

# AUSTRALIAN STYLE

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## The Australian National Corpus Initiative

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There are now more than 22 million users of language in Australia. Language is used constantly in our daily lives, from face-to-face conversations, reading newspapers and books, through to writing emails and blogging. A variety of different languages are also spoken by these users, including indigenous languages, migrant or community languages, and, of course, English. The latter predominates in public life, and also in private life for a large proportion of the population, but it does not exist in a vacuum, being influenced by and influencing other languages and users in Australia. This complex linguistic landscape forms an important part of what it means to be Australian.

Information technologies – in particular, increasingly powerful computers as well as the Internet – are offering new ways in which to study the Australian linguistic landscape. One such possibility is the establishment of a representative collection of digitised spoken and written language in Australia in all its forms and diversity. The term *corpus* is generally used to describe such a collection. Many countries have large corpora, including the U.S., the U.K., Germany and Denmark, but Australia's language data resources remain scattered and relatively inaccessible. The Australian National Corpus initiative involves a concerted push by linguists, applied linguists, language

technologists and those interested in language more generally to establish a massive online database of language in Australia. In this way, we can take advantage of the capacity of computing technologies to search across large amounts of language data, and also make this corpus easily accessible, not just to researchers and educators, but to everyone who is interested in language and the ways in which it is used in Australia.

In order to be representative of language in Australia the Australian National Corpus needs to be very large indeed. The English component, in particular, needs to be enormous because there are so many different people in Australia who have used or are using English in multiple ways in spoken, written, and increasingly, computer-mediated forms of communication. At present the largest collections of Australian English we have are the Australian Corpus of English and the Australian component of the International Corpus of English, which are approximately one million words each. While one million words may sound like a lot there are much larger corpora held in other countries. The British National Corpus is one hundred million words, and the Corpus of Contemporary American English is more than four hundred million words. There is now even a two billion word corpus of English held by

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Oxford University Press, the Oxford English Corpus.<sup>2</sup> The reason other countries have built such large corpora is that many questions about language and language use can only be answered when you have a much larger, more representative collection.

We are all familiar with certain phrases such as *taking the piss* (or *taking the mickey* if you will), for instance, in Australia. Yet if we search current corpora of Australian English we cannot find even one example where this phrase is used. This means that while we might assume that *taking the piss* is something that many Australians enjoy doing, we cannot get a handle on what such an iconic phrase means across the Australian linguistic landscape. We know from searching the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English that it is phrase also used frequently by the British, but rarely by Americans. But we do not yet know if Australians mean something different by this phrase to the British. This is just one example of a multitude of questions about language use that could be answered through the establishment of a large Australian National Corpus.

An Australian National Corpus would not only be useful to those studying languages in Australia and seeking to better understand what it means to be Australian. It would serve as a helpful resource for those teaching English and other languages, as it would provide real-life, authentic examples of spoken and written language to use in the classroom. It would also be of assistance for those building human-computer interaction systems. Unless we all want to start speaking like Ameri-

cans, then language technologists will increasingly need access to large collections of data where Australians are speaking English. It might be irritating to be answered by a computer system on the phone, for example, but voice controlled systems are probably here to stay. The development of more Australian-friendly systems is at least one way to reduce such irritations (albeit not completely).

The Australian National Corpus initiative is a collaborative effort amongst Australian researchers, but we hope to involve Australians more broadly in this project in various ways. After all, ultimately every one of us has a deep investment in how language is used in Australia, as it is through all of us using language in our daily lives that we create the complexity and diversity of the Australian linguistic landscape. □

## Notes

1. Papers from the 2008 workshop can be found at <http://www.lingref.com/cpp/ausnc/2008/index.html>
2. The British National Corpus and Corpus of Contemporary American English are accessible online at <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/> and <http://www.americancorpus.org/> respectively. The Oxford English Corpus is not currently available to the public.

