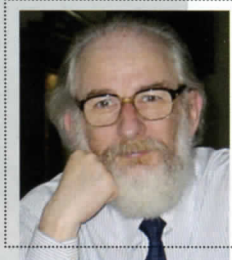




New Englishes: going local in Brazil



David Crystal is currently patron of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) and the Association for Language Learning (ALL), president of the UK National Literacy Association, and an honorary vice-president of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, the Institute of Linguists, and the Society for Editors and Proofreaders. He has also been a member of the Board of the British Council and of the English-Speaking Union. He received an OBE for services to the English language in 1995, and was made a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA) in 2000.

When people talk about 'global English' they are usually referring to the common features which identify the variety we call standard English. Increasingly, however, attention has been drawn to the regional features which differentiate one part of the English-speaking world from another. So today we happily talk about British, American, Australian, South African, Indian, and other 'Englishes', and studies are accumulating of the way these varieties make distinctive use of pronunciation, orthography, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. Much of the distinctiveness resides in the area of lexicology, the linguistic domain which most closely reflects cultural identity, and dictionaries have been compiled of the distinctive lexicons encountered in these regions.

It does not take long before these lexicons reach many thousands of words. When a country adopts a language as a local alternative means of communication, it immediately starts adapting it, to meet the communicative needs of the region. Words for local plants and animals, food and drink, customs and practices, politics and religion, sports and games, and many other facets of everyday life soon accumulate a local wordstock which is unknown outside the country and its environs. When someone in South Africa says 'The bakkie had to stop at a red robot', we need to know that a bakkie is a truck and a robot is a

traffic-light. There are thousands of such words in dictionaries of South African English. And other parts of the English-speaking world display the same kind of creativity.

When a group of people in a country (such as students, teachers, or businessmen) switch into English, for whatever reason, the subject-matter of their conversation inevitably incorporates aspects of their local environment. They talk about the local shops, streets, suburbs, bus-routes, institutions, businesses, television programmes, newspapers, political parties, minority groups, and a great deal more. They make jokes, quote proverbs, bring up childhood linguistic memories (such as nursery rhymes), and recall lyrics of popular songs. All this local knowledge is taken for granted, and used in sentences without gloss. Visitors who hear such sentences, or read them in local newspapers, need to have them explained. Conventional dictionaries will not help, for they do not include such localisms, especially if the expressions are encyclopedic in character (referring to local people, places, institutions, and suchlike).

Even if a name is recognized, the cultural associations may not be. You need to know quite a bit about London before you can interpret these sentences correctly:

His watch was more Petticoat Lane than Bond Street.

It was like Clapham Junction in

our office today.

You have to know that there is a street-market in Petticoat Lane (where watches are likely to be cheap and probably replicas), whereas Bond Street is an expensive shopping centre. And you have to know that Clapham Junction is a particularly complicated railway station, where lines from many directions converge, making it one of the busiest railway junctions in the UK. Many London names, because of their historical associations, have developed a general meaning, such as Whitehall (the government), Harley Street (medicine), and Threadneedle Street (Bank of England).

You must also be prepared for differences between parts of the world: *Soho* in New York does not have the same set of connotations as *Soho* in London, nor does *Oxford Street* in London have much in common with *Oxford Street* in Sydney. Phrases such as 'browsing in Oxford Street' would mean something very different in the two cities (especially when one realizes that the western end of the Sydney location is the city's main gay district). And the kind of risqué jokes that might be made about London's Soho would not translate into New York.

Every English-speaking location in the world has similar usages which make the English used there distinctive, expressive of local

identity, and a means of creating solidarity. From this point of view, notions such as 'Portuguese English' and 'Brazilian English' take on a fresh relevance, going well beyond traditional conceptions of English spoken with a Brazilian Portuguese accent, or English displaying interference from Portuguese grammar. Brazilian Portuguese English, for example, I define as the kind of English I need to know about when I go to Brazil, otherwise I will be unable to converse efficiently with local people in English. It would be amazingly useful to have a glossary of the English equivalents of Brazilian cultural references. I have personally mastered quite a sizeable vocabulary to do with samba schools, but there is a great deal more.

As English spreads around the world, and achieves unprecedented levels of fluency in local situations, the problems illustrated here will grow. How do we solve them? The cultural background of the mother-tongue English-speaking nations is

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often handled by incorporating the cultural information into the practice texts in teaching books. An exercise on past tenses, shall we say, may be illustrated by a shopping visit to Oxford Street in London, and the reader will then unconsciously pick up the relevant associations for that name. But this is fortuitous. It isn't a systematic guide. The cultural information has not been evaluated in its own terms or graded in any way. The solution requires something more ambitious.

Before we can grade and evaluate we need descriptions, and that means, in the first instance, the integration of linguistic and cultural

studies, and in the production of regional cultural dictionaries or glossaries. It is something every region can do, and something to which everyone who learns English can contribute. Having participated in a few informal brainstorming sessions of this kind, in various countries, I can report that it takes only an hour or so to accumulate a list of dozens of culturally specific items. Subsequent reflection raises the total to hundreds. And when these are written down, in the style of a glossary, it has an interesting effect upon the participants. They feel they have somehow made the English language their own. I suspect such projects also add greatly to their linguistic confidence and self-esteem, for no-one else in the world knows their home-grown variety of English as well as they do. And they can take pride in the fact that they have added their own small piece to the global jigsaw-puzzle that comprises the English language. Brazilian English is one of those pieces, awaiting global recognition.