Editing across borders: state, national, professional

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About the author

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Introduction

This paper explores ways in which the English language, especially its vocabulary, varies across several types of border, more and less visible.

Border-crossings often challenge us to rethink the choices of words, where language—even the English language—is differently used on the other side. Coming to Perth from the East Coast, I was intrigued to find that blowie is used to refer to the poisonous 'blowfish' found in WA, not just the Australia-wide blowfly. It's a trap for unwary easterners—and something to be mediated or explained, just like the WA use of the adjective heavy to refer to land whose soil supports large vegetation, as opposed to scrub country. On one side of the border, the word makes good sense to its readers, on the other it's hardly understood on first encounter. What editors do with such words depends of course on where the intended readership of the text is located, and whether the writer or publisher has ambitions to sell the text on both sides of the border. Finding the appropriate word, in terms of the geographical readership, or the intended professional or specialist community it speaks to, is among the provisions of the newly revised Australian Standards for Editorial Practice (sections D4 and D5).

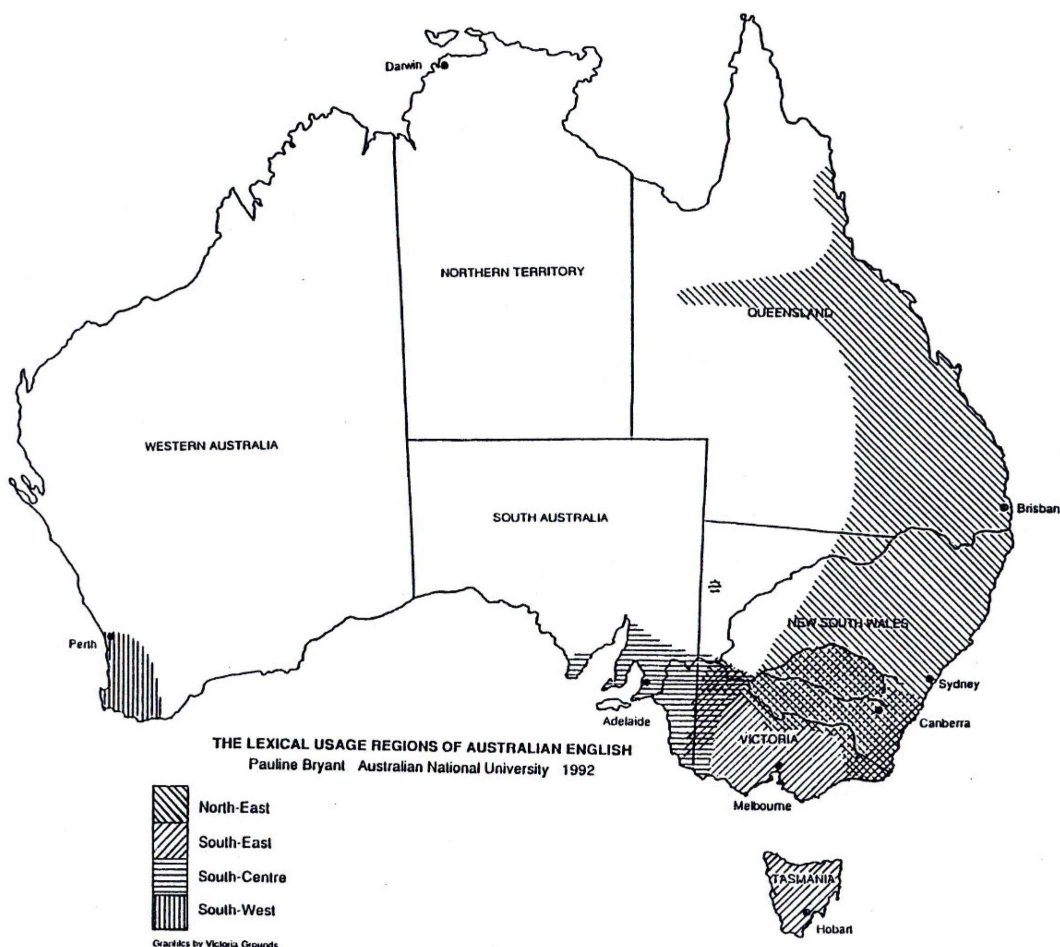
Choices, choices

Research on the different words and expressions used from one Australian state to another has begun to turn up remarkably diverse inventories. Pauline Bryant (1991:291) found 97 different words for swimming costume, including some more or less established regional choices: *bathers* (across the south of the continent) and *swimmers* (up and down the east coast). The Australian Word Map project, a joint initiative of the ABC and Macquarie Dictionary, unearthed countless more outrageous examples, as well as the surprising fact that examples such as *budgie smugglers* and *lolly baggers* seem to be known all across the country from Sydney to Perth, and are not confined to any state or regional corner. This doesn't of course mean that the latter are the better choices of words when you're editing a text for readers all across Australia, but it underscores the issue of choices to be made. Bryant (1991:294-5) found with other everyday things, that the Australia-wide terms were the standard English words like *frankfurt(er)* and to a lesser extent *saveloys*, whereas the local state words were often the colloquial alternatives, such as *cheerios* in Queensland, and *little boys* in south-eastern and south-western Australia.

With these different layers of terminology (more and less standard) for the same things, mapping the regional alternatives is far from simple, and in fact few of the state variants stopped neatly at the border. One outstanding exception is the set of terms for different sizes of beer glass, which differ from state to state with some confusing overlaps. For example, the pot is a 285 ml glass in Queensland and Tasmania, but twice as large (575 ml) in WA. Within each state there is consistency, because they are all supplied by metropolitan breweries. This curious fact led the well-respected Australian linguist Michael Clyne to the 'Beer Theory' of language distribution (quoted by Bryant 1993: 34-5). Unfortunately for editors, it does not apply to other kinds of words, since most regional variation is not confined within state borders. It would be true within WA, Bryant's *South West* (SW) region. But elsewhere in Australia her research pointed rather to large, diffuse dialect areas, which she consolidated into three:

