

Sticking together

By the end of the century, a billion people will be speaking English, and another billion will be learning it. Over 60 countries now use English as an important means of communication. And they are all adapting it to suit their needs.

This has always happened. 800 years ago, when the language began to move from England to other parts of the British Isles, it changed. Now, if you hear people say *wee bairn*, you know they are from Scotland. If you hear *Jack bach*, you think Wales.

The same thing is happening now, but on a world scale. *Sidewalks* and *diapers*? America. *Walkabout* and *outback*? Australia. *Wallah* and *chapatti*? India. These are some of the major international dialects of English.

A century ago, most people would not have been aware of this variety. Today you'll find it on film and TV; you'll see it in novels and on the Internet; you'll hear it on the tourist trails.

English in the 21st century is going to be an even closer encounter with new dialects. But the language isn't likely to break up. There is a glue binding things together. You'll read it in the daily papers of all these countries, and hear it on their broadcasting channels. It is called Standard English.

It's its

Why are we so unhappy about apostrophes? We walk down many a high street, and see signs for *potato's* and *pie's*. In a department store we see *Ladies wear* and *Mans shop*. Millions think it's correct to write *Its time for it's bath*.

The apostrophe is a newcomer on the English punctuation scene. People started to use it widely only 300 years ago. It seemed like a good idea. It marked when a letter was being left out (as in *can't*), and it kept awkward letters apart (as in *cross your t's*). It also helped show the difference between one (*the dog's bones*) and more than one (*the dogs' bones*).

But not everyone liked it. Some felt it was unnecessary, fussy, or ugly. By the beginning of this century, many banks and businesses had dropped it from their names (*Lloyds, Harrods*). Today it is very common to see it left out in shop signs and brand names.

In the 19th century, grammarians and printers tried to work out rules for people to follow, and we now expect children to use them, when they learn standard written English. But it's not surprising that people still get confused. There are lots of puzzling cases. Do you prefer *1940's* or *1940s*?

David Crystal

New words for old

At least a thousand words a year are coming into the English language in Britain. How do we know? Dictionary writers comb the newspapers and periodicals looking out for them. And every now and then they publish their findings in books of 'new words' .

One of the most popular ways of making a new word is to take parts of old words and weld them together in new combinations. The world of computers has added thousands of words to the language in this way.

Take *cyber-*, for instance. In the past year or so we have seen the arrival of *cyberspace*, and this has led to new locations (*cybercafes*, *cyberpubs*, *cyberia*), new people (*cyberguardians*, *cybersurgeons*, *cybernerds*), and new concepts (*cybertechnics*). And if you're not too sure about it all, you could be a *cyberflirt*.

Who's responsible for these new words? We all are. On a recent radio show, a comedian talked about *Euroboggling* and *Euronagging*. A lady in a shop was heard to complain about the *Euroweather*. People are inventing new words all the time, though only a tiny number ever catch on and make it into the dictionaries. So, if you've coined some new words recently, share them.

Off colour?

Take a word. Any word. Then try to say what it means. It's often quite difficult to do, because there are so many ways in which the word can be used. You have to look carefully at the context before you can be sure what it means.

Take an everyday word like *colour*. In a box of paints, the colours are red, blue, yellow, black, white, brown, and many others. But when you're talking about films or television sets, black and white are not colours.

If any word has to be a colour, it must be *red*? Not in the field of snooker, where the red balls are distinguished from the 'coloured' balls, black, pink, blue, green, brown, and yellow. The colours can be played only after a red ball has been potted. Notice that *black* in snooker is definitely a colour, and *white* is no colour at all.

Sometimes, *colour* is restricted to just one or two hues. What would you expect to see if someone said 'She's a good colour'? If you're Caucasian, it means a healthy-looking pink, possibly a sun-tanned brown. There are lots of other 'good colours' in the world, but in this context they're certainly not bright red or green.

No grammar? No way

Here's a line from a recent ad for a course teaching English to foreigners: 'We teach you how to speak, so there's not much grammar'.

It's easy to fall into this way of talking. What the ad means is that learners won't be burdened with all the technical terms to do with grammar, such as *clause* and *active voice*.

But grammar is far more than technical terms. Grammar is the skeleton of a language. It is the way in which we make our words make sense. There's no such thing as a language without much grammar.

A word by itself makes very little sense. Think about *round*. You can see what it means only after you put it into a sentence. *I see a round table* is rather different from *It's your round*. That's what sentences are for - to show how words make sense. And grammar is the study of the way sentences work.

It can certainly help to know some technical terms. It's a bit like driving a car: if you know something about what's under the bonnet, you're likely to be a better driver. Of course, this knowledge won't stop you breaking the law or having an accident. Safety and enjoyment need practice, care, and consideration for others. It's the same with grammar.

David Crystal

Fly BA to LA?

'The LA DJ lost his ID, and couldn't MC the ITV phone-in about the NATO HQ brunch.' Half the words in this sentence are abbreviations. But they are of several different kinds.

LA (for *Los Angeles*) uses just the first letter of the two words. ID (*identity card*) takes one letter from the beginning and another from the middle of the word. *Phone-in* is a shortened word. *Brunch* blends two different words (*breakfast* and *lunch*).

We live in an age of abbreviations. One published collection contains over half a million of them. Why do we do it?

Abbreviating words is one of our most natural linguistic activities. The more we get to know a subject, the more we shorten its words. It saves time, both in speaking and writing. When we're in a rush, we abbreviate. And everyone seems to be in a rush.

But there's a second reason why we abbreviate. It shows we're in control, or among friends. If we were to say *What You See Is What You Get* in a company of computer buffs, we could get some very strange looks. If we want to be 'in', we need to say WYSIWYG, as a single word. It shows we belong.

David Crystal

Look it up

What have salaries got to do with sausages? And why should scouts have good ears?

These are some of the strange relationships which emerge when you start investigating the history of words - or *etymology*. This intriguing subject is always uncovering the unexpected.

Salary came into English via French from Latin, where *salarium* was money given to the soldiers to buy salt. *Sausage* travelled the same route: in Latin, *salsicium* was something made from salted meat. Salt is the common element - and it turns up again in the history of the words *sauce* and *salad*.

The other question has a similar answer. *Scout* comes from Latin *auscultare*, meaning 'to listen', which is closely related to the word for 'ear', *auris*. Scouts must originally have been good listeners.

But when you study word-history, beware. Words do not always mean what they seem. You might think that the party drink *punch* is so-called because that's the effect the mixture can have on the drinker! In fact, the name comes from the Hindi word for 'five', because the drink was made from five ingredients.

Where is all this information to be found? In the pages of any reasonably large dictionary - an essential tool for anyone concerned about better English.