

British and American Style

a letter to the *TLS*

Dear Sir,

Glyn Paflin's review of the *New Hart's Rules* (OUP) in the *TLS* no. 5827, page 26, calls for some comment, as he seems to me to betray some classic misconceptions about language and linguistic change. In particular are the remarks to do with the differences between "British and American style", as Mr Paflin terms it, and where he notes that "American English is always making inroads in Britain", citing especially *impact* and *appeal* in connection with the "transitivity of verbs".

In the first place, there can be no such thing as an American, or British, style, *tout court*. There is a multiplicity of styles observable in both forms of English. John Steinbeck's style is not only American but also quite distinct from that of Barack Obama; similarly, Winston Churchill's style, I suggest, is a little different from David Cameron's. How would one, in Mr Paflin's words, "adapt the text" of, say, D. H. Lawrence or, indeed, Shakespeare, "to the American market"? Do Henry James, Steinbeck and, perhaps, even T. S. Eliot require "adapting" to the British market? These three all betray elements of the American variety of English; in the case of Eliot, this is very apparent in his early works: he uses *masterful* for *masterly* and, in *Prufrock*, has "Do I dare to eat a peach?" (British: "Dare I eat a peach?") In his early poetry, the rhythms, and implied intonation, are decidedly not those of the British English of that period. If they no longer strike us as different, this suggests an important matter to do with my second point of issue with Mr Paflin, namely, linguistic change.

Mr Paflin speaks of "inroads" of American English into the British variety but neither he, nor anyone else to my knowledge, appears able to perceive what these actually amount to in terms of the semantic and conceptual "substrate" of the language. Changes in language are not merely substitutions of one term for another or one grammatical structure for another but are evidence of an alteration in perception and conception. It is impossible to translate, say Shakespeare, into modern English or, rather, one of the modern Englishes, without turning his language into that of a modern speaker and thinker, thereby alienating the original.

With respect to the matter in hand, I might draw attention to my little book *Dear Mr Howard—the Changing of Modern English* (2003) wherein I discuss with many examples what linguistic change in relation to English entails in terms of what is loosely called "meaning". In this, Mr Paflin would, perhaps, see what is implied by the loss of, for example, the gerundial usage that was once a familiar aspect of British English (e.g. dressing gown, cycling cape, rocking chair, swimming trunks, sparking plugs, sorting code, waiting room, sailing boat, *etc.*) and its relation to the near-disappearance of non-finite clauses. In addition, American English *in toto* betrays remarkable semantic gaps and failures of conceptual discrimination. Why should any writer or speaker of British English wish to "translate" his or her thoughts into this—and how would he or she set about it?

Yours sincerely,

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P.S. Henry James' short story, "A Bundle of Letters", is an amusing and interestingly pithy exercise in contrasts of style in English: American (three sorts), British, French, German. James seemed to think that females of the English aristocracy were especially fond of using "nice" *à tout propos*. Perhaps he was drawing his stereotype from the Catherine Moreland of *Northanger Abbey* rather than from personal observation.