

LANGUAGES: THREE INTERVIEWS BY PETER BROWN

Taking a stroll down Babel Street

There are many shops in Babel Street. They range from Fred Fortran's successful grocery chain to Dr. Avery Tower's latest toy shop. To gain a better understanding of the businesses Peter Brown talked to some of their proprietors, beginning with the pernickety grocer himself.

Of all the grocer's shops in town, Fred Fortran's does the most business. In fact only one shop of any nature does better and that is Cobol's stationers. Fred has been around for untold years and the doctors expected him to die long ago. Yet he continues working, looking the same as ever, watching his rivals come and go.

He is a man of very precise habits and it was important that I arrived at the right time to interview him. His day is broken into eighty periods, and various parts are set aside for different activities. This is one of his rules. If you arrived in the wrong period he might refuse to see you, or, worse, take you to be someone else.

Fortunately I was alright and walked straight into his office above one of his shops. He greeted me cheerfully, but did not interrupt his work.

I started by asking him why his shops sold so few lines, and why they had remained unchanged for years.

'I won't stock any of these fancy new-fangled foods,' he replied, 'what was good enough when I was a lad is good enough now. My customers have got used to the foods I stock and it would be madness to change.'

I had brought him a box of assorted subscripsts as a present, but, sensing that he might not be pleased with it, I decided to explore the ground first.

'I see you are still stocking the old Brand 704 plain subscripsts.'

'Yes, sold well for many years, those have,' he said

proudly, 'no one else makes them like that any more.'

I remembered that most items in his shops were labelled Brand 704 or Brand 709. Obviously my intended present, a relatively new brand, would not be welcome so I decided to forget it.

I moved on to an even more controversial issue, and told him that many people accused him of spreading the debilitating disease of *gotoitis*, which results in a considerable loss of productivity.

'Rubbish!' he said. 'Everyone has *gotoitis* but it doesn't do them any harm. Nowadays some people want to cover it up by wearing fancy clothes, but it's still there underneath, you know. Back in the good old days...'

He continued talking of the good old days for some time. When at last he finished I asked him about some details of the running of his shops.

'Let's say I ask you to repeat an order X times,' I said, 'and I tell you X is zero. Why do you execute the order once?'

'Your question is phrased badly, I won't accept it,' he said crustily. 'When you say X I assume you don't mean an integer. It's one of my rules. And if you don't mean an integer, I won't execute your repeat instruction at all. What's more I would reject all your other instructions until the error is corrected.'

'Alright, make it N times,' I said, amazed at the escalating consequences of my original slip.

'That's better. I will accept N times. To answer your

original question, if you tell me to do something I get on with it. I don't waste time asking if you really didn't want it done after all. When I have finished the first time, I look to see how many more times I have to repeat the order. I try to be efficient, that's the point—not like Lady Algol, who spends so much time deciding whether or not to do anything that every job takes twice as long.'

He continued his deprecating remarks about Lady Algol, who owned a rival chain of shops.

'...and the most ridiculous thing of all is that there is no standard input/output system in her shops.'

Eager to change the topic of conversation I asked him about his own input/output.

'Oh, mine is very simple,' he explained, 'you have formats with labels attached and within the formats...'

He tried hard to explain to me, but I never did manage to understand it.

We then talked about his worldwide success, a shop in every town. His plan has been to make every shop the same, so that customers could adapt easily from one to another. Every detail of the shops has been specified by Miss Ansi, who is very particular about such things.

Fred was a bit resentful of her, however.

'She is very keen to standardise other people,' he complained, 'but with herself it's different. She even keeps changing her own name.'

The standardisation of shops had been quite successful ('Compare it with the mess the Algol shops are in,' said Fred), but the size of some goods varied a bit and many shops had introduced some new lines of their own. I had even bought my box of assorted subscripts in one of Mr. Fortran's other shops.

Throughout our interview, Fred had continued to work away at his accounts. It amazed me the work he got through. He did not show any imagination, just thoroughness and efficiency, and the result was low prices and lots of customers.

It was time to leave. I thanked him and gathered up my things. As I left I asked him where the toilet was.

'You go to Room 163.'

'Doesn't it have a name on the door?'

'No,' he said, 'I only allow people to go to rooms with numbers. It's one of my rules.'

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The faded majesty of Lady Algol

Peter Brown continues his exploration of Babel Street with a visit to the aging Lady Algol who, despite her great fecundity, still retains a measure of the beauty that won her much success abroad.

Lady Algol has a shop at number 60. A rival shop, run by a relative, is at number 68 but has not, as yet, had much effect on her business.

The shop impressed me, but when I went inside I was even more impressed by Lady Algol herself. Although she is getting old now, I was still struck by her grace and beauty. One could well understand how she appealed to the youth of her day. Yet there were signs of old age—a few wrinkles and a very slightly faded look about her. Perhaps this is why her appeal is not so strong to today's youth.

We talked of the past. She reminisced enthusiastically of the times when every eager academic in Europe sought after her.

