Estuary English and New Zealand speech

David Rosewarne (*ET*37) cannot foresee Estuary English 'being adopted in ... New Zealand'. Neither can I, but undoubtedly for different reasons. There is no need for it to be adopted into New Zealand speech, because it has been there for a very long time already. 'Estuary English' is an intriguing name which has gained rapid acceptance, but we must be wary of allowing the name to confine our thinking. Certainly, Rosewarne cannot be allowed to lay claim to *estuary l* to describe the transformation of *all* to *aw*. This is a longstanding feature of New Zealand speech, as is the lengthening of the final vowel of *very* and *city*. More recent, but well entrenched, are the use of *there is* for both singular and plural, and the stressing of prepositions.

I suggest that claims that Estuary English has developed out of an amalgam of RP and popular London speech do not provide an adequate explanation for the presence of many of its features on the wider linguistic stage.

Beverly Fairfax,
The Language Centre,
Leeds Metropolitan University,
Leeds,
England

Collocations

In his very interesting article on collocations (*ET*40), Oct 94, Thierry Fontenelle raises some important points and clearly describes the pitfalls they present for the foreign learner. However, while it is certainly true that one of the identifying criteria or traditional characteristics of idioms is their invariability or "frozenness hierarchy", we quite frequently see some variation, used no doubt to create a certain (humorous or possibly dramatic) effect, e.g.:

- He was three (but also *four* and occasionally even *five/six*) sheets in the wind.
- "They swallowed it all, hook, line and padded bill."
- "..., and then go off to lunch with the head of a European bank to discuss selling the [building] society lock, stock and mutual status" (*The Times*)

Mr Fontenelle's statement that we say "*on* the stock exchange" and not "*at*", is true only up to a point, in the sense that a "killing *at* the stock exchange", for instance, would be dramatically different from a "killing *on* the stock exchange".

A. Lind, Associate Professor,
Institute of Languages/Institutt for språk,
Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration/Norges Handelshøyskole, Bergen,
Norway

Junk food junkies

I presume that the definition supplied for "news junkies" in *Kaleidoscope* (*ET*40, p. 21) – "consumers of junk food for thought" – was an interpolation rather than part of the original Safire citation, since it does not correspond to the North American use of this term. (If an interpolation, though, why was it in round brackets, not square?) Usage here relates to sheer quantity, not quality (or lack thereof); the term plays on the drug-addict meaning of junkie rather than on the idea of junk food. The definition of a news junkie, therefore, might simply be: "obsessive consumer of packaged news." These "addicts" get their "fix" by staying close to all-news radio or TV outlets, channel-hopping during news broadcasts so as to catch multiple versions of events. or buying multiple editions or types of newspapers and news magazines. The sources might be junk, but are not necessarily so.

Penny Williams,
Toronto, Ontario,
Canada

Ed. The definition was indeed William Safire's own, not an interpolation by us.

Semantics versus ethics?

I wonder what the verdict of your readers would be on the struggle going on in my mind between semantics and ethics.

Some years ago, when I was a director of an advertising agency, I was unfortunate enough to have a client who was terrified of taking decisions. One day he told me that he was applying for a senior job at a rival agency and asked if I would give him a reference.

I was sorely tempted. If I helped him to get the job, not only would I be rid of him but he might prove a liability to our competitors. On the other hand, how could I give him a favourable reference without lying? Then I had a brainwave. I wrote a brief reference saying that I had always found the applicant extremely meticulous. I was using the word – derived as it is from the Latin *metus*, meaning fear – in its true sense of 'timid, indecisive'.

I was thanked for what was described as my favourable reference, the man got the job, my conscience was clear, and I thought I had been rather smart. Now I have begun to have my doubts. In terms of pure semantics I had been strictly honest. In terms of ethics, however, I could be accused of blatant dishonesty, since I was quite sure that the word I had chosen to indicate a vice would be taken to indicate a virtue.

Which side would your readers

The Kachru contrasts

Congratulations on and thanks for 10 years of *ET*! Every issue is full of interesting information and lively argument. *ET*41 (Vol. 11:1, pp. 21-31) contains a masterpiece of tightrope writing by Yamuna Kachru. Without committing herself to anything but a vague notion of cultural diversity, she manages to weave a web of controversial critical comments on 'contrastive rhetoric', captivating the reader until we start asking questions like:

(1) *What exactly is this contrastive rhetoric that is being attacked here?* Is it really as 'well-established' and single-minded as suggested? In view of the author's admission that research in CR 'has had many different strands' it is surprising that (a) these multiple approaches are not allowed to emerge, and two bibliographical references to the literature (via an unpublished paper of hers!) leaves us in the dark, (b) her own published work in this field (in a volume edited by Kaplan whom she criticises) is not substantially different from the kind she now so apparently dislikes, and (c) the strand of CR that she concentrates on, i.e. the one related to ESL writing, is credited (without proof) to have an 'enormous impact'.

