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English as a Second Language for Americans?

ALISON W. CONNER*

Most travelers eventually realize that they are the foreigners, and for me language was an early clue. From the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s, I spent eleven years teaching in Singapore and Hong Kong, where—despite the broad reach of American popular culture—some form of British English ruled. In Singapore, it is true, many people spoke “Singlish,” full of local words and expressions such as *kopi tiam* (coffee shop), *kampong* (village), “can or not” (yes or no), *lah* (untranslatable word of emphasis) or *kiasu* (the fear of missing out). But terms like these were rarely the source of my language problems.

During my years of teaching there, both Singapore and Hong Kong law faculties were strikingly diverse. Some fifty percent of my NUS colleagues were “local,” i.e., from Singapore or Malaysia, though most of them had studied abroad. My expatriate (or “expat”)¹ colleagues came from Canada, India, Hong Kong, Australia, and even one or two from the U.S. At HKU, only a few colleagues were Hong Kong Chinese, and most of my colleagues came from the U.K. and the Commonwealth: England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland (same difference in my view, but definitely not in theirs), Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Tanzania, plus a few, a very few, from the U.S. Though these colleagues spoke with the most varied of accents (pity our poor students!), they shared an academic vocabulary that I did not.

Years of reading English literature had given me the basics, and I was soon reminded of all I had learned. You post letters and ring people up. Braces, not suspenders, hold up your trousers, suspenders hold up stockings,

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¹ Not “ex-patriot,” which is how some American friends kept referring to me.

and garters hold up socks. Braces, suspenders, garters. Do not say pants when you mean trousers, and knickers are definitely not plus-fours. You must ask for the bill and not the check, the loo or the lavatory and not the bathroom (unless you want to “have a bathe”). Walk on the pavement, not the sidewalk, refer to your handbag, not your pocketbook, and remember that a purse is only for change. I had long been familiar with phrases such as “too right,” “as she then was,” the use of “one” (meaning “you” or even “I”) and the very idiomatic use of “then” (as in “right, then”). Yet all that reading had somehow failed to prepare me for academic life in the colonies, or ex-colonies, and—with no online glossaries to hand—I worked hard to improve my vocabulary. Thus, in Singapore and Hong Kong I learned another language—though unfortunately it wasn’t Hokkien or Cantonese: it was Britspeak.

My education began shortly after my arrival in Singapore, when I received an invitation to the vice chancellor’s tea for new faculty members. A nice gesture, I thought, but why not the chancellor? I had already noticed his portrait hanging in every government and post office in Singapore and imagined this reflected a deep respect for education. Of course Devan Nair was actually the president of Singapore, which made him the chancellor—and therefore the titular head—of the university system. The vice chancellor, usually known as the “VC,” was the real head of the university, and I had suffered no slight when he asked me to tea.

In my teaching, I soon realized that a judicial opinion was called a judgment (actually a judgement), or a decision (if more than one judge), or possibly a speech if given in the House of Lords. When reading the name of civil cases, “v” is pronounced “and,” so the great negligence case is always read *Donoghue AND Stevenson*. “Brief” meant the written instructions a solicitor gives a barrister. Barristers are called to the bar, but if they violate professional ethics, they may be struck off (the rolls).

But there was so much more to learn. In both Singapore and Hong Kong, “faculty” referred to the institution (e.g., the Faculty of Law), not those who taught in it. In a careless moment in Singapore, I once referred to the “law factory” in front of the dean, who smiled sweetly and made no comment. At HKU, moreover, a faculty clearly had higher status than a school; to call a faculty a school was to downgrade it. Ordinarily, “school” referred to primary or secondary education only, never the “tertiary” (i.e., the university) level, which is what we were—though the basic law degree in both jurisdictions was taught at the undergraduate, not the postgraduate (graduate) level. When I taught in Hong Kong, the head of department (the “head”), had

more power over staff than the dean, whose position was not just ceremonial but carried less weight. One's colleagues were "staff," sometimes senior or academic staff, although initially I tended to forget this. During my first year at NUS, I dutifully refrained from using any door marked "staff" in the library, until at last a history colleague, over my objections, took me through one. "But *we* are staff," he reminded me.²

