1992 and the institutions

Dear Sir — Howard Gray in your March issue comments that the proposal in my article in January 'to expand Institution activities abroad with lectures, conferences and seminars in English' is the lazy solution. It might be lazy for individuals, but not for institutions.

I fully agree with him that the first priority should be to develop our school system so that more of us can become proficient in a foreign language. That is vital for both business and social reasons. But the point I was trying to make was a different one. Because English is now so commonly spoken and understood on the Continent, we are the only nation able to mount conferences anywhere in Europe, in our own language, and draw for an audience from all over Europe. That, surely, is a service to the world and many people speak it as a second language. This is because of our imperial past and the influence of American culture and films. But this in itself does not make it the best contender for a common world language.

To begin with there is no recognised body which defines what is good English. The French have the Académie Française, and perhaps we should have a similar body which would be internationally recognised. Without it, it may be in the not too distant future that we shall need an interpreter to understand our American and Australian cousins.

English has, of course, certain advantages: its grammar is comparatively simple, and its vocabulary is rich in words of Latin and Greek origin and words relating to engineering and science which are recognised internationally. Its disadvantages are: compared with French, Spanish or Italian, tense and mood are not expressed so accurately, and the pronoun and spelling are difficult for a foreigner.

Russian, which is widely spoken and taught in all the schools in the USSR, could claim to be a candidate for a world language. Unfortunately, its grammar is more complicated than any of the languages in the European Community.

There are, of course, artificial languages. The best known is perhaps Esperanto, whose grammar and rules can be learnt in a few hours, but there seems little chance of the Community adopting any of these.

So we are left with English, but as a sop to national pride, it is perhaps best that all children in the Community be taught their native language and given a choice of learning another community tongue. In Europe, most students will opt for English; while in Britain, students will probably opt for French or German. Then, without any effort on our part, international conferences and communications tend to be in English. This should not inhibit us from teaching foreign languages in our schools, or us from learning them.

Learning a second language is always worthwhile. It encourages logical thought and expression of ideas in simple terms. Both these abilities are essential to an engineer.

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15 May 1990

A common language

Dear Sir — I agree with the contents of Ray Pressnell's letter in May. However, some think that England depends on selling equipment abroad. A few words of the native language quickly breaks down barriers, the first step to a sale. This may even occur with a nation that considers its own language the best and has been our enemy historically, namely the French. Vive la France.

Even before the 'wall' was demolished, one or two words of Russian would cause it to start to topple. Even when many years ago I went to Bulgaria on a package tour for 10 days, I started to learn the language. The waiters became friendly, even gave me a coffee free and showed a desire to learn English.

On the other hand, the wealth of the English language causes despair in the heart of anyone who tries to read and understand Shakespeare or the poets. — Yours faithfully,

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27 March 1990

Space limits

Dear Sir — I found the article by Mark Williamson in April very interesting and informative. One of the claims for the Hubble telescope was that it will be able to look into the cosmos to about 100 000 years after the Big Bang. This raised a number of queries for me.

1 What are the limits of telescope distance/time viewing?
2 Is it theoretically possible to construct a telescope that can 'look back' to the Big Bang or even farther?
3 Is it possible to construct such a telescope?
4 If we could look back to the Big Bang or even farther, what should we expect to see?

— Yours faithfully,

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8 May 1990

Brief letters of up to 300 words on technical and professional matters are welcomed. All letters will be acknowledged. The Editor reserves the right to edit letters which are published. The Editor's decision on which letters are published is final.