

Die englische Familie

Crossing Borders

With English becoming engrained as the business vernacular of that part of the universe inhabited by humans, spellcheckers and other popup menus might lead you to believe that we were talking about minor variations of a common tongue. But as the Wild English of the global majority outnumbers the Native English of the original culture club by three to one, the time has come to take a more generous view of this cyberspace Latin. As Oscar Wilde put it, "The English have every thing in common with the Americans – except language." Not only do Americans choose to spell differently (a highly effective and very early example of national branding) but they behave in a totally different way inside the English language. Forget about the 'donut' for 'doughnut' and 'fall' for 'autumn' preferences, listen to the way American conversation differs in shape and substance to British chitchat. Author Raymond Mortimer supplied a helpful sporting metaphor: "In America conversation is a game played with rules differing from England's. It is not tennis, in which you return the other fellow's service, but golf, in which you go on hitting your own ball."

Now think about all the other sporting arrangements available inside Native English – from Australian and Canadian to Hibernian, South African, Caribbean and New Zealandese. "A language," wrote Max Weinreich, "is a dialect with an army and a navy" and each of these dialects has both. Hinglish and Chinglish boast armies and navies of much greater significance, with the world's largest number of English language users and learners respectively. Now add all your global creoles such as Franglais, Spanglish, Denglish and Taglish (Philippine English) and you've got a very sporty and colourful English-language family indeed. The phonology, morphology and syntax of English might be vaguely the same in each, but the language behaviour (as opposed to the language system) will vary wildly. What you need to grasp, whether you are a native speaker or a language tourist, is some sense of pragmatic competence. In other words, you need to guess your contact's inference from their utterance – to know when "How are you?" is simply a goodwill filler not meant to be answered and when it requires a reply. Have you ever noticed that when you ask for directions to the hospital in a new city, the locals direct you via the police station – which naturally you also do not know? This blind-spot in your knowledge is called cultural fluency, with the locals always associating the hospital with the police station and quite unable to imagine one without the other. The language of global business may be English, but the pragmatic and cultural framework underneath that will rarely be. The rules of engagement within any one sporting variety of English will always be different, with the mixed-scenario and cyberspace context of most global projects presenting complex communication challenges. Instead of simply switching your spell-checker to American or British, reflect the wider global context by identifying the respective balance between information and communication in each intercultural project. Now slant your lingo towards the exact member of the English family you are talking to – plain-spoken Sven from Sweden or soft-pedaling Sammy from Singapore.

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