

On the Vagaries of American English

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Being an English teacher is a thankless task. No matter how much we teach students, even if they learn it all, it is never enough. New vocabulary is added to the English language every day, while familiar words acquire additional meanings. We teach the grammatical rules of a standard language, but native speakers can speak in non-standard ways. We teach General American English, but the students may meet someone with a strong regional accent. We can do our best, but students also have to learn to accept incomplete knowledge of a language as a fact of life even for native speakers. At most we can show students how the language can differ and offer them strategies to cope, such as asking the meaning of an unknown word.

A teacher's best friend is often his/her textbook. We depend on the textbook writer to tell us what to teach at what time and to develop the exercises and classroom activities for us, and we depend upon the Ministry of Education officials and our school principals to set the requirements and choose the most effective textbooks. At the primary and secondary level especially, we are simply too busy to contribute more than some supplementary activities to the lessons in the book. Even at the tertiary level, few people write or create all their own materials, though they may gather and use more supplemental materials beyond a textbook. But even the best textbooks cannot contain everything about the English language; they can only cover areas of the language students are most likely to encounter. Rarely can they cater to special interests, although there are materials for English for Special Purposes (ESP). Even these, such as English for business, cannot cover everything. Whether students go abroad or remain in Taiwan, they are likely to encounter differences, vocabulary in particular, that their English teachers never taught them.

In this paper I will present a brief survey of some of the ways that English can “trick” our students. I will concentrate on American English here because this is the

variety taught in Taiwan; students may encounter those speaking other varieties of English from around the world. However, the strategies for coping would, in general, be the same. We will look first at how words are added to language through new words and extensions of meaning, level of formality, and idioms. We conclude with a few examples of nonstandard pronunciation and grammar.

New Concepts, New Words

Why does English vocabulary seem so hard for many students? For one thing, English is said to have about three times more words than other modern European languages (Baugh & Cable, 1978). Therefore, unlike in Chinese, English has so many synonyms, each one with its particular shade of meaning. The basic vocabulary is from Germanic, as English is a Germanic language, a cousin of Modern German and brother or sister of Modern Dutch. But, as a result of its history, English has borrowed from the Scandinavian languages (the Viking Age) and French (after the Norman Conquest). Baugh and Cable claim that as many as 10,000 words entered English between 1066 and 1500, and about three-quarters of the words remain. English has used Latin as a source all through its history, especially for more abstract terms, and Greek has been the basis for much scientific terminology. Other words from all over the world have become English words, among them in recent decades: **apartheid** (Afrikaans, South Africa) and **tsunami** (Japanese). So it is no wonder students are frustrated with English vocabulary and feel they can never learn enough words.

Why do languages need new vocabulary? Generally speaking, we humans need to give everything a name. When explorers went to new lands and found new plants and animals and geographical features, they had to give them a name. Often they took the word the local people used and changed it to fit their own language. This is how we get words like **guava** and **banana** and **kangaroo**. Or they may meet new cultural artifacts, as when the English met the American Indian **wigwam** and **papoose**.

Cultural and social events may also engender a need for new words to describe new concepts. The Christianization of England brought in hundreds of words from Latin, both for concrete (e.g., **candle**) and abstract (e.g., **creed**) nouns and verbs such as **pray**, as well as the formation of new words on native Germanic roots (e.g., **gospel**, **Easter**, **Holy Ghost**). During the Renaissance, English borrowed Italian words for aspects of art, architecture and music. More recently, wars and conflict have caused

English to borrow words (e.g., **burqa/burkha**, an outer garment worn by Muslim women to cover the body completely) or make new words from native sources, (e.g., **ethnic cleansing**).

Peaks of technology also engender the growth of vocabulary, and we are in one now with the computer and digital age. While **digit**, meaning a number, has been around for some time, the adjective **digital** has just come into general use in the past few years with digital cameras and the like. Technology has given us many new words: **wi-fi**, **sim card**, **YouTube**. Notice that when new names are created, the ordinary spaces between words may be eliminated: **PowerPoint**, **FrontPage**, as well as **YouTube**. Even more interesting is that we can even change the category of a word: first we had the company **Google**, and now we can use the verb **to google**, meaning to use Google to search for a person or thing.

