gaining ground) “allophone” (for those neither English nor French in ancestry). And English Montrealers talk about a quick trip to the “dépanneur” (i.e. corner store).

I’ve found the tag-ending, “Eh?” much more common in

eastern Canada than western. Finally, Canada has “reserves” where the United States has “reservations”. (To the credit of neither party.)

Penny Williams,
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Slips of the pen

In a recent article published in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (‘Processor of Elimination’ 6 July 1991), I continued the periodic discussion about galloping illiteracy among students. I observed that academics, though preaching the teaching of basic skills, have been influenced by a pervasive contempt for niggling accuracy. It appears to be particularly acute in writings of a transitory nature: letters, internal circulars, conference proceedings and student handbooks, to name only a few. I cited a few examples, this one being typical: ‘. . . so mthat a collective instance of writers writing poetry adds up to an aversion to using a word-processors to write poetry.’ (Linguistics Lecturer, presentation draft report). Such footling errors put the reader to the trouble of disentangling thought from expression and get in the way of comprehension. During a two-year brush with academia I ran into a surprisingly large number of writers who remained unconcerned. They regarded trivial mistakes as mere slips of the pen that have no bearing on the grand design.

I put forward the suggestion that there is a new class of word-processor-induced errors: that people are reading on screen (notoriously badly designed for readability) and are not checking what they have said on the print-out. Mis-keyed letters, sentences with endings not originally intended and moved from somewhere else, a word unintentionally deleted, faulty punctuation – these are not illiteracies but the hazards of word-processing. To the reader,

though, the difference is barely distinguishable, and where readers are the young being trained in our polytechnics and universities, such carelessness in the educators can perpetuate the already cantering disregard for precise expression. Now that computer literacy is entering the stakes, said my article, it is an anomaly that galloping carelessness should be racing it to the finish.

That irony was further reinforced by four silly slips of exactly the type I was talking about being introduced into my article by THES itself. The responses I got to this are illuminating. The Editor declined to print my (good-humoured) disclaimer in which I asked if some wit of a sub-editor was trying to show readers, by example, just how irritating errors in written English are. No-one would think the errors were mine, he said, and with their current system he was surprised there were not more. Philip Howard thought a weekly was a ‘different kettle of print’ from a daily and it could have been cleaner. Robert Burchfield said that hardly a single one of his 50-odd pieces for *The Sunday Times* had emerged without blemishes of one kind or another. Fellow authors said it was the same story in books.

What do *ET* readers think? A transposed keypress in the decimal point of a drug dosage is critical. So, occasionally, is a misplaced comma. But vigilance in print is subservient to economics. Is it worth preserving, lest, as Lord Chesterfield says to his son, by slipping, others should think you careless in larger matters?

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An arrogant pronoun?

Is it possible that one reason why members of the English-speaking nations have a reputation for being arrogant is their use of a

capital I for the first person singular pronoun? No other language that I am acquainted with does the same. The French with *je*, the Germans with *ich*, the Italians with *io*, are content to express themselves with humble lower-case letters.

Some languages, it is true, do use a capital initial letter for the personal pronoun in formal modes of address, such as the Italian *Lei*. But this is done in order to enhance the status of the person addressed, not the person doing the addressing. Is there any language other than English that bestows on its users such a built-in assumption of personal superiority?

Alec Bristow,
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Possession and pronouns

EFL teacher: ‘José, ask me what my name is.’

José: ‘What is my name?’

EFL Student 1: (as waiter) ‘Good morning, sir. What would you like?’

EFL Student 2: (as customer) ‘You would like a glass of beer, please.’

Typical scenes in an EFL class. As if the departure from the student’s native language entailed a temporary loss of identity.

A pronoun is common property. A publicly-owned honorary identity-signal; common currency. Like Othello’s purse: “’twas mine, ’tis his, and has been slave to thousands.”

Yet fixed as we are in our individual singularities (Who’s this ‘we’ he’s writing about?), each one of us clings to his or her ‘I’ as if it were personal property. ‘I’ am writing this letter; ‘you’ are reading it. But ‘you’ would not turn from it and say to someone else: ‘You’re reading a fascinating article about pronouns.’ – even supposing you find it fascinating. ‘You’ would say: “I’m reading a fascinating, etc., etc.”

But then, as I said earlier. I'm writing the article (or, by the time you read it, I will have written it.)

