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# Bespoke English

wheel make it up as kneaded

by Damien Isiah Proldjere

The Australian language is changing before our ears. Nouns and verbs are being increasingly substitution for each other and the subjunctive seems to have gone out the door. If only it weren't so.

We now frequently hear people on 'proper' radio (the ABC) say that there is "a divide" between A and B. Recently, on the same radio station, a politician said: "We will division the proceeds fairly."

Other examples are people being loaned money (instead of lent), or gifted money (instead of given). The former seems to be entrenched usage, while the latter can still be rescued. An increasing number of people now say that they have bought a plate of food to share, instead of 'brought', although they may have bought the ingredients from a shop. They might tell their workmates next day that the visitation was a lot of fun.

We all know what these people mean, so communication is still possible.

Language is a fluid thing and is continually changing (maybe even continuously or constantly). Our brains are able to adapt easily. Pedants have more difficulty. We may shudder at hearing someone say 'aks', perhaps assuming it to be an unfortunate Americanism. Look up the word 'ask' in an etymological dictionary and you will find that the *s* and the *k* have several times swapped position in the word over the centuries.

We learn rules about the use of language in order to slow down the morphing. Some of these rules are purely about aesthetics, such as the one that forbids you to thoughtlessly split an infinitive. The rule against ending a sentence with a preposition was also one I grew up with.

It seems pointless to me to attempt to keep a language static through rules. It is a human activity and subject to human foibles. What I do feel sad about, is the erosion of subtlety and nuance when words are lost through neglect or carelessness. For example, 'unique' is an absolute – it denotes that there is no other. When someone says 'almost unique' they probably mean 'rare' or 'extremely rare'; someone saying 'quite unique' probably means 'unusual'. I do bristle at one thing being 'more unique' than another.

The word 'decimate', apart from being overused, has shifted in meaning from 'destroy one tenth' to 'destroy almost completely' and the same meaning is often given to annihilate, although this word is also often used instead of 'beat soundly'. There is a whole group of words, including beat, destroy, annihilate, decimate, trounce, demolish, devastate, all with subtly different meanings.

Although English may now be an international language, it is not homogenous. North American usage differs from Australian which is not the same as 'proper' English spoken in the UK. Within Australia differences are increasing from place to place, mainly in the words

used for certain objects: for instance bathers, trunks, swimmers, cossie. Not surprising, given the size of the country. I *was* (perhaps naïvely) surprised, when I was in England, that I could hardly understand people in places such as Leeds and Birmingham when they spoke in their respective local dialects. I doubt they could understand each other between the two cities.

This is not limited to English; it is probably true in every language. In the tiny south-west corner of the Netherlands, inhabitants of neighbouring villages cannot understand each other's dialects, though they may live only five kilometres apart.

Divergence in languages adds richness to the human experience. Knowing a second language gives me insight into other cultures and other ways of thinking and of seeing the world. That is what makes precise translation difficult or even, in some instances, impossible. 'Don't come the raw prawn with me' does not translate well, even into British English, let alone Italian or Swahili or Pitjantjatjara.

Partly because of the almost global adoption of English, we are losing this language/cultural diversity. It is a shame that we may also be losing the riches within the language we speak. The confusion that leads to the misuse of words may come from problems in our education, from laziness or from both. No longer learning about the roots of words leads to people saying things like: "In retrospect to this report ...". However, this does not fully explain why well-educated politicians, business people and university lecturers are using the language incorrectly. I shudder at the memory of hearing a high school teacher on radio saying: "I've given up learning the students grammar, because it bores them and doesn't get them to speak any more better."

As 4 me, Isle keap on wrighting good, and mayk shore I speek more better then other peepel, littorally.