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An ongoing source of mistaken complaints to the ABC about declining grammatical standards is the “rule” that adverbs ending in *-ly* must be used in expressions like “it doesn’t come cheap”. One listener said, “This sounds terrible. Why was the adverb not used? ‘It does not come cheaply’ sounds so much better and is, with respect to the intention of the comment, more accurate”.

Her reaction reflects a belief in a simplistic rule, possibly instilled in primary school, has made her insensitive to what is actually being said. The idiom calls for “cheap”, the short rather than long form, because it’s about something not being available for a small price (cheap); it’s not about something being done in a cheap way (cheaply).

Another listener objected to the expression “act crazy”, saying it should be “act crazily”. The ABC staffer answering the complaint wasn’t sure which was right:

“I prefer ‘act crazily’, which I think is more correct. However, ‘act crazy’ strikes me as more common (perhaps American?).” This is an interesting response, illustrating the tension between vaguely remembered teachings and an awareness of the common usage. (Also, when in doubt, blame the Americans!)

In yet another complaint the target was “they emerged triumphant”. Perversely, the listener thought only the full form of the adverb “triumphantly” was correct. But the expression has nothing to do with the manner in which the people emerged. What matters is the resulting state – they were triumphant when they emerged. And this combination of a copular verb and a predicative adjective or adverb is not at all new or mistaken. It’s ordinary idiomatic usage. Other examples are: *appear busy, go hungry, play rough, run wild, plead guilty, hold dear* and *sleep easy*. (There is of course a difference be-

tween *sleep easy* and *sleep easily*. The latter means you have no trouble falling asleep.)

Listeners have been noticing odd stress patterns in the speech of presenters on TV and radio. If they hear you say things like “The cause of the fire is unknown” (a real example), who could blame them for ignoring your message or muttering to themselves how incompetently you have delivered it. The important words are *cause* and *unknown*, not *of* – “The cause of the fire is *unknown*”. Stress the **content words** (i.e. nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs, demonstratives and question words), rather than the **function words** (i.e. prepositions, articles, auxiliary verbs, conjunctions and pronouns), unless there’s a good reason to do otherwise.

It pays to work on developing your vocabulary. A couple of seldom used expressions attracted attention when they were used incorrectly. In an interview on *Media Watch* in August the Federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland said:

“I would like to see a protocol developed that can be activated rather than waiting for the good officers of the relevant organisation.”

At least, that’s what it sounded like, not only to those who recorded the official transcript but also to the ABC staff who prepared the *Media Watch* transcript. It so happens that “officers” and “offices” sound the same in Australian English, but “good officers” makes no sense in the context – McClelland had in fact used the expression *good offices*.

On the *7.30 Report* one evening the interviewee, the artist and filmmaker Peter Greenaway, used an unfamiliar word. It sounded like “incubala”, and lo and behold there it was in the transcript the next day:

“It makes sense to make an attachment to those paintings which we might not have seen in person, but we are familiar with through

*Language researcher Irene Poinkin summarises recent discussions at SCOSE, the ABC Standing Committee on Spoken English.*

chocolate boxes, tea towels and all that other incubala you buy in gift shops all over the world.”

The speaker was apparently thinking of *incunabula* (pronounced /in-kyooh-NAB-yooh-luh/), but this doesn’t fit the context either. In Latin *incunabula* meant swaddling clothes or things of the cradle, but in English it came to refer to books from the infancy of book production, especially those printed before 1501. It is sometimes anglicised as *incunables* /in-KYOOH-nuh-buhlz/.

A final example warns us to be alert to the unintended connotations of what we’re saying:

“A bishop in Britain has advised churches not to use holy water in order to prevent the spread of swine flu.”

If holy water could prevent the spread of swine flu, it would be a sin not to use it. That wasn’t the point. A simple change in word order would have fixed the problem:

“To prevent the spread of swine flu, a bishop in Britain has advised churches not to use holy water.” □



# The placename dictionary. Where to from here?

Jan Tent is a Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at Macquarie University, and Director of the [Australian National Placenames Survey](#). His article is adapted from a presentation he gave at *Australex 2009*.