- *South Centre* (SC), mostly South Australia, but spread up to Alice Springs and north-east to Broken Hill for some words
- *South East* (SE), essentially Tasmania, Victoria and the southern part of NSW
- *North East* (NE), Queensland and northern NSW

The borders of these three regions overlap considerably, as can be seen in the cross-hatching in Bryant's (1993) map, reproduced here with her permission.



The border within NSW between Bryant's SE and NE regions is quite variable—varying with the set of words being investigated. For the *canteloup/rock melon* pair, the dividing line between SE and NE is definitely down on the Murray River. But for words to refer to a school bag (like *port*, the NE word used solidly in Queensland as well as northern NSW and the Central coast), the boundary is now south of Sydney, at least down to the Southern Tablelands (creeping/leaping south 'like the cane toad' as Kel Richards put it (2005: 157). The geography

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of Australian WordMap <www.abc.net.au/wordmap/> works with 27 smaller zones, dividing all states into subregions, in an attempt to pin the alternatives down more tightly.

Unfortunately it makes the regional picture no less complex than Bryant's use of four large zones.

Where regional differences come in

All this verbal research has made the most of variation in the words for everyday things in Australia—what we eat, drink, wear and recreate with—and they vary more in spoken language than writing. But they do impact on editorial work in children's fiction (primary or secondary—young adult), where the vocabulary needs to be right for the location of the story. So the need to choose between *bathers* and *swimmers* could come up if you were editing English reading materials for the state education department and needed to know the dominant word choice for students in say WA, VIC or QLD. If you were editing pamphlets for a local council, you might need to know that the word for the playground *slide* (in Bryant's SE and SW) is a slippery dip in SA, whereas in QLD (NE) it's definitely *slippery slide* (Bryant 1993:35).

The local differences in terms for everyday things pale into insignificance by contrast with those relating to the environment, for example the *jarrah*, *karri* and *tuart* trees of WA as opposed to the *angophora* and *Sydney blue gum* of the east coast. The Aboriginal loanwords used by Australians for local fauna diverge: small freshwater crayfish are *gilgie*, *koonac* and *marron* in WA, but *yabbie* in Victoria (Ramson et al. 2006). If you were editing documents for a state education authority, you would need to ensure that the written text used words that are at home in that state, so as to localise it for school readers. If you work for either state or local government authorities, their readerships are much more clearly defined by geography than the typical commercial publisher or communicator.

Localisation

This is a key issue in global publishing: whether the content is to be optimised to work within national borders, or edited as far as possible with region-free vocabulary, so as to be able to cross over them. Many Australian publishers try to do the latter, to extend the markets for their books beyond Australia to other parts of the English-speaking world. Modest adaptation of the text may allow reuse of its content, to capitalise further on it. It happened very conspicuously when David Williamson's play 'The Removalists' was exported to the US, under the title 'The Moving Men'. It happens a lot more often in areas of nonfiction publishing (e.g. cook books), where Australian ingredients such as *shallots* and utensils such as the *frying pan* have to be translated, and metric weights and measures all have to be converted into the US imperial equivalents for the American market.

