TALKING POINT

LET'S SPEAK U.S. !

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Is it not time to adopt American? Program: not 'programme' (which is in any case, French with a Greek root). Labor: not 'labour' (an illogical spelling, in any sense).

Sixty or 70 years ago there was a wave of enthusiasm for Esperanto, a universal language to transcend all language barriers. Although there was great care to ensure it was based on all the major western languages, so that no special group might feel snubbed, it failed. Where Esperanto failed, the computer will win.

I am writing from the point of view of a purist, a grammar school product, one who was passed through to the gateways of journalism with the injunctions never to split an infinitive, always to remember that the verb 'to be' is intransitive, never to put a comma before a conjunction, that with rare exceptions, words beginning with an 'h' were aspirates.

For this article and this argument, my pedagogues will turn in their graves. They, however, lived in a different world, one in which the computer was an S.F. vision. We are all emotional about our various languages: and rightly so. They are a direct reflection of our cultures, history and descent. Afrikaners fought a long and stolid battle for the rights now attached to their language. So still do the Flemings or those who wish to converse in Romansh. As one who delights in the absur-

dities of English, I can only share their aspirations and the thrill of turning neat phrases. English absurdities? Try running bough, bow, rough, row, through (threw) a computer.

Or you can try this for size: there are approximately 450 000 words in the Complete Oxford Dictionary while French boasts only half that number. This is a clear indication of the paucity of French as a language but it has never been satisfactorily explained why so many French phrases are essential in everyday English conversation.

Try, for example, to translate 'Ruse de guerre'. War trick? Another: Avant-garde. Cri de coeur just might translate as a cry from the heart but, certainly, without the same emotional effect. As for femme fatale, the Oxford calls her: 'a dangerously attractive female', which is enough to turn off any redblooded Englishman. Food provides another area of concern: for vin fume consider smoked wine and for bouillabaisse, fish stew.

We English-speakers have, therefore, borrowed with considerable vigour (vigor?) from other languages and have allowed other cultures to borrow from us. We borrowed 'trek' and we appropriated 'hot dog'; at the same time the French are trying to eradicate 'taxi', 'hamburger' and a host of other imposed words and phrases for which they currently have no convenient substitute. Meanwhile, English borrowed words such as bungalow, verandah, stoep, even hotel: yet purists moan that 'boatel' has entered the Oxford. The curiosity is that the English purist will appropriate what he wants but still resent someone else torturing his language. He will acknowledge it as a living language, and that he probably cannot understand Chaucer in the original yet, even so, he will resist changes to the language which come not from within and from common usage, but from external pressures. So much for emotional factors. Pragmatism dictates something else.

It is a fact that in 10 or 15 years' time, anyone who is not computer literate will have little chance of reaching a management position. Computers understand one language only: U.S. - the language of the United States. Even the incredibly talented and dedicated Japanese have been baffled by the task of producing software, which will accommodate their communications

needs. For the forseeable future, all hardware and software, whether from the USA, the UK, Japan or Taiwan, will acknowledge a language which has its basis in English and its fulfilment in Silicon Valley.

Computerese and, therefore, the language of international communication is American-style English. If proof of that is necessary, use any modern word processing software package. All have 'dictionaries' or 'spell-check' systems and when you prepare a document in purist English, they will drive you nuts with their queries on your purist spelling. Try spell-checking a document on labour relations. The computer will highlight 'Labour', 'Colour', 'Programme', 'Organisation' and a dozen others until you wish you had used longhand. If we cannot beat them, let's join 'em.

Dialects have a habit of survival. Yorkshire remains distinct from Lancashire, Cape Afrikaners speak with a different accent to their Transvaal cousins, and the patois of Romansh and Flemish exist against all the odds. Pure English, if there is such a thing, should survive only as a dialect (and, hopefully, as a living language which constantly absorbs, changes and modulates as it has from the time of Chaucer). Afrikaans will do the same. As will Cantonese. They should, however, become the languages of academics and the languages of intimacy. The broad language canvas belongs to the international medium of communication, the computer. So let's speak U.S.

Footnote: This article was passed through a 'spell-check' using an American-sourced computer dictionary. It produced hiccups with: Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho, Bryan, Programme, Esperanto, Labour, SF, Afrikaners, Flemings, Romansh, Guerre, Avant-garde, Cri, Coeur, Femme, Fatale, Vin, Bouillabaisse, Vigour, Stope, Boatel, Chaucer, UK, Computerese, Colour, Organisation, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Transvaal, Flemish, Cantonese.

I readily forgive all except 'UK' and 'Chaucer'. My Yorkshire and Transvaal friends may prove less tolerant.

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