Toponyms (or placenames) are names to denote or identify human habitation sites (cities, towns, villages etc.), natural geographic features (mountains, rivers, lakes, bays, seas etc.), and political boundaries (states, municipalities etc.). They identify and reflect culture, heritage and landscape, and therefore offer much to cartographers, geographers, historians, genealogists, linguists, language planners, and tourists. Toponyms are also a vehicle for public and personal reference (Kostanski 2009). In the former, they are used for location delineation and identification (e.g. for emergency services, postal services, deliveries, communication, defence, navigation etc.). They can also function as powerful political tools (e.g. anti-German sentiments during World War I resulted in the renaming of 69 German placenames in South Australia). As a mechanism for personal reference, toponyms play an integral part in personal identity, because people always associate themselves with one or more places (e.g. where they were born, live and have lived, where their ancestors came from etc.). People

have very strong attachments to placenames because they are linking agents or symbols of attachment between themselves and a place. To illustrate this, I cite one example. In 1993, a new virus was isolated in the Four Corners area of south-western United States. Residents so vehemently objected to it being named “Four Corners virus” or “Muerto Canyon Virus” (for obvious reasons) that it was ultimately named “Sin Nombre virus”, which in Spanish means “no name” (Strauss & Strauss 2008).

The naming of places is, therefore, a core human activity. Places without names are merely spaces. We can say that a place is space with meaning attached, and this is brought about by human interaction with a place and is recognised through its name (Kostanski 2009).

For all these reasons, placenames generate much interest with the public. For instance, radio station switchboards usually run hot when

talkback broadcasters discuss placenames. This interest is also reflected by the numerous placename dictionaries that are published. Indeed, more placename dictionaries are published than any other type of dictionary.

Toponyms constitute a very distinct class of proper noun, and therefore require a special type of dictionary. In my work and research for the Australian National Placenames Survey, I sometimes refer to placename dictionaries as a first step in investigating the origin or meaning of a toponym. Unfortunately, they are frequently disappointing because the information they provide is regularly inaccurate, unreliable (often based on folk etymology), inconsistent in format, and well-known placenames are routinely omitted. Placename dictionaries therefore leave a lot to be desired and need re-viewing.

## Placename publications

Placename publications date back to at least the sixteenth century. In 1599, John Thorius [aka Thorie or Thorio] published a pocket-sized encyclopaedic style dictionary of places, *The Theatre of the Earth*. It alphabetically lists short accounts on towns, cities, a variety of geographical features, and countries in general. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a plethora of treatises on and dictionaries of toponyms. Many of these were etymological in nature, tracing the linguistic origin of toponyms.

I make a distinction here between what I would term *placename* (or *toponym*) *dictionaries* and *dictionaries of places*. The former largely deal with the etymology and meaning of toponyms, whilst the latter largely contain encyclopaedic information about the places to which the toponyms refer. Some publications are a blend of the two.



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### Dictionary functions

Dictionaries have two broad functions: *communicative* and *cognitive*. Those designed for communicative purposes are used for language encoding or decoding (bilingual dictionaries and learners dictionaries are prime examples of this genre). Dictionaries compiled for cognitive purposes are chiefly used for acquiring knowledge or information (technical dictionaries and the *Oxford English Dictionary* are key examples of this genre). Placename dictionaries have a cognitive function, i.e. they are knowledge-oriented, and should, therefore, also be considered as specialist or technical dictionaries because, like these, they have:

- a special purpose
- nouns as headwords (in this case proper nouns)
- have a “technical” terminology<sup>1</sup>
- have standardised forms, and therefore have a *normative* function<sup>2</sup>
- only denotations of terms
- often an encyclopaedic definition style
- potential for the inclusion of maps and illustrations.

How well placename dictionaries fulfil this cognitive function will depend on who their intended users are. A toponymist, geographer or linguist may require information on the etymology, geographic feature code, or toponym type. Historians will generally require more information in the form of location of the named feature, who, when and why a particular placename was bestowed, or historical notes about the

place named. On the other hand, tourists, attracted to the cultural authenticity and identity of places they are visiting would be interested in all of this information, as well as local attractions, facilities etc.

