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News & Tips
from

English support

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Dear friends

I think everybody enjoyed themselves at our 5th anniversary party (see page 6), but now it's back to the grindstone. To help with the workload, three new part-timers are joining us in the office this month: **Kim Parfitt** will be helping us with teaching, **Angela Stonier** is coming in to help with software, and **Pia Møller** will help us run the office. Pia also specialises in translation from legal and technical French, so if you're battling with that kind of thing, you know who to ask for! ☺

Final solutions and smiles

The young girl on the hill top watches with a few friends as Israeli jets pound the densely populated Gaza strip just across the border. “*I think they should wipe them off the face of the earth! – I'm just a little bit fascist*” she adds, with a pretty smile for the TV camera.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the conflict is the demonstrator (right), whose command of English is much less convincing. But when we've stopped smiling, the message is just the same: “final solution” meets “final solution”! Absurd and horrific.

After more than 60 years of death and destruction caused by the (in every sense) **hopeless** *kill-them-and-drive-them-out* politics pursued on both sides, from Menachem Begin's Irgun terrorists to Hamas today, it must surely be time for something different.



There have been people on both sides arguing for another approach, but they keep being sidelined by the deadly populist mix of revenge and religion. It is the framework that needs to change. The European Union proclaims itself as an example of how to make war impossible between neighbours with centuries of conflict behind them. This rhetoric needs translation into renewed effort to make a difference in the Arab-Israeli conflict. And the world could really do with some *Change-we-can-believe-in* from the USA on this question too! A temporary cease-fire is not it!

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A law on language? – No thank you!

All sorts of people seem to be toying with the idea of what we might call *language protectionism*. That's where you start passing laws about what languages people should or should not use in a country – usually with the aim of “protecting” one particular language against dropping out of use. This idea has been tried in France and elsewhere, and is increasingly being raised in Denmark.

So *Dansk Sprogævn*'s director, Sabine Kirchmeier-Andersen, argued recently for a law to force Danish universities to use Danish rather than English in some subjects. An interesting idea. You might get the impression that English is chosen (in 25% of classes) for some *other* reason than

Just my own view..

(contd.)

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the purely practical one of being able to communicate in courses with international students. This is also why scientific papers are written in English, and why 25% of Danish companies have English as their company language. Universities and large companies live in a globalised world.

For Sabine Kirchmeier-Andersen, the advance of English is at the *expense* of Danish and other languages. She makes it sound like a war.

The DSFF (*Dansk Selskab for Fagsprog og Fagkommunikation*) is more subtle. In the latest issue of its journal, "LSP & Professional Communication" (Vol. 8, No. 2), the editorial argues that "the supporters of one single language in Europe to the detriment of the national languages are seeking a return to the 15th century" (when Latin was the inter-European language).

Note here how English is not just *advancing* at the expense of other languages; people are actually *advocating* that it become the "one single language in Europe to the detriment of the national languages". Just who this enemy is, is never mentioned – and for good reason! *Ce n'existe pas!*

The comparison with the use of Latin, however, is a good one. Latin remained the language used in inter-European communication for centuries, *despite the fact that it was dead!* The reason is obvious: *international communication was necessary*, and the language of the last big empire in the region lingered on – especially in educated circles – so it was used.

English plays that role today in the world as a whole – because of the relative dominance for a long time of the British Empire, subsequently followed by the overwhelming dominance of United States power in our own day. One key difference with Latin, then, is that English is still very much alive.

The DSFF editorial refers to the "famous Villers-Cotterêts Decree, which was signed by François I in 1539 and replaced Latin with French" in the territory under the French crown at the time. Somewhat disingenuously, the editorial argues that the "overriding priority for those exercising political power was to make

themselves understood by populations who did not speak or understand Latin". In fact, most of these populations did not understand French either, and the decree led to the *forcible suppression* of their native languages, including most notably the famous *langue d'oc*, which represented the first flowering of non-Latin literature and culture in Europe.

Although very successful, this is not, to put it mildly, a very happy example of the use of law on the question of language!

