

The next step: cultural usage guides

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Writing a paper for Ingrid has to begin with this story (forgive me if you have read my telling it before) because it took place in Leiden in February 2012, where I had been invited to give a lecture. Which part of Leiden, exactly? Read on.

The country was in the grip of exceptionally cold weather. The canals were frozen and people were skating on them. The previous time the canals had frozen over like this, it seems, was 1997. So it wasn't surprising that after the lecture the dinner-time talk - four Dutch colleagues, my wife and me, with a conversation entirely in English - at one point turned to the ice skating. Which bits of the ice were safe? Which weren't? Under the bridges was dangerous, evidently, for it was warmer there. Our knowledge of ice-skating was increasing by the minute. It was a lively and jocular chat, and the exceptional weather formed a major part of it. Then one of them said something that I didn't quite catch, and the four Dutch people suddenly became very downcast and there was a short silence. It was as if someone had mentioned a death in the family.

I had no idea how to react. Somebody commented about it being such a shame, about the - I now know how to spell it - *Elfstedentocht*. One of the four noticed my confused face. 'The 11-cities tour was cancelled', he explained, adding 'because of the ice'. Ah, so that was it, I thought. Some sort of cultural tourist event taking in 11 cities had been called off because the roads were too dangerous. I could understand that, as the roads were so slippery that I'd had to buy some special boots a few days earlier to keep myself upright. But why were my colleagues so upset about it? 'Were you going on it?' I asked. They all laughed. I had evidently made a joke, but I'd no idea why. 'Not at our age!' said one of them. I couldn't understand that answer, and didn't like to ask if it was a tour just for youngsters. Then I got even more confused, for someone said that it was the south that was the problem because the ice was too thin. But why was thin ice a problem? That would mean the travelling would be getting back to normal. I was rapidly losing track of this conversation, as the four Dutch debated the rights and wrongs of the cancellation. It might still be held...? No, it was impossible. It would all depend on the weather... And eventually the talk moved on to something else.

What I'd missed, of course, was the simplest of facts - and cultural linguistic differences often reduce to very simple points - which I discovered when I asked my host about it afterwards. I learned that *Elfstedentocht* firstly referred to a *race*, not a tour (*tocht* in Dutch has quite a wide range of uses) and moreover an *ice* race, along the canals between eleven cities in the northern province of Friesland. It is an intensive experience, only for the fittest and youngest - hence the irony of my remark. But the semantics of the word was only a part of it. The full cultural significance of the word I had still to learn. I discovered it later in the website of the *Global Post*.

It's hard to overestimate the grip that the Elfstedentocht has on the Dutch psyche. For sports fans in the Netherlands the epic 200-kilometer (125 mile) skating race is like the World Series, Super Bowl and Stanley Cup combined. Its mythical status is enhanced by the fact that it can only be held in exceptional winters when the canals are covered by 15 cm (6 inches) of ice along the length of the course. ... If the Elfstedentocht, or "11 cities tour," goes ahead, organizers expect up to 2 million spectators – one in eight of the Dutch population – could line the route. The race has only been held 15 times since the first in 1909, and winners become instant national heroes. The legendary 1963 contest was held in a raging blizzard. Just 136 finished out of 10,000 starters.

'It's hard to overestimate the grip that the Elfstedentocht has on the Dutch psyche.' A stronger cultural affirmation is difficult to imagine. The fact that it was an ice race was so obvious, to the Dutch people at the table, that they took it completely for granted, disregarding the fact that for me, coming from Wales, the significance of the thickness of ice on canals would totally escape me.

As a regular visitor to The Netherlands (one of my daughters lives in Amsterdam), I would appreciate an English usage guide to Dutch cultural allusions, so that I could anticipate topics of this kind. And the same point applies to any country, for allusions like this are going to turn up in everyday conversation in English wherever I go. When a country adopts English as a local alternative means of communication, it immediately starts using 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 stock of words and idioms which is unknown outside the country and its environs. And in everyday conversation, these turn up repeatedly. People 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. They then take all this knowledge for granted and allude to it partially or indirectly in conversation. They also begin to use it outside the context where it originated, as I'll illustrate below. Visitors who do not know the original context become increasingly confused.

Often a problem of cultural misunderstanding is never recognized. People readily sense when someone's *linguistic* knowledge is imperfect, and may go out of their way to accommodate to an outsider 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.