A considerable range of placename dictionaries exists. Some attempt to cover the entire nation, others concentrate on specific states or regions (e.g. the Hunter River region), whilst others focus on certain types of placenames (e.g. Indigenous, French).

There is also a considerable range in the type of information provided under each entry in placename dictionaries. In what may be termed “pure” placename dictionaries, the user is presented with toponyms, their etymologies, and perhaps their meanings. In dictionaries of Indigenous placenames, toponyms’ purported translation equivalents are provided. Sometimes, when it is known, the Indigenous language from whence the placenames derive is given. In dictionaries of places, some or all of the above information may be provided, but primarily location of the named places, purported origins and meanings of the name, and histories of the places. As mentioned above, the quality of this information is often dubious and/or inconsistent.

Given the popularity and profusion of placename dictionaries, it seems puzzling that they are very rarely dealt with in lexicographic and onomastic literature. They only seem to be mentioned in the review sections of academic journals. Moreover, these reviews are generally superficial and uninformative, only dealing with the form and scope of entries.

It is clear that the placename dictionary is not a highly developed genre. My research indicates that there have been few, if any, innovations since John Thorius.

### Where to from here?

What kinds of queries should a placename dictionary be able to satisfy? The answer naturally depends on who the intended users are. As

outlined above, different users require different kinds of information. No print dictionary can satisfy the needs of all types of users. As a very minimum, it would entail the melding of “pure” placename dictionary entries and the encyclopaedic style entries of dictionaries of place. However, the large amount of information needed for each entry would restrict the total number of entries in such a dictionary, thereby significantly reducing its ultimate usefulness. An online dictionary, however, would solve this particular impediment because space is not an issue. Cross-referencing to other toponyms via hyperlinks, cross-referencing between other online dictionaries and encyclopaedias, audio pronunciations, stored user profiles, user defined filters/settings, images, videos, hyperlinks to all placenames depicted on maps, natural language queries (e.g. “capital of Victoria?”), fuzzy spellings (e.g. *Woolongong* > *Wollongong*), searching by exonyms (e.g. *Nieuw Zuid Wales* > *New South Wales*), statistical information (e.g. the number of *Sandy Creeks* in Australia), and toponym typology using spider diagrams are just some of the possibilities offered by this medium.

So, what might an online dictionary of Australian placenames and places contain? Among other things, it should contain:

- articles or information on: scope and arrangement of the dictionary; relevance of toponyms; unique characteristics of Australian toponymy; features of the Australian toponymic system; Indigenous toponyms; introduced toponyms

- but also: a toponym typology (by which all toponyms will be classified); a glossary of geographic feature types (by which all toponyms will be classified); abbreviations used in the dictionary; catalogues of introduced toponyms from different languages, e.g. French, Dutch, German, Polish, etc.; maps showing toponyms catalogued in the dictionary; useful web links; references.

<sup>1</sup> Toponyms are counted here as technical terms.

<sup>2</sup> Gazetted or official toponyms have standardised spellings and therefore have a prescriptive function. A good placename dictionary should only catalogue gazetted toponyms.



The structure of individual entries could have the following arrangement:

**Toponym** /pronunciation/ [in audio, and in phonetic and respelling forms]

- Location (State, latitude & longitude)
- Map reference
- Feature type [type of geographic feature, e.g. BAY, STREAM, RESERVE, MOUNTAIN etc.]
- Toponym type [Indigenous or introduced, and whether descriptive, eponymous, shift etc.]
- Traditional Indigenous owners
- Alternative and previous name(s) [if any]
- Exonyms [foreign names for the toponym [e.g. *Australisch Hoofdstedelijk Territorium* > *Australian Capital Territory*]
- Post Code
- Population statistics
- Parish / Municipality
- Electorates (State & Federal)
- Description [of the place]
- Origin of toponym [etymology, who bestowed the name and why etc.]
- Meaning [of the name, if relevant]
- History [of the place, and cultural significance of both the place and its name]
- Local attractions [in, near or at the place]
- See also [nearby places, places with the same name, web links, other references and sources etc.]

