

Tom Swifties

Boy have I got some Tom Swifties for you! How about:

"I long for the forest," pined the lumberjack

and

"I seek the great, white whale," said Captain Ahab superficially.

Paul Thompson,
Shrewsbury, England

Uses of humour

I thoroughly enjoy *ET* and think linguistic humour, such as Tom Swifties and Etymorphs, a serious enough topic to warrant attention quite apart from any intrinsic merits it has in making life brighter. Like poetry and many forms of literature, the humour of language tells us a lot about language itself, the human psyche and specific social cultures. It is no coincidence that most of the major writers in the English canon have been in one form or another highly sensitive to the humorous ambiguities and connotations of their native tongue. Best wishes for your continued success.

Norman F. Davies,
Editor, *System: An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics*,
University of Linköping,
Sweden

Not so EMUsed

As Tom McArthur pointed out in a previous issue (*ET*15), some abbreviations are never pronounced as acronyms even though they could be, but I have been wondering whether the reader is nevertheless subliminally aware of these unpronounced words and their associations. For example, the World Health Organization is never the "who?" but

how often do those initials nevertheless evoke the question at the back of our minds "What does it actually do?" Are we perhaps conditioned in our attitudes by the unspoken acronyms?

Consider the ERM and EMU. I for one was not surprised that it took Britain so long to make up its mind to join something whose name, if pronounced rather than spelt out, is synonymous (or rather homophonous) with the sound we make when we hesitate. And what of the enthusiasm, or lack of it, for EMU and a single European currency? As we all know, an emu is a large flightless bird – a rather unattractive, cumbersome creature of prehistoric appearance, which simply cannot get off the ground. Is there any wonder that so many Britons, rightly or wrongly, are dubious of the value of EMU – however we choose to pronounce it?

Donald Watson,
Wimbledon, London, England

An easy explanation

David Mermin's (*ET*24, Oct 90) puzzlement over the absence of *boojum* from the 1930 printing of *Webster's Second Edition* is easily explained: it wasn't the Second Edition, which appeared only in 1934. The 1930 printing was of the First Edition (1909) of *Webster's New International Dictionary*. Incidentally, the *OED Supplement* defines *boojum* as "An imaginary animal, a particularly dangerous kind of 'snark,' and lists 4 illustrative quotations, the first from 1904 and the last, of Auden, from 1950. None of the quotations sheds much light on the intended meaning, and it is not at all clear whether the OED's definition applies to any of them. The quotation from 1922 ("Both these beautiful abstractions are in reality boojums.") is intriguing because, like Mermin's current use, it reflects Lewis Carroll's original equation of being (reality) with vanishing (abstraction).

Sidey I. Landau,
Cambridge University Press,
New York City, USA

Boojums and scientific writing

... In *ET*24 you solicit readers' views on Professor Mermin's article 'E pluribus boojum'. I ought at the outset to indicate the background against which my comments are made. I studied science at D.Phil. level, though without taking a degree, so I know of the processes of publication and referral Professor Mermin describes. My fascination with words has led me to setting crosswords (for *The Independent* and *The European* among others), as well as voracious reading. I am also a member of the Lewis Carroll Society. I take the liberty to doubt whether you could have tailored an article more precisely.

And it fitted. I have derived pleasure from many *ET* articles, but rarely come this close to joy. That may, of course, be due to the tailoring. I hope, though, that it has more to do with the basic quality of the article.

Reading an article so closely involving 'difficult' science in a magazine such as *ET* was bound to spark off considerations of the communicability of scientific information. There was little in 'E pluribus boojum' of greater complexity than that involved in say, passing a longish sentence. Yet there is an inbuilt resistance in many people to approaching science.

Part of this is due to jargon, and *ET* could provide a service in elevating its discussions of scientific neologisms out of 'Kaleido-

scope' and into full articlehood. Part is due to style; here scientists are a little more to blame. Many articles are written in a formal and precise English that is designed to be unambiguous. But it is also portentous and stodgy; this is the case even in articles intended to popularise their subject matter. Yet it is evident that scientists can be stylists if they allow themselves some flexibility. At the literary end of the spectrum, one thinks of, say, Primo Levi, whose prose is simultaneously precise and pregnant. It is emphatically not the language of scientific journals; it would be wonderful if it were.

I am tempted to summarise by saying that science is plagued by the 'academic' that *ET* is so free of. (A sentence like that comes of embarking upon a thought without knowledge of the landing point!) This isn't entirely true – yet scientists can be their own worst enemies. No one is asking for pages of purple prose, but an awareness of the maintenance of interest would not come amiss.

