

## A context for business English

### Written by:

Frances Gordon and Suzan St Maur  
June 2005

This article discusses these four issues:

1. English has become a **lingua franca**, a common language used between people who speak different languages.
2. English is – and has always been – in a state of change. **New varieties (or types) of English** have developed and continue to develop.
3. To make your writing understandable to lots of different kinds of people, you need to use a **standard form of written English**.
4. Problem is, it's often difficult to define what the standard is. There are two points to note: first, issues around metaphors and culturally-specific references. And second, issues around **Commonwealth English and US English** (not to mention South African English!).

Note: This article is very short and many important ideas are summarized and perhaps even over-simplified. If you are interested in learning more about the theory of the English language, please go to the end of the chapter where you'll find our suggestions for further reading.

# 1 English as a global lingua franca

Did you know?

- About 400 million people speak English as a first language (or native language).
- About 600 million people speak English as a second language.
- English is widely used in about 100 countries.

English is on the rise: every year the numbers of English speakers go up and more and more people learn it as part of their schooling.

Of course, no-one can predict what will happen to a language. If you told a Roman that Latin would one day hardly ever be used, they would have thought you were crazy!

However, the use of English does not seem to be slowing down. In fact, it's just the opposite: a recent report<sup>1</sup> from the British council shows that within 10 years, about three billion people (half the world population) will speak at least some English.

## English bridges linguistic divides

Thanks to technologies like the Internet, the world has become a smaller place. These days, we can use the World Wide Web to read information from all over the world, 24 hours a day. We can work with people in different countries, without spending much money – or much time – on travel.

Most of us are quite often in situations where we are speaking to people from different cultural and linguistic groups. This happens if one works in multinational businesses, in organizations like the UN, or even in everyday life – as populations grow increasingly diverse.

Business has certainly changed, and so has the language we use for it. Because English is so widely spoken, and because it is often seen as a prestigious language, it is used increasingly often as a lingua franca (or 'common language') between people who have different home languages.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Power, C, page 41

## 2 English has always been in a state of change

### *A whirlwind history of the language*

Now we know that English is a lingua franca, let's look at what else makes English different to nearly any other language. To understand this, it helps to have a quick look at how English developed. There are two things that will become clear as you read about the history of English:

1. The fact that English has a bigger vocabulary than any other language on earth is no coincidence. Throughout its history, the English language has taken<sup>2</sup> extra words from all the languages it has come into contact with. Sometimes, it takes on extra words without getting rid of the word it had before. This has led to the situation where we have more than one word for the same idea.
2. In the last two or three hundred years, mostly due to colonialism, many different varieties (or types) of English have developed around the world.

### **The origins**

The origins of what we know call English come from around the fifth century, when a group of Germanic tribes arrived in the British Isles. The word, *English*, came from one of these tribes, the Angles. The Angles came from a place called Engle, and their language was called *Englisc*.

Although these people were Germanic, they brought many Latin words to English because of their contact with the Romans. These included many words for everyday objects, for example, *anchor*, *butter*, *table* and *wine*. Later, in the sixth and seventh centuries, more Latin words were added by early Christian missionaries. These words were mostly about religion, for example, *priest*, *pope*, *mass* and even *school*.

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<sup>2</sup> Linguists call this phenomenon 'borrowing' but I prefer 'taken' – it's not like English gives the words back when it's finished with them!

## Early influences

### The Scandinavians

In the ninth century, the Vikings from Scandinavia arrived in the British Isles. With them, came a huge number of new words. For example:

The English already had these words:	But decided to take these extra ones from the Norse:
wrath	anger
from	fro (which still exists in the expression "to and fro")
sick	ill

### The French

The next big increase in vocabulary came from the French language spoken by the Norman aristocracy (who arrived in the British Isles after 1066). The Normans brought many words relating to the ruling classes and to the business of government, for example, *city*, *conservative*, *empire*, *executive*, *marriage* and *senator*.

Again, some concepts already had words in English – and so just like with the Scandinavians, English ended up with two words meaning more-or-less the same thing. For example:

The English already had these words:	But decided to take these extra ones from the French:
shut	close
answer	reply
wish	desire
novel	new

At this time, the English peasant class worked for the French aristocracy. This is why the French words are a little more formal and "fancy" than the English ones. While the original English words are *cow* and *sheep*, the English peasants needed fancier words to reflect the food that was to become of them, so French words were taken to form the words *beef* and *veal*.

### **Standardization and streamlining**

In the 1300s, English once again became the politically-dominant language in Britain. The language variety spoken in London became what we now call 'Modern English'. When the printing press was invented in the 15th century, the English language became more standardized.

