When people talk about 'global English' they usually referring to the common features which identify the variety we call standard English. Increasingly, however, attention has been drawn to the local features which differentiate one part of the English-speaking world from another. So today we happily talk about British, American, Australian, South African, Indian, and other 'Englishes', and dictionaries have been compiled of the distinctive lexicons encountered in these regions.

It does not take long before these lexicons reach many thousands of words. When a country adopts a language as a local alternative means of communication, it immediately starts adapting 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 wordstock which is unknown outside the country and its environs. When someone in South Africa says 'The bakkie had to stop at a red robot', we need to know that a bakkie is a truck and a robot is a traffic-light. There are thousands of such words in Jean and William Branford's Dictionary of South African English. And other parts of the English-speaking world display the same kind of creativity.

Note that these lexicons eliminate the difference between native and non-native speakers of English. I am a native speaker of English, but when I first encounter such words as bakkie and robot on a visit to South Africa (or reading about South Africa), I am in exactly the same position as a non-native speaker. I do not know what they mean, and have to ask someone - or look them up, if there is a dictionary. Nor is it just individual words that cause problems. Here is an example to do with conversational discourse. Travelling in New Zealand in 2006, I frequently saw roadside advertisements for Tui beer which used the catch-phrase 'Yeah, right'. They have become so successful that two books collecting them have been published. The phrase is an ironic affirmation. When we react to a sentence by saying 'Yeah, right', we are expressing some sort of suspicion about its content, as these examples illustrate:

- Let your mum stay as long as she likes. Yeah right.
- Quiet student seeks room. Yeah right.
- Of course I remember your name. Yeah right.
- One careful lady owner. Yeah right.

These particular ads are culturally neutral, in the sense that they would be understood in virtually any English-speaking (and doubtless other-speaking) society. But others require an intimate knowledge of New Zealand culture to make any sense at all, for they rely on local knowledge of names and places.

There are no skeletons in Rodney's closet. Yeah right.

Hasn't Dick made a difference? Yeah right.

Let Paul fly us there. Yeah right.

Who are Rodney, Dick, and Paul? New Zealanders would know, without need for a gloss, that Rodney is a national politician (a footnote in the book tells us that this jibe was 'aimed at parliament's most vocal perk-buster'), that Dick is mayor of Auckland (and the ad was put up six months after he was elected), and that Paul is a radio personality (the breakfast host on Newstalk ZB, the country's main breakfast show) who owns a plane, which he crashed – twice.

Every country has the equivalent of Rodney, Dick, and Paul. In the UK Paul's equivalent would be someone like John Humphrys. But I have no idea who the equivalent personalities would be in Italy, Switzerland, or Slovenia – or, at a more local level, in Verona, Rome, and Naples. So, if I encountered these names used by someone speaking English in these parts of the world, I would be at a loss.

And that is what is increasingly happening, as English becomes a local alternative language. When a group of people in a country (e.g. students, teachers, businessmen) switch into English, for whatever reason, the subject-matter of their conversation inevitably incorporates aspects of their local environment. They talk about the local shops, streets, suburbs, bus-routes, institutions, businesses, television programmes, newspapers, political parties, and a great deal more. The local knowledge is taken for granted, and used in sentences without gloss. Visitors who hear such sentences, or read them in local newspapers, need to have them explained. Conventional dictionaries will not help, for they do not include such localisms, especially if they are encyclopedic.
expressing knowledge about people, places, institutions, and suchlike).

Few attempts have been made to identify or quantify the cultural element in a language’s encyclopedic lexicon. One example is David Grote’s British English for American Readers. It is subtitled ‘A dictionary of the language, customs, and places of British life and literature’, and includes such items as Black Country, Blackpool, blancmange, and Blighty. About half the entries are proper names. Another is The Longman Dictionary of Language and Culture, which under its letter J, for example, includes such items as Jackanory (a children’s TV series), Jackie (a young person’s magazine), and Jaeger (a shopping chain) for the UK and Jack in the Box (a restaurant) and John Doe (an anonymous American) for the USA. This is an interesting compilation, as it includes general words as well as culturally specific words. For example, letter J includes such words as jab, jabber, and jackal, as well as some general place names (eg Jamaica, Jakarta) alongside the culturally specific items. About a quarter of the items are culturally specific.