Of course, neither DSFF nor *Dansk Sprognævn* is arguing for the suppression of English! But they do argue for the use of the law in this area. DSFF wants to make it "obligatory" for people to learn *two* foreign languages, i.e. not *just* English. That is also much the view expressed by Niels Davidsen-Nielsen, chairman of *Dansk Sprognævn*.

Now, as a teacher of language, I want students who are *encouraged* to learn, but not students who are *forced* to take part in lessons!

People learn languages in order to *communicate* in them. The "advance" of English is not at the *expense* of other languages but as a means of international communication. Other languages play this role too, but none to the same degree. And the fact that English can play this role, and on a scale way beyond that of Latin in the 15th century, is clearly a *plus* not a minus!

Is Danish in danger of dying out? Hardly! Latin did though. Paradoxically, the language most under threat from the advance of English may be English itself. *Linguae francae* have a tendency to degenerate to some lowest common denominator. *English support* is dedicated to the not always easy task of preventing that happening to English at the hands of Danes! ☺

But if anyone thinks *Danish* is under threat, the answer is to promote it! *Dansk Sprognævn* should be arguing for free Danish lessons to *anyone* who wants to learn the language, not just people who already have a residence permit. Many foreigners wait for months for a CPR number. And universities should promote summer courses in Danish and Danish culture. *Stop bemoaning the widespread use of English and start promoting the use of Danish!*

(2)

From the workshop...

Sick and ill

When a language has two words which mean much the same, there is a tendency for them to develop subtle differences in usage which may not be logical.

So to *be sick* can mean exactly the same as to *be ill*, but it also can mean to *throw up* or *vomit*, as when you've had a few too many beers. Similarly, you can *feel sick* meaning the same as to *feel ill*, but to *feel sick* can also mean to *feel as though you are going to throw up*. The word *sick* also has other metaphorical meanings, as in “*a sick joke*”, while “*ill*” is more literal (but see other meanings below).

On the other hand, if you are ill, you might take *sick leave* from work and be *off sick*. The word *ill* cannot be substituted here. Note too that although being *injured* or *hurt* does not count as being *ill* or *sick* (see below under *injury*), time off work is still described as *sick leave* or being *off sick*.

Another subtle difference is that we seldom use *ill* on its own to qualify a noun, but prefer to say *sick* instead, as in “*a sick child*”.

But when the word is preceded by an adverb, it is more common to use *ill* as in “*a terminally ill patient*” or “*she is seriously ill*”.

Where the word *sick* is preceded by an adverb, it is usually has one of those meanings that *ill* does not have, as in “*he was violently sick*” (meaning he vomited violently) or “*an extremely sick joke*”.

Other uses of ill

Unlike *sick*, the adjective *ill* can also have the quite different and slightly archaic meaning of *bad* or *evil*: as in *ill will*, *ill repute*, *ill manners*, an *ill omen*, etc.

The word can also be an adverb, meaning the opposite of the adverb *well*, as in “*Do not speak ill of the dead*”, “*He ill deserves such a reputation*”, and even “*He can ill afford to take time off work*”. It appears in a small number of expressions such as *ill at ease*. Like the adverb *well*, it can also be hyphenated with a past participle used as an adjective, as in *ill-disposed*, *ill-advised* or *ill-mannered*.

Finally, the word *ill* can also be a noun meaning misfortune, as in “*May no ill befall you!*” and “*all my ills and misfortunes*”, but again we are in the realm of the more or less archaic here.

Sickness and illness

The word *sickness* is the opposite of *health*. It is usually used only as an uncountable (like *health*) in modern English. The word *illness* is usually used as a countable: *an illness*. If you have an illness, there is something wrong with your health (though not just an *injury*, see below).

Note that the word *wellness* is a modern invention, which should not be used outside of the very limited context of *health* that is not just the absence of *illness*, but also *feels good*.

Disease and injury

A *disease* is a particular type of *illness*, caused by a bacteria or a virus. If you have a *disease* you are *ill*. But an *injury* of any kind, like a broken leg or a dislocated shoulder, is not considered an *illness* in English, though any accompanying *infection* or *fever* would count as *illness*.