'Did you also visit America?' I asked her.

'Well, yes,' she said, with rather less enthusiasm, 'but I did not make quite such a hit over there. I wanted to set up some of my shops, but the Americans thought my overheads were too great and my prices too high. Also in those days people were not even sure how to build my shops at all. Nevertheless I think that the main reason for my relative lack of success in America was that they resented that many of my roots are in Europe.

They prefer All-American girls.'

'Were they right in thinking your shops aren't efficient?' I asked.

'It depends on the premises. Nice Mr. Burroughs has provided some excellent premises, designed specially to meet my needs. He is one of the few Americans who really love me, and he has remained faithful for years. He buys almost everything from my shops, but has made me introduce a lot of new lines. Some of my friends think he has gone too far, and has destroyed the nature of my shops, but I don't think so.'

'I see that your prices vary from shop to shop,' I continued, 'but how do they compare on average with those at Fred Fortran's stores?'

'Don't talk to me of that common and cheap Mr. Fortran,' she said severely, 'I refuse to be compared with him.'

I should have realised what a *faux pas* it was to mention such a name in the majestic atmosphere of one of her shops. (I smiled to myself as I remembered Fred Fortran's comments about Lady Algol.)

'Sorry, My Lady,' I said, obsequiously, and quickly changed the subject.

We talked of her children, of whom she was very proud.

'How many do you have,' I asked.

'Hundreds! They are all over the world, and most of them have different fathers.'

The number seemed a bit excessive to me. Perhaps she was counting her grandchildren and sister's children, as well. However there was no denying that there were many fruits of her boisterous youth. Moreover the geneticists regarded her as good material for breeding. They had even paired her off with Mr. Cobol, but she talked without warmth of their relationship.

'It was an arranged meeting, and I don't think we ever had any real feeling for each other. And he does talk so much!'

Mr. Cobol must have done more than talk, because they produced an offspring—PL/I, one of whose shops I was planning to visit later. I think Lady Algol gained some spiteful pleasure out of the result because Mr. Cobol's arranged marriage with one of Fred Fortran's daughters failed to produce any issue.

I turned the conversation round to the goods in her shops. All the shops sell much the same basic lines, but the design of the shops varies greatly and her goods always seem to be packaged in different ways. This is a great nuisance if you move from one shop to another. I wondered why she did not follow Fred Fortran's example, and adopt some standardisation (though even he wasn't always successful in this respect). However I did not dare mention Mr. Fortran's name explicitly again.

'Why do your shops vary so much?' I enquired.

She immediately became embarrassed, and talked round the subject for a while, saying that it didn't really matter. Finally, after I had asked some more pressing questions, she broke down and told me the full story.

When her company was started, the board of directors consisted of thirteen people, covering seven different countries. To many people's surprise the board did a good job. Contrary to the usual practice of multi-national committees they agreed to something significant and almost free from ambiguity. However they made some omissions—intentional at the time—the most significant of which was a plan for how to get in

and out of the shop. The result was that every shop manager designed his own input/output system. No manager was going to be seen to copy anyone else's system, so all the shops developed differently. (Many of the original shops were designed by Dr. Avery Tower and his followers. By the very nature of their designers these shops were all unique.)

Thus anarchy reigned, and once the shops had become established in this way it was too late for the board to do anything about it. In any case the board didn't meet very often as they had mostly gone on to other things.

I changed the topic of conversation to happier matters and asked about some of her famous customers. Her favourite was Mr. ACM Algorithms, who had made regular monthly visits for many years, though recently he had taken to frequenting other shops as well.

Before I left her she showed me round the shop. It was all very orderly, with large units divided into smaller units and these in turn subdivided into smaller units still. I only noticed a few blemishes; and *else* dangling from a shelf and her chocolate *declares*, own brand, which looked a terrible mess.

She showed me some of her famous tricks. Two mirrors are arranged in the shop so that you can see an image of herself within herself within herself, *etc.* This had acted as a great enticement during her youth, and it still remained seductive. She also showed me Jensen's machine for picking goods off the shelves in a variable way. I must say I didn't understand it properly, and it appeared difficult and expensive to operate. In my ignorance I thought it would be easier to take things off the shelf without the aid of the device.

As we walked round the shop at the end of our interview, I noticed more signs of her age. She was not quite as steady on her feet as she used to be. Would she still be flourishing in ten years' time! Maybe she would not. But one thing was certain: through her children and grandchildren she would remain a major influence worldwide.

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Having everything under one roof

In the third interview of the series Peter Brown meets the thrusting, ambitious Mr. PL/I whose failure to make a complete success of his general store stems, in part, from his unwillingness to really come to terms with the impossibility of profitably pleasing all his customers all of the time.

On the door of the PL/I General Stores there is a sign saying 'We sell everything.'

I went in, or rather I tried to. As with all my interviews I had trouble getting into the shop because of a very unpleasant doorman employed by the JCL Security

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Agency. Instead of helping people to use the shops these men seem to do their best to hinder. This was my third visit to a shop, and I had never yet got past the doorman at the first attempt. Something ought to be done about these people.