Even if the name is recognized, the cultural associations may not be. You need to know quite a bit about London before you can interpret these sentences correctly:

His watch was more Petticoat Lane than Bond Street.

It was like Clapham Junction in our office today.

You have to know that there is a street-market in Petticoat Lane (where watches are likely to be cheap and probably replicas), whereas Bond Street is an expensive shopping centre. And you have to know that Clapham Junction is a particularly complicated railway station, where lines from many directions converge, making it one of the busiest railway junctions in the UK.

You must also be prepared for differences between parts of the world: Soho in New York does not have the same set of connotations as Soho in London, nor does Oxford Street in London have much in common with Oxford Street in Sydney. Phrases such as ‘browsing in Oxford Street’ would mean something very different in the two cities (especially when one realizes that the western end of the Sydney location is the city’s main gay district).

Every English-speaking location in the world has similar usages which make the English used there distinctive, expressive of local identity, and a means of creating solidarity. From this point of view, notions such as ‘Italian English’ take on a fresh relevance, going well beyond traditional conceptions of English spoken with an Italian accent, or English displaying interference from Italian grammar. Italian English I define as the kind of English I need to know about when I go to Italy, otherwise I will be unable to converse efficiently with Italian speakers in English. It would be amazingly useful to have a glossary of the English equivalents of Italian cultural references, but I know of none – and not only for Italian. This seems to be a totally neglected area for any language.

The neglect is especially critical for English, as it increases its global reach. When people from different parts of the world meet each other and use English as a lingua franca (as in a political or business meeting), I suspect there are many failures of communication which result from the participants assuming different cultural interpretations of a particular word or phrase. A breakdown may occur in relation to the most everyday of topics. For example, on a recent visit to a small town in the Czech Republic, I had a conversation which went something like this. We were talking about coincidences, and P was telling me about Q, who had just got a job in P’s office:

P: Me and Q both live in ZZ street. And what’s even more of a coincidence is that he lives in 355 and I live in 356.

Me: So you can wave to each other, then!

P (puzzled): No.

Me (confused, thinking that they’ve perhaps had an argument): I mean, you could keep an eye on each other’s house, if one of you was away.

P (even more puzzled): Not very easily. I can’t see his house from where I live. It’s the other end of the street.

Me: But I thought you were neighbours.

P: Not really.

Me: Ah.
I didn’t know what to say next, and we moved on to some other subject.
The next day I made enquiries, and discovered what had gone wrong. It transpired that P’s system of house numbering operates on a totally different basis to what I was used to in the UK. In Britain, houses are numbered sequentially in a street, usually with odd numbers down one side and even numbers down the other. So 355 and 356 would probably be opposite each other – or maybe even next to each other (for some streets have linear numbering). But in the Czech Republic (or, at least, in that part where I was), houses are numbered on the basis of when they were built and registered with the housing authority. House number 356 was built (or registered) immediately after house number 355. So it was not necessarily the case that 355 and 356 would even be in the same street, and certainly no expectation that they would be opposite or adjacent to each other. That is why P thought it such a coincidence.
I do not know how widespread this principle of house numbering is. Nor do I know how many other systems of house numbering there are, in the countries of the world. But as English comes to be increasingly used in countries with hugely different cultural histories, I do know that this kind of cultural communicative misunderstanding is going to become increasingly frequent, unless we anticipate the growing problem and solve it.
How to solve it? I think the solution lies in the integration of linguistic and cultural studies, and in the production of regional cultural dictionaries or glossaries. It is something every region can do, and something to which everyone who learns English can contribute. Having participated in a few informal brainstorming sessions of this kind, in various countries, I can report that it takes only an hour or so to accumulate a list of dozens of culturally specific items. Subsequent reflection raises the total to hundreds. And when these are written down, in the style of a glossary, it has an interesting effect upon the participants. They feel they have somehow made the English language their own. I suspect such projects also add greatly to their linguistic confidence and self-esteem, for no-one else in the world knows their homegrown variety of English as well as they do.

REFERENCES

* David Crystal is one of the world’s foremost authorities on language.