Around this time, English grammar changed. As Alex Games points out in the very entertaining 'Balderdash and Piffle', the language was streamlined as it lost the inflections (verb or noun endings).

Games says that 'spellings were... liberated, and free to be used in more creative ways'. She gives the example of the word, 'work'. We can *work* hard, do hard *work*, or indulge in *work*-related behaviour – and we don't need any special ending to show that 'work' is a verb, then a noun, then an adjective.

These days, many people point fingers at those who like to 'verb' nouns – something cannot *impact*, strictly speaking *impact* can only be a verb. One wonders if the same pedants complained about the people who first 'verbed' these nouns<sup>3</sup>:

- To arm (1205)
- To shoulder (c. 1300)
- To thumb (1593)

### **Continuous influences**

English continued to change. With the renaissance in Europe, many words were taken from classical languages, such as Latin and Greek. These words were often used for new concepts in the fields of administration, science and technology.

This variety of influences continued throughout the Industrial Age in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

One of the most important developments was the 1755 publication of Dr Johnson's Dictionary – a work that he completed almost single-handedly in seven years.

Dictionary-making, attempts to *describe* English words that are used (and *prescribe* the way they *should* be used) continues right up to today.

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<sup>3</sup> Games 2006, page 55

## **The effects of colonialism**

### **The American influence**

In the early 1600s, the first English-speaking colony was formed in North America. The colonialists were separated from the English – it was a long journey between the continents – and so the English spoken in the UK and that in the US began to grow apart.

Americans gave English many of its words, for example, *hangover*, *teenager* and *joyride*.

### **The African, Asian and Oceanic (Australian and New Zealand) influence**

British colonialism moved into Africa, Asia, and Australia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During the time of colonialism, English started becoming a very diverse language – as it changed according to where it was used.

English used by the colonialists who settled in new places changed in response to new experiences as well as influences from new people. But English changed the most when it was forced onto speakers of other languages. In fact, some of the varieties of English become quite different to standard Commonwealth English (for example, Singlish in Singapore, and Hinglish in India).

## ***What makes English?***

The table below shows just a few examples from the many languages that English has taken words from:

Afrikaans	apartheid, commando, springbok
Arabic	algorithm, admiral, zero, sofa, giraffe
Balti	polo
Cantonese	lychee, wok
Czech	pistol
Dutch	landscape, dyke
Egyptian	ebony, ivory
Ewe	voodoo
French	A huge number of words, some of the more obvious ones: hors d'oeuvres, a la carte, and faux pas.
German	Some obvious ones: kindergarden, Nazi. And some less obvious ones: hamburger, dollar
Greek	academy, theory, chorus
Hindi	bangle, cot, sari
Hungarian	biro, paprika
Japanese	Judo, karate, sushi
Congo	gorilla, bongo (drums)
Malay	sarong, gong, amok
Romania	dracula
Russia	bistro, soviet, tsar, vodka
Tamil	anaconda, mango, curry
Turkish	bridge (the card game), tulip, yoghurt
Zulu	impala, mamba

### 3 The world needs a standard form of English

From our quick tour of its history, we have seen that English has always been a language that changes and grows with the times.

Writers, editors, politicians and business people have all noted the need to write clearly so that your writing can be understood by everyone. And these days that means EVERYONE.

Because the world is a global place, we can no longer rest assured that the type of English we use will be understandable to all our readers. Business English is a part of what linguists call International English or Global Standard English. This is the English that works best when communicating with people from different cultures and different language groups.

<b>Some examples of different varieties of English</b>
<i>There is nothing 'incorrect' about these examples. None would sound out of place when they were originally spoken or written. But how many are you comfortable with?</i>
"I have hazaar things on my mind right now." [I have thousands of things on my mind right now.] <i>Hinglish (source: Wikipedia)</i>
Is she coming with? Ja she's coming just now. She's by the robots. [Yes, in a few minutes. She is at the traffic lights] Sharp, ma' bru [OK, fine] <i>Varieties of South African English</i>
What I'm gon say? she ast. Say you living with Sofia husband and her husband say Sofia not being punish enough. <i>Black American English, sourced from The Color Purple, Alice Walker 1983</i>
Why is my neighebores wyf so gay? She is honoured overal ther she gooth <i>Modern English, sourced from Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, England 1300s</i>
If a man want something, and he want it really bad, he does get it, but when he get it he don't like it. <i>Trinidad in the 1930s, sourced from Miguel Street, VS Naipaul</i>
Dis country weather very hot, one. [In this country, the weather is very warm.] <i>Singlish (source: Wikipedia)</i>
Get tu mach turis naudeiz. [There are too many tourists nowadays.] <i>Hawaiian English (example from www2.hawaii.edu)</i>
Cowld the day, mar. [It's cold today.] <i>Georgie: Dialect spoken in Newcastle, England (example from www.une.edu.au/langnet/geordie.htm)</i>

## 4 Issues around standard English

### *Metaphors and cultural references*

Here is a short excerpt in English which contains a whole lot of metaphors. It was translated into Afrikaans, and then the Afrikaans version was translated into Zulu. Finally, the Zulu version was translated back into English. Of course this translation exaggerates the problems – but we should always take into account how easily speakers of other languages can understand what we write.

