A franker lingua?

From: Tony Fairman,
Maidstone, Kent, England

Marko Modiano [*ET*60, Oct 99, pp.3–13] says he applies a democratic *modus operandi* for defining a standard English as an instrumental lingua franca, which will be 'a composite of those features of English which are comprehensible to a majority of native and competent non-native speakers of the language' (p.4).

There are a large number of points in Modiano's argument I would like to ask him to clarify, but my key questions can, I think, be embodied in just one question:

> Does Modiano assume there is one and only one realization for concepts such as (A) democratic *modus operandi*, (B) standard English and (C) a particular variety or dialect?

Take, for example, (A): 'democratic *modus operandi*'. The democracies of the USA and the UK both operate on a first-past-the-post, winner-takes-all principle, but most western European countries operate forms of proportional representation (PR). If Modiano agrees that PR is a democratic *modus operandi*, then he must also agree that there is more than one democratic way to define (B) – standard English

Since speakers of AmE form the largest group in the English-speaking world, then, by US democracy and Modiano's composite principle, the lingua franca standard will be everything they say, though, if about 10% of the population of China becomes competent in English, the Chinese will take this power from them. Which would not be fair, would it? Just as first-past-the-post democracy has never been fair in Northern Ireland (nor in a large number of third world countries), and was not seen as fair in Britain when one of the two major political parties (Conservative) failed to convince the Scots and the Welsh that it did not favour the majority electorate, the English.

Modiano does, indeed, define a lingua franca standard in other ways, though he gives no sign he sees the definitions as yielding different lingua francas (linguas franca? *linguas francas*?). Another definition reads: 'Standard English, by definition, must be a composite of those attributes of the language which are shared by proficient speakers of the language' (p.2). On page 11 Modiano says AmE *condominium* is not shared by other speakers of English: therefore, 'it would be better to refer to a *privately owned apartment*'. (Sub-question (1): Does this accord with a descriptive model, on which Modiano says 'this standard should be based' (p. 4), or rather with a prescriptive one?) If this definition is applied, the resulting lingua franca standard will be as useless as a tramp's jumper. It will not, for example, contain *got* nor *gotten* (since they are not shared by speakers of AmE and BrE), nor will it contain *outside* (since proficient speakers and writers of Scottish English use *outwith*), nor will it contain *was* or *were* (since I know many proficient speakers of local varieties of BrE who normally say, for example, *we was*). Sub-question (2): What would it be better to use if *was* and *were* are excluded? Sub-question (3): Modiano says (p.3) that 'One problem with [John Honey's insistence on 'a BrE prescriptive norm'] is that it acts as a platform upon which notions of "correctness" and a deep-rooted prescriptivism are empowered.' When, therefore, Modiano argues for '*one* standard English,' is he moving to a new platform, from which he still empowers 'correctness' and prescriptivism and 'stifl(es) the language learning process'?

Finally, we will look at Modiano's statements about (C), 'a particular variety or dialect.' When he writes of 'shifting' (p.7) and 'switching' (p.13) from regionally restricted varieties, is he making the same assumption about all dialects as he makes about the standard – namely that there is, or should be, one and only one way to use a dialect? After all, dialectologists usually focus on precisely those forms which are unique to particular dialects, but what about the rest of the dialect? Is it true that users of, say, Cockney or Appalachian have firm beliefs about, and invariable uses of, all aspects of their dialect, as standard users are formally taught to have of standard? Or could it be that they feel at home using their dialects multiformly? If this is the case, then, when they adopt forms which are commonly named 'standard,' would it not be more accurate to describe this behaviour not as code-switching, but as code-sliding (along a scale within the dialect) or code-growing (including new forms, as standard lexis regularly does)?

I suggest we need to think far more radically about the problems of lingua franca English than Modiano does. Since I have discussed these problems elsewhere (most recently in 'Schooled and Open Englishes' in *ET*57 and in 'English pauper letters 1800–1834 and the English language' in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, David Barton and Nigel Hall (eds), John Benjamins, 1999), I will not repeat nor develop my thoughts here. I merely ask questions.

Editor: Tony Fairman is a native-born Englishman, who has lived for more than nineteen years, variously, in Scotland, Wales, Germany, Botswana, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda.

Mid-Atlantic?

