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The future of Englishes: going local

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 the *Dictionary of South African English* (Branford/Branford, 1991). And other parts of the English-speaking world display the same kind of creativity.

Note that these lexicons eliminate the difference between native and non-native speakers of English. I am a native speaker of English, but when I first encounter such words as *bakkie* and *robot* on a visit to South Africa (or reading about South Africa), I am in

exactly the same position as a non-native speaker. I do not know what they mean, and have to ask someone – or look them up, if there is a dictionary.

Nor is it just individual words that cause problems. Here is an example to do with a fixed phrase as used in conversational discourse. Travelling in New Zealand in 2006, I frequently saw roadside advertisements for Tui beer which used the catch-phrase “Yeah, right”. They have become so successful that two books collecting them have been published (Tui, 2005; Tui, 2007). The phrase is an ironic affirmation. When we react to a sentence by saying “Yeah, right”, we are expressing some sort of suspicion about its content, as these examples illustrate:

- (1) Let your mum stay as long as she likes. Yeah right.
- (2) Quiet student seeks room. Yeah right.
- (3) Of course I remember your name. Yeah right.
- (4) One careful lady owner. Yeah right.

These particular ads are culturally neutral, in the sense that they would be understood in most English-speaking (and doubtless other-speaking) societies. But others require an intimate knowledge of New Zealand culture to make any sense at all, for they rely on local knowledge of names and places.

- (5) There are no skeletons in Rodney’s closet. Yeah right.
- (6) Hasn’t Dick made a difference? Yeah right.
- (7) Let Paul fly us there. Yeah right.

Who are Rodney, Dick, and Paul? New Zealanders living in the country at the time would know, without need for a gloss, that Rodney is a national politician (a footnote in the book tells us that this jibe was “aimed at parliament’s most vocal perk-buster”), that Dick is mayor of Auckland (and the ad was put up six months after he was elected), and that Paul is a radio personality (the breakfast host on *Newstalk*

ZB, the country's main breakfast show) who owns a plane, which he crashed, and survived. He then got another plane, which he crashed, and survived. So let Paul fly you there? Yeah, right!

Interestingly, the second *Yeah Right* book had far more of these opaque aphorisms than the first. As the writers searched for fresh examples, they relied increasingly on local allusions. It is as if, having established the convention, people felt able to use it in more daring and intimate ways, specific to New Zealand. I see an analogy between this and the situation which emerges when people become increasingly fluent in English as a lingua franca: they become readier to use it to talk about more parochial or private concerns.

Every country has the equivalent of Rodney, Dick, and Paul. In the UK Paul's equivalent would be someone like John Humphrys or Terry Wogan. But I have no idea who the equivalent broadcasting "anchor" personalities would be in the USA, Canada, or Australia, or – to move away from the major varieties of the past – in Italy, Switzerland, or Slovenia – or, at a still more local level, in Paris, Rome, and Barcelona. So, if I encountered these names used by someone speaking English in these parts of the world, I would be at a loss.

And that is what is increasingly happening, as English becomes a local alternative language. 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).

The more intimate and colloquial the language, moreover, the more difficult the problem becomes, especially if the context is sensitive in some way. Minority groups provide a clear example. Many

ethnic minorities in the UK reflect the historical connection of Britain with former colonial territories, such as India and Pakistan, and several demeaning or insulting words and phrases have been one of the consequences, such as *Paki* for *Pakistani*. Because of the sensitivity surrounding such usages, it is difficult for a foreigner to get information about them or receive guidance about whether to use them or not. The danger, of course, is that a casually overheard usage will be assumed to be an uncontentious expression, and might then be used in a context which would be embarrassing to the speaker, to say the least – as if, to continue the above example, the innocent learner at a dinner-table were to talk about seeing “several Pakis” in the street.

Few attempts have been made to describe the cultural element in a language’s encyclopedic lexicon. An example of one attempt to do this is *British English for American Readers* (Grote, 1992). It is subtitled “A dictionary of the language, customs, and places of British life and literature”, and includes such items as *Black Country*, *Blackpool*, *blancmange*, and *Blighty*. About half the entries are proper names. Another is *The Longman Dictionary of Language and Culture* (Summers, 1992) which under its letter J, for example, includes such items as *Jackanory* (a children’s TV series), *Jackie* (a young person’s magazine), and *Jaeger* (a shopping chain) for the UK and *Jack in the Box* (a restaurant) and *John Doe* (an anonymous American) for the USA. This is an interesting compilation, as it includes general words as well as culturally specific words. For example, letter J includes such words as *jab*, *jabber*, and *jackal*, as well as some general place names (e.g. *Jamaica*, *Jakarta*) alongside the culturally specific items. About a quarter of the items are culturally specific.

Even if the 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:

- (8) His watch was more Petticoat Lane than Bond Street.
- (9) 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 "Italian English" and "Swedish English" take on a fresh relevance, going well beyond traditional conceptions of English spoken with an Italian or Swedish accent, or English displaying interference from Italian or Swedish grammar. Swedish English, for example, I define as the kind of English I need to know about when I go to Sweden, otherwise I will be unable to converse efficiently with Swedish speakers in English. It would be amazingly useful to have a glossary of the English equivalents of Swedish cultural references, but I know of none – and not only for Swedish. This seems to be a neglected area for any language.