Aches and pains

Somewhere in between being *injured* and being *ill*, there are *aches* and *pains*. Basically, if they are bad enough, you are *ill*, but otherwise they don't count as an *illness*, even though you may have to take *sick leave* (see *sick* or *ill* above). 😊

Not ... nor

A lot of people go wrong with *nor*. It combines *not* and *or*, but should only be used where there is either another verb after it (to which the *not* in *nor* applies) or at least punctuation indicating a pause of some kind that separates what comes after from the verb and its *not*:

- Contrast: “The gallery will **not** be open on Sundays **or** public holidays”
with: “The gallery will **not** be open on Sundays, **nor** will it be open on public holidays”
and: “The gallery will **not** be open on Sundays, except in May, **nor** on public holidays”
and: “The gallery will **not** be open on Sundays – **nor** on public holidays”.

In the first sentence, repeating the *not* by using *nor* would be a double negative. In the second sentence, the *not* is needed for the second verb. In the third sentence, the parenthetical insertion separates the last phrase from the verb making it necessary to repeat the *not* by using *nor*. In the final sentence, the last phrase is, as it were, added as an afterthought; the pause is sufficient to play the same role as the parenthetical insertion in the third sentence.

To simplify, we can say that the *phrasing* of the sentence, which determines the punctuation, also determines when *nor* should be used.

The same pattern can be seen with other negatives such as *no*, *never*, *nothing*, *nowhere*, and even sometimes with some words with negative prefixes, such as *un-*:

- Consider: “**None** of our galleries will be open on Sundays **or** public holidays”
and: “He was **unable** to move his arms **or** his legs”
and: “She was **unable** to say what had happened, **nor** why the knife was in her hand”.

The exception is *neither*...

Neither ... nor

The word *neither* is normally followed by *nor*, and it normally links only *two* things. These patterns are sometimes broken in informal speech, and I am aware that examples of this can also be found in written texts from all of the last four centuries, but they are few and far between. So my advice is: *Do the normal thing*, especially in formal writing:

“The gallery will be open **neither** on Sundays **nor** on public holidays”.

Et al.

This is one of the most common abbreviations found in scientific or academic writing, and it is very often written incorrectly. It is of course Latin, and it is short for *et alii* meaning *and others*. It can also be short for *et alia* (meaning *and other things*) and *et alibi* (meaning *and elsewhere*). In each case, the same abbreviation is used and the context usually makes clear which is meant.

But what often goes wrong is that the abbreviation is written with a full stop after the *et* as well as the *al*. Since the *et* (meaning *and*) is not abbreviated, I'm afraid it just looks silly. ☺

Did you know?

English support can offer you **native-speaker** translation and proofreading help with not only *English*, but also *Bangla*, *Bulgarian*, *Chinese*, *Czech*, *Danish*, *Dutch*, *Farsi*, *Finnish*, *French*, *German*, *Hindi*, *Hungarian*, *Icelandic*, *Italian*, *Japanese*, *Kurdish*, *Malay*, *Nepali*, *Norwegian*, *Polish*, *Portuguese*, *Rumanian*, *Russian*, *Serbo-Croat*, *Spanish*, *Swedish*, *Turkish*, *Ukrainian* and *Urdu*.

And if YOU can translate from at least one foreign language, speak English or Danish, and are a native speaker of Arabic, Greek, Greenlandic, Swahili, Welsh, etc., we'd like to hear from you!

Questions & Answers

(Edited)

E-mails

Hi Lawrence

In one of your forthcoming newsletters, could you write about how to end an e-mail explaining what the difference is between for example:

Regards

Best regards

Kind regards

Best wishes

Warm wishes

Etc.

That would be most helpful.

Thanks for your e-mail. Actually there's no difference between them, except that "Warm wishes" is maybe a little warmer than the others. All these endings are informal. If you are on first-name terms with the person, you could use any of them even in a business letter. You could also end with "Love and kisses to the wife and the cat", if you feel that is appropriate. But the first four are all in very common use.

The real problem is that sometimes we need to send e-mails that are more formal or written to complete strangers.

E-mails are fundamentally informal – sort of electronic notes. But in today's business world, they are increasingly used as a replacement for the formal business letter. (There are some very useful tips and hints on business letters at www.englishsupport.dk/How to No 3.pdf and in *News & Tips* No. 31).

