

# FRACTURED ENGLISH DEFRAGMENTED

DON HAUPTMAN

New York, New York

(donhauptman@compuserve.com)

In the July 22, 1990 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, Bill Bryson guest-wrote the "On Language" column, substituting for the vacationing William Safire. Titled "A Taste for Scrambled English," the column focuses on the garbling of American English around the world.

Bryson contends that English abroad is mangled in ways that create puzzling and inscrutable results. But the examples he cites do not strike me as particularly opaque. I wrote a letter with my interpretations, but the editors chose not to publish it (although three other reader responses to the column were published in the August 19 issue).

Here is how Bryson establishes his theme:

Anyone who has traveled almost anywhere in the world in the past couple of years will have noticed that young people everywhere sport T-shirts, sweatshirts and warm-up jackets bearing messages that are invariably (1) in English and (2) gloriously meaningless.

But are they really? Let's look at three examples he cites, and attempt some exegesis.

Recently in Hamburg I saw a young man in a bomber jacket that stated on its back: "Ful-O-Pep Laying Mash." In slightly smaller letters it added: "Made by Taverniti Oats Company Chicago USA 1091DS."

Is this phrase "gloriously meaningless"? Or is it, self-evidently, a brand of chicken feed? Confirming evidence is provided by the fact that the advertiser is a grain company in Carl Sandburg's Chicago.

In Tokyo, a correspondent for *The Economist* magazine sighted a T-shirt proclaiming: "O.D. on Bourgeoise Milk Boy Milk." The words, one supposes, were chosen from an unabridged dictionary by a parrot with a stick in its mouth.

Well, this one may be a trifle more cryptic. But it is far from unintelligible. Most likely, someone misspelled "Soy Milk," a beverage long popular in the Orient. *O.D.* is street slang for overdosed, which presumably is meant in jest. As for the repetition of "Milk," perhaps it's a typo attributable to soy intoxication!

Copyright © Don Hauptman 2001

And two years ago in Brussels I saw a boutique where a sign in the window intriguingly offered “Sweat, 690 francs.” Closer inspection revealed this to be merely a Belgian truncation of the English word “sweatshirt.”

Bryson is probably on target in his deduction that *sweat* is short for *sweatshirt*. (Lopping off the end of a word is technically known as *apocope*.) But to label the word a “Belgian truncation” is bizarre in the extreme. Exercise clothing has long been called *sweats* right here in the U.S.A. The word also serves as an abbreviation of such compounds as *sweat pants* and *sweat suit*.

Bryson’s citations entertainingly prove that American English has a certain cachet appeal abroad, that people enjoy flaunting interesting phrases and slogans on their clothing, and that apparel manufacturers who aren’t fully bilingual sometimes jumble and distort the words. But such garbling hardly divests these expressions of meaning. With a little effort, their sense can often be teased out.

Bill Bryson is author of *The Mother Tongue*, a fine popular book about the history of the English language. So his inability to decipher his own transparent examples strikes me as peculiar.

Perhaps the decision of the editors of *The New York Times Magazine* not to publish my response can be attributed in part to the possibility that they--and Bryson--might have suffered embarrassment had it been revealed that the examples Bryson characterizes as “strange,” “bewilderingly vague” and “[making] next to no sense” are in fact obvious or readily interpreted.

Having been denied a forum to make my point at the time, I am delighted to have the opportunity to do so in *Word Ways*, albeit a decade belatedly.