

Archaic or not?

From: Geof Huth
Schenectady, New York, USA
Email Huthg@emi.com

I've just read, with interest, Samuel Ahulu's article on "Lexical variation in international English" (*ET*55, Jul 98). Although I was interested by his close examination of the topic, and although I agree with his final and major point, I have one small quibble with a single term the author used. Ahulu's first example of lexical variation is "archaism." Though a small one, this presents an issue that I've run across more than a few times in articles and books by people writing from a British perspective.

I prefer to use the term "archaism" or "archaicism" to refer to a term no longer used unselfconsciously by fluent speakers of a language. So, for instance, I picked at random out of a dictionary the term "bookcraft." I can easily envision William Barnes supporting this term as a good, native Anglo-Saxonism, and I believe the word holds connotations not really present in any word we still use, but its useful life has passed. I've never heard anyone use the word or (to my knowledge) seen it used in print. And if it were somehow reborn at the dark end of this century, I'm sure it would be given a new meaning ("the practice of producing book art," for instance), rather than "authorship." The term is gone as a useful presence in our vocabulary, by which I mean the vocabulary of fluent speakers of English. That makes it a true archaicism.

But, most frequently, I see "archaism" used to mean "a term no longer used in standard British English" and for the most common example of this to be the American and Canadian word "fall" meaning "autumn." It always seems laughable to me to mark a term used by at least two thirds of the native speakers of English as

"archaic." The word may be archaic in some dialects of English, but certainly not in North American English.

To see how funny this actually is, consider the word "fortnight," which appears twice in the same issue of *ET*, in an article by the incomparable David Crystal. Although occasionally heard in the US, "fortnight" is a term that in my country can now only be used self-consciously. Here, it has virtually the same currency as "sennight." So "fortnight" is archaic in American English, though it isn't an archaicism in English as an abstract whole.

Interestingly, Ahulu's use of the term "archaism" is the aporia that undermines his text – to use what seems to me now humorous deconstructionist terminology. Although the author ends saying "language scholars and educationalists can no longer afford to ignore the incorporation of such variability into the codification of 'Standard English,'" his designation of certain Ghanaianisms (or Nigerianisms) as "archaic" shows that he holds some form of British English as the touchstone for the tongue. This also shows that the preferred and purest form of the language remains British English.

Here is a story. I used to live in Accra, Ghana, and one day the gardener handed my father a brief letter that used the term "bereft" as a synonym for "bereaved" – to indicate great sadness at the death of a loved one. Having by that time lived in at least four English-speaking countries (the US, Canada, Barbados, and Ghana), I was at first unsure if the word was "right" or "wrong," though it sounded wrong to me. Only tonight, about 21 years after the incident, did I look up the two words in an American dictionary to verify that my original "American" impression of what the words usually meant was right. But I'm not now saying that the gardener was wrong; he may have been exhibiting a West African use of

the word that might actually be common. And his meaning was still clear to all of us.

Humpty-Dumpty was almost right when he said, "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." In reality, words mean whatever at least two people agree that they mean. But when writing technically about language, we should use words as carefully as we can.

Too strong a distinction?

From: Peter Tan
Department of English
National University of Singapore
Email petertan@leonis.nus.edu.sg

There's very often a tendency to polarise British English and American English and I find this problematic partly because (a) it belies the situation, and (b) it suggests that all Englishes should conform to one or the other. So whilst I appreciated Bobda's article (*ET*56, Oct 98), I am very uncomfortable when he suggests that most or all Americans say 'sem[1]', or that they only use 'fall', or that in Britain everyone spells *-ise* (in words like *civilise*) only; or that 'living room' (as opposed to 'sitting room') is not used; or that nobody 'calls' (rather than 'rings' or 'phones') someone else. Before going to the UK in the 80s as a student, I found that all the books said 'corn' to mean *maize* was an Americanism. Then I found the University refectory serving 'corn'. When I was invited home, the host served 'corn'. It was always *maize* that they served, not wheat!