Conventional dictionaries don't help, because they won't include such localisms, especially if the expressions refer to local people, places, institutions, and suchlike. I know of one brave effort to incorporate cultural topics into a general dictionary: *The Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, which went through three editions before it ceased publication over a decade ago. It is not difficult to understand why. As English becomes increasingly global, covering the cultural allusions of all English-speaking countries would become an overwhelming task. It would also require a faster rate of updating than any commercial operation could

countenance. A change of government, for example, would bring new names, nicknames, and political issues, each of which might be dropped into a conversation at any time. To take a British example: a sentence such as *What will Basil do?* would have had little general significance in the UK (or EU) a couple of years ago. If somebody had used it in a conversation, listeners would have been within their rights to ask 'Who's Basil?' But as soon as Mr Johnson became prime minister, nobody who was aware of British culture would ever need to ask such a question. *Maggie* provides a similar example from the Thatcher political era. Every country has its Basils and Maggies, and even the most famous and long-serving eventually become a distant memory. It is not that we have forgotten who they are; it is that we would not recognize a casual allusion to them in an everyday conversation without spelling it out. *Winston* today means nothing without *Churchill*.

We need country-specific cultural usage guides that keep up-to-date with changing situations. It is the next step the genre needs to take, prompted primarily by the rapid growth of English as a global language. To cope with the geographical spread and the speed of change, these will need to be internet-based. And because the range of topics is so great - in principle, any aspect of human life can generate a cultural allusion - they would need to be wiki-like, crowd-sourced, though of course under editorial supervision and with clear guidelines. To illustrate the scope of such guides, I give below the results of a collection I made of potential cultural usage entries for British English, and an example of how they might be treated. They are all expressions I have heard in real conversations, whose meaning demands an understanding of the way a cultural allusion has been used metaphorically. That is a crucial point: a cultural usage guide is not an encyclopedia. Encyclopedic information is readily available in all sorts of places, and is infinite in scope. If I do not know what the Forth Bridge is, I do not need a linguistic usage guide to tell me: I will simply look up *Forth Bridge* in an encyclopedia or website. But something different happens when we hear someone say, while weeding a garden, 'I feel like I'm painting the Forth Bridge'. The speaker has taken the literal meaning of a cultural allusion and adapted it to express an analogous situation. The metaphor is based on the belief that the Forth Bridge is so big that when painters finish giving it a protective coat, they need to start again. It expresses the never-endingness of a task. Where can the EFL learner look this up - or for that matter, young native-speakers for whom it might equally be opaque?

I actually tested this last point recently when talking to a class of native-speaking 17-year-olds in a British school. The example I chose was of someone leaving an office and saying *It's like Clapham Junction in there!* To understand this, you have to know that Clapham Junction is a railway station in south London, said to be the most complicated of all British stations because of the number of platforms it has. People are always rushing about and getting lost. The speaker means 'It was chaos in there'. But none of the students recognized it or could explain it. I don't know how many of the following examples would be challenging to a younger generation. And conversely, given my age, the list below is missing the kind of cultural allusions which the youngsters would use, and which I would find opaque. Some of the examples also relate to old television catch-phrases, slogans, and programmes, and may no longer be in popular memory, though they would be frequent in any literature of an older period. A historical and sociolinguistic perspective for any cultural usage guide is going to be essential.

Such a guide could be organized either alphabetically or thematically, in the manner of a thesaurus. Here are some very general themes.

People

agony aunt; angry young man; Arthur Daley; Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells; Doubting Thomas; Hooray Henry

Places where something happens

Aintree; Blarney Stone; Bond Street; Clapham Junction; Colditz; Cook's tour; Forth Bridge; Glastonbury; Hyde Park; magical mystery tour; Mayfair; Park Lane; Petticoat Lane; Piccadilly Circus; Portobello Road; Savile Row; Soho; Spaghetti Junction; The Archers; The Tower; Timbuktu; Wembley; Wimbledon

TV, film, and radio names and catch phrases

action replay; and now for something completely different; boom boom; Carry On VERBING; Crimewatch; Eastenders; *ex-* usages [the parrot sketch from Monty Python]; Fawlty Towers; the good life; Hammer horror; hi-de-hi; I don't believe it; Mickey Mouse; nice to see you, to see you... nice; nudge-nudge, wink wink, say no more; pass [from Mastermind]; Pythonesque; Que?; Sir Humphrey; here's something I made earlier; Tardis-like; the full Monty; the man from Del Monte says yes; top of the pops; twenty questions; the Wombles; your starter for ten

Literary people and animals

Atlas; beauty and the beast; big bad wolf; Big Brother; Billy Bunter; Cheshire cat grin; Cinderella; Dennis the Menace; Desperate Dan; fairy godmother; good Samaritan; handsome prince; Hercules; patience of Job; Prince Charming; Sherlock; sleeping beauty; Tweedledum and Tweedledee

