



A tale of two trends

'The future of English' panel at the
2007 Sydney Writers' Festival

Intro

Holding a panel discussion on the future of English is a bit like doing long term forecasting of the weather. If you predict clear skies, there will inevitably be stormy climes.

But at the risk of getting the weather wrong, I want to forecast two seemingly contradictory impulses for the future climate of English: that our language will become both more democratic and more diverse.

A more democratic language

So how exactly does any language become more democratic?

Well, for several centuries our institutions have used both word choice and syntax to distinguish between those in power and those on the nose. They tend to strut their status with long, Latinate words, the passive voice, plenty of clutter and endless sentences snaking down the page.

Here's how my local council puffed up with self importance after I wrote to it about the noise from a swimming pool:

Reference is made to your customer service request in relation to noise from the pool pump at the above-mentioned address.

In this regard please be advised that the owner of the subject property has been reminded of the permitted hours of operation for pool pumps in accordance with the *Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997* (POEO).

The owners have also been requested to ensure the pump is enclosed within a specified time-frame. This matter will be monitored by Council and should the matter remain outstanding Council will consider its options action under the POEO.

This is the language of officialese, and it has been the norm for centuries in the language of commerce, of government, of the law and in the academy. It is anti-democratic because it places unnecessary barriers between our institutions and the people that they serve.

Leaving aside the question of how my neighbour could physically enclose a pump 'within a specified timeframe', let alone what exactly an 'options action' might be, the council here is more concerned with its status than it is with communication.

Imagine using this language at the dinner table: 'in accordance with your request, it is incumbent upon me to pass the salt'; or 'In relation to the aforementioned foodstuffs, this matter will be monitored for options action'.

The good news is that officialese has started to die a well-deserved death.

The plain language movement over the last 20 or 30 years has been cajoling and at times humiliating our institutions into lightening up, into using a language closer to that of the people. We've been democratising our institutions for decades, and now we are democratising their language as well.

Pick up a bank mortgage or an insurance policy and compare it to one from 20 years ago, and you will notice the difference. Chances are, you might even understand some of it today.

Of course, against this trend is the ever-present tendency for new institutions to develop new forms of officialese. The most recent of these combines management speak and computer jargon to sound something like this:

As a means of simultaneously decomposing both the optative and indicative parts of a requirements problem, from an abstract business level to concrete system requirements, we leverage the paradigm of projection in both approaches while maintaining traceability to high-level business objectives.

I think this means ‘we solve both specific and business-wide problems’. Or in other words: no problem too big or too small.

But while there will be new forms of jargon to guard against, the overall trend will open up our language and reduce the barriers between institutions and the public, between writers and readers.

And that’s my first hopeful forecast for sunny weather. It’s a kind of cooling of the hot air of officialese.

A more diverse language

My second prediction in some respects runs counter to the first: that English will become increasingly diverse. On the one hand, our public language is evolving into a more accessible common tongue, but alongside that we are developing a raft of entirely new dialects.

Depending on who you believe, English has between 320 and 380 million native speakers. With second and foreign language speakers, this reaches somewhere between 800 million and well over a billion. And the sheer volume of those extra half a billion non-native speakers is taking our tongue in unexpected directions.

English now has a significant presence in around 90 countries. But from Singapore to Shanghai, from Barbados to Bombay, people are no longer shy of adapting it to suit their own circumstances. We no longer believe that we should all sound like some genetically-faded aristocrat living in the south east of England.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than the foreign language forms of ‘Engrish’ emerging unashamedly throughout Asia, particularly on packaging, public signs and clothing. As Steven Caires tells us in his books on Engrish, these can take on an almost mysterious poetic wit.

For example, a box of chocolate biscuits in Korea can read:

As for beautiful harmony to play, it is probably to reflect it elegantly this
chocolate cake your tea time.

A T-shirt slogan can rise to the art of the haiku:

Like newly born drops of water
My favourite dreams and wilful life
I like you in the recent days
Very wonderfully and more pleasantly

In Japan, there is no ambiguity in the public signs for the toilets at international venues:

Lavatory. It has separated to the male and the woman. Don’t mistake.

These are new and strangely functional forms of English, emerging from the mix of cultural air streams at different linguistic pressures. If this is what is emerging from foreign language users of English, imagine the even greater influence of second language speakers.

Reconciling two trends

But how do we reconcile these two trends: a more democratic common English with a rising diversity around the globe?

To do so will call for a much more sophisticated use of our language—one where we all master a lingua franca at the same time as developing dialects for our own communities.

Some forecast that the climate of diversity will prevail, and that English will inevitably split into sub-languages, much as Latin divided into the Romance tongues at the fall of the Roman Empire.

But something exists now that the Romans couldn't conceive of: the technology of mass communication.

To illustrate the importance of technology to the fate of English, I'd like to compare the current digital age with that of the printing press.

When Gutenberg invented moveable type in the mid-1400s, there were probably several thousand hand-written books throughout Europe. Within 50 years, that figure leaped to something like 9 million books.

This surge of information transformed language, politics, culture and economics, and today we call this seismic shift the Renaissance.

Well, we are in the midst of another technology-driven leap.

Twenty years ago, the Internet was still a minority technology. In 2007, there are now 1.1 billion Internet users throughout the world—approaching 20 per cent of the globe's population. Internet use has grown 208 per cent since 2000 alone. This upsurge in the volume and the accessibility of information is easily comparable to the rise of the printing press.

And the largest language group on the net is English, with nearly 36 per cent of users—well above the proportion of native speakers in the world's population. The next largest language group is Chinese with under 14 per cent, followed by Spanish and Japanese. And the *Oxford Guide to World English* tells us that 75 per cent of the world's mail and the world's electronically stored information is also in English.

The impact of technology

This technology will reinforce both of the trends I've been forecasting.

On the one hand, it will accelerate the democratisation of our language. When we write an email or some copy for the web, we use a far more natural language than when typing a formal letter.

And to reach the global potential of those English-reading Internet users, we can no longer keep our outdated officialese. Our audience simply won't tolerate writing that is so unclear, inefficient and hard to read. We have precious few seconds to keep them on our site—it's a case of three clicks and they're out.

But the rising technology will also promote diversity by allowing all kinds of communities to connect in virtual ways. No matter what your interest or concern, set up a website or a blog or a U-Tube and your community will find you. Together you can work on your own language.

Digital technology is also diversifying publishing as never before. You no longer need an editorial department, a distributor, and two tons of type metal to reach an audience. All you need are five letters: a PC and an ISP.

So if a definitive long range forecast still eludes us, I can at least suggest the future of English will lie in how these tensions play out; in how well we use our technology to mediate between a democratic common tongue and the fertile climate of our growing diversity.

Dr Neil James is Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation. He has a doctorate in English from the University of Sydney and has published over 50 articles, essays and reviews in outlets as diverse as the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Daily Telegraph*. *Writing at Work*, his forthcoming book about writing in the workplace, will be released in September 2007.

www.plainenglishfoundation.com