Additional Meanings

In the area of technology, in addition to new words, old words are given new meanings. Words like **cell** and **mobile** have been in English with other meanings (e.g., **skin cell**, **prison cell**, **upwardly mobile**) for a long time, but now they also refer to phones. Words like **windows** and **mouse** have become more common in their computer contexts than in their household contexts.

Imagine this situation. You have just arrived in the USA and are having a great time with your host family. The mother asks you to stop off on your way home to pick up two pounds of **hamburger**. Where would you go to complete this errand? Would you go to McDonalds or to a supermarket? While **hamburgers** are usually interpreted as sandwiches—meat with bread; to many housewives hamburgers mean just the cooked meat patties, and this is why supermarkets also sell hamburger buns—the bread that goes around a hamburger. **Hamburger** as a mass noun, as in two pounds of hamburger, refers to ground (in some varieties minced) beef. Ground beef is most often used to make hamburgers, but it is also a major ingredient in many other dishes like chili and Spanish rice.

This is perhaps the most frustrating area for students: they know the basic meanings of words, but then they encounter a new meaning. At the recent 2007 meeting of the English Teachers Association of the Republic of China, Professor Michael Hoey gave over twenty examples of different meanings of the word **dry** in his workshop *Word Meanings and Word Definition – A New Approach*. Among these were

dry wine, dry toast, dry wit, dry dock, and the idiom **cut and dried**; he pointed out that none of these expressions carries the meaning of the opposite of wet. It is no wonder our students are frustrated.

Jargon—Examples of Household Items

Can you identify these kitchen tools? **Colander, Strainer, Sifter, Spatula, Wisk**. Match the words with the food with which they are most usually associated.

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| Colander | a. cake batter |
| Strainer | b. noodles |
| Spatula | c. adding flour to dough or batter |
| Wisk | d. adding flour or corn starch to hot liquid |
| Sifter | e. lemons or oranges to make juice |

Another question arises from the simple descriptions above: what is the difference between **dough** and **batter**? Dough is the soft mixture of bread before it is baked; it can be worked with the hands and must be **kneaded** with the hands (or a bread machine) as part of the preparation process. Dough is made up of primarily flour, yeast, and water, with additional ingredients added (salt, sugar, milk, seeds, etc.) for variation in flavour. Batter is the soft mixture of cake, most cookies, and other similar pastries before it is baked; it is too wet to be handled with the hands, so it is mixed with a spoon or spatula. So dough will become breadlike, while batter will become cakelike. Or what is the difference between a **spice** and an **herb**? In the cooking world, spices are brown and include seeds (e.g., caraway, coriander), roots (e.g., ginger, turmeric), and even bark (e.g., cinnamon). Herbs are green and include stems and leaves (e.g., chives, parsley, rosemary, basil). Some plants, such as coriander and dill, give us both their seeds and their leaves. Yet despite these distinctions, most ordinary people designate both herbs and spices as spices.

All of these terms are specific to cooking and the kitchen. How do we learn these words? Are we taught these in school? No, we learn in context. Girls learn from their mothers. Similarly, boys, at least in the countryside, learn about various tools, how to use the tools, and the proper vocabulary for those tools and processes they perform: **plunger, wrench, screw driver, pliers, and wheelbarrow**. What about a **snake**? It's not the animal but, like the live snake, this tool can be wound through drainpipes that twist and turn to locate and break up blockage. We learn these words in the old apprentice way—we watch and observe. Eventually, we may

be given some simple task and, if we show promise and have interest, we may become masters. The situation is similar in a foreign language. If one goes to France to study cooking, one works in the kitchen and hears the French of the kitchen. For the rest of us, specialized ELT dictionaries, often with pictures, can teach us basic vocabulary for various household items. Men can discuss their cars and learn the specialized vocabulary in context.