Localisation in the opposite direction also makes work for Australian editors, in adapting high investment nonfiction publications for Australian readers. In one such project, I was asked to advise on how to translate an American health-care reference for the Australian market. It was a large (two-kilo) dictionary, in which many things had to be adapted—in terms that localised the medical problem. Take out the references to treating rattlesnake bites, but add in funnel web spiders. Replace terms from American medical practice with those at home in Australia. So the American term *ambulatory surgery* (picture the surgeon operating beside a moving trolley in the hospital corridor if you will!) becomes *day surgery* (i.e. you walk in, walk out of the clinic the same day).

Supraregional labels

Terms like 'American English' (AmE) and 'British English' (BrE) are often used in describing the process of localisation and moving a text across national borders—though they are not exactly precise in terms of their underlying geography. Both those labels refer to what we

might call 'supraregional varieties', used way beyond their geographical homes. BrE is of course the post colonial standard on which the nativised norms of English writing are based in many ex Commonwealth countries (e.g. India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia). At the same time the term BrE overgeneralises about the extent to which it really represents the language norms of Scotland or Ireland.

AmE is also used well beyond its continental borders. It has left its mark on the English used in the Philippines, as well as Japan, and increasingly China. In Japan the *lift* is referred to as an 'elevator' and *story* can mean the floor of a building. Whereas in Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, the postcolonial variety of English is traceable to British English, and the words *lift* and *storey* are the norm. Working for clients and companies in those parts of the world, you can more or less predict which kind of written English is naturalised there (AmE or BrE), and edit accordingly.

Supraregionalisms

Within the so-called 'new Englishes' of Asia and the Pacific, new usages are emerging simultaneously in non-contiguous places. There are collocations such as the intransitive use of the verb *discuss (about)* which is fairly standard in Indian, Sri Lankan and Fijian English. It is the normal idiom for the locals, part of communicating locally. New phrasal verbs using the particle *up*, as in *fuel up*, *google up*, are appearing in many SouthEast Asian varieties of English, and the remarkable cope up with has been observed in several, not just Malaysian English, where it was first noted (Zipp and Bernaisch 2012). Yet if you were editing international communications put out by the national government in such countries, it would be important to standardise the idiom in line with either BrE or AmE. Likewise with the peculiarly local uses of common English words. The word *shed*, for instance, is used in Fiji English, and also in Philippines English, to refer to a large roofed but open-sided building in which a formal reception may take place. Within each country, this usage is well known, but it needs some explaining to international visitors (especially when found on the invitation!). These common usages in dispersed Pacific and Indian Ocean locations raise interesting research questions about 'a real English', where the same borrowings are taken up by speakers of different languages in the same region. They also illustrate some of the distinctive usages of those for whom English is a second rather than first language.

Regional and socio-cultural identity

So far we have been focusing on geographical location and the geographical borders for the currency of words, both local ones within Australia and the more global ones that go beyond borders with national/imperial expansion. Words go across borders not by leap-frogging, but because of the people who speak them and take them over into new territories, as with the spread of BrE and AmE in Asia. The expressions that belong to Great Britain, and the US, or to Australia and to individual states and regions within it, should really be attributed to the people who identify with those places, and whose speech and writing are grounded in that locality. It is their social and cultural association with that place which localises words, and imbues them with the sense of having come across borders when found outside their home base. They are identified with that place in a more abstract way, and the borders that they have crossed are as much socio-cultural as geographical.

Even small differences in spelling can carry this sense of coming from another culture, for example the difference between our Australian Department of Defence and the US Defense Department. It not only occurs in those proper names, of course. The choice between the 'c' and 's' spellings spills over into many a compound like *defense capability* or *defense tactics*, where the 's' spelling always smacks of the US military machine. Even *self-defense* could be a military exercise.

