Call me madam, *or* The lost key word

SUZANNE HINTON

A short guide to formal address in English

I WAS 11 years old. I was sitting in the second-class compartment of a train from London to Blackpool, travelling alone for the first time in my life. The steward, complete with white jacket, stopped by my seat, silver coffee and hot milk jugs in hand, bowed imperceptibly and said: 'Would madam like some coffee?' I was thrilled. It was 1957. That was what shop-keepers said to my mother – and *she* was a grown-up.

Fast forward. The hip days of the 60s are long over. Margaret Thatcher reigns and we are all into power dressing. Now that I am 36 I finally have enough money to progress beyond Marks and Spencer for my clothes. I walk into a chic ladies' wear boutique: 'Good morning, madam. May I help?' I am insulted. I feel old. Isn't this the way you speak to a dowager duchess? I'm a dynamic, professional *young* woman. Or perhaps that is not the way the slightly supercilious young assistant sees me. Perhaps this is the ironic use of *madam*. One is never quite sure.

Further forward. It's nearly 2007 and I'm beginning to feel like that duchess. And now nobody, but *nobody*, is going to call me 'madam'. Except, of course if they come from France.

When my French students greet me at the beginning of the day, the abrupt *Good morning* seems to them discourteous in the extreme when compared to the mellifluous *Bonjour, madame*. So here I am, squirming at *Good morning, madam* and there they are with a problem: either frustrated at their inability to mark accurately the social distance between us if they don't use the title or being aware they are not speaking 'correct' English if they *do* use it. Thank goodness not one of them has yet tried *Good morning, Mrs*. That is more due to the fact that they have not needed to work on a market stall in the East End of London than that they have studied all the social niceties.

Let us imagine that a French student of mine has finished her A-levels and opted to continue her studies – and then work – in Britain. She finally emerges as a fully qualified British tax inspector, and has reason to believe that Mr and Mrs Smith are defrauding her department. She visits their home and, after an hour or so of closely questioning them, is pretty sure her suspicions are accurate. In French, the scene might go like this: *l'inspecteur du contrôle fiscal … s'en va en nous assenant un «Monsieur, madame ».*[1] Any native English-speaking tax inspector of the 90s might well have taken his leave with a disdainfully abrupt *Sir, madam.* And yet… Can I not hear Inspector Morse saying *Sir, madam* with just a hint of residual respect? In many – different – circumstances, it might be a sneer of insulting irony that would be evident in those two words. Yet neither of these seems appropriate to the neutral, if violent, word *assener* ('to land a blow'). My French speaker is in a quandary. How oh how is she to take leave of this couple who she clearly feels are committing a crime. Perhaps we have to fall back on the 'named person' solu-

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tion: *The tax inspector left with a terse 'Mr Smith, Mrs Smith'*. All very well if you know the name of your interlocutor.

Or suppose that one of my French students had to take the place of Inspector Dionisi. After a long interrogation, the Inspector realises that he will get no more information from Adela Franca. He barks to a young police officer: «*Reconduisez madame*»[2]. The English 'Show madam out' would be highly anachronistic and would smack more of the dress salon than the police station. 'Show Miss Franca out' would be fine, were it not just a little too affable. Dionisi is, of course, quite aware of the young woman's name. He wishes not to use it. He wishes to express a certain disapproval, a certain displeasure, a certain frustration: she has not 'come up with the goods'. How would our Inspector Morse deal with the situation? 'Show the young lady out'? Just how old is Adela Franca? How old is *old*? 'Show the middle-aged lady out' is plainly not English and surely Inspector Dionisi would not sink to 'Show the old lady out' spoken to Adela Franca's face. Her behaviour has not warranted such an insult.

It is true that recently the French have started to use names to represent the vocative far more than in the past. This Anglo-Saxon tendency is a blessing for both translators into English and French speakers wishing to use a natural form of English. Whether it is an embellishment of or decadence in the French language is not for me to discuss, but what joy to have been a French/English translator in the 19th century. «*Madame, dit le comte en saluant poliment la femme de l'avoué, veuillez indiquer, s'il vous plaît, la sortie de votre maison.*» [3] How deliciously formal: 'Madam,' said the Count… The use of *Madam* underlines the fact that not only are the middle-class young woman and the aristocrat of differing social class and sex, but highlights the formality of a first meeting. None of this nonsense about having to know everybody's name.

And finally, gentlemen, I have not forgotten you. You also suffer from anonymity, not to say non-existence, in English. How on earth does the well brought-up Frenchman attract a waiter's attention in Britain. The exquisite «*Monsieur*» will bring, albeit not running, the French waiter to your table. The tentative, apologetic 'Excuse me' is probably the best we can do to attract a monoglot English waiter's attention. But 'Sir' is still alive and well without conveying the condescension of 'Madam'. Any antiquarian bookshop assistant might well sadly announce: 'The problem is, Sir, that poets just aren't selling.' This would convey just the right tone for this identical situation: *Le vendeur était, lui aussi, sincèrement désolé. «Des poètes, monsieur, c'est bien le problème.»* [4]

When asked about the *Sir* dilemma, my husband assured me that not only is *Sir* current English, it is on the increase. 'Go and listen to the *Big Issue* sellers,' he said. So I did. The most successful one I heard used a whole range of forms of address, from *Folks* for couples, *Love* for most women, *Mate* for younger men and, last but by no means least, *Sir* for men of 50 and over. And the least successful? You have guessed it: '*Big Issue*, madam?' ■

Notes

1 «Trois jours d'engatse» by Philippe Carrese 1994 *Éditions Fleuve Noir* page 48
2 «Bar de la poste, Marseille» by g.m. bon 2003 *L'Écailler du sud* page 131
3 «Les Bourgeois de Molinchart» by Champfleury 1857 from the « Gallica » website
4 «Ethique en toc» Didier Daeninckx 2000 *Éditions Librio* page 50

USAGE 3

Punctuation: tapping its benefits

'The benefits of punctuation for the creative writer are limitless, if you know how to tap them. You can, for example, create a stream-of-consciousness effect using full stops; indicate a passing of time using commas; add complexity using brackets; build to a revelation using colons; increase your pace using paragraph breaks; keep readers hooked using section breaks. This, its impact on content, is the holy grail of punctuation.'

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