When at last I forced my way inside the shop, I was

amazed by what I saw. The rows of shelves stretched out as far as the eye could see. All the shelves contained different goods, apparently thrown together in a somewhat haphazard way. Just glancing at the shelves near me I could see keys, labels, dates, a cosh, logs, lineno, records, files—one of them had the *exclusive* attribute and cost extra—together with some common objects parading under unusual names such as a time function (watch), a variable length string (elastic), and a generic sin function (a place for orgies?)

While I was admiring all this, Mr PL/I himself came up to meet me. He was a youngish man, rather fat. He was thrusting and obviously ambitious, but nevertheless I had a feeling that he had not quite made the grade. The success which he seemed to be groomed for had just escaped his grasp.

He showed me round some of the shop, but I am afraid I became exhausted before we got right round. He pointed out high-class goods similar to those in Lady Algol's shop. They often shared shelves with severely practical commercial goods which you would expect to find in Cobol's stationers. I remembered that Mr. Cobol and Lady Algol were his parents.

He was very proud of a monitor system he had for detecting unusual circumstances. It was called the ON system. ('Because it is always on,' he said with an inane smile). If anything goes wrong, such as stocks running out, a shelf overflowing, or a bottle of champagne blowing up then the ON system will signal it.

'Does it enable you to recover easily from the catastrophies?' I asked him.

'Well sometimes,' he replied.

When we got back to his office after the partial tour of the shop I asked him how he had come to stock so many lines.

'We wanted to make it so that our customers did not need to visit any of the other shops,' he said. 'Hence our policy of selling everything. If we found we hadn't got something, we immediately started stocking it. Sometimes the new goods were our own make, but usually they were an existing make. Unfortunately the shop eventually got full, and our accountants said we could not have yet another extension. So one day we decided to stop and work with what we had. That means there are just a few goods we don't sell.'

'Why didn't you try to rationalise a bit?' I asked him. 'Lots of your goods seem to be the same things in different packaging.'

'It might have been a good idea,' he admitted, 'but there were so many people to satisfy and they were all very insistent that they wanted particular goods.'

'But it's well known,' I said, 'that whatever a shop has in stock the customers will always find something they want that isn't there.'

'I know that only too well,' he said ruefully.

I asked him how many shops he had.

'Not very many,' he said. 'There are some good comprehensive ones but a few of them, who claim to be PL/I General Stores, actually don't stock many more goods than Fred Fortran's grocery.'

'In the comprehensive stores,' I asked, 'how on earth do you keep a record of the goods that are to be stocked and what they are used for?'

'Ah! We've taken care of that,' he said smugly, 'our friends in Vienna have produced a comprehensive list. I will give you a copy.'

Unfortunately I couldn't take it as I wasn't strong enough to lift it.

I asked him if customers had trouble specifying their orders since they had so many choices to make. He explained that this problem is partly avoided by the use of his default system. ('No one else has as many defaults as me,' he claimed). In this system if customers did not say exactly what they wanted, Mr. PL/I automatically gave them the most popular item of the type.

'Ah! I get the idea of these defaults,' I said, hoping to impress him with my perspicacity, 'if I just said buy something at a shop, without specifying which shop, you would by default get it for me at Cobol's since that is the most popular.'

I was wrong, however; he didn't seem impressed by this at all. In fact later on he rather spitefully punished me for my lack of understanding. I asked him for a toothbrush, but instead of an ordinary one, he supplied an automatic electric one.

'Automatic is the default,' he said, with a smile. 'That will be fifteen pounds, please.'

Indeed the whole shop was not the place for a thrifty customer. Fred Fortran's prices were generally less in those cases where he stocked the same items. This was not, I think, because the PL/I shop was inefficiently run but because of the general overheads of stocking so many items. It is not unreasonable for customers to pay extra for this convenience.

At the end of our interview, I decided to undertake an experiment. The precision of the calculators in the PL/I Stores has been subject to some comment so I made some purchases in the shop. I bought one object at 89 pence, and, rather perversely, seeing something else advertised at three pence I took just one of them. At the check-out the machine was set to perform the calculation $89 + \frac{1}{3}$ and came up with 9.33.... It was a good way of saving 80 pence, but it didn't make up for what I lost on the toothbrush.

Looking back on my visit, I felt life had been a bit hard on Mr. PL/I—maybe I had been a bit hard on him, myself. Possibly he hadn't come up to the early hopes some people had of him, but he certainly hadn't failed either. Though it may be true that his shops are too big and that some of his goods are poorly packaged, it is a very real achievement to have created so large a shop and customers find it a great convenience to find so much under one roof.

And I couldn't help liking Mr. PL/I himself. He was so eager to please his customers by stocking everything they wanted. He had even promised me to add left-handed teacups to his stocks after I had complained that he only stocked right-handed ones.

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