Invisible borders

In the same way, words and terms may carry the stamp of belonging to or coming from a very particular professional culture or scientific discipline. Such professional and disciplinary language cuts across geographical borders, to be used by all those affiliated with the specialism across the world. For example, educators everywhere seem to share terminology. There is the use of *competencies* in the plural, for instance, as a way of enumerating the capabilities of students and trainees. Those outside educational circles find the singular *competence* is all they need. The International Union of Pure and Applied Chemists mandates the use of *sulfur*, along with *sulfate*, *sulfide* etc., and these spellings are taken up by Australian chemistry teachers. But in environmental science and ornithology, *sulphur* remains the standard form in non-chemical allusions, as in the *sulphur-crested cockatoo* and the less well known *sulphur-bottom* (i.e. the blue whale). The International Union of Pure and Applied Chemists also commits Australian chemists to the *-ize* spelling, which challenges writers who would wish to advise the Australian government on science policy: Should they use the spelling *-ize*, which identifies them with professional chemists internationally, or the *-ise* form, which has been endorsed for almost 50 years by the Australian Government *Style manual*? Editors working with scientists need to weigh up the alternatives with them—it is a strategic choice.

Cases like these point to the invisible borders of language and communication, the fact that words and spellings can seem to belong to particular professional circles or what linguists call 'communities of practice'. So using the professional spelling puts the writer/communicator inside that abstract group of people scattered round the world, and use of the alternative puts them on the outside. These invisible borders between usages are some of the more challenging ones for editors to negotiate. I was asked by a medical editor why he found *causal factor* less natural than *causative factor* in the text he was working on—a fine point which took me to the internet to find that *causal* is far more common than *causative*, but the latter is used more often in medical writing (and law). The editor was evidently responding to what he knew on both sides of the often invisible border between specialised terminology and common usage.

Working inside professional circles, there is of course every incentive for writers and their editors to use technical terms and specialised senses of everyday words, as well as the abbreviations and acronyms that allow specialists to communicate accurately and efficiently. We've been looking closely at the terminology of family law, finding that it often resides in longer phrases (*apprehended violence order, less adversarial trial*)—so no surprise that such phrases are turned into acronyms or initialisms (*AVO, LAT*) for ease of reference, in both spoken and written discourse. Editors working on texts that communicate within those legal circles would of course make use of such abbreviations. But for readers outside those circles, whether in government or the general public, the acronyms may be opaque. Such terms do not come across the invisible border, and need to be mediated or spelled out in full. Again this poses a dilemma when there are dual audiences for the document, both inside and outside professional circles.

Borderless communication on the internet

Perhaps the greatest linguistic border-crossing challenge is in writing/editing on the internet. For serious world-wide communication, the choice of words (and spellings) is strategic at all points where there are alternatives. The writer/editor has to be able to cross the immediate state borders and national boundaries, embedded in local geography and the local population, and also to transcend the invisible barriers imposed by specialised terminology, including inside attempts to compact it into acronyms which may only make it more impenetrable for those outside. Supraregional styles (American, British) cut across the spellings of significant numbers of words in institutional documents, and alternatives within everyday vocabulary of the *skillet/frying pan* type impact on individual postings and blogs. The more informal the

blogger's personal style, the greater the challenge to communicate in region-free terms—not that the average blogger is looking for editorial help to maintain a ghost-written blog!

For region-free communication we still lack a well-established international English. The differences between British and American spelling still constitute barriers to the free flow of information across all borders (McArthur 2001). Yet while some of these are what you might call categorical divisions, with one spelling standard in say AmE, and the other one in BrE, some are more permeable, depending on your point of view. Thus putting a 'u' in *honor* is excessive for an American, while leaving it out may be unthinkable for a British writer/editor ('it takes the honour out of the ANZAAC roll of honour', as one Australian veteran told me). In these cases there is no possible compromise. But where one or another style is pluralistic, as with *ise/-ize* in BrE, there's more hope of establishing a single international alternative, one which is current in both. I have discussed a number of such international English options in my *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (2004).

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Choosing the most appropriate word or spelling to suit the writer's text, and communicate its meaning effectively to the primary audience at least, is a particular challenge for Australian editors. We are heirs to BrE, but have to be very aware of how well-assimilated some elements of AmE are in AusE in the post-colonial world. Our short history has also generated interesting regional differences from state to state, which need to be factored into texts intended for local readers, or avoided where the text is intended for national consumers, especially in commercial contexts.

When editing content for the internet, for world-wide consumption, we need to balance our natural commitment to AusE style with a dispassionate appraisal of who we're likely to be talking to out there on the web, and whether our British legacy style projects Australian texts in the way we intend. Like other speakers of new Englishes, we too need an international style, so as to communicate free of irrelevant or unfortunate colonial connotations—a style which can reach across every kind of border: geographical and national, and avoid erecting unnecessary professional barriers to communication as well.

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