

Nil desperandum – Americans are adopting Britishisms!

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While the World Cup was being played in Brazil, there was an interesting little item on National Public Radio in the USA, which I happened to hear:

A presenter was complaining, albeit not very seriously, about the use of the word “nil” in American sports broadcasting, and its apparently rather rapid spread into general public usage in the United States. It is “not American”, he protested.

This was of course nil as in “Brazil are losing seven-nil” (or as Americans would say, “...is losing”).

Americans never used to say that. They would have phrased it as “seven to nothing” or “seven-zero” or “seven-zip”.

However, the employment of large numbers of British commentators and co-commentators on the American TV networks to describe and analyse the World Cup matches (“games” in the USA) has led to lots of Americans using a number of sporting Britishisms, as the presenter called them, at least in the football (“soccer”) context.

This complaint about Britishisms is really rather amusing, given the number of complaints there have been over the decades in this country about Americanisms and how dreadful they are.



■ Hopefully, nils and noughts won't feature too highly in Norwich City's scorelines this coming season.

Picture: JAMES BASS

It's rather entertaining to see the boot on the other foot and to hear Americans protesting about evil linguistic influence from our side of the pond.

But nil meaning “nothing” was not originally an English word anyway. It only dates back to the 1830s, and comes from the Latin nil, which was a contraction of nihil “nothing”, which we can see in its full form in our word nihilism.

The word zero, as formerly preferred by Americans, is not originally an English word either. It has a rather long history. It came from French zéro, which was borrowed from Italian zero, which came down from Mediaeval Latin zephirum, which in turn originated from Arabic sifr,

which itself was a translation of Sanskrit sunyam “empty place, desert”. Sifr is also, via French, the source of our word cipher. That too originally meant zero but was then extended to all numerals, and then to secret codes (because these often involved substituting numbers for letters).

The word nothing, though, really is an ancient English term, and so is naught/nought. In our part of the world we have an innovative version of that which involves a re-interpretation of original “a nought” as “an ought”.

Let's hope that this season Norwich City are not going to lose seven to nothing, seven-zero, seven-zip, seven-nil, and especially not seven-ought.