The editor responds John Algeo, who is one of the best informed people in the world regarding the shared and distinct usages of the US and UK, has consistently over the years pointed to the difficulty of highlighting AmE/BrE contrasts that are truly absolute. The two communities have interacted for so long and each is so complex and the language is so fluid that the

teaching of absolute contrasts can seriously mislead. So Peter Tan has a point. But Augustin Simo Bobda has a point too, because on many occasions Brits and Yanks do confound and confuse (as well as amuse) each other – and cause trouble for the rest of the world. Something therefore needs to be done about the differences while emphasizing the unceasing interplay between the two primary varieties of the language. Further comment?

Lack of sensitivity?

From: David Cole
The British Council,
Bucharest, Romania
Email David.Cole@bc-
bucharest.bcouncil.org

I refer to Pam Peters' article 'Surveying Contemporary English Usage' in *ET* 56, Oct 98. I took part in the survey and found her findings interesting. She has a remarkable lack of sensitivity, however, in lumping all NS respondents from Europe under the heading 'England'. I object to this most strongly, as I am sure the Editor does too! Why could she not have used a neutral term to include contributions from Celtic countries?

The editor responds It has been Pam Peters's intention to use the heading 'England' only for questionnaires originating in England,

and use 'Scotland', 'Ireland', 'Germany', etc., for all others originating in Europe. She is not available for comment as this issue of *ET* goes to press, but will I'm sure respond as soon as she can.

On language rights

From: Anthea Fraser Gupta,
School of English,
University of Leeds,
Leeds LS2 9JT, UK
Email
engafg@arts-01.novell.leeds.ac.uk

I'd just like to briefly address Tove Skutnabb-Kangas's response (*ET* 56, Oct 98) to my column (*ET* 50, Apr 97) on Language Rights:

○ By using the word 'Movement' I did not imply an organisation, but rather loosely connected people with a view tending towards a common goal (OED 6). I was using the term as I would use 'Feminist Movement' – also not a card-carrying organisation.

○ I am aware that many powerful bodies and organisations have supported giving children the right to mother tongue medium of education. That does not preclude the notion's being questioned.

○ I do not recommend what TS-K calls 'submersion'. I recommend examination of the demographics and of cultural settings, which can take account of varying needs.

○ I don't think that the sole use in education of a language that is not the mother tongue is necessarily a bad thing – TS-K and I really do disagree on this point. 'Many places have traditions of certain languages being 'school languages'. Non-school languages often flourish for centuries despite not being languages of education.

○ I am sorry if I gave the impression that all education must be monolingual. That was not my intention, and if TS-K can read that in what I have written I must have expressed myself carelessly on that point. I'm certainly not a monolinguist.

○ TS-K accuses me of putting up straw people, when I discuss whether mother tongue education should be compulsory or not. In my paper I clearly stated that the dominant view at the Language Rights Conference was that it should be provided but voluntary. I also do not agree with the view that governments should be required to provide MT education for all those who want it.

○ TS-K needs to address the definition of 'mother tongue' which is one of my central difficulties, given the floridly multilingual cities with which I am familiar.

○ She also needs to give some credence to practical and economic issues in making MT education a right. □

In versus On: A losing battle? (continued from page 44)

In or *on* an omnibus is a point which is illustrated in chapter 6 of *Manners for Men* by no less an authority than Mrs Humphry ("Madge" of *Truth*), first published in 1897. Apart from dealing with such delicate issues as the dripping umbrella and the "newspaper offender", it raises the question (in the nicest possible way) as to who should go on top, suggesting that the correct preposition in such a situation at that time was inside or outside, as in the phrase

cited, "Won't any genelman ride outside to oblige a lady?" (Mrs Humphry, *Manners for Men*, James Bowden, 1897. Pryor facsimile 1993, p.41)

Ultimately does any of this really matter? Not in the least, except for those poor souls who spend their lives trying to explain the finer points of English to foreign learners eager for rules of grammar. So why do I still wince when I hear *on* when I was expecting *in*? The only piece of advice I can give to anyone who feels the same is, "Hang on in there." □