A curious footnote, which I'm sure Frank Palmer would corroborate, concerns the number of scientists whose literary inclinations have led them to crosswords. There is quite a range: physicists, astronomers, mathematicians, dendrologists, a few computer scientists. It may be the mix of the rigour of the grid pattern combined and contrasted with the freedom of the clues. How this fits in with a high level of interest in serious music is less clear!

It seems, though, that there could be space in *ET* for a (possibly pedagogical) piece in English as used in crossword clues – by Frank Palmer, no doubt. He could give David Bergeson a run for his money in heteronyms – crossword setters have been using them for decades!

Paul Henderson,
London, England

P.S. One valuable point you

Worthy Word

COOLTH is a word, a real word.

It's in Webster,
the opposite of warmth,
but nobody uses it.
Still, if you say it slowly
on a blazing hot day
with a finger to your lips,
"Coo-oo-oo-oo-oolth"
turns into a portable zephyr.

Alma Denny,
New York

omitted. Professor Mermin's books sounds fascinating; I would consider buying it. But, as in all things the actual cost is a deciding factor – and that's what you omitted!

E pluribus boojum

Mermin's article has added to *ET* a tone of no mean measure: nothing anywhere near comparable has so far appeared within its pages. And I opine as one who has subscribed to and perused *ET* from its outset.

To begin with, the article threatened to be formidable reading. But as you got into it and on with it, you became as intrigued as fascinated, so that there was no thought of breaking off and laying it aside. Only towards the end could a reader, unacquainted with the *New Testament* become somewhat puzzled: the 'etc.' should have read "but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath". No matter! *ET* has scored over the *New Scientist* in securing this reproduction from *Physics Today*.

David Wiard,
Grantchester Meadows,
Cambridge, England

David Mermin replies: May I commend to Paul Henderson my book *Boojums All the Way Through* (the cost of the paper-

back in the UK is about £10), where I discuss the consequences for science of the recent tradition of indifference to good writing and where he (and David Wiard) can find the unabridged version of my boojum article. For his benefit (and mine) I would also like to correct the impression that Tom McArthur may have given in his *Comment*, that except for the boojum article my book is a collection of technical papers. While the technical content of the 25 essays varies from one to another, the majority were written for non-scientists, and I am happy to report that it has enjoyed a considerable vogue within the Cornell English Department, where it is widely regarded as a funny book. The confusing transposition of "not" and "shall" noted by David Wiard was introduced by *ET*. The biblical text was quoted correctly in *Physics Today* and in my book.

A plea for clear writing

I was interested to read Mr Barton's letter in *ET*24 (Oct 90) and do agree that the phrase "due to" is too often used when "because of" (or "as a result of") is meant.

I find his example unconvincing, however, because of the confusion between "written" and "spoken" English. It would have been correct to say "Mr Tulliver was unable to pay the money due to his creditors". When the phrase is written it should be "Mr Tulliver was unable to pay the money that was due to his creditors". There are words that are omitted in speech (but understood), which must be specified in writing.

Robert Clairborne summarised the difference when he wrote: "... if to speak and to speak well are two things, to write well is another thing, whose essential quality was summed up by the Roman orator Cicero some two thousand years ago: the aim of

writing is not simply to be understood, but to make it impossible to be *misunderstood*."

May I, having read Mr Barton's letter through, put in a plea for the correct use of the word "since". It is not a synonym for "as" or "because" as many people (including Mr Barton) seem to believe. Yes, we must preserve clarity in thinking and communication.

Mary Evans,
Technical Editor,
Scarborough, North Yorkshire,
England

Collins COBUILD English Grammar

On page 56 of *ET24* (Oct 90), towards the end of her review, Mistress Chalker professes to possess 'a passion for grammar'. Methinks she cannot be as passionate as all that, if she regards as a 'tease' what would seem to be a woeful inadequacy, when she points out that "the subjunctive is not to be found under verbs or mood etc." (ibidem, bottom of left hand column).

Luckily for him who reads through *the Glossary of grammatical terms*, the term subjunctive is given adequate treatment. My own impression, (being one who DID read methodically through said Glossary) is "NOT a good, concise, exposition in every instance".

