

Reflections on TLC

by David Crystal

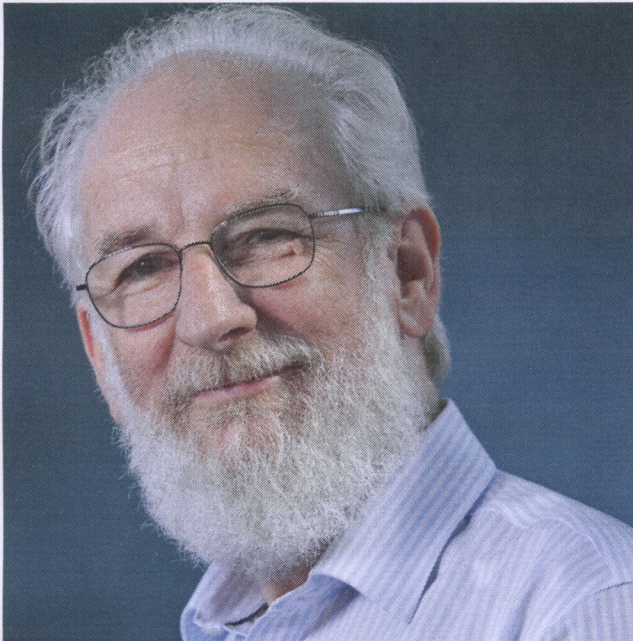


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The acronym of this timely new journal brings to my mind all kinds of topical associations, several culture-specific in character. When I was working in clinical linguistics, TLC meant 'total lung capacity'. When I encountered it in a sandwich bar in New York, it meant 'tomato, lettuce and cheese'. For Indiana Jones buffs it could only mean *The Last Crusade*, and for Harry Potter nerds – *The Leaky Cauldron*. In everyday speech, it means 'tender loving care': 'I need a bit of TLC', someone might say. Translate that into French, Swahili, Chinese...

Acronyms, and abbreviations in general, are one of the most noticeable indications of the way language and culture interact, and one of the most opaque areas of encounter in second language

learning. Some, such as BBC and CNN, are so common that it would never cross the mind of a native speaker that they might not be obvious to someone new to the language. But in every language I have tried to learn, I have been brought up short by everyday abbreviations dropped into a conversation without a second thought. Culture-specific language is like that. It is adventitious, unsystematic, unpredictable. And that makes it difficult to teach.

Cultural awareness is a tricky area because there is so much of it within a culture. How much? That is one of the questions TLC will surely investigate. When I was engaged in a multilingual online advertising project, a decade ago, the keywords that formed part of the online search, taken from a college-size English dictionary (about 100,000 in all), had to be translated into a dozen different languages. In most cases, the translators found a one-for-one correspondence, but there was always a significant number where there was no straightforward equivalent because of cultural contrasts. The closer the language relationship, it seemed, the fewer the differences, but even with languages as closely related historically as English and German, there were hundreds. In the case of English and Chinese there were thousands.

It is a tricky area to explore objectively, for there are cultural sensitivities to be respected, in such areas as gender, politics, and religion, and the history of this field is littered with unpremeditated offence. On more than one occasion, a dictionary has been banned in a particular part of the world

because its cultural definitions caused upset – *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* is one I recall, and Peter Gilliver reports another in his new book, *The Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. In the case of English, the problem is amplified by global diversity. Each ‘new English’ has its individual cultural history. When a language is adopted by a community, it is immediately adapted to meet the communicative needs of its culture, and hundreds of new words and expressions soon arise, along with pragmatic variations in such areas as politeness,

topic choices, and forms of address. It is a fascinating and neglected area of study, where the issues are only going to increase as time goes by, especially on the Internet, where not even anonymity manages to hide the expression of cultural mindsets.

There needs to be a rapprochement between linguistic, media, and cultural studies, and this new journal is the place where this can happen. From now on ‘I need TLC’ will have a different meaning.