Now there are some fundamental differences between an e-mail and a letter. For one thing, your postal address and telephone number will not normally appear at the top, so it is quite a good practice to add them under your signature. Another obvious difference is that the subject heading has a box of its own in an e-mail, above the text – which means that (unlike in a business letter) it comes before the initial *Dear* ...

But there are also other differences. In a business letter, what you write after *Dear* is something you might actually call the person(s) you are writing to. But because e-mails are fundamentally informal, it can feel a little odd to use *Dear Sir or Madam* with *Yours faithfully* at the end or *Dear Mr White* with *Yours sincerely* at the end. This can be appropriate, as in the rather cold exchange between Mette Aarslew and me in *News & Tips* No. 21, but usually we like to get on first name terms as soon as possible.

So a kind of compromise has arisen, especially in Europe, in which we often tend to start an e-mail with *Dear* + the full name, as in *Dear Lawrence White*. This would be unusual in a business letter, but seems to be a trend that has come to stay in e-mails.

Such a beginning sort of half legitimises using one of the more informal endings at the end, such as *Best regards* or *Best wishes*. In a formal business letter to someone you are not on first-name terms with, that would sound odd, but in an e-mail it feels more normal.

This not to say that there is no place for the formalities in an e-mail. For instance, a lawyer writing to client or an employer writing to an employee might well make use of the full strength of the formal business letter usage in an e-mail. They might feel it creates the right "distance". On the other hand, most of them would probably send a letter instead in such circumstances.

All the other words and phrases from business letters can also be used in e-mails, because as noted in *News & Tips* No. 31, the difference between the written word (even in formal business letters) and the spoken word is much less in English than in most other languages (including Danish).

Did you know?

Did you know that by far the cheapest, most effective and simplest way of doubling your visibility on the Internet is to have your website translated to English and/or other languages? English support is holding a workshop on this subject at Roskilde's Store Erhvervsdag on 28th April 2009, where we will tell you why it works and how to do it. Information on this business event at <http://www.storeerhvervsdag.dk/dk>.

It was party time!



*Business consultant Mogens Lundbech gets a big **Merci** for his role as sparring partner when **English support** was little more than a gleam in Lawrence White's eye. (Photo: Fjordbyerne)*

What they said about it...

“Thank you so much for a fun-filled anniversary celebration. And for the marvellous High Tea – what a sumptuous spread! I was really pleased to have this opportunity to meet you and learn a little more of the history, people and philosophy behind *English support*. To have made such a success of the company in only five years is indeed impressive. Again, my thanks to you, Claire, Michael and all the other contributors to an entertaining and inspiring afternoon.

Thank you for a wonderful afternoon last Thursday. I enjoyed myself very much and got the opportunity to talk to a lot of interesting people. But most of all, I really enjoyed the entertainment.

I really enjoyed your party last week. I attended partly because I was curious about your company as I have so much enjoyed reading the newsletters (and learning about tricky phrases and expressions).

Thanks to you for an entertaining afternoon. You were all great, I met a lot of interesting people and the high tea was delicious.

Thanks for holding a party! It was delightful, and a wonderful audience. :-) Always a pleasure to sing for people who understand and listen! And you lot were so amazing in your play! It was a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon.”

English support celebrated its first five years of existence in style!

You can't see it from the press photo (left) but some 40-50 well-wishers – friends, customers and freelance partners – came by to have a glass of wine, a cup of tea, and a cucumber sandwich or six.

The buffet was actually quite luxurious, with cake, and scones with cream, as well as a variety of sandwiches and drinks. No one went home hungry!

In his welcome speech, Lawrence paid tribute to business consultant Mogens Lundbech for his sage advice when *English support* was born.

One of the crazy things that came out of discussions with Mogens was the idea for this newsletter. Now there's an idea that has certainly caught on!

Next came live music from the beautiful voice and guitar of Bodil Ashkenazy, who sang a Gaelic version of *Auld Lang Syne* and a moving love song of her own composition.

Finally, there was some – er – “theatrical entertainment” from the office staff (Claire, Michael and Lawrence).

In short, a good time was had by all, and we look forward to seeing even more people next year! ☺

More news and tips next month!

Best wishes

Lawrence White

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