



## Tech Talk

### The Future of the AZERTY Keyboard©

by John McCarthy

Hi and a very warm welcome once again to Tech Talk. There are many peripherals we employ to communicate and interact with computers. We refer to these as input devices and a motley assortment has been developed over the last thirty years or so. The mouse in a plethora of shapes, designs and sizes, image scanners, graphic tablets, trackpads which instinctively enable us to tap, double-tap, pinch, swipe, drag, finger slide, scroll and digitally rotate; touch screens which can be prodded and inevitably smeared, eye-tracker apps which trace ocular movement over the screen and automatically turn over web pages for us, voice activation, speech recognition, pen touchscreens, not to mention all the gadgets that will enable us to communicate more efficiently via hand gestures à la 'Minority Report' ... and who knows, maybe one day by mere thought.

Last but by no means least, the ubiquitous *doyen* of all peripherals has to be the humble, good, old-fashioned keyboard, descendant of the first QWERTY typewriter, which was first made in 1873. As many of you probably already know, the QWERTY design took many years to develop and the idea was to split up commonly used letter combinations in order to avoid jamming problems caused by the slow method of recovering from a keystroke. You'll see that most of the widely used keys figure on the left-hand side of the keyboard, and if you don't believe me, see how many words you can type with the letters attributed to the left hand, and then try the same with the right. Although the jamming problem no longer exists on modern computer keyboards, little has changed since the original design was patented.

There do exist international variations on the theme. QWERTY is used mainly in the English and Spanish speaking world, QWERTZ in Central Europe; DVORAK, which allegedly increases speed and lessens mistakes; and of course AZERTY (designed in the 1890s) which reigns supreme here in France. On first arriving here many moons ago, I did find the quirkiness of AZERTY somewhat annoying, probably of course because I'd never used it before, and old habits die hard. The two major irritants which would often lead to a lengthy tirade of four-letter expletives were: the fact that you had to use two keys to obtain a full-stop (the semi-colon is the default button – this made, and still makes absolutely no sense whatsoever, as we use full-stops all the time ... even in the

language of Molière). Having to use the SHIFT button to get numbers was also rather irksome. Still, I decided that it was a case of ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’, so I took the bit between my teeth, persevered and eventually became as fast as is humanly possible using only thumbs and index fingers. Just as one was about to give oneself a well-deserved pat on the back, news has come through that France’s venerable AZERTY ‘*exception française*’ is to be reconfigured, after the government ruled that it encourages bad writing.

The Ministry of Culture has decided to produce a new standard keyboard to replace the current one and has commissioned a consultancy to create a list of recommendations. The main problem is the difficulty to use certain accented characters, especially in capital letters, or uppercase. All of the lowercase accented letters can be accessed through a simple keystroke: the é (e-acute), è (e-grave) and ù (u-grave), even though it’s only used in one word in the entire French language. Accented capital letters, according to the Ministry, require dexterous keyboard manipulations with which the average person is unfamiliar. The Ç (capital C-cedilla) is also absent from the AZERTY keyboard, although depending on the operating system you use, the solutions can be relatively simple. On the Mac keyboard, all you have to do is press down on the block capitals and then corresponding lower-case key. My French teachers at school in the UK always taught us that including an accent on a capital letter was a mortal sin – certainly not the case, according to the Ministry of Culture.

Other singularities of French spelling are the ligatures of æ and œ, as for instance *Lætitia*, *œuil*, *œuf* and *œuvre*, which aren’t accessible on the keyboard. Neither are the signs for introducing direct speech – the double chevrons, which of course are the equivalent to the inverted commas used in English. Again, on most operating systems using recent software, these would be automatically corrected by setting the preferences on the main menu to ‘France’. As for all the other accentuated characters in European languages, you have the choice of either memorising certain SHIFT-CONTROL-ALT combinations or – on certain operating systems – pressing down on the vowel or consonant in question for a second or two, and then clicking on the desired character that will appear on a dedicated sub-menu immediately above. Bob’s your uncle!

Many have expressed reservations about the expense these changes would entail and feel the money might be better spent on teaching pupils how to write French properly at school in the first place. Others believe that this is a case of change just for the sake of change ... a case of ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’

That’s all we have time for, I’m afraid. If you have any comments or ideas you’d like to share on the subject, I’d be delighted to hear from you, so please don’t hesitate to get in touch at [contact@englishwaves.fr](mailto:contact@englishwaves.fr). Tune in to another edition of Tech Talk next week.