

## viewpoint



### Which English version will be official language?



**John Moretti**

Guest  
Columnist

Following closely in the footsteps of California — as Texas seems to do occasionally — our state is looking over a proposal that would require Mexican-Americans to learn and practice English as the "official language" of Texas.

Pity the non-English-speaking resident who may be forced to adopt this complex and ever-changing mode of communication. Which English will they be required to learn, anyway? Are they to master the over-inflected babble of Dallas high school students, or the Gary Cooper-esque, snail's-paced patter of the West Texas cotton farmer? Perhaps they should become fluent in the monosyllabic grunting of Houston's inner-city street people.

As an exchange student to

England in 1978, I was startled to learn how different the same language could be, depending on one's geographical location. Even in England, within a 100-mile radius of my "hometown," there was an infinite variety of radically different dialects — all "English."

It's a shame that we Americans impose our language on others, even while we're in foreign countries. In Switzerland, most people have a utilitarian command of at least four languages: French, Italian, German, and of course, English. In Canada, both English and French are studied throughout primary school. Of course, precedence is given to the regionally dominated tongue, but proportional attention is given to the "other" language.

I do believe that English is one of the most efficient languages on the planet today. Its capacity for specific and vibrant imaging is unsurpassed. How, though, can we ignore another language simply because we have to go to the trouble of learning it?

We don't seem to have any trouble adapting to computerese or

staying abreast of the latest "in" figures of speech. For years we have been coining such incomprehensibilities as "containerize," "prioritize," "finalize," "Martinize," "groovy," "bad," "gag me," "fer sher" and "bag it." "Tech-talk" is another popular offshoot of English we've learned to deal with. You've no doubt heard someone say they're "in party mode" or "derezzed" or "downloading data before the big exam." "Like, have your modem call my modem and we'll interface."

Acronyms also are pouring into everyday speech, especially in science and the military: CPU's, RAM's, IO's, CD's, DMZ, PX, ICBM and M\*A\*S\*H. Syndicated writer Rich Hall is laughing himself up several income tax brackets with the help of this country's fascination with language. His "Sniglets" quickly are finding their way into day-to-day conversation and, if consistent use justifies it, may eventually wind up in the dictionaries.

So why the problem with tolerating another language in

I do believe that English is one of the most efficient languages on the planet today. Its capacity for specific and vibrant imaging is unsurpassed.

Texas? Even if English is pronounced as the state's "official language," Spanish is not going to simply go away. Is the proposal an honest attempt at determining an "industry standard," or is it a reflection of our silly, ethnocentric attitude toward anything that isn't pure "apple pie?"

Perhaps we should turn our attention and energy toward the thousands of functionally illiterate Anglos in Texas. After all, if we can't even use our language properly, who will teach English to the Hispanics?

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# The acronym explosion

By John P. Moretti

Caught that new "800" number on tv yet? I choked on a great mouthful of apres-exercise Perrier when it dawned on me that 1-800-CLUB—INFO had *eight* digits after the 1-800.

"A new sort of exchange?" I lamented. "We've just been graced with another four digits of Zip code, and now we've got eight-digit phone numbers?"

Frantic at the thought of having more to remember, I picked up the phone and dialed the number. 1-800-2582-4636. To my relief, the connection was made after dialing the customary seven digits. The extra 6 did nothing; it was there only to make the acronym work.

I hung up on the operator and settled back to think about what had begun. Surely, this little trick would forever change the way we are coaxed into remembering phone numbers. Just think of the possibilities. 1-800-SUPERCALLAFRAGILISTICEXPIALLADOCIOUS; perhaps a number for ordering "Mary Poppins" videocassettes. The call, of course, would be routed after dialing 1-800-SUPERCA.

Let's look at some of the ground rules for alpha-numeric acronym generation. Q and Z are not on the dial, and out the window. There are no corresponding letters for the digits 1 and 0. To make being clever even more difficult, all area codes employ a 0 or 1, or both. So much for a number like 1-THE-BIG-GUYS. All acronyms must begin *after* the area code—unless a way is found to work in both letters and numbers without confusing the reader.