But not all staff were professors, a title reserved for the elite few who held chairs. NUS had already adopted a hybrid system of ranks and titles (professors, associate professors, senior lecturers and lecturers), though associate professor was the highest rank most colleagues could hope to attain. HKU followed the British system more closely and had not yet undergone any retitling exercises, so the possible ranks were professor, reader, senior lecturer ("SL") and lecturer.³ "Professor" referred only to the most senior colleagues; otherwise we were merely staff, or perhaps university dons. (Since I have a Ph.D., I could be addressed as Dr.) Although in Singapore I was employed on a fixed-term contract, after my first few years in Hong Kong I was eligible to apply for "substantiation," which despite its vaguely religious sound actually meant tenured. Once duly substantiated, staff could not be made redundant (laid off), though some colleagues were seconded, that is, temporarily assigned to another department, perhaps in the government. At HKU, staff also belonged to the university's superannuation ("superann") or retirement scheme.

We "took" lectures and tutorials, though perhaps this is transatlantic usage now. We taught during term, or term-time, but our academic schedule was not contained in the calendar: the "calendar" or academic calendar was actually the university bulletin or catalog. In Hong Kong we began teaching in autumn term, not fall ("Excuse me, Dr. Conner, but when is fall?"), but we did not teach during the hols or the long vac. At HKU, we were also eligible for "long leave," a six-month period originally designed to allow British members of staff to take the ship home to the U.K. and back.

² This term continues to confuse Americans, and on occasion I still translate for colleagues. When we were negotiating an exchange agreement with a Commonwealth university, for example, several colleagues asked why they wanted *staff* exchanges. "They don't," I explained. "They are talking about the faculty."

³ HKU has continued the retitling process, but perhaps people's views haven't quite caught up with its goals. When I became a full professor at Hawai'i, a former HKU colleague greeted the news with the comment that this didn't mean I was a real professor. "Oh, it most definitely does!" I replied.

Every month we attended meetings of the Faculty Board (i.e., the board of the faculty), which at HKU also included non-staff representatives of the profession. I was taken aback when, at an early faculty board meeting at NUS, we voted to table a motion—and immediately went on to discuss it (to table does not mean to shelve). During my first few months in Singapore, I tore open all envelopes marked “urgent and confidential” immediately upon receipt, though they invariably proved to be minutes of such meetings, or sometimes only circulars (notices) or agendas of meetings yet to come. This may not have been a language problem: more discerning colleagues consigned them straight to the dustbin (the waste basket).

Our students had moved up through forms (grades), and at the Law Faculty we admitted students from Form 7. Many of them had attended “colleges” before they came to us, and had taken their O levels and A levels to qualify for admission. Once at university, they read (studied) law, and as exams approached they revised (reviewed) their work. The good students might swot up (cram) for exams, or the bad ones skive off (play hookey). (A swot is a nerd.) Our students, if they could get university housing, lived in halls or private “mini-halls,” not dorms. When Singaporean students were asked what profession they most respected, most of them said “ministers.” Who knew they were so religious? Well, maybe they weren’t: they meant ministers in Parliament.

The examination process also entailed its own special language. After some initial confusion, I understood that the “paper” was the actual set of examination questions, not what we would call a paper (that’s a “written assignment”). One “set the question” (drafted the exam), and that appeared in the paper. As internal examiners, we “marked,” and then second-marked scripts (i.e., we graded exams), then forwarded them to the external examiner (someone outside the university) for the final round of marking. The “scripts” were the actual bluebooks in which the students wrote their answers, and they were passed along with the mark sheets from one examiner to another. In my first few years at HKU, the office manager posted a daily notice (called the “Movement of the Scripts”) to chart their progress around the faculty during exam periods.

