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# Celebrating 100 issues of *English Today* and musing on museums

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Looking back over 100 issues of *English Today*, and forward at the prospects for English language museums

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## Introduction

'*ET*'s success', said a young-looking Tom McArthur in his first editorial, 'will depend on keeping one's balance and getting all the ingredients right'. A hundred issues later, we can say with some confidence that he certainly managed it. At the time, I don't think anyone knew exactly what all the ingredients were. Now, looking back over the coverage of those hundred issues, we have a pretty good idea. Who would have expected the journal to be so diverse? There are 18 themes identified in the Index to the first 60 issues, published in *ET* 61. Take a look at them in the panel. It is the extraordinary range of the subject-matter, along with its copious and often quirky illustrations, both textual and pictorial, which has given the journal its identity and appeal. The models we looked at when planning the journal, such as *History Today*, seem staid by comparison.

Tom cast his net wide. Or rather, he didn't cast it at all, after the early issues, but rather let it hang over the side of his boat and waited to see what came his way. As a consequence, the journal reflects a broader and more realistic picture of what people find interesting in English language study than in any other published source. And this achievement turns out to have a hidden value. For quite a number of people are currently interested in the question 'What do we include under the heading of "the English language"?' They include teachers and examiners (such as those involved in A-level English language courses in the UK), educational website owners, producers of radio and television programmes, and – the least

expected, but possibly the most far-reaching – museum curators.

## Exhibiting English

The notion that museums, galleries, and other exhibition centres might be interested in language in general, and in the English language in particular, is relatively recent. Language of course is always 'on show' in a museum collection. Walk into the British Library and you will see on display many canonical works that would be the centre of attention in any history of the English language, such as *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare's First Folio, and the King James Bible. But they are there because of what they are. They are not there to illustrate the history of the language. The British Library has never had an exhibition devoted exclusively to the English language,



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## Themes

The 18 themes recognized in the *ET* index

- 1 World English
  - 1.1 General, global and standard
  - 1.2 The Quirk/Kachru debate
- 2 Africa
- 3 The Americas
  - 3.1 The United States
  - 3.2 Canada
  - 3.3 The Caribbean and Latin America
- 4 Asia
  - 4.1 East Asia: Mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea
  - 4.2 South Asia: India and Pakistan
  - 4.3 South East Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore
- 5 Australasia: Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Pacific Islands
- 6 Europe
  - 6.1 Britain / UK / British Isles
  - 6.2 England and Wales
  - 6.3 Scotland
  - 6.4 Ireland (Republic and North)
  - 6.5 Island states
  - 6.6 Mainland Europe
- 7 History
- 8 Grammar
- 9 Usage, with a separate section for gender and political correctness
- 10 Style, register, rhetoric, journalism
- 11 Plain language, jargon, gobbledeygook
- 12 Words, names, vocabulary, neologisms, etymology
- 13 Lexicography, works of reference, publishing
- 14 Speech and pronunciation
- 15 Writing, spelling, punctuation
- 16 Language, linguistics, language teaching, education, with a separate section for ELT, TEFL, TESL, TEIL
- 17 Literature, literary theory, poetry, the media, editing
- 18 Communication, computing, corpora

where the exhibits are selected because of their linguistic rather than their literary or historical significance. That, as we shall see, is about to change.

Museums (I use this term now to include every possible kind of exhibiting venue) exist to satisfy our curiosity about ourselves, our history, and our environment. And for most of the questions we ask, there is already a museum to help answer them. If I am interested in natural history, science, aeroplanes, ships, toys, dolls,

clothing, film, painting, archaeology... I can in many cities walk into a building devoted to my subject and spend a happy few hours exploring it in the company of like-minded people, and benefiting from the expertise of the curators who have put the exhibition together. But, until recently, that has not been possible with the most humanity-defining of subjects, language. Apart from sections in major museums devoted to individual linguistic contributions (such as Egyptian hieroglyphic in the British Museum), language has been largely neglected as a museological domain.

In the past ten years, the situation has begun to change. A new linguistic climate emerged in the late 1990s, following the publication of major surveys of the languages of the world (such as the *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*) and the discovery that so many of the world's languages were seriously endangered. The 2001 European Year of Languages was an important initiative, as was the International Year of Languages in 2008, both emphasizing the importance of maintaining global linguistic diversity. Several museological projects were proposed, aiming to promote public awareness of language and languages. I have told the story of the British initiative, the World of Language, elsewhere (Crystal, 2008). Taken to quite an advanced stage of planning in the late 1990s, with a possible venue identified on London's South Bank, the project collapsed when the government decided to put all its resources into a white elephant (aka the Millennium Dome).

Since then, other projects have succeeded. There is now a National Museum of Language in College Park, Maryland, USA, which opened in May 2008; and a House of Languages (Casa de les Llengües) is scheduled to open in Barcelona in 2010. A World Language Centre is planned for Reykjavik, under the guidance of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. Museums of local languages now exist in some cities, such as the Portuguese Language Museum (Museu da Língua Portuguesa) in São Paulo, Brazil. A fuller list can be found on a website created by Don Osborn.

Surprisingly, the English language has been rather neglected, but there are some promising signs of progress. As part of the BBC's British History website, there is now an English language timeline. The British Library also has an English language timeline, as part of its Learning programme. English is a major

theme of the Medieval Gallery of the Museum of London, along with Latin, French, and Norse. Each contains an audio dimension – an important innovation in historical linguistic presentations.