All languages have jargon specific to certain contexts. We English teachers talk about **communicative competence, task-based instruction, the affective filter, i + 1**, and so on. Most of us are not familiar with specialized vocabulary outside our own professions and interests even in our first language, though we may pick up that of other fields through spouses and friends—or editing scientific English and teaching ESP. We expand our vocabulary into these fields when we need it, and even just a basic foundation in a language allows us to add and use new vocabulary.

Acronyms

The English language is full of acronyms, with more coming in every day. In Taiwan even those with minimal English know **USA, IBM, MIT, and TSMC**. If they have an interest in politics or business, they may belong to the **KMT** or **DPP** and have discussions on the **WTO, UN, and WHO**, and may even aspire to own a **BMW**. If they have cable **TV**, Papa may watch an **NBA** game on **ESPN** while Junior watches **CSI** on **AXN** and other members of the family watch **HBO** or **MTV**, and if all that is boring, they can watch a **DVD**. Computer users worry about the cost of **ADSL** and whether they have enough **CPU**, and teachers worry about the latest decision of the **MOE** while their students have sleepless nights over the **TOEFL**. I once saw a primary school English teacher give a lesson in the English alphabet to beginners using these familiar acronyms.

Every country and even region has their own uses for acronyms, and sometimes there is more than one meaning. What is a **CD**? If you listen to music, it is a compact disk, but if you are an investor, it is a certificate of deposit. As with jargon, each profession or area of interest has its acronyms. We may know what the **IAEA** (International Atomic Energy Agency) does, but we probably do not know that many of the general guidelines it follows were formulated by **IRPA** (the International Radiation Protection Association), and that when they build new facilities, in order to minimize the potential danger to the public, they calculate radiation dose rates follow-

ing the **ALARA** principle (as low as reasonably achievable). And as with jargon, you learn it if and when you need it.

Food Words from Immigrant Groups

What kind of cheese goes on pizza? What kind goes on pasta dishes (spaghetti)? What's the difference among these kinds of pasta: **spaghetti, fettucini, macaroni, and rotini**? Here is another case of learn it when you need it. You go to the market or a restaurant, see something new, try it and find out. Italian food has been popular in the USA, so many food terms are used, such as words for many kinds of cheeses, pasta, salami—and coffee. Thanks to the marketing of Starbucks and their competitors, terms like **espresso, capuccino, and latte** have spread around the world. And we all know **pizza** and **lasagne**.

Often food words are also regional. For example, in the US South one is more likely to find various sorts of Mexican food on offer, as well as more Spanish words for all sorts of things. The greater the number of people who speak a language in a region, the more likely their words will come into more general use. Yet Mexican restaurants (many not all that authentic) can be found all over the US, and virtually all Americans know what **burritos, tacos, nachos, and enchiladas** are.

In the part of Pennsylvania where I'm from, everyone is familiar with **halupkies** (from holubky—ground beef/pork with rice and spices wrapped in cabbage leaves and steamed in tomato sauce) and **pierogies** (from pirohy—process similar to making Chinese dumplings but filled most often with mashed potatoes or grated cabbage and subsequently heated with butter and fried onions) and may even look forward to Friday pierogi/pirohy sales at the local church. In other regions of the USA as well as in other parts of the world, one would find different combinations of foods, both indigenous and from immigrant groups.

Euphemism and Level of Formality

All languages can express ranges of formality. In Chinese, saying 去洗手間 is more polite than saying 上廁所. English has a **rest room** where one doesn't rest, a **bathroom** where one does not always take a bath, and the more direct but slightly less polite **toilet**, which can also refer to the fixture itself. There are additional terms appropriate for medical usage; to the doctor one talks about **urinating** and **moving**

one's bowels. With children, it's **make** or **go pee pee** or **poo poo /kaka**. Sometimes more roundabout ways are found to avoid causing offense. A man might say he's **going to see a man about a dog**, whereas a woman might say she's **going to check her make-up**.