#### The original English version:

Some career advice: Let sleeping dogs lie and keep your nose to the grindstone. Don't drag your feet or beat around the bush, and don't rub your colleagues the wrong way. If you hang around and shoot the breeze, you might only make your deadline by the skin of your teeth.

#### Here's what happens when somebody who does not understand the metaphors translates it into Afrikaans:

Party loopbaan advies: Laat slapende honde lê en hou jou neus tot die skuursteen. Moenie sleep jou voete of slaan om die bos, en moenie vryf jou kollegas die verkeerde manier. As jy hang rond en skiet die briesie, jy miskien net maak jou doodlyn by die vel van jou tande.

#### ...And now a literal translation is given into Zulu, another South African language:

Eminyane umsebenzi iseluleko: Vumela ukulala izinja zilale bese ufaka lakho ikhala etsheni lokugaya. Ungalohothi udonse izinyawo zakho noma ushaye eduze kwehlathi, futhi ungahhhudluzi ozakwenu ngendlela embi. Uma ulenga eduze udubula umsinga, ungazenzela kuphela umugqa wokufa ngesikhumba samazinyo akho.

#### Now if we translate it back into English, this is what we get. You'll notice that it's a completely different message – and one that doesn't make any sense at all!

Other job advises: Allow dogs to sleep and then put them inside there. Do not move slowly, or leave it near the grass and also do not be rough, go gentle. Do not move aggressively next to your in-laws when your penis. Do not make your own line to die skin for your teeth.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Creative Mix, Systems Publishing, December 2003

## ***Differences between US and Commonwealth English***

As we have seen, there are many types of English used around the world – however, there are two varieties that are most commonly used in the business world: US English and Commonwealth English.

We have already seen that US English developed slightly differently to the English used in the UK. Although an English person can easily communicate with a speaker of US English, there are some differences in accent, in grammar and punctuation, and in spelling. Here are some examples of vocabulary differences:

<b>US English</b>	<b>Commonwealth English</b>
Gas	Petrol
Postman	Mailman
Closet	Wardrobe
Apartment	Flat
Elevators	Lift

These vocabulary differences can lead to a lot of embarrassment. For example, while Americans may talk about *pants* meaning trousers, for UK-English speakers, *pants* is used for underwear, or as a slang word to describe something that is unpleasant or of poor quality. And if an English person asks for a *rubber* to erase some pencil marks, an American will think he or she is asking for a condom!

Well, unfortunately, there is no consensus over which of these conventions we should use for global business. Although the differences between these types of English are subtle, they do exist – and writers must make a conscious decision on which conventions to use. In some cases this is easy:

Obviously US English is used... everywhere in the US, from government to business, from the media to education. It is also used to a varying degree in:

- much of Eastern Europe
- Russia
- Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines
- South America
- in some countries in Africa.

Besides in the UK, Commonwealth English is used in many countries which Britain colonized. Places that use Commonwealth English include:

- much of Africa
- Indian, Pakistan, Malta
- Australia and New Zealand
- some of South East Asia
- Hong Kong
- Canada (although sometimes US English is also used).

Commonwealth English is also used by many organisations like the European Union, the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation.

### **Where does South Africa fit in?**

Traditionally South Africa has used Commonwealth English, reflecting the country's history of colonisation. However, like most places around the world, we are increasingly turning to the conventions of US English. In many cases, it is becoming very difficult to know what is 'correct' business English in South Africa. In my work as a business writer here, I have learnt to follow the conventions of the company or the organization (organisation?), because the jury is certainly still out on which conventions we should be using.

## 5 To summarise:

English is used in many countries around the world. There are more second language speakers of English than first language speakers. There are many varieties of English spoken around the world.

Although it is important to recognise that there is no 'correct' variety of English, we do need to use a standard form when communicating for business, especially in an international setting.

Unfortunately, using a standard form of English gets a little more complicated because there are still some differences between US and Commonwealth conventions. And in South Africa we have an added issue – although we have traditionally followed Commonwealth conventions, we (together with the rest of the world) are moving closer to American English. Of course, there is also a South African dictionary – which suggests that we may have our very own written conventions.

As a business writer, you need to make a conscious decision about what variety of English best suits the needs of your audience and your subject matter.

## 6 References and further reading

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