

OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS' ROOM

What's wrong with English?

by

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Synopsis

People often suggest that English is the greatest language in the world. The author sets out to persuade you that is simply not true. He then takes you on a survey of English grammar rules and spelling, explaining why some of them exist. He then suggests some interesting ways to reform and improve parts of the language that may cause your students trouble.

What's wrong with English?

A lot of what has been written about the English language verges on eulogy. The popular writer Bill Bryson claims that 'English retains probably the richest vocabulary and the most diverse shade of meanings of any language'. The famous lexicographer Robert Burchfield said that 'as a source of intellectual power and entertainment the whole range of prose writing in English is unparalleled anywhere else in the world.' How lucky the rest of the world is to have the opportunity to learn a language with such simple grammar, such concision, such lexical richness and such quirky spelling!

Many of the strengths of English are indeed obvious: the huge number of homophones that make double meaning and word play such fun; the compounding of words that enables us to be both exact and economical; the ease with which we can turn nouns into adjectives or verbs or vice versa such as Shakespeare's 'to out-herod Herod'.

However, what is ignored by much of the English-speaking world is that every language has its glories. Of course, most teachers of English as a foreign language know this and have never been fooled by linguistic jingoism because (unlike many British and American applied linguists) they speak more than one language.

Every language has its great literature, its strengths, and its quirks. As someone who speaks Spanish a lot of the time, it is impossible not to be aware of the extraordinary vitality of a language that has produced the adventures of El Quijote, the poems of Machado or the plays of Lope de Vega or Calderon de la Barca. At a more prosaic level,

Spanish outstrips English in such vital functions as expressing emotions, discussing food and wine, talking about the family, and having arguments at traffic lights. Spanish syntax has the flexibility of an Olympic gymnast and Spanish idiom often has a lovely twist. Talking straight becomes 'talking in silver' and a useless economy is described as 'saving on the parrot's chocolate'.

So English is just as good as other languages, but no better. But have you ever thought it would be great to actually improve the language? If only we could change this or get rid of that, it would make the language so much simpler to learn.

Of course, for many people, the first changes would be to spelling. No language (that I know of) has such an anarchic approach with few rules, no accents to help out, millions of exceptions and an often tenuous relationship between spelling and pronunciation. Just look at the awful 'ough' combination and its different sounds: ought; through; though; enough; plough; cough.

However, I think I would have to defend English spelling on the following grounds:

- 1 It shows where words come from and in a mongrel language like English that must be a good thing. Dessert, cuisine, buffet and restaurant are so obviously French. The silent letters of debt, doubt and receipt all go back to Latin origins and the silent letters of know, knee, folk, and alms go back to Middle English.
- 2 With English spelling, everybody is at a disadvantage and not just foreign language learners. Remember US Vice President Quayle's famous gaffe. While visiting a school he wrote 'potatoe' on the blackboard! That **must** give heart to our learners.
- 3 Attempts to reform spelling have actually made things even worse. For example, the 'Simplified Spelling' movement came up with such gems as tuf (tough), def (deaf) and troble (trouble). Besides there are so many varieties of English with different pronunciation that it wouldn't make much difference.

In my opinion, there are however some clear candidates when thinking about reforming English. The first and most obvious one is the much-hated present simple third person singular 's'.

When beginner students have been lulled into a false sense of security about English grammar, they are suddenly hit with this odious morpheme. They learn 'I like, you like, we like and they like' but then

suddenly come to 'he/she/it likes'. To add insult to injury the 's' ending often comes after a nasty consonant cluster thus causing large numbers of students around the world real nightmares (such as 'lasts', 'corrects' and 'mends').

It is not surprising that this simple inflection causes so much trouble. According to research in morpheme acquisition, the third person 's' is one of the last word-endings of English grammar that students use accurately. The reason is quite simple - it shouldn't be there. When verb inflections were gradually lost in the Middle Ages and Early Modern period it just hang on in there like some kind of linguistic fossil. In fact many varieties of English have given it up. For example, between 60 and 70% of American working class speakers from Detroit and 70-97% of British working class speakers from Norwich quite happily say 'he go' or 'she like'.

Having recovered from the shock of the third person singular, our students are then faced with the indignity of the 'Saxon genitive' (its name gives it away). They have just learnt that nouns in English do not seem to have any gender or any kind of inflection apart from singular and plural (no nominative, accusative, dative or ablative). Then they come to 'Mary's lamb', 'Charles's pencil', and 'my parents' car'.

The next thing we know is that they start talking about 'the door's handle', 'the table's leg', and 'the window's sill'. Why don't we simply say 'the café of Jim' or even 'Jim café'? This would save both teachers and students a lot of grief as well as avoiding the constant misuse of the apostrophe in Britain and elsewhere (Fred's Bar, tomato's).

My third candidate is the bringing back or standardising of cumulative negation. Shakespeare was still allowed to use this wonderful device to reinforce his message - 'And that no woman has, nor never none, Shall mistress be of it.' It is also used in lots of non-standard English such as that used in pop songs - 'My baby she don't love me no more.' For some reason, when speaking or learning Standard English we have to carefully remember that two negatives contradict each other and correct our students when they produce sentences that in their own languages would sound great such as - 'I don't like it nothing.'

While we're at it, there is just one more thing I would also change. Think about the following sentences:

a The teacher needs to have his objectives clear when he is assessing his students.

This is grammatically correct but makes a lot of people howl in anger at its lack of political correctness.

b The teacher needs to have her objectives clear when she is assessing her students.

This one will irritate grammarians and male teachers.

c The teacher needs to have his or her objectives clear when he is assessing his or her students.

This sentence avoids upsetting people but leaves everybody worn out with its endless redundancy.

d The teacher is someone who needs to have their objectives clear when they are assessing their own students.

This is perfectly politically correct and now actually used. It avoids any mention of gender but the lack of concord between singular and plural would have any respectable grammarian muttering into his or her beard (if he or she had one).

The solution is to introduce a non-gender-inflected third person singular pronoun, in the same way as we have 'they' for the plural. My choice would be to rescue an Old English pronoun (feminine third person):

The teacher needs to have **hiere** objectives clear when **heo** is assessing **hiere** students. We need to support **hie** as much as possible.

Surely this would satisfy everybody and it looks a nice blend of modern masculine and feminine pronouns too, doesn't it?

More drastic reform of English could include bring back the 'thou, thee, thy' forms which would make 'you' into a polite form of address again. It would certainly avoid a lot of our messing around with indirectness and periphrastic polite forms such as 'You wouldn't be going to the centre of town, would you?' The tired lyrics of pop songs would also get a boost. Imagine: 'Thou really turn me on by thine brown eyes, baby. I love thee so much.'

However, that is probably enough for one day. If you have any ideas or suggestions yourself for reforming English, write into the Opportunities Website and tell us about them!

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