A common language

Dear Sir — I refer to Howard D. Gray's letter in the March issue. I fully concur with the statement in Prof. J.C. Levy's article in January that 'English is virtually the common language in Europe'. I also agree that our language should be promulgated through series of lectures etc. across Europe. This latter suggestion causes concern to Mr. Gray. What concerns me is that he calls this the 'lazy way out'.

In my view, British people are quite wrongly portrayed as lazy when it comes to learning other languages — just check the number of successful foreign-language schools and colleges in the UK for confirmation that, as a nation, we are avid learners. I feel the root of the matter is that there probably should be a common language for all people on Earth, but there is not. The fact that English has proved to be the most popular choice for this title is no reason to call Britons lazy — quite the opposite. It has taken a great deal of real effort to spread our language to all corners of the Earth.

If the common language was Swahili, I am sure that most of Britain would be trying to learn it; but it is not. English is the most powerful contender, with over 300 million people worldwide currently speaking it as a first language. As an alternative, my choice is Spanish, which happens to be the second most popular, with over 240 million speakers. It also happens to be one of our Eurolanguages. As for German and French, which rank ninth and sixteenth respectively in order of popularity, we might wonder at the sense of learning such minority languages. Thankfully, for whatever reason, many people do. But how many languages should we learn?

To be truly European, we should all speak every one of the languages in the Common Market. This is, of course, a ludicrous proposition. Instead, I argue that we should work hard towards a single common language. English is the best contender (and for that we should be labelled 'lucky', not 'lazy').

To be fair to Mr. Gray, he only called us lazy by implication, and rightly seemed more concerned about antagonising our colleagues in continental Europe. But, given the present state of progress of English into Europe, those same colleagues have to learn only one more language to feel Common (in the best sense of the word). I do not think that any nation would feel up to the task of learning a dozen or more extra languages, which Britons would have to do in order to feel equally at home.

Let's just do the sensible thing, as Prof. Levy suggests: let's have a COMMON language for a COMMON community in a COMMON market! — Yours faithfully,

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14 March 1990

First wireless manufacture

Dear Sir — I read with interest the article by R.J. James on the history of radar in October 1989, particularly the claim that Marconi was the first wireless manufacturing company, established in 1897.

Some 10 years ago, I helped my widowed sister-in-law to move house. She offered me a mahogany box of about 16 x 16 x 24 inches, which had machined brass terminals, obviously to make electrical connections. The inside was brass lined and contained what I identified as a very early coherer. This I took to the Science Museum, where it was examined and confirmed that the coherer was the earliest they had seen. They retained the 'box'.

Some months later, while sorting over some correspondence in my sister-in-law's folders, I came across letters from somebody in Yorkshire, dated 1898, which obviously referred to the 'box'. They described how to set up the aerials for a wireless transmitter and receiver and how to tune the apparatus. However, the last letter was of great interest as it apologised to the obvious purchaser of the apparatus that the wireless did not work because the instructions were those for an earlier model!

These letters were sent to the Science Museum, returning them to the connection they had with the 'box'. I asked them as a matter of form to acknowledge to my sister-in-law the receipt of the letters. This was never done.

The implication is that in 1898 somebody was manufacturing and selling wireless equipment and indeed had been doing so at an earlier date.

Marconi may have been the first, but I suggest that it was a very close run thing. — Yours faithfully,

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3 April 1990

Salary Survey

Dear Sir — I noted with surprise that this year’s salary survey showed a preference (71 %) for the new graphical presentation over the old tabular format.

It is true that the graphs give a relatively quick overall comparison between the various categories, for one to see which areas are higher or lower on average. However, apart from the first pair of graphs, which are irrespective of field of employment or type of work, all others are independent of age. This makes it virtually impossible to see how one personally stands in comparison with one’s immediate peers within any individual category.

It is possible to calculate the ratio between the appropriate age band and the figure independent of age on the first graphs, and use this to extrapolate an estimated figure for one’s own age group within a relevant category. But this is obviously somewhat inaccurate and defeats the object of the graphs being an easily readable presentation.

I feel sure many members, like myself, would like to see the former tabular format brought back and suggest a fuller survey of opinion, perhaps with next year’s renewal letter. — Yours faithfully,

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17 March 1990