Two instances should suffice to justify my appraisal: (1) "finite" BETTER – a finite verb is one that has a subject; infinitives and participles are NOT finite as their action is NOT limited by a subject (page 51). "Subject" (page 54) could more concisely have read "the person or thing that does the verb's action". (2) "preposition" (page 53) might better have been defined as "a LINKING word, most usually, of space or time". Only *after* such a definition should the examples "by, with, from" and others have been instanced. Admittedly, "*preposition*" is a brute, but its

etymology "put in front of" a noun, noun phrase, etc., is more significant than what it is *followed by*.

David Wiard,
Grantchester Meadows,
Cambridge, England

OXFORD GRAD SLAMS BUNG-IT-ALL-IN SUBS

The importance of conciseness in journalism was aptly summed up in the once well-known (are they still?) verses which had the refrain "boil it down" and which ended:

When you think 'twould be a sin
to
Cut another sentence into
Send it in and we'll begin to
Boil it down.

For the headline writer this art largely resolves itself into the question, How far dare I go in the use as adjectives of words which are not adjectives?

I don't think anyone would claim that this aspect of the practice of condensation has produced any benefits to English literature, but it often has the merit of being funny. The examples quoted below have been culled from various British newspapers during the past year.

"Knicker M.P. And The Wrecked Wedding." Simply by using one noun as an adjective this captures most of the virtues of the pop headline. It arouses our insatiable curiosity about sex, it has humorous overtones. It referred of course (or had you forgotten?) to the rather complicated private life of Mr Ron Brown M.P. whose wedding in April 1990 was marred by a bomb hoax.

I hereby offer to Radio 4's 'News Quiz' this idea for a subsection of the programme to be called *Historic Headlines*. Members of the panel would be asked to explain headlines such as the "Knicker M.P." one.

Of course the further back you go the more difficult it becomes

to recall what the news was about. "Boy Rapist Law Killed By Red Ken" does such a good job that it is almost unnecessary to read the story – provided that you already know that the House of Commons had been discussing a Bill that would have made it possible to prosecute boy rapists. Otherwise it might look as if "Red Ken" had committed murder. Similarly "Customs Arrest Five In Bomb Trigger 'Sting' Operation" requires a certain background knowledge of the contemporary scene just as the audience at a Greek tragedy needed to be familiar with the events preceding Scene One. "Club Blast Police Hunt Bogus Porter" (July 1990) is also somewhat enigmatic unless you have been reading the newspapers regularly or otherwise keeping in touch with the news. It reminds me of a visit I made some years ago to a basement library in Oxford when my daughter was reading Chinese. I asked her if she was able to read the ancient books which lined the shelves. "I could" she replied "if I knew the general gist of what the book was about." Chinese is remarkable for its ambiguity; as ambiguous as the headline "Cash Deal May End Aids In Blood Row." In the context of a feud between Scottish or Pakistani clans this highly condensed heading might be thought to convey a very different message from the one intended, which had to do with haemophiliacs.

"Rape Me Not My Virgin Girl" looks like the title of a modern novel. A comma after the word "Me" makes the meaning clear but commas are not favoured in the larger headlines. The next three words read "Mother Begg Beast."

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.

“Bookies Take a Bashing in Big Bishop Bet Coup”. Irresistible but a puzzle even to regular tabloid readers. The story which followed, in *The Sun* of 26th July 1990, went on: “An unholy betting sting over the next Archbishop of Canterbury . . .” That “sting” again. Presumably it refers to a once famous film about gangsters, but who today can remember the plot? I think a certain sub-editor must be pushing his luck.

“Frozen Lungs Kill Sniff Girl” has plenty of “read-on” and when we do learn that butane gas can “freeze” the lungs.

The practice of using other parts of speech as adjectives has a distinguished ancestry. Coleridge’s “nigh-thatch” smoking in the “sun-thaw” comes to mind as well as the more way-out “dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon” of G.M. Hopkins. Headlines, however, tends to produce ugly, jerky English.

I end this small showcase of epithetology with a classic which appeared in the *News Of The World* twenty years ago because it says so much in 15 words, is a model of clarity and is funny: “Nudist Welfare Man’s Model Wife Fell For The Chinese Hypnotist’ From The CO-OP Bacon Factory.”

Richard Blomfield,
Poole, Dorset, England

1990 A-level examination results

Before we all succumb to the euphoria arising from finding that this year’s British A-level results may not be the unmitigated disaster some people were fearing, it is worth looking closely to see what examiners have to contend with when marking manuscripts.