But I predict that longer acronyms will be the wave of the future. Why squash together an acronym when the

*(Continued on Page 22)*

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## Acronyms

*(Continued from Page 18)*  
number of characters is unimportant?

Consider the following examples of possible phone numbers which make use of those handy phantom characters:

1-800-YEA-OR-NAY (for a White House public reaction line).

1-800-RAIN-OR-SHINE (a toll-free, 24-hour, weather database).

1-800-NAME-THAT-TUNE (a music trivia quiz line).

1-800-WAR-IS-HELL (a veterans' counseling hot line).

1-800-SEND-CASH (a teleministry pledge line).

1-800-OBSCENITIES (a phone-

for-sex service).

1-800-DEADLINE (order line for a supplier of generic, college research papers).

1-800-BIG-BUCKS (a lottery registration line).

1-800-ANTIDOTE (a poison control center hot line).

1-800-OUT-DAMNED-SPOT (a consumer information line for Lever Bros.).

I spoke with an AT&T public relations person, Jim Van Orden in Dallas, and he advised me that all numbers are assigned on a first-come, first-served basis. Let's get cracking, because with only 5,760 possible combinations from a set of 24 letters (based on a 10-character acronym)—and the word out—time's a'wasting!#

## If network TV improves, it will pay its way

Recently I read with fascination Walter Cronkite's diatribe about the destructive impact of cable TV on "free" network programming.

There is simply no such thing as "free TV." Someone is paying for the programming, whether it be the advertisers who purchase time within the programs (in this case the viewers also, who are subjected to an increasing number of interruptions per hour) or those who elect to pay outright for superior, less-interrupted programs.

Cronkite refers to the chairman of a major cable operation who

told him that, sooner or later, broadcasters will have to pay to have their signals carried by cable firms. His unhappy tone is ironic, as networks already pay their affiliates to carry network products.

If the networks' programs were worth watching, wouldn't Americans be willing to absorb the cost of having the broadcast signals delivered to their home via cable?

It seems to me that the decline of audience share for broadcast TV is the result of networks vying to be "No. 1" with everyone.

Today's busy viewers are tuning

in to programs that more specifically meet their needs. Why should broadcasters delude themselves into thinking that by offering a product designed for the lowest common denominator, they'll be able to keep every individual tuned to their network? Like any successful business, networks must rethink strategies, decide which demographic and psychographic groups they want to reach, and be willing to give up revenues from ads targeted elsewhere.

JOHN MORETTI  
Denver

# Look What They've Done To My Song, Ma

Op-Ed for *Recording Engineer/Producer*

(accepted for publication just before the magazine suddenly folded)

You worked hard to record your latest prospective hit. You toggled through endless synthesizer screen pages to design perfect voices, tweaked your gear endlessly to assure the best possible sonic quality, stayed up nights to carefully sequence every note for a perfect arrangement, chewed your fingernails to stubs while assembling the tracks and even boned up on the elements of graphic design to put together an eye-catching package.

If you were lucky enough to end up with a final product that found a tiny slot in the song rotation of a radio station brave enough to stray from the trade-playlist safety zone, you may have been alarmed at the difference between what poured out of your NFMs during mastering and what finally aired on the radio. We're not talking the difference between speakers or even radio's inherently narrow bandwidth. We're talking about Humpty Dumpty being reassembled to look like a bagel instead of an egg.

Just two words can neatly sum up radio's willingness to apply "creative license" (the butcher's knife) to the fruits of your labor.

Bottom Line.

They're nasty words to any artist and perhaps especially frustrating to the musician who, for the most part, depends on broadcast radio's dissemination of his or her work to arouse interest and sell product.

If you've been a consumer of radio for the past decade or two, you probably have noticed a steady decline of titles, an increase in cookie-cutter formats, a barrage of sound-alike and banal positioning statements and a growing unwillingness to explore the medium's true entertainment potential. There's a reason for that too.

Yep, Bottom Line.