### Challenges

The dispensing of this prescription is not straightforward because the compilation of a placename dictionary brings with it challenges that compilers of other types of dictionaries do not face.

The most significant of these include the all too common lack of historical documents that detail or allude to the origin of introduced toponyms. This leads to the inability to establish the motivation for the bestowal of a particular name. This in turn, affects our ability to accurately classify toponyms. For a host of historical and linguistic reasons, the origin and/or meaning of innumerable Indigenous toponyms is also impossible to establish.

Added to this is the extensive amount of research needed for many toponyms. It is not unusual for me to spend six to eight fruitless months researching the origin of a toponym.

Finally, the sheer number of toponyms (approximately 5 million in Australia) makes a full coverage impossible. No general dictionary can contain all the words in a lan-

guage; likewise no placename dictionary can contain all a nation's or region's toponyms. There are many more toponyms in Australia than there are words in the entire English language. For that reason, like the compiler of a general dictionary, the compiler of a placename dictionary must also decide which toponyms to include and which ones to exclude.

### Conclusion

Judging by the content of the majority of placename dictionaries and dictionaries of places, their compilers seldom appear to take into account who the users may be. In so doing, these dictionaries rarely fulfil their proper cognitive function. Compilers and publishers alike should more carefully consider who the users will be and format their product accordingly. Secondly, lexicographers and toponymists should collaborate in developing some guidelines for the lexicographic selection and presentation of the toponymic data. This would ensure consistent and functional presentation of the data, thereby increasing the cognitive functionality of the dictionary. These

guidelines should be applied to both print and online dictionaries. Given the type of data to be presented in an ideal dictionary of placenames and places, an online format is the most preferred. This medium is flexible and will allow the dictionary to be continuously updated, as well as significantly increase its cognitive functionality. □

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## From the Editor

Many thanks to all the readers who have expressed their pleasure at the return of Australian Style, and those who have offered suggestions for improvements to the online edition. One of the most common requests was for a printable version of the newsletter, for those who find reading online difficult, or like the portability and convenience of hard copy. We've supplied a PDF version of this and the previous edition for this purpose. Please bear in mind that this cannot include all the content of the online edition, and a few articles are shortened or omitted.

We have supplied a printable version of the Feedback questionnaire in the current PDF, realising that some of you might prefer to fill it out that way. Hopefully we have ironed out most of the frustrations you had with the online survey. We received 210 Feedback responses, which was very satisfactory for our first foray into the electronic medium, but would like to increase this number along with our online readership. There are currently some 1100 email addresses on our contact list, for people who've asked to receive notifications of new editions or updates. If you

would like your email added, or think we might have an old address for you, please send a message to [adam.smith@mq.edu.au](mailto:adam.smith@mq.edu.au).

We'd also like to have you input in the form of questions about usage. Letters to the Editor is one forum for this, and you'll find some interesting responses to the question about ship naming conventions from the last issue. Also, if any readers would like to contribute a short piece on a new word, or one with an interesting history, for our word column, we'd be happy to consider it for publication.

I hope you find this issue an interesting one. Michael Haugh's lead article describes the important initiative for a national Australian corpus, and we have articles by Jan Tent and Julia Miller based on their presentations at the recent Australex conference in Sydney. Along with the other regular features, you will find some additions to the PDF archive, which takes us back to 1999, and a page featuring new publications that might interest our readers.

Wishing you all a happy Christmas and New Year. The next edition is planned for June 2010.

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## Poultice

If you won a "poultice" on Shocking in this year's Melbourne Cup, you've probably been too busy spending to worry about how a term for a soothing medication came to mean "a large amount of money". Horse-racing actually has a lot to do with it. Medical poultices are commonly applied to horses to relieve inflammation, and according to the *Australian National Dictionary* (AND) *poultice* was first used in its metaphorical sense for a large bet, typically on the horses. Given that the earliest citations in the AND are about people with inside knowledge putting money on a horse they're confident

of winning, it's plausible that the financial stake was originally seen as a kind of security, massaging the chances of the horse winning, rather like the medical treatment. Our current broader meaning – along with another historical sense, "mortgage" – has obscured the word's origins. It's understandable why money has become associated with sustenance in colloquial terms such as *dough* and *bread*, but its healing properties are less well established.