(2) *What is it, in both theory and methodology of CR, that is so reprehensible?* Yamuna Kachru fails, in this reader's opinion, (a) to show exactly what is wrong with the statement that languages and cultures differ in the way authors structure texts for effect, or to give counter-examples to the 'directional' rhetorical pattern of English for academic purposes (which she incidentally equates with 'Western' logic), (b) to demonstrate how a more 'socially realistic linguistics' might do better, e.g. by means of a systematic analysis of parallel texts from corresponding register ranges of language pairs, (c) to support her argument with substantial evidence (the quotations from authorities and extracts from student essays displayed in panels and odd references to Foucault, Strevens and others remain gratuitous at best and irrelevant at worst).

take in this confrontation between semantics and ethics?

Alec Bristow,
Eye, Suffolk, England

Neutralized, unstressed and ambiguous

(1) I was intrigued to find on p. 3 of the July 1994 number of *English Today* a very normal-looking lady described as a "chair", an item of furniture to which she bears not the slightest resemblance, and on p. 6 the lady herself refers to "the disgust of the chair of the Queen's English Society".

Frankly, I was not aware that a chair had any feelings at all!
But on p. 42 a *male person* is referred to as a "chairman". Is there some sort of sexual discrimination here?

My wife, when presiding at a meeting, always strongly objects to being addressed as "Madam Chair", remarking that she is a living human being, not an inanimate object.

Surely in these days when the feminist movement has convinced us that an actor can also be an actress, a poet a poetess, and a priest a priestess, the word "chairman" can also mean "chairwoman"?

In this connection I noted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* recently (October 19, 1994) two references to "the Commonwealth Ombudsman, (Ms) Philippa Smith" – I enclose the cuttings. Note that in one of them the writer asks in brackets (facetiously, I hope!) "(Ombudsperson?)". And in a TV drama recently I noticed that a judge addressed the chosen leader of the jury as "Madam Foreman".

Really, I think the attempted neutralisation of the English language has gone far enough. There is, after all, a very real difference between a man and a woman, and it is often useful, or at least informative, to know which sex is referred to. What picture does a "gathering of priests" convey to you? and then "a gathering of (priests and) priestesses"? (I must confess that I still feel the expression "a woman priest" rather akin to referring to a queen as a "woman king"!)

(2) The dropping of 'h' in *(h)er* and *(h)im* by the Queen Mother and Prince Charles (p. 6 of the July issue) is almost universal in unstressed positions. Just listen carefully. Only the most pedantic would pronounce all the h's in a sentence like "He has hidden his hat, has he?". Almost everyone in natural speech says "He 'as hidden 'is hat, has 'e?".

(3) In lighter vein, the reference on p. 43 of the July issue to the ambiguity of "Daphne turned into a tree" reminded me of the story of the commercial traveller who gave a lift to a very attractive young lady while driving to his next destination. Chatting casually, he asked her what she did for a living, and she replied "I'm a witch." The traveller laughingly

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(3) *What, then, are the implications of Yamuna Kachru's paper for contrastive rhetoric and writing across languages and cultures?* What I find disturbing in a paper about rhetorical conventions is the big inferential leap the author makes from the relatively small-scale observations that have been undertaken of interlingual differences and interference errors to the wide-ranging demands imposed on what cross-cultural description and composition teaching should be like. It goes something like this: (a) deviant rhetorical structures cannot (should not) be explained in terms of ESL/EFL learners' errors due to mother-tongue interference, but as part of a wider range of varieties of English as a world language (this is tantamount to saying that Mrs. Kachru uses Indian English when she writes in American publications, and I use Austrian English when I write in British publications), (b) every effort must be made not to 'devalue' or 'shut out' such non-native rhetorical patterns from the English teaching context, (c) it is in any case impossible to produce contrastive descriptions of either different dialects of English or of English and other languages because there isn't a single rhetorical standard available for comparison.

(4) *Given the 'pluricentric' nature of English, who adapts to whose rhetorical conventions?* What Mrs. Kachru seems to come down to in the end is the view that the onus is as much on native speakers of the Inner Circle (as readers) to learn and accept products of Outer Circle writers as it is on Outer Circle and Expanding Circle learners to master the norms of the Inner Circle. (This sounds like the perfect excuse to stop correcting the essays and postgraduate theses of international students!)

All of which comes dangerously close to using linguistic and pedagogical arguments for political ends. But is that still the province of *ET*?

Reinhard Hartmann,
Department of Applied
Linguistics,
University of Exeter, Devon,
England

remarked that "There's no such thing as a real witch." She smiled knowingly at him and ran her hand up his thigh, whereupon he turned into a motel ...

Alan Towsey
Tahmoor, New South Wales,
Australia

Poetical statistics

Readers might like to consider what seems to be a rash encroachment on the study of literature perpetrated by some psychologists recently. Badalamenti, Langs & Robinson '(Lawful systems dynamics in how poets choose their words', *Behavioral Science 39*, 46–71, 1994) even got a full page write-up in *New Scientist* '(Shall I compare thee to a Poisson Curve?', p. 15, 15th October, 1994).