From: Laurence Urdang,
Old Lyme, Connecticut, USA
e-mail: luverbatim@aol.com

In his interesting and generally accurate article, 'Standard

English(es) ....' (*ET*60 Oct 99), Dr Marko Modiano writes, in reference to *International English*, about Peter Trudgill's and Jean Hannah's claim 'that *I haven 't got any* and *I haven't got a bloody clue* are examples of standard English,' as follows:

> Both of these sentences are ungrammatical to many speakers of AmE, who are more likely to say *I don't have any* and *I don't have a clue*.

While speakers of AmE are not heard to use *bloody* as often as are speakers of BrE, the statement is not accurate: among the various forms that might be heard in AmE are, *I haven't got any*, *I haven't got none* [nonstandard], *I ain't got none* [nonstandard], *I don't have any*, *I've got no* ..., and, perhaps a few others. The point is that *I haven't got* is not only common but the prevailing construction.

In his comments about utterances like *I'm sitting my A-levels in the summer*, I should scarcely have categorized the discussion as focused on grammar: BrE *sit*/AmE *take*, BrE *read*/AmE *study*, BrE *given over to*/AmE *devoted to*, *scheduled for*, etc. are matters of lexicon, not grammar, and there are a number of good books that have dealt with the subject adroitly. The discussion that follows is entirely correct, but it has to do with lexicon, not grammar.

An amusing illustration of a lexical slip of mine some years ago might bear repeating. In discussions with Collins publishers in the UK regarding the budgets for the preparation of *Collins English Dictionary*, in 1970, the subject of a budget for advertising and promotion arose. Collins, I felt, were being somewhat niggardly in allowing too little money for the proper publicity, and, in frustration – bearing in mind that some of the meetings extended into the wee hours when I was still suffering jet lag – I blurted out, 'If you want to make a penny, you've got to spend a penny!' Those present were too polite to roll about on the floor, and it was not till a bit later

on that I learnt the meaning of *spend a penny* as a BrE idiom. (Besides which, had the idiom been reflected in AmE, it would have been *spend a nickel*.)

A truly bilingual individual is a very rare commodity, and I consider myself quite fluent in my (native) AmE as well as in the BrE that I have acquired during the thirty years in which I spend fully half my time in England. It is true that there are some relatively minor grammatical differences between the two dialects, but it would be hard to find examples of their leading to genuine misunderstanding. The lexical problem is another matter, one certainly not restricted to interdialectal contact.

My compliments to Marko Modiano.

Dunglish

From: Joy Burrough-Boenisch, Wageningen, Netherlands
E-mail: burrough@bos.nl

ET readers might be interested in a small book of mine published last December by Sdu (the privatised Dutch Government Printer), currently being reprinted. When the book appeared last December, it carried a Dutch blurb. But for the reprint, the publisher has decided to use the following English text, which is as good a way as any of giving you a flavour of the book's content:

> Written English that's gone Dutch contains carry-overs from Dutch language and writing conventions. Using examples collected as an editor and translator working in the Netherlands, Joy Burrough takes a sideways look at this language interference, which affects those writing English in a Dutch environment. Even English native speakers 'go Dutch'.
>
> Find out how and why Dutch paragraph layouts, pronunciation, spelling, abbreviations, brackets, hyphens, quotation marks,

word emphasis, forms of address, and conventions to do with names get into written English. What does the present tense signal in the two languages? Do French and Latin expressions mean the same in Dutch and English? And how do differences between British and American conventions fit in?
>
> This contrastive stylebook explores the zone where Dutch and English meet, and gives advice on writing English right.

In 1995 *English Today* published Susan Ridder's article 'English in Dutch' (Vol. 11, pp. 44–50), which looked at English words and phrases imported into Dutch. In my book I take a wry look at a much broader range of imports from Dutch to *written* English. I know that some of these transfers also occur from other European languages into English-language publishing here in 'continental Europe', so I think the book would be of interest to readers outside the Low Countries. Unfortunately, readers who don't speak Dutch will probably miss some of the bilingual puns (there are about 20 of them), but I'd be glad to explain them. Most of the puns and wordplays are in English, and it has been gratifying to find that these are appreciated by Dutch readers.

The book is one spin-off of 20+ years of editing and translating for Dutch scientists. Another spin-off is my PhD research (being done at Nijmegen University's Centre for Language Studies) on Dutch scientific English. That will result in a much more serious book early next century, which will look at the deeper issues of cultural transfer into English writing.

Editor: Joy Burrough-Boenisch's book is published by Boudewijn van der Lecq, Sdu, Postbus 20025, 2500 EA The Hague, Netherlands ISBN 90-57-9700-82 1998/9, 94 pp.