How to handle speech has always been a problem in museological linguistic projects. There are both institutional problems (museums have traditionally focused on written records from the past) and technical problems (how to actually include an oral/aural dimension within an exhibition space). There are linguistic problems too, both diachronic and synchronic. Diachronically, what version of 'original pronunciation' will best represent the various stages in the history of English? And synchronically, how are we to select, organize, and present Modern English, given that there is simply so much speech 'out there', nationally and internationally? You will catch my drift. How many thematic dimensions should an exhibition include if it were to claim to be a good representation of the realities of English? This is where *ET* can provide some answers.

### Current plans for English exhibitions

There are currently two main projects now being planned. One will be complete by the time *ET* reaches issue 104. It is in the hands of the British Library in London, which has plans for a temporary English language exhibition in autumn 2010. The time-scale of the other is less certain. It is in the hands of a consortium at Winchester, who hope to open a permanent exhibition in three or four years time. As always, with such things, progress depends on money. Just as the Millennium Dome sucked financial life out of the proposed World of Language, so the 2012 Olympic Games is leaving many arts and leisure projects in the UK destitute. The recession hasn't helped, of course. But if enthusiasm and expertise count for anything in our world, along with broad-based support and efficient public relations, then I think it likely that we will have the world's first English language permanent exhibition in Winchester before *ET* 120.

In the meantime, there is time to be thinking about several important questions, and the pages of this journal would provide a good forum. First, in relation to treatment. How is linguistic material best displayed? The answer may seem obvious when it comes to an ancient text. All we can do, shown a copy of a First

Folio, is look at it. We certainly won't be allowed to touch it, or turn its pages. But with some imagination, maybe there *are* things we can 'do' to it. Using current software, with many famous works we can highlight bits of text, look at a text from different angles, and make the pages turn over on screen. There are also things we can provide by way of cultural background. Shown the text of *Beowulf*, for example, might we hear some of the text spoken or sung? Might we accompany the text with images or sculptures of Anglo-Saxon lords and monsters? We don't want to dumb down the linguistics, though, which raises another question: just how much non-linguistic background should we allow in to enliven our material?

These days, the watchword in museum circles is 'interactive'. Visitors like to be involved. So how is this to be done, with language? At the Shakespeare's Globe exhibition in London there are several clever activities. You can join the cast of a play and add your own voice. You can edit your own text of a play. You can engage in a Shakespearean insult exchange. This kind of thing can be adapted for any historical period. You could have a simple conversation with King Alfred in Old English, or Chaucer in Middle English, as well as Shakespeare in Early Modern English. For the written language, you could do some Caxtonian typesetting or try writing with a Shakespearean quill pen.

Another example of interactivity is the way visitors to a language museum could leave their linguistic footprint (or more precisely, voiceprint) within an accent/dialect archive. This kind of thing is already promoted online, for example in the BBC Voices website, which has a word map of the UK containing (at the time of writing) 620,000 words, all submitted by site visitors.

### The language of presentation

Then there are the literary questions. A textlinguistic issue arises, in relation to the practicalities of visitor management. Think about it: when you visit a museum, how long do you spend in front of an exhibit? For most people, it is less than a minute. So what exactly can we write, in the exhibit label, which can be quickly and easily read (or heard) in that time-frame? What exactly do we say about, for example, Johnson's *Dictionary*, which summarizes its

linguistic character and significance? In a minute. 100 words or so. Plainly, there is an interesting stylistic issue here. And what follow-up material will visitors take away with them (especially schoolchildren), and how will that be presented? Another stylistic issue.

There is also a terminological question. Issues of coverage, treatment, and presentation aside, what do we actually call a building devoted to the English language? The term 'museum' can be a hindrance. What would you expect to see in a place called 'A Museum of the English Language'? Most English-speaking people think immediately of dusty texts, for the term 'museum', without qualification, fails to capture the living, dynamic aspect of language. Other terms, such as 'gallery', 'house', and 'hall', are livelier, but each has its own set of associations. We seem to have no word for a presentation which captures the blend of national and international diversity and change which characterizes the history and present-day life of English. The Winchester group have gone for simplicity, calling themselves simply 'The English Project'.

### Exhibition ingredients

Finally, what are the ingredients of an English language museum? Obviously the canonical works (Caxton, Shakespeare, etc.) must be there, in some shape or form. Specific influences, such as grammars, dictionaries, pronunciation manuals, and usage guides, also need to be there. But what else? Of especial importance will be the ephemera – recipes, letters, lawcourt records, posters, advertisements, playbills, diaries, newspapers, etc., for it is in these sources that we get a genuine insight into the everyday life of language. Much of this material will display nonstandard varieties of English, of course – regional dialects, criminal argot, local slang. But that is all to the good, for nonstandard varieties have been badly neglected in traditional accounts of the history of English.

The question of national vs international

needs to be addressed. No English language museum should restrict itself to the varieties of the country in which it is located. Global varieties have to be present, and here too there is the issue of selection. Space is always limited, and even if there is an online dimension (as there is bound to be), it is not possible to show everything. So how do we choose? Which countries will be represented? Which regional standards? Which pidgins and creoles? And what other themes, within these domains, are 'right' for a museum? Coming immediately to mind are place names, personal names, loan-words, slang, etymology, spelling reform... But why should I go on? This is beginning to read like a contents list in an *ET* index. For museums too, it seems, success will depend on keeping one's balance and getting all the ingredients right. ■

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