Adam Smith

*A version of this article was first published in Campus Review (13.11.06).*



# No jam for the wicked: do all English speakers understand and use the same idioms?

Julia Miller, of Adelaide University, reports on the results of a survey into English idiom (see Australian Style 15.2).

I would like to begin by thanking all those who completed my idiom survey last year. There was a huge amount of interest, with 2085 surveys completed by native speakers of English aged 16 or over in Australia and the UK. Some people did more than one survey, but overall there were about 1500 different participants. Since these people were either already interested in language or coerced by their school teachers, this doesn't count as a random sample of the population, but the findings do indicate a general pattern of idiom use by different age groups in the two locations.

Eighty-four idioms were divided equally between six different surveys. These idioms represented the classes of Biblical (e.g. *cast pearls before swine*), literary/historical (e.g. *an albatross around the neck*), Australian in reference (e.g. *back of Bourke*), British in reference (e.g. *send someone to Coventry*) and older reference (e.g. *full steam ahead*). Participants were asked to suggest any idioms they knew, from a word and picture prompt, and then to indicate whether they had heard this particular idiom before, what it meant, and where/how often they would use it. The aims were to elicit as many idioms as possible, and to ascertain whether certain idioms are more familiar to, and used by, certain age groups in certain countries.

Most familiar idioms in Australia and the UK	Familiarity level
<i>to cry wolf</i>	98%
<i>to be off steam</i>	98%
<i>to turn the other cheek</i>	97%
<i>full steam ahead</i>	95%
<i>to run out of steam</i>	95%
<i>not to move an inch</i>	93%
<i>an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth</i>	93%
<i>give someone an inch and they'll take a yard in it</i>	92%
<i>look before you leap</i>	92%
<i>the blind leading the blind</i>	91%

Table 1: Idioms most familiar to all participants

The ten most familiar idioms from the surveys are shown in Table 1. Idioms including the word 'steam' were obviously popular, and so were those of a Biblical origin. The ten most used idioms were almost identical, with *the penny drops* replacing *not to move an inch*. The least used idioms in the survey, aside from Australian or British expressions, were *to rain fire and brimstone* (26%); *to be/look every inch* (25%); *jam tomorrow* (23%); and *to beat swords into ploughshares* (17%).

Those idioms which were most familiar in Australia were, not surprisingly, Australian expressions (see Table 2). Some of these idioms were entirely unknown to the UK participants. Only *don't come the raw prawn with me* had a fairly high UK rating, perhaps due to its distinctiveness, and Barrie Mackenzie's influence.

Older speakers were generally more familiar with the idioms in the survey than younger speakers. For example, *the spirit is willing but the flesh is*

*weak* was familiar to 94% of those aged over 41, but only 21% of the 16-22 age group. The only idiom which seemed to be used more by the younger group was the elicited expression *whatever floats your boat*, suggested by seven people in the 16-22 group and two in the over 41 group.

Older participants had heard the surveyed idioms from a variety of sources. The most popular places for the 16-22 group were conversation, literature, parents and television. Music and films also featured. For example, *all that glitters is not gold* was first heard in Led Zeppelin's song *Stairway to heaven* by at least one and possibly four younger participants, though it appears there in the positive form, *all that glitters is gold*. *Full steam ahead* was first encountered by at least one younger person in *Thomas the tank engine*. The youngest group were most likely to use the idioms when talking to older people, while those aged 23 and above were most



Continued from previous page

More familiar in Australia	Familiarity level in Australia	Familiarity level in UK
<i>done like a dinner</i>	69%	20%
<i>in the box seat</i>	68%	15%
<i>like a shag on a rock</i>	66%	5%
<i>to get a Guemsey</i>	60%	0%
<i>don't come the raw prawn with me</i>	58%	36%
<i>back of Bourke</i>	57%	3%
<i>not to have a bar of something</i>	12%	0%

Table 2: Idioms more familiar in Australia than the UK

likely to use them when talking to friends.