At HKU, my contract required me to invigilate examinations in courses I taught, either as “chief invigilator” if I had run the course, or merely as one of many invigilators if I had not. One of my few American colleagues claimed his dictionary defined invigilation as herding sheep—though we learned it really meant to proctor or monitor an exam. If students failed to satisfy the examiners in all their subjects, they might be required to take

“supps” or supplementary exams, or, in the absolute worst case, they would be “discontinued” (i.e., expelled). But exam results were never final until approved by the Board of Examiners, which was composed of all the internal examiners in our subjects plus at least one outside external examiner. During my first year at NUS, the students satirized this process in a clever skit about the “Bored of Examiners”—though it wasn’t until I had sat through a few such meetings that I understood how true it all was. Once results were calculated, students might graduate with several classes of honors: first, upper second, lower second and third class, or else a bare pass.

My physical surroundings could also raise issues: my office, it seemed, was filled with objects whose English name I did not know, including drawing pins, notice boards, sellotape, power points, tippex, rubbers, biros, A4 and A11 (paper). In one NUS class, I asked two students why they were whispering to each other; did they have a question? “Oh no, Dr. Conner,” one replied. “I was just asking him if he had a rubber.” “What?” But he only wanted to borrow an eraser from his classmate.

My Singapore office was on the first floor, actually the second floor to me; as in England, the ground floor is our first floor. In Hong Kong, where our campus was built on the side of a hill, many buildings also had “lower ground 1” and “lower ground 2,” and the first floor was actually the fourth. My 4th floor office was thus actually on the 7th—though fortunately I could take the lift (elevator). My colleagues socialized in the staff common room, not the faculty lounge, and in Hong Kong we ate at the senior common room, also known as the SCR, not the faculty club. As a member of the NUS coffee club, I ate biscuits with tea or coffee in the morning, though these proved to be either crackers or cookies, never our biscuits. (In Britspeak, all kinds of crackers and cookies may be lumped together in a single category, like obligations in civil law countries, when intuitively you know that torts and contracts are very different things.) Like most people in Singapore and Hong Kong, I lived in a flat, which was in a block of flats, not an apartment building. More specifically, I was housed in “quarters,” which the university assigned to me as an outsider on expat terms, all in accordance with my “terms of service.”

During my first few years, accents could also lead me astray, though I quickly learned to say SingaPORE and Hong KONG. In Singapore an English friend once told me that what Americans called a divided highway was known as a “jewel carriageway” in the UK. “A *jewel* carriageway? Are you sure?” I kept asking her. “Well, I know it sounds a bit old-fashioned to an American,” she said a little sharply, “but that’s what it’s called.” If only I

had asked that perennial Hong Kong telephone question: “how to spell?” Of course she was actually saying *dual* carriageway. I was also puzzled by the dialogue in an English television show I really liked: why did the clean-shaven hero keep saying “mustache”? English friends laughed as they translated for me: he said “must dash” (got to run). When I gave up on another English series because I couldn’t understand the broad local accents, several Commonwealth colleagues refused to believe me. “Oh, you Americans!” But soon thereafter we all began watching the much anticipated American series “Lonesome Dove,” set in Texas and starring two native Southerners who spoke *au naturel* throughout. During the first commercial my telephone rang: “Do you do simultaneous translation?” asked the same colleagues. (I declined, though years later I was pleased to interpret an Australian movie for my parents.)

But just as you are congratulating yourself on your ability to understand pretty much anything anyone says, you can all too easily lose your ear. On a return visit to Hong Kong, I found the faculty abuzz with the doings of a senior academic who had been flown out from the U.K. to review their work and decide if they should be told to produce—or else. This figure, the bizarrely named Smorman, called on staff in their offices for a private chat, and perhaps also a suggestion that they should resign by the end of the year. Several Australian friends regaled me with accounts of those who had been “Smormanized” since my last visit six months earlier, and the verb entered into common usage. But later that summer I found a report of his visit in the staff newsletter and startled everyone in the SCR reading room when I suddenly exclaimed out loud, “Well, for Pete’s sake, the man’s name is Smallman!”⁴

In Hong Kong, the few remnants of pidgin (nullah, shroff, godown, topside) and essential Cantonese (dim sum, gweilo,⁵ taitai) were easily learned, and I continued to improve my knowledge of Britspeak. During those years especially, I picked up a lot of slang, which was probably dated even then, yet necessary if I wished to socialize over lunch or tea in the SCR. Thus, something could be brilliant (cool) or naff (tacky). Colleagues might be chuffed (pleased), quite keen (eager) or just plain daft (foolish); they might be shattered (mildly tired), fagged (extremely tired) or knackered (exhausted). Sadly, they might indulge in argy-bargy (a row, an argument) or they might

⁴ I really had no excuse for this: for years a Kiwi colleague had told us how most Canadians believed he had gone there to study “lore.”

