

PRESIDENT'S EDITORIAL

Problems of Trans-Atlantic Communication

There is an old story that an Englishman laughs at a joke three times, first when he hears it, then when it is explained to him, and finally, much later, when he understands it. To me, aside from its libelous character, this joke deserved no more than the first laugh: I did not regard it as having profound aspects which required explanation or challenged more than superficial understanding. That I was wrong became manifest to me when I read the editorial in the June 1962 issue of *Weather*, our distinguished British contemporary journal which is, its masthead proudly announces, "Published by the authority of the Royal Meteorological Society."

This editorial pleasantly recounts the experiences of a meteorologist who "recently decided to swallow a dictionary." Initially the only unusual aspect of this action to the editorialist was the choice, the *Glossary of Meteorology* published by the A.M.S. But then, abruptly, the meteorologist—and the editorial writer, for it becomes obvious that they are one—gags. Here on page 14 is something he cannot swallow:

AGNOSTIC CHART—A prognostic chart that no one believes in.

The remainder of the *Weather* editorial is devoted to the attempt to explain and understand. Not to understand how such a farcical touch crept into a serious scholarly work, as I attempted when my attention was brought to it: Poor Messrs. Huschke, Wurtele, *et al.*, I thought. Swamped by the awkward, confused, and even ridiculous jargon which we meteorologists have developed, they sought relief by inserting a sensibly absurd expression. In characteristic Col. Blimp fashion, tongue in cheek, of course, the editorialist proceeds doggedly to find the logic in what he regards as a contradiction in terms: "Was there ever a prebaratic (prog) that was not admired by its composer?" [Prebaratic, indeed, Mr. Huschke; clearly this is the single term so utterly ridiculous that it justifies the mockery in which you indulged.] Strengthened by recourse to French

phrases, the editorialist reaches his conclusion: the prog no one believes in was produced by a computer, since if it had been a human, at least one, the maker, would believe in it.

Now it is not my intention to contest this seemingly impeccable logic. Flaws I can find, for what about the programmer, the builder of the computer, or for that matter the large number of followers of that great new deity, the computer? The computer and the satellite are to solve all the problems of meteorology, and for every one who doubts it there are a dozen believers to cast stones at the heretic.

No, it is rather my purpose to ask why a learned and indeed a good humored writer like our colleague across the Atlantic is impelled to explain and understand, rather than to accept and to laugh once. It becomes necessary to explain and understand the story about the Englishman. If he laughed when he heard the joke without understanding it, he must have known it was a joke; no self respecting humorist would label his story in advance, so how did he know he was supposed to laugh? Having laughed, he must have given the teller and other hearers the impression he understood; why did they explain? Since he laughed again, they must have sighed with relief at having made clear what should have been obvious, and departed post-haste from the dull company; who was there to report the occurrence of the third laugh?

It is indeed puzzling.

Another puzzle, and one I am more eager to solve, is how to find the other joke which has been inserted in the *Glossary*. I am assured that there is at least one more, and it is most tantalizing. Must I follow our English friend, and proceed systematically to "swallow a dictionary"?

Along with this curiosity I am haunted by a fear, the fear that one of the definitions in the *Glossary* which I have accepted at face value and regarded as serious is really an "agnostic chart" in disguise. Will someone please tell me what's the joke?

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