Literary titles, events, and catchphrases

cupboard is bare; elementary my dear Watson; feeding of the 5000; Guinness Book of Records; Holy Grail; Mills and Boon; 1984; open sesame; page three; thought police; Waiting for Godot; your nose is growing longer

Games and toys

a duck [from cricket]; Action Man; an all-rounder; Aunt Sally; deuce [from tennis]; Happy Families; lucky dip; pass the parcel; Queensbury rules; tally-ho; Trivial Pursuit

General activities

act of God; an MOT; Brownie points; Changing of the Guard; Custer's last stand; D-day; Dunkirk spirit; GBH; gone AWOL; he's behind you (Oh no he isn't...); King Canute; QED; the blitz; the riot act; you cannot be serious

General descriptions

all-singing, all-dancing; all things bright and beautiful; blue flag; Buckingham Palace; Chamber of Horrors; crown jewels; Cruft's; Heinz 57; Marie Celeste; out of the Ark; Pandora's Box; the holy of holies

There are 125 here, each of which I have heard used in a metaphorical way, and that is only the tip of the usage iceberg. They are moreover all 20th-century items; earlier centuries would require their own lists. In many such cases the work has been done, though not presented in the form of a usage guide. A cultural usage guide to Shakespeare, for example, would be based on a compilation of all the explanatory

notes in the editions of his plays and poems. The donkey-work has been done in his case. But some periods have very little material. It is very difficult to work out the meaning of items corresponding to the above in, say, the issues of Victorian magazines, as I recently had to do for a forthcoming book, *That's the Ticket for Soup: Victorian views on vocabulary as told in the pages of Punch* (Oxford: Bodleian Publishing, 2020). Someone might allude to 'Cremorne' in a suggestive tone. To make sense of this, you have to know that Cremorne Gardens was a hugely popular leisure park in Chelsea, laid out in the grounds of Viscount Cremorne's London house. It opened in the 1840s with numerous attractions. The 'fast set' would have been there in force, and before long it developed something of a bad name. It lost its licence and closed in 1877.

How might one handle cultural linguistic material? A usage guide might restrict itself to succinct definitions, but without illustration these would mean very little, especially to people learning a second language. Alternatively, one could present the information in the form of a short exchange followed by a prose explanation and several usage examples; or in the form of a dialogue, which would introduce a range of associated vocabulary. I illustrate the first procedure in the Appendix below. A glossary of any difficult words could also be added, as any description has to take into account the needs of non-native speakers - and we are **all** non-native speakers of a cultural dialect other than the one(s) we have been brought up in. I am not a native-speaker of American cultural English, and still find it necessary to ask for explanations when I see a US expression (such as from baseball) being used metaphorically in a newspaper headline or at a conference. In 1992, David Grote compiled a book called *British English for American Readers* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press), which covers some of the topics in my list. I need a book called *American English for British Readers* - and another called *Dutch English for British Readers*, and so on for all countries, and perhaps also for regions within countries. Actually, *Dutch English for Everyone* would suffice, as I don't suppose the needs of British and American (and other) users would differ very much. But you can sense the scale of the enterprise nonetheless.

This is doubtless well beyond the capacity of a traditional book publisher, but it is well within the capacity of the internet, once the appropriate organizational structure is in place. It would need an international team, perhaps housed within an institution that already has many country links, such as the British Council, a university, a dictionary company, or a worldwide teaching organization such as IATEFL. There are several groups of professionals who are already very familiar with the issues involved, such as translators and interpreters, lexicographers, the publishers of travel and culinary guides, and those who organize citizenship tests for migrants. Small-scale cultural lexicons (such as the Dutch *cultureel woordenboek*) already exist. Language-teaching programmes, both first-language and second-language, often have a cultural element these days. The editor-in-chief could come from almost any background. It would have to be someone who is not scared by Big Data.

Such a project would start small. My experience of discussing local cultural expressions in workshops around the world is that a collection of over a hundred can be built up in just a few hours. It would then grow rapidly. The Urban Dictionary (<www.urbandictionary.com>) shows just how quickly a crowd-sourced lexical project can be created and managed - and how large it can become. My list is for just one culture, British English. A similar list could be compiled for any culture where English is routinely used - which these days means all countries. There is no difference any longer between countries which use English as first, second, or foreign

language. The distinction between native and non-native disappears. I can get linguistically lost in the USA or New Zealand just as easily as can any non-native speaker. As soon as there is a conversation in English, regardless of the fluency of the speakers, cultural usages will arise and assumptions of mutual understanding will be made which - as in the Dutch example with which I began - can fail. I was fortunate in that case, for my confusion did not last long. I had the best tutor to explain what was happening, as the conversation took place in Ingrid's dining room.