

## Proverbial humour

I was particularly amused by one "proverb" you didn't recognize in your review of Jerzy Gluski's book (*ET20*, Oct 89), namely "The husband is head of the wife." Amused, because you feature the book from which it comes on the cover of the current issue!! Yes, it's from the Bible, Ephesians 5 v.23 – "The husband is head of the wife, as Christ is of the church . . ." Different circles, different knarledge! Keep the wonderful magazine going!

David L. Seymour,  
London, England

## Demanding a refund

Your correspondent's consternation is understandable. Writing to you from Canterbury (*ET20*), Sylvester Mazzarella includes a sample of the pathetic mess that passes for English amongst a 'group of students' at the University of Kent and asks the pertinent question: 'What should be done about it?' It seems to me that, for starters, the parents of these alleged students – together with other tax payers – should storm the offices of the local education authority; bang a few desk tops; and demand an immediate refund.

Dick Ogden,  
Sumas, Washington, USA

## Who is playing about with English?

Whatever Joan Butler's purpose was in "Playing about with English" (*ET20*), she overdid it at least twice, i.e.:

(1) "In a reputable magazine the other day I saw a short paragraph by a respected journalist concerning a television programme and it contained two

grammatical mistakes."

(2) "Perhaps some of these arbitrary and bizarre usages are what students from overseas should be thinking about and which could form the basis of their work."

To me, that's atrocious ("And yet I wondered" if she noticed it). English is a language, like other languages; you can play, not fool about.

J.P. Parigi,  
Frankfurt, West Germany

## Grammatical overkill?

What Torkil Christensen says about the unhappy results of language teaching via grammar in Japan (*ET20*) is true in many countries. The interesting thing is that methods of language teaching are themselves part of a cultural tradition. It is an undeniable truth that grammar, far from being an indispensable prerequisite of language learning, is more of a hindrance to *efficient* language acquisition than most of the profession would be ready to admit. Even as a linguist and grammarian I am decidedly against the *explicit* teaching of grammar in foreign language courses. At any rate, *English Today* would be well advised to keep this vexed and controversial question on the agenda.

Professor Ewald Standop,  
Universität Würzburg,  
West Germany

## Tom Swifties

To the "Tom Swifties" may I add –

"I'm leaving you, Rupert," said Tom, with gay abandon!

One of the neatest I ever read was in David Nobbs' "Second to last in the Sack Race". Describing the hero's first sexual experience as a teenager, it ran:

"Oh heck," he ejaculated, prematurely.

What more can I say?

Paul Thompson,  
Shrewsbury, England

## Caught on the wrong foot

May I put in a good word for those people, much derided by academics, who when interviewed on radio or television fill their replies with such phrases as "You know", "Sort of" and "I mean"?

When grief-stricken parents have microphones thrust in their faces and are asked "How did your feel about your daughter being raped and strangled?" what other answer is possible but "You know"?

Similarly, when an ordinary person, unused to cameras, lights and studios, is questioned by an experienced interviewer, it is surely both natural and right to hedge replies with such words as "I mean" and "sort of". In such a context "I mean" signifies "Not being as professionally glib as you, I may not be doing myself justice", and "sort of" means "Since I lack your command of language, this is as near as I can get to choosing the right words on the spur of the moment".

"Er" has the same function, with the additional sense "Please don't interrupt me while I'm fumbling to find the best way to express myself".

Alec Bristow,  
Eye, Suffolk, England

## Diagnosing the less competent

Teachers of English all over the world are faced with a particular problem: that of the occasional learner, usually adult, whose lan-

guage learning ceiling is exceptionally low. In a great many institutions where English is taught this proves to be a serious obstacle when students who are initially placed in good faith prove unable to keep pace with the rest of the group, often causing resentment on both sides and a severe problem for the teacher.

It would be very useful indeed if there were some generally available and easily administrable language aptitude test which would enable teachers and institutions to predict which students might be expected to experience problems in the acquisition of a certain language. Possibly some reader of *ET* might be aware of some diagnostic test of this nature, and if so I, and, I am sure many others, would be very interested to hear of it.

Martin R. Eayrs,  
Director,  
Victoria School of English,  
Uruguay

## Spying for the grammar god

The reader must realize where "I'm coming from" – to cite a common American usage. When I was 10 years old – a Fourth Grader in a small Western Oklahoma school named City View, three miles east of Mangum, a small town – I decided that I wanted to devote my life to eradicating a murderous act, the killing of English grammar.

My teacher, early on in that important year, introduced me to *Plain English Handbook* by Walsh and Walsh, and I was fascinated.

For these 45 years, I have been making enemies by spying, for the Grammar God, on delinquent usages, and for 34 years I have been selling Good Grammar on the open market as a teacher of English at a regional university.

Many faux pas bother me, but I feel as though I have been massacred when someone I love or someone whose English usage

I have respected falls into grammar traps.

Most recently I have taken upon myself the lofty role of Protector of the Conditional Auxiliaries *would* and *want*:

"He wants to thank his wife for helping him with the printed program." "He would like to express his gratitude to the members of the Arrangements Committee." "He would like to thank, for their help, X and Y."