'So 'I' – that unique indication of 'my' individuality, that signal, whether in speech or writing, of the thing the speaker/writer holds most close is in fact the common property of everybody else, inhabiting entities that 'I' might yearn to be or shudder from being.'

This First Person pronoun in English – so upstanding, so CAPITAL compared with a French *je*, a German *ich*, an Italian *io*, a Spanish *yo* (although the latter, though generally omitted, makes up in attack what it lacks in height) – acquires additional interest when it is put in relation, compared with the other languages, to the Second Person.

For to the English-speaker, 'I' is (I am surely!?) surrounded by an inchoate 'you' lacking number and gender, and of indeterminate acquaintance. A kind of 'I' calling out into the darkness to an invisible 'you'. German, French, Spanish, Italian, all indicate intimacy or formality, singularity or plurality, sometimes even gender (to differing extents) in their Second Persons.

Of course 'you' and 'I' can colude as a First Person plural 'we', especially if a Third Person is available to be a 'he', 'she', or 'it'. As in most other languages 'we' is (are?) indiscriminate in the number and sex of those included: usually two or more (although *one* person can suffice with monarchs, certain Prime Ministers, and the object of attention of, e.g., a visiting nurse: 'And how are we feeling today, Mrs Smith?') Spanish does make a distinction as to whether 'we' are all females, *nosotras*, or all male, *nosotros*; but in mixed company the distinction

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Nasal risk

Congressmen should get plenty of rest,
eat wisely and wear the right clothes.
Otherwise Federal budgets may sprout
Totals with many more O's.
"Million"'s exactly like "Billion" when paid
By men with a cold in their nose!

Alma Denny, New York

Alma Denny's illustrated collection of poems, *Blinkies: Funny Poems to be Read in a Blink*, has just been published by Lamb & Lion Studio, Box 298, Tamworth, New Hampshire, U.S.A. (ISBN 1-879865-01-7, 1991), and costs \$6.95.

breaks down in favour of the males.

But generally 'we' is a moveable (if not volatile) feast, hosting a host determined only by the speaker's/speakers' Machiavelian shifting focus, as any observer of political speeches will know.

Returning to the Second Person in German and Spanish, the *binary* nature of the English 'I(or we)/you' confrontation is made clearer. In German, you-out-there can be defined verbally as one single person the speaker is informal or patronising towards – *Du. Ihr* would express the same attitudes towards a group. A more formal approach, but whether to one person or to a group, would require *Sie*. Note, however, compared with English 'I/you', the respect shown by lower-case *ich*, in writing, to *all* these Second Persons, no matter what the relationship or attitude. German, in writing, at least, seems to consider 'you' more important than 'I'.

Spanish Second Persons abound. A single one can be formal *tu*, or formal *Vd*. Both can be pluralised: *Vd* becoming *Vds*, but *tu* becoming a fully feminine *vosotros* or mixed or fully masculine *vosotros*. Note, again, however that the written and formal or polite *Vd/Vds* grants a capital denied the First Person (*yo* and *nosotros/as*).

Finally, there is an entire life-philosophy in the differences of

usage of the Third Person in English, compared with the other languages mentioned.

In sum, English is in the singular anthropocentric, dividing everything but 'you' and 'me/us' into either (basically) human males or females ('he/she'), with some honorary inclusion, in the scheme, of animals, ships, and things held in affection; otherwise, it's all *things* out there – 'it'. In the plural, even humans qualify for this indiscriminate attitude; all 'they'.

By comparison with this image of Adam and Eve and a few chosen favourites wandering amid a frozen world of objects, the other languages while basically following the same pattern (although German, for instance, calls a young girl 'ein Mädchen', with a *neuter* noun which the others lack, so that *everything* is masculine or feminine) seemingly launch into a gendered universe where a door (*una puerta, une porte, una porta, eine Tür*) is as feminine as a woman (*una mujer, une femme, una moglie, eine Frau*); and the sky, or heaven (*el cielo, le ciel, il cielo, der Himmel*) is as masculine as a man (*un hombre, un homme, un' uomo, ein Mann*).

And the corresponding pronouns – some also in the plural, some not – concur, outside the human, rarely and randomly with their English counterparts: masculine (*he*), feminine (*she*), neuter (*it*); sometimes even plural (*they*).

This (neuter demonstrative,