Strunkenwhite

From: Dr Donald D. Hook
E-mail: Herrdoktor@com-
puserve.com

As a supplement to my article on the apostrophe in *ET*59, Jul 99, I wonder if the following would be of interest to *ET* readers. It is an interesting account by Bob Hirschfeld, a guy who lampoons the news at his Web site Bobs-fridge.com and has an unusual importance, I think. Here goes [a selection from the full piece follows: Ed.]:

Title: *A bug about grammar: e-mail is infested with major faux pas*

A new computer virus is spreading throughout the Internet, and it is far more insidious than the Chernobyl menace. Named Strunkenwhite, after the authors of a classic guide to good writing, it returns e-mail messages that have grammatical or spelling errors. It is deadly accurate in its detection abilities, unlike the spell-checkers that come with word processing programs.

The virus is causing something akin to panic throughout corporate America, which has become used to the typos, misspellings, missing words and mangled syntax so acceptable in cyberspace. The CEO of LoseItAll.com, an Internet startup, said the virus has rendered him helpless. 'Each time I tried to send one particular e-mail this morning, I got back this error message: "Your dependent clause preceding your independent clause must be set off by commas, but one must not precede the conjunction." I threw my laptop across the room.'

...A broker at Begg, Barow and Steel speculated that the hacker who created Strunkenwhite was a 'disgruntled English major who couldn't make it on a trading floor. When you're buying and selling on margin, I don't think it's anybody's business if I write that "i meetinged through the morning, then cinched the deal on the cel phone while bareling down the xway."'

If Strunkenwhite makes e-mailing impossible, it could mean the end to a communication revolution once hailed as a significant timesaver. A study of 1,254 office workers in Leonia, N.J., found that e-mail increased employees' productivity by 1.8 hours a day because they took less time to formulate their thoughts. (The same study also found that they lost 2.2 hours of productivity because they were e-mailing so many jokes to their relatives and stockbrokers.'...

The virus has left government e-mail systems in disarray. Officials at the Office of Management and Budget can no longer transmit electronic versions of federal regulations because their highly technical language seems to run foul of Strunkenwhite's dictum that 'vigorous writing is concise'...

'This is one of the most complex and invasive examples of computer code we have ever encountered. We just can't imagine what kind of devious mind would want to tamper with e-mails to create this burden on communications,' said an FBI agent who insisted on speaking via the telephone... .

Uses and misuses of the apostrophe in English

We would like to apologise here to Don Hook [above] for omitting the references list at the close of his article on the apostrophe in *ET*59, Jul 99, and to acknowledge his gracious response to our slip-up.

References

Bongartz, R. 1986. *The apostrophe's position.* Publishers Weekly 82 .

Crystal, D. 1992. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language.* New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 205.

Hall, N. & A. Robinson. 1996. *Learning about punctuation.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, p. 150.

House, H. & S. Harman. 1950. *Descriptive English grammar.* 2nd edn. New York: Prentice-Hall, pp. 30–31, 42–44.

Lowth, R. 1762/1804. *A short introduction to English grammar.* n.p.

McArthur, T., ed. 1992. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language.* Oxford: University Press. pp. 74–76.

Mühlhäusler, P. & R. Harré. 1990. *Pronouns and people: the linguistic construction of social and personal identity.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 18.

Murray, L. 1794. *English grammar.* n.p.

Nunberg, G. 1990. *The linguistics of punctuation.* Stanford University Center for the Study of Language and Information, pp. 4ff., fn3.

Palmer, B. 1990. *Descent into discourse.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Pei, M. 1955. *The story of English.* Philadelphia & New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., pp. 86–87.

Pyles, T. & J. Algeo. 1970. *English: an introduction to language.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, p. 321.

Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, & J. Svartvik. 1985. *A comprehensive grammar of the English language.* London & New York: Longman,pp. 1610–1611.

Safire, W. 1983. *New York Times Magazine.* p. 14.

Shaw, H. 1993. *Punctuate it right! – a complete quick-reference guide to modern punctuation.* New York: HarperPerennial.

Skelton, R. 1933. *Modern English punctuation.* London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons.

Strunk, W. Jr. 1979. *The elements of style,* 3rd edn by E. B. White. New York: Macmillan, p. 1.

Warriner, J., W. Renison, & F. Griffith. 1965. *English grammar and composition,* (rev. edn) New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. pp. 480–488.