The corrections are simple: "Thanks to my wife for . . ." "I express my gratitude to . . ." "He thanks X and Y for . . ."

Some questions remain: Doesn't he feel free enough with his wife to thank her – and not just want to? If he "would like to" express his gratitude, why doesn't he do it? If he "would like to" thank X and Y, why doesn't he barge right in and save time?

The examples used here shouldn't be considered extreme. All a person must do in order to believe them are to listen at any public gathering and read some well-known journals.

Professor Leroy Thomas,  
Southwestern Oklahoma State  
University,  
Weatherford, Oklahoma, USA

## Linguists and linguisticians

Opening his attack on grammarians (*ET*17, Jan. 89), Tony Fairman states that "students of modern linguistics are taught that the first task of a *linguist* is to describe how languages are used". Is it not time for this word *linguist* to become more limited in its use? Whatever its historical development, to most people it indicates someone speaking several languages. The rise of the study of *linguistics* should engender the word *linguistician*, which is not to be found in my *SOED* or in my *Chambers's* of 1952, but I find it in my new *Chambers* (an interesting distinction) of 1988. A linguist may not be a good

linguistician, although I hope any linguistician may possess the skills of a linguist. I make a plea for greater clarity in the use of English, so easily obtained in this case by the employment of a neologism, so easily lost by the ignorant use of a word of precise meaning (eg. *disinterest*, *decimate*, *cohort*).

Tony Fairman is perfectly entitled to pursue his descriptive interests, but what he and others of his persuasion overlook is that the great majority of those who *learn* English – rather than pick it up – wish to be told what is correct or, at least, acceptable. Anarchy is a vacuum of the mind. Advertisements in the daily papers offer opportunities to "improve your English", showing how the poorly educated or the inarticulate are conscious of their shortcomings. "Why can't I make myself clear?" "How can I fulfil my ambitions when I destroy my hopes by opening my mouth?" In other words, "I was let down not merely by being a Scouse, but also by being taught by one." And foreigners wish to be taught a *standard* English. The successful among them show up most of our countrymen to their disadvantage.

What kind of English does a descriptive linguistician use himself? Tony Fairman is content to say ". . . prescribing may prevent *us* attaining . . ." and ". . . handicapped by *them* having to learn and read . . ." (rather than *our* and *their*). He will claim no doubt that this is the form that most people use, even though it does not follow 'educated' practice, based on the logical structure of the phrase. I can only conclude that he is being deliberately defiant. (Incidentally, "I can remember *him* dining with us" is perfectly acceptable; a different idiom is here employed.)

It really does not matter all that much to the ordinary reader, but in an academic journal one expects to find academics

## To collectors of collectives

You speak of a 'bevy' of beauties,  
And lions, you say, form a 'pride';  
You mention a 'skulk' of red foxes,  
And 'herd' are the cattle you ride.  
A cluster of geese is a 'gaggle,'  
And 'covey' is several quail.  
But what do you call New York buses  
That roll in a row, head-to-tail?

Please find a correct appellation,  
Among your encompassing terms,  
For buses that move in formation  
Like lumbering chrome pachyderms.

Alma Denny, New York

employing academic standards; 'purely academic', you may say. My respect for those who use the colloquial form is not shattered on that account, but an experienced linguist should be sensitive enough to avoid the solecism.

Fredrick H.G. Percy,  
Sanderstead, South Croydon,  
England

Close in his *Reference Grammar* defines five ways of referring to the future in English and then goes on to say: *Since 'tense' can be defined as 'form taken by the verb to indicate the time of an action', there is no reason for not giving the name 'tense' to each of those five ways of referring to the future.* I couldn't agree more.

Louis Alexander,  
Haslemere, Surrey, England

## Why future tense?

F.R. Palmer's plea that English should be regarded as unique among European languages in not having a future tense is wholly unconvincing. We all fervently hope that English is not some kind of *Herrensprache* without a future! To suggest that *shall* and *will* (and indeed other ways of expressing the future) are coloured by notions of probability even when used for simple prediction is merely to state the human condition. All predictions, in any language, are bound by their very nature to be tentative, conditional or probable. One of the best examples of this is the almost-obligatory formula *insha'allah* (= *God willing*) used in Arabic to accompany any future reference. The question is, can we legitimately use the term *tense* to describe ways of referring to the future? R.A.

## The truth will out

After reading Frank Palmer's claim (letters *ET* 20) that *shall* and *will* seldom express simple prediction or pure futurity, I spent a couple of hours looking through the supplement to *The Guardian* newspaper of Friday October 20th checking all occurrences of *will* (I found none of *shall*). I turned up 89 examples in nine pages, leaving out 5½ pages of job adverts which would simply have multiplied the examples unrevealingly. Of these 89 I found half-a-dozen with significant traces of other meanings (e.g. willingness) as well as futurity. All the rest (i.e. 93-4%) seemed to me plain future. Here is a representative sample:

(1) When the ivory has been pumped out of the rest of Africa the attention of the ivory criminals *will* turn southwards.