The neglect is especially critical for English, as it increases its global reach. When people from different parts of the world meet each other and use English as a lingua franca (as in a political or business meeting), there are many failures of communication which result from the participants assuming different cultural interpretations of a particular word or phrase. A breakdown may occur in relation to the most everyday of topics. For example, on a recent visit to a small town in the Czech Republic, I had a conversation which went

something like this. We were talking about coincidences, and P was telling me about Q, who had just got a job in P's office:

- (10) P: Me and Q both live in ZZ street. And what's even more of a coincidence is that he lives in 355 and I live in 356.
 Me: So you can wave to each other, then!
 P (puzzled): No.
 Me (confused, thinking that they've perhaps had an argument): I mean, you could keep an eye on each other's house, if one of you was away.
 P (even more puzzled): Not very easily. I can't see his house from where I live. It's the other end of the street.
 Me: But I thought you were neighbours.
 P: Not really.
 Me: Ah.

I didn't know what to say next, and we moved on to some other subject.

The next day I made enquiries, and discovered what had gone wrong. It transpired that P's system of house numbering operates on a totally different basis to what I was used to in the UK. In Britain, houses are numbered sequentially in a street, usually with odd numbers down one side and even numbers down the other. So 355 and 356 would probably be opposite each other – or maybe even next to each other (for some streets have linear numbering). But in the Czech Republic (or, at least, in that part where I was), houses are numbered on the basis of when they were built and registered with the housing authority. House number 356 was built (or registered) immediately after house number 355. So it was not necessarily the case that 355 and 356 would even be in the same street, and certainly no expectation that they would be opposite or adjacent to each other. That is why P thought it such a coincidence.

I do not know how widespread this principle of house numbering is. Nor do I know how many other systems of house numbering there are in the countries of the world. But as English comes to be increasingly used in countries with hugely different cultural histories, I do know that this kind of cultural communicative misunderstanding is going to become increasingly frequent.

It takes a while for the speakers to realize that there is a problem. People readily sense when someone's *linguistic* knowledge is

imperfect, and may go out of their way to accommodate to the foreigner by speaking more slowly or by simplifying sentences. But they are not so good at *cultural* accommodation. There is too ready an assumption that foreigners will know what they are talking about. People always tend to underestimate the cultural knowledge of their non-native listeners and readers, whatever the language and whatever the setting. Because the words and phrases are so familiar and routine, people are usually not aware that they are using something which foreigners will not understand. They take things for granted.

For the most part this behaviour has no serious conversational consequence. If someone says in passing that they did some shopping in a certain part of town (e.g. "I took the bus into Islington this morning and bought this bag"), and I have no idea where that is, it would be conversationally absurd to interrupt the narrative to enquire exactly where Islington is, given that the speaker's intention is to focus on the bag. The location is of no consequence, and the speaker might have omitted this information without conversational loss. But it would be very different if the sentence had been "People don't go into X [part of town] in the evenings, as a rule; it can be a bit risky". If you have no idea where X is, then it would pay you to find out.

Occasionally, writers make the effort to explain local allusions. The writer of a short story about a Colombian carnival (Torrecilla, 2008) took the trouble to explain several of the unfamiliar words. Here is the opening few lines of his story:

- (11) Showers of cornstarch thrown by revellers flew in a warm wind of a Barranquilla carnival night while Anibal's music was heard in the distance. The party goers laughed at each other's powdered faces and drank greedily in anticipation of a night of partying and joy.

Just on a night like this a year ago, despite his age and against his doctor's and father Dominiqui's advice, Mingo was wildly dancing a Rasca rasca in a dim corner of a verbena on a carnival Saturday.

Footnotes explain where Barranquilla is (a city on Colombia's Caribbean coast) and who Anibal is (a popular carnival singer). We are also told that *Mingo* is a short form of *Domingo* (a first name meaning 'Sunday'), that *rasca rasca* is an onomatopoeic sound produced by a guacharaca (a scraping musical instrument played in accordion

songs, to which couples dance fast and close), and a *verbena* is a popular carnival location where people dance and drink.

But do these explanations go far enough, from a cultural point of view? Some uncertainties remain. For readers unfamiliar with US English, you would also need to know that *cornstarch* is the name of what British English would call *cornflour*. You might wonder why it is being thrown? And is it the cause of the powdered faces, or are they separately powdered? Not all readers will know what a *carnival* is, and even if they know the dictionary definition of the word, they may not know the cultural significance of it in a particular country, any more than Western Christians might not know the cultural significance of various Jewish or Islamic feasts. And is there any significance in the phrase *carnival Saturday*? Indeed there is, for Saturday is the beginning of the carnival period, which ends on Ash Wednesday, and is known for its outburst of musical energy, with all party-goers fresh and looking forward to the next few days.

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

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