

EUROFILE LANGUAGE

For all its versatility and vibrancy, in one respect English is found lacking, says **PETER TRUDGILL**



LOST CAUSES: HOW OUR LANGUAGE IS MISSING OUT

Our ancestral Anglo-Saxon language performed many grammatical operations by alternating the vowels in related words. In modern English we do this less, but we have some traces such as *foot-feet, take-took, sing-sang-sung*. Also, if you *fell* a tree, it *falls*; if you *raise* something, it *rises*. Obviously *fall* and *fell*, *rise* and *raise*, are related words.

Verbs such as *fell* and *raise* are called causatives: to *fell* means 'cause to fall', to *raise* means 'cause to rise'. Old English had many pairs like this, but modern English has only a few causatives left. One example is *sit* and *set*: if you *set* a child in a chair, you cause it to sit.

Another pair is *lie* and *lay*: to *lay* means 'cause to lie'. But we have lost the word *sench*, which meant 'cause to sink' – today, if you want to scupper a boat, you don't *sench* it, you just *sink* it. (German still has *sinken* and *senken*.) Similarly, to *stench* meant 'cause to stink' – John Donne wrote: "after a horse that devours the grass, sheep will feed; but after a goose

that stanches the grass, they will not". The original meaning of *drench* was 'cause to drink'; as recently as the 19th century, one could *drench* a thirsty horse. And *bait* originally meant 'cause to bite'.

In contemporary English, even the causatives we do have are gradually going the way of *sench* and being lost. The distinction between *lay* and *lie* is disappearing in many forms of English. This process is helped along by the fact that *lay* is not just the present-tense of the verb to *lay* but also the past tense of *lie*. Many of us these days tell the dog to *lay* down, and then perhaps go and have a nice *lay-down* ourselves.

German has retained this way of forming causatives through vowel alternations to a greater extent than English. German has *fahren*, 'to travel', and the causative *führen*, 'to lead'; (*auf*) *wachen*, 'to awaken', *wecken*, 'to wake somebody up'; *schwimmen*, 'to swim', *schwemmen*, 'to be washed (eg ashore)'. Scandinavian languages also have some

LAY OR LIE?

Using *lay* instead of *lie* is regarded by some as a 'mistake'. But it has been in common usage for many centuries. In the late 1500s, Francis Bacon wrote: "nature will lay buried a great time and yet revive". And no less a poet than Lord Byron wrote: "thou dashest him again to earth: there let him lay".

causatives which we do not: Norwegian *springe*, 'to jump', and the causative *sprengre*, 'to blow up'; *gråte*, 'to cry', *gröte*, 'to make (someone) cry'; Swedish *sova*, 'to sleep', *söva*, 'to send to sleep'.

Many of the world's languages have much more fully developed systems of grammatical causatives than the Germanic languages. Amongst European languages, Hungarian makes verbs into

causatives not by changing their vowels but by inserting elements such as *-at-* or *-tat-*: *olvastnak* means 'they read' while *olvastatnak* is 'they make (somebody) read'; *mosok* is 'I wash' while *mosatok* means 'I get (somebody) to wash'. In Finnish *pesen* means 'I wash' and *pesetään*, 'I get [something] washed'; *syön* means 'I eat', *syötän*, 'I feed'.

We see the same phenomenon in Lithuanian: *degti*, 'to be burning', *deginti*, 'to burn something'; *sprogti*, 'to explode', *sprogdinti*, 'to make something explode'. Basque employs the causative suffix *-erazi*: 'to eat' is *jan* while 'to feed' is *janerazi*. Turkish provides another example of a European language with a fully developed system of grammatical causatives.

Some English speakers are fond of saying what a wonderful language English is. All languages are wonderful, but I can't help thinking that our lack of a fully developed causative verb system means that English is missing out on something.

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