Of course, English has more vulgar ways of saying this, such as **going to take a piss/shit**, but this would fall into the range of taboo words, words one should not say in public. All languages have their taboo words. For English one must be careful with words for sexual activities, toilet activities, and aspects of religion. Therefore, the most vulgar words in the language, those used for cursing, or swearing oaths in the case of religion, come from these three areas. An angry person shouting "**Jesus Christ!**" may offend many believers. On the other hand, euphemisms are also created to avoid causing offence.

Death is another area which, though not actually being taboo, often requires politeness to grieving relatives. Ordinarily, we might mention that someone **died**, but in newspaper obituaries we read that Mrs. Smith **passed away** and is referred to as **the deceased**. Instead of **bury**, we may read "**laid to rest**." **Coffin**, a simple box, is replaced by **casket**, a more elegant and more expensive box. At the same time, people, perhaps seemingly mocking death, have made up all sorts of idioms for to die (e.g., **kick the bucket**, **bite the dust**) or be dead (e.g., **pushing up daisies**, **six feet under**).

Idiomatic Expressions

Idiomatic expressions have, of course, more uses than just euphemism. Some may be proverbs or famous quotations: **Let sleeping dogs lie; A fool and his money are soon parted**. There are so many possibilities and so many books explaining idioms already written. These expressions are also among the most creative and even amusing aspects of a language.

In English there are a number of expressions to describe someone who is not particularly bright. At the beginning of the first Shrek movie, there is a song, and within the song we hear **ain't the brightest light on the Christmas tree**, **ain't the sharpest knife in the drawer**. Both bright and sharp can mean intelligent, and the idioms work on the double meanings. Other idioms refer to something lacking: **two sandwiches short of a picnic; nobody home upstairs**. A crazy person might be described as **nuts, not all there, got a screw loose**. There are also some very colorful

expressions to describe someone who is drunk: **three sheets to the wind, tied one on, got a snoot full.**

Variation in Pronunciation

One difficulty our students in Taiwan have is with understanding spoken English language. Students learn how to pronounce individual words but have little practice listening to how ordinary people—not the careful speakers making ELT materials—elide their speech in ordinary conversation. This often happens with auxiliary words, which are often contracted even in more careful speech.

dincha ‘didn't you’ *Dincha ever hear that one before?*

hafta ‘have to’ *I hafta get up town ta play da number before 7 o'clock!*

We also hear **amina** ‘I am going to’; **kupola** ‘a couple of’; and even some more idiosyncratic elisions like **gradz** ‘garage’.

Many speakers of English who use nonstandard varieties may not pronounce “th” but instead use “t” and “d” and in **I tink so, dis an' dat**. Final consonants or consonant clusters may be eliminated or reduced, fast becoming **fas'**.

Regional accents can, of course, cause difficulties, especially if the person's accent is rather strong. Most educated speakers switch their regional accent to something closer to Standard English when speaking to people from outside their region or when speaking in contexts where their regional accent would be less appropriate. This means that our students are more likely to encounter speakers who speak in a more standard way, but there are always exceptions. An exchange student may hear more Standard English from his teachers but hear something incomprehensible from cafeteria staff.

Stress and intonation can also contribute to comprehension problems. In the American South, for example, in the word **police** stress may be put on the first syllable. We are taught that the tone of a declarative sentence should drop at the end, and yet the feature of rising intonation continues to spread. In some areas, pitch range is narrower, giving an almost monotone effect, while in other areas pitch range is broader and sounds more musical.

Non-standard Grammar

While we so not want to teach students to use nonstandard grammar, they will encounter it and should recognize it. Some common nonstandard features include the

use of the participial form for the past tense, as in **I seen it; He done it;** and the use of double negatives: **I don't want none.**

What is the plural form of you?

- a. You
- b. Yuns
- c. Youz
- d. Y'all
- e. You lot

It should be remembered that not all use of nonstandard grammar is a mistake or a mark of an uneducated speaker. A wise salesman speaks like his customers, like “one of us”. Standard language is not always appropriate when one is with classmates or family. However, if one speaks only a nonstandard variety, he may have trouble communicating outside his groups of nonstandard speakers.

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