(2) The candidate *will* have a recognised accounting qualification.

(3) The duties *will* include strategic management of the formulation of management policies.

(4) In the long run we *will* need more waste paper.

(5) We have got a pump order from West Germany that *will* take the CFCs out of old fridges but we *won't* have it for several months.

(6) The population *will* rise by 16 million this year.

(7) The new lifestyle checks *will* be promoted as the NHS's answer to the expensive BUPA screens. But *will* they work?

(8) With the advent of transgenic crops, engineers *will* clearly need ways of outmanoeuvring the itinerant pollen grain.

(9) This Hamlet promises great revengeful things but his voice and demeanour suggests he *will* never rise to them.

(10) Quite soon it *will* be us in charge.

(11) However, more persistent rain *will* reach southwest Britain during the evening.

Of course everything depends on what Frank Palmer means by *simple prediction* and *pure futurity*. The examples of *will* I have quoted are certainly simple enough and pure enough for me, and I suspect for most other people. Frank Palmer says that 'in the majority of their occurrences' (i.e. of *shall* and *will*) 'the meaning is either that of a conditional future or of probability.' Only one of my 89 examples was conditional (accompanied by an *if*-clause), though in any case I don't see what material difference that makes to the futurity of *will*. Present tense and past tense

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Readers' letters are welcomed.

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statements may also be modified by an *if*-clause, yet we would not normally say that they were therefore not 'pure' present or 'simple' past.

As for 'probability' I don't understand that either. Philosophically of course the future is always in doubt, but I suggest this is irrelevant to the sort of cases quoted. 'Probable' implies 'but possibly not'. But if we say that something *will* happen we can't then add 'but possibly it won't'.

I think we all agree that *shall* and *will* are *sometimes* used 'simply to' refer to future time' (Frank Palmer's own words in his book *The English Verb*). I would argue that they are used in this way very frequently, more particularly *will*, and moreover that they correspond more closely than any other future-referring form (e.g. *be going to*) to the inflected future tense in

French and other languages. No wonder the vast majority of EFL teachers refer to such *will/shall* forms as a future tense, a concept which their pupils have no difficulty in understanding. I agree with L.G. Alexander (letters *ET19*): why should we hesitate? Academic reservations serve only to confuse, and even among linguists the debate about future time and tense is far from settled.

Philip Tregidgo,  
Petersfield, Hampshire,  
England

Anada problem fo spiykaz ov Inglix az sekanderi languij iz poust voukälük R. Oldou moust spoukan varayati ov Inglix, i.e. Jenral Amerikan, häz poust voukälük R, majoriti ov forinaz aa aneybal tu pranauns dis saund. Agen, spelin ov Kaneydian meyz veri fyu kansexanz tu intanaxanal präktisiz. No daz Kaneydian gou eni wey tuwodz ripradusin intanaxanal pranansieyxan, fo ekzämpal, veri fyu yuzaz ov Inglix az sekanderi, o okziliari, languij yuz ständad pranansieyxan ov douz saundz reprizentid bay daygräf TH.

Ay sajest dät Paali, az hia prizentid, iz mo intanaxanal and iyzia tu leun dän mista Culp'z Kaneydian, wic iz haadli les paroukial dän ständad Inglix.

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

### Doesn't go far enough

Ay red mista Ted W Culp'z pres riliys in Oktouba'z edixan ov Inglix Tudey. Ay kánt help thin-kin dät hiz Kaneydian languij daznt gou faa inaf. Feustli hiy riteynz aatikalz. Yus ov aatikalz iz wan ov douz thingz dät forinaz häv greytist difikaltü in handlin.

## CROSSWORD

### ET 21 CrossworLd Solution

1	B	E	A	R	3	O	U	4	T	5	H	E	6	L	P	7	O	U	8	T
	R		L		U		O		E		I		F		U					
9	I	S	L	E	T		10	S	U	P	P	O	R	T	E	R				
	N		E		L		H		T		N		E		N					
11	G	A	G	G	E	R		12	M	A	N	C	A	N	D	O				
	U		O		T		13	P		T		U								
14	P	H	R	A	S	A		L	V	E	R	B		15	O	A	F			
								A		U										
16	S	I	C				17	T	O	M	M	C	A	R	T	H	U	R		
20	G	I	21	F	T	B	O	O	K		22	C	I	T	R	O	N			
24	O	B	F	U	S	C	A	T	E		23	R								
26	F		E		C		N		A		25	S	E	E	T	O				
28	F	I	S	H	O	U	T		27	P	R	E	S	S	O	N				

### ET 20 CrossworLd Winners

The winners of the *Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature*, the prize for our October 1989 crossword, are:

- J. Buxton, Chesterfield, Derbyshire, England
- A.L. Hahn, Dunellen, New Jersey, USA
- Arthur Gordon, Surrey, British Columbia, Canada
- R. Rainsbury, New York, New York, USA
- M. Skeggs, Eltham Park, London, England

## ETYMORPHS

Answers 1c; 2d; 3c; 4a; 5d; 6c; 7a; 8b; 9c