In better days, radio attempted to cater to different tastes via "block programming." One might have heard classical music in the mornings, pop music during the afternoons and jazz at night. Over the years though, there's been a shift toward narrowcasting - programming for tightly defined groups of consumers. The practice is now evident in almost every area of mass communications. Magazines are aimed at ever-tightening demographic and psychographic groups.

Likewise, cable television provides growing numbers of channels devoted to increasingly tiny interest groups. Perhaps the last bastion of "broadcasting" (in the truest sense of the word) is network television, and many pundits argue that the networks' unwillingness to specialize is what drove the success of cable and has eroded broadcast television's viewership. People just don't have time to sit around and wait for subject matter that appeals to their interests. They want "what they want, right now."

Broadcast radio not only has drifted toward narrowcasting, but has run aground on a sandbar of debt and decreasing profits. During the go-go eighties, the industry was a hotbed of station sales and re-sales, almost a gigantic Ponzi scheme. One could purchase a station, do whatever it took to get good numbers for one or two ratings periods, turn the station for a huge profit and retire. Greed and over-optimistic speculation drove an endless cycle of deals until the last buyers were left holding the bag - overpriced stations whose debt service was so high that just paying the monthly interest installment required selling - and airing - 61 minutes of commercials-per-hour. Add to that a weakening economy and one or two bad ratings reports (or "books") and you have a recipe for bankruptcy.

Owners and General Managers were suddenly faced with potential disaster. Many stations canned entire on-air staffs and hooked up with generic satellite services. And almost every station that *could* support an on-air staff, decided to play it safe by eliminating all possible risks. Unfortunately, risk is what good programming is all about. Subsequently, music playlists began to shrink, on-air announcer banter was minimized and we began hearing slogans like "more music, less talk."

That's where we are now. Travel to any city in the country, you'll hear the same basic formats and almost identical and banal "handles" like "Magic," "Power," "Mix," "Classic" and "Real." You'll hear stations screaming about how they play "the most music per hour" or "the best mix of music" or "no repeat workdays." If you're attentive, you'll no doubt hear a growing number of satellite stations - easily identified by the lack of specific references to location or time, and plenty of generic news culled from the pages of USA Today.

Because of the withering business climate I've just described, stations, now more than ever, are willing to dicker with a song to make it fit into a slot of time or a station's image.

More songs-per-hour means more shorter songs and, my friend, if yours is playable but too lengthy, it *will* be shortened. Also, satellite radio networks are faced with windows of specific length during which local affiliates can cut away to air commercials. These windows may range in length from 2 1/2 to 3/12 minutes and, because there are a finite number of selections which are both safe and of applicable length, appropriate measures will be taken to render them suitable.

Methods I've both witnessed and very grudgingly participated in include preliminary fades, removing entire versus or bridges, shrinking or stretching songs with variable speed control and even running music through a time compression program to shorten or lengthen as needed, without affecting pitch.

I've seen intros that are too long shortened to accommodate a jock's 10-to-15 second weather updates. I've seen intros that are too short looped to accommodate announcers' contest details. I've seen intros, bridges, versus and choruses that were too "rap" or "metal" completely stripped away in pre-production.

On the processing end, I have witnessed the application of unmentionable amounts of EQ to sweeten songs. I've seen levels jockeyed to smooth out the dynamics. I've seen board outputs compressed beyond belief so the station would sound louder on the dial, then clipped by limiters so the station would not exceed federally mandated specs.

I have seen just about enough.

It's a shame that any artist would have to suffer such blatant mishandling of his or her efforts. But most of all, it's a shame that listeners everywhere are being conditioned to expect so little out of a medium that can do so much in the way of imaginative and entertaining programming.

I'd love to go on, but I've got to get back to that contemporary jazz number we're working on. We need to bring up all the softer passages to a minimum of -2 dB, limit all the hot passages to +3 dB, cut out that obnoxious EWI solo, loop the first four bars of intro, brighten with some EQ, and then squeeze the whole thing into 2:59.

Trust me. You'll love it.

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