⁵ Literally, “white ghost,” a semi-derogatory term for Caucasians or foreigners, but often used by them as well.

whinge (whine incessantly). “What a whinger!” a friend exclaimed as we discussed the constant complaints of a colleague. I loved that useful term but loathed the dreadful, unromantic “snog” (to make out).

In Hong Kong I also developed a fair knowledge of Australian slang, since I now had many more Aussie (pronounced *Ozzie*) colleagues and I liked their colorful speech, with its crook, drongo, (dole-) bludger, no-hoper, and dobber. “What is a drongo?” I asked an Australian friend one day over lunch at the SCR. “That’s one right over there,” he said, pointing to a rather dim colleague who had just entered the room.⁶ Dobber comes from the verb to “dob in,” which means to tattle or inform on, and represents a deep cultural aversion, not just a term. After June 4, 1989, for example, I watched television in the SCR with colleagues, some of whom became very exercised upon seeing an interview with a Chinese woman who had turned her brother in to the authorities. They were absolutely beside themselves: her actions were as bad as the shooting itself. “Australians don’t dob,” they informed me.

Aussie speech was full of appealing diminutives, such as bikkie (biscuit), prezzie (present) and of course Uni (the University); as well as many “o” variants: journo (journalist), banko (bank holiday), aggro (trouble-making) and arvo (afternoon, as in “this arvo”). But it could also contain the occasional bugger or bloody (“bloody hell!”), along with many other terms quite unsuitable for a lady (e.g., “jumped up little turd,” said by one colleague of another). In the mid-1990s, Governor Patten (as he then was) caused an uproar in Hong Kong when he was reported to have called mainland Chinese officials, in a private conversation, a “bunch of wankers.” My Aussie colleagues were surprised at all the fuss and assured me this wasn’t really rude: “It just means someone ineffectual.” “Well, of course *they* don’t think it’s rude,” exclaimed an English friend, who probably had a better take on the governor’s meaning. Brits and Aussies, I also learned, had plenty of their own linguistic misunderstandings: in Oz, for example, the entree is the appetizer, not the main course, and the pavement becomes a footpath. Perhaps more confusingly, “Durex,” which in the U.K. is the best known brand of condoms, to Aussies is cellophane tape.

In the end, although I could sometimes forget my new vocabulary under stress, as one reverts to one’s mother tongue in a crisis, I became fairly fluent. This made my re-entry to the U.S. all the harder. When I left Hong Kong for Hawai`i, I encountered both Hawaiian and pidgin, two languages it seemed unlikely I would ever be speaking. But I also ran into an essential

⁶ A drongo is also a bird.

body of local terms, a mixture of pidgin, Hawaiian, local Japanese words and abbreviations. They constituted a far larger number of local terms than I had ever found in Singapore or Hong Kong—and they seemed much more necessary to academic as well as daily life. At my first faculty meeting, for example, colleagues casually threw around words like *akamai*, *kokua*, *shibai*, *kuleana* and *pau*, among others. “It’s not my *kuleana* (responsibility).” “It’s all *shibai* (lies).” “So, are we *pau* (finished)?” the dean asked at the end of most meetings.

For their part, my new colleagues seemed bemused by talk of scripts, faculty boards and lifts, not to mention marking and whingeing—and I soon fell into language difficulties once again. A few months after my move to the University of Hawai`i, a colleague rushed up to tell me that the president had finally issued his report on the law school. “The president?,” I exclaimed in surprise. “President Clinton has issued a report on the law school?” “What’s the matter with you?,” my colleague replied. “The president of the *University!*” Of course she meant the VC.