One of our members, Dr Bernard Lamb, Reader in Genetics at Imperial College of Science and Technology, has marked this year’s papers in the 1st year (post

Words for the whys

Archaic, trite, outworn, cliché
Are words passé and vague;
All students sharp as tacks today
Avoid them like the plague

Dick Hayman,
Salinas, California

A-level) examination in genetics, molecular biology and viruses. There were 120 candidates at the June examination, and very few submitted manuscripts entirely free from spelling errors. Dr Lamb has culled the following list (omitting papers written by foreign students):

TOITTOISE (tortoise)
FAMILLIES
DISCOVERED
MODLE (model)
FINED (found)
QUALATATIVE (qualitative)
OPOPOSITE (opposite)
OPOSITE
PREFORM (perform)
ARIS (arise)
SUPPLIMENT
SEA (see)
FORE (for)
TOBBACO
STABALISING (stabilising)
GEEN (*gene*)
ANTERRHINUM
(antirrhinum)
EMMIGRATION
IMIGRATION
TWO (to)
TO (two)
SORPRESSOR (suppressor)
VAIRIATION (variation)
VARYATION
INNACTIVATION
INNACTIVATED
SEGROGATE (segregate)
BY-PASTED (by-passed)
RAPE (ripe)
PREMOTE (promote)
EFFECT (affect)
AFFECT (effect)
AFECT
DELATERIOUS

SHO (show)
ORGANCE (orange)
CHARECTERS (characters)
CHARACTURES
BREAKES (breaks)
MODIFYFS (modifies)
BEAS (bees)
SPONTAINEOUS
LOOSE (lose)
AJACENT
SEGEMENT
HIBRID (hybrid)
IDIPENDENT (independent)
EXSTREMES
SNALE (snail)
CONSEQUATIVE
(consecutive)
REFFERED (referred)
MEDIA (medium)
POCESSING (possessing)
EXAMBLE (example)
EXCLUDED (extruded)
HIEGHT (height)
WHO’S (whose)
WERE (where)
WHERE (were)
PRESENCE (presence)
CORSE (course)
COMPLIMENTARY (complementary)
ON (one)
ARANGED (arranged)
BAKK BONE
PROSSES (process)
WHEATHER (whether)
OCCOURED (occurred)
OBSILITE (obsolete)
SHAIR (share)
HERDETARY (heredity)
INCOOPERATE (incorporate)
DIFERENT
STREATCHING
SUCCEPTIBILITY
WITCH (which)
LATER (latter)
BREAD (bred)
NUCLEII (nuclei)
SIMILLAR
SIMALAR
RELAVENT
TOLLERATED
REEDING (reading)

Confusion was common between singular and plural, as shown by the sentence ‘The difference between maternal inheritance and maternal pre-termination *are* very different [sic]’, and the crucial importance of correct punctuation is illus-

trated by the candidate who wrote 'Escherichia coli has a broad spectrum of habitats - in the gut of some animals in sewage works, etc'. A comma omitted after 'animals' changes the meaning completely!

The Abbé Mendel fares badly at the hands of today's budding geneticists: MENDAL, MENDIELIAN, MEDELIAN, MENDELLIAN, MENDALIAN; and the 'Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium' emerges badly mauled: HADWEINBEG, HARDYWEINBER.

This demonstration of inability to spell correctly commonly-occurring words is disturbing enough, but the deeply worrying feature that comes to light is that science students were unable to spell correctly the technical words they have to use:

REPARATION (repair) (of damaged DNA)

EPESTASIS (epistasis)

PROTINE (protein)

RIBOSOMME (ribosome)

INTERCHELATING

(intercalating)

CYTOCINE (cytosine)

PRIMODENES (pyrimidines)

AMMINO (amino) (*Amino* has a different meaning)

GAMATE (gamete)

TEMPORARY bacteriophage (temperate)

PYRODENES (purines)

MESSINGER RNA (messenger)

BARE BODIES (!) (*Barr*, after Prof. Barr)

POLLYPEPTIDE (poly..)

A tendency to leave the letter 't' uncrossed caused confusion: 'repeating' becomes 'repealing'!

Dr Lamb explains that his students were warned a year ago of the importance of correct spelling, but confesses that this list, though exhausting, is far from exhaustive - "I have many, many examples of other errors!"

Peter M. Bassett,
Vice-Chairman,
Queen's English Society, UK

a capital ad?

Advertisement in one of our local newspapers. This organisation, incidentally, has the support of Kent County Council Social Services Department and Shepway District Council.



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telephone: (0233) 629897
closing date: 17 october 1990.

Words fail me!

miss d.m. raynor,
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