Badalamenti *et al* present statistical analyses of word usage by eight eminent writers in seven poems and a piece of prose. They conclude that "the creative urge is a psychobiological process that involves innovative use of fresh words and that this urge cannot be held off for too long. That is, a tension builds within the poet in that the longer he does not invoke a new word the greater the probability that his next word will be a new one." (p. 59), "These results are suggestive of a basic property of the human mind and human communication" (p. 60).

A finding offered in support of these grand claims is that writers have distinctive profiles on a number of measures. Shakespeare (Sonnet xvii) was found to show "a unique combination of inventiveness and parsimony" (p. 57), but Edgar Allen Poe (Annabel Lee) "is a highly undisciplined, erratic and redundant poet" (p. 57). Wordsworth (Sonnet xiv) and Byron (She walks in beauty) were in a class similar to Shakespeare, with Poe's poetry most similar in profile to the prose of Lewis Carroll (an extract from Alice's adventures in wonderland), and Henley (Invictus), Frost (The road not taken) and Coleridge (Kubla Khan) are in a middle group. "The Wordsworth trio (displayed) richness of word use ... (close to) using all of the potential variety available in the number of words they used. Poe ... is the contrasting writer ... His results are a consequence of his strong tendency to repeat the same word again and again in his poem – an inclination that reduces the variety and complexity of the work." (57).

Badalamenti *et al*'s analysis is of only one piece by each writer (a check on a second of Shakespeare's is said to give similar results to the first). Surely one might have expected them to have typed in a few more once they

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 subjected to editional adaptation in order to make the most effective use of both the letters and the space available.

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had set up their statistical package! I analysed one more poem by each of Shakespeare and Poe using one of Badalamenti *et al*'s methods. Shakespeare's second (The Passionate Pilgrim, vii) comes out with a profile similar to the middle group, and Poe's (To Helen) better on some measures than Shakespeare's first.

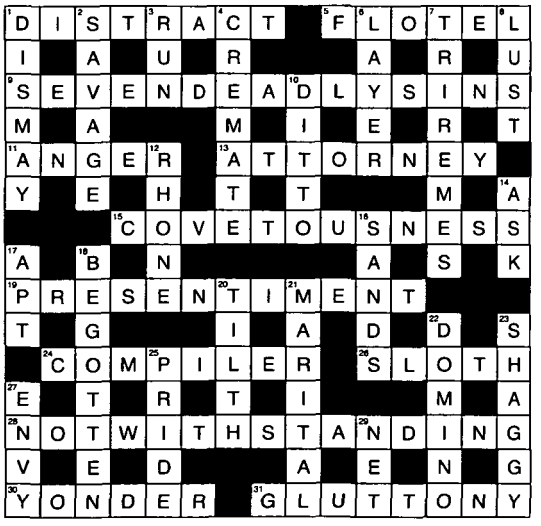
However, there are other qualms. Badalamenti *et al* make claims that would surely seem intuitively strange to anyone with some sensitivity to literature. Badalamenti *et al* talk of urges that cannot be held off, tensions building to introduce new words so that the probability the "next word" used will be a new one, as if such writing just poured out of writers off the top of their heads, rather than being the result of much effort and revision (or anyway a lengthy gestation period). And why should a poem with much repetition in it be "undisciplined, erratic and redundant"? The subject matter and its intended treatment by the writer must have some bearing on its form. So, one might expect Shakespeare to be able to write repetitive stuff, and Poe the opposite, if they judged it appropriate (as I have indeed found). Fair enough, the writers might have preferred styles, but it is not clear this can be put down to a psychobiological imperative!

It should be noted that the words that tend to be repeated most are common connector words such as 'the', 'and', 'a', 'of'. Poe's poem has many repeated themes: variations of "of the beautiful Annabel Lee" appear six times, and of "in a kingdom by the sea" five times. I am inclined to judge that poets put more of the repeated words in poems if, for instance, they want to be more conversational in tone, and as one way of achieving lyricism. A repeated chorus in a song is not evidence of lack of inventiveness, but is a convention, enduring for a number of reasons such as the sheer joyousness of repeating a happy phrase, and that it helps to sustain a mood! "Annabel Lee" is surely so evidently meant to be songlike, if one is approaching it as literature rather than as an exercise in statistics and neurobiological determinism!

Dr David Yates,
Preston, Lancashire, England

CROSSWORLD

ET 41 CrossworLd answer



ET 40 CrossworLd winners

The winners of *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar*, eds. Sylvia Chalker and Edmund Weiner, the prize for our October 1994 crossword, are:

Robert W. W. Greaves, Kampus UNLAM, Kalimantan Selatan, Indonesia
Mr R. Hall, Escrick, Yorkshire, England
Mrs Valerie High, Braughing Friars, Ware, Hertfordshire, England
Dr B. C. Lamb, London, England
Mrs Z. Rimmer, Thwaite, Eye, Suffolk, England

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