I had hoped that the survey would give me a portrait of emerging expressions, especially from the younger group, but this was not the case. However, there were some interesting suggestions which I will include here: *no jam for the wicked*; *never judge a wolf by its cover*; *the albatross ate my baby*; and *feed pearls to pigs and their meat will sparkle*. These were all from the 16-22 group, in both locations. The main innovation across ages and countries was *sheep in wolf's clothing*, suggested by 32 people. It occurred so frequently that I'm beginning to wonder if it is developing into an idiom in its own right.

The survey indicates that there is indeed a variation in idiom use between younger and older age groups in the UK and Australia. Collating and discussing all the findings will take some time, but I shall inform readers when the novel, movie and tee-shirt are available. □





# Book Notes

## Ernest Gowers: Plain Words and Forgotten Deeds

*Alan Kuslap, a public servant with the Attorney General's Department, reviews Ann Scott's biography of Ernest Gowers Plain Words and Forgotten Deeds, Palgrave Macmillan. 2009 ISBN: 978-0-230-58025-1*

Ann Scott has a wealth of experiences and achievements in the public arena but, as the granddaughter of the late Sir Ernest Gowers, she has written about another civil servant in a more turbulent time. Sir Ernest is best known as the author of *Plain Words*, a text championing the replacement of pompous and overly elaborate written language with plain, understandable English. A text written at the end of Sir Ernest's career that took him from the anonymity of the civil service into the public eye of authorship.

In *Plain Words and Forgotten Deeds* one discovers the man behind this corner stone in the use of everyday English. We get an insight into his working life more normally hidden in the mysterious corridors of bureaucracy. We see a man formed by his circumstances and who equally influenced the circumstances in which he was found. It is a quirk of history that placed a man like Sir Ernest in the British Civil Service during a period that spanned two world wars and a volume of social revolutions.

Ann Scott has not told the story of the author of *Plain Words* as much as she has painted the canvas of the

life of a career civil servant, seemingly undramatic, but the image of a proverbial "paddling duck" comes to mind as the tale unfolds. In this book the author has fulfilled her aim, set out in the book's preface, to both "preserve the memory" as well as "prolong the usefulness of a valuable life". Though this is a book backed by scholarly research and built from archival material, the heart of a granddaughter discovering the character and inner workings of her grandfather underlines every page.

I may be a biased public servant, but I enjoyed reading the life and times of one of the 'back room' boys who helped hold together the fabric of society whilst participating in the revolution of change savagely pushed by conflict, political will (or the lack of) and self serving indulgences of others. Selective quotes from Sir Ernest and his peers punctuate and illustrate his professional career, and though you can glimpse the character of the individuals, what you can't miss is the character and machinery of Government.

Sir Ernest was a formidable leader within the Civil Service. His political masters placed him in many different roles utilising his capacity to drive and negotiate change, yet somehow maintain stability. In these pages we see into the conflict of profiteering coal mine owners resisting a Government's attempts to nationalise their rampant, unsafe and inequitable industry. We gain an understanding of the home guard's role in resisting the onslaught of the blitz bombing of London in World War II (nothing like 'Dad's Army'). We witness the struggle of individual and political will as the case for the abolition of capital punishment locks horns with popular opinion. These are just some of the tasks taken in the stride of a competent and versatile

civil servant, but it is the 'forgotten deeds' that give character and colour to this book.

One initially has the impression that all the worldly upheaval played a significant role in eliminating the language divide in British society, and that Sir Ernest was simply in the right place at the right time. But the man who chaired committees and led investigations, invaded board rooms and bantered with politicians, yet only noticed by those with whom he directly interacted, takes a deliberate and dramatic turn in his career to write *Plain Words*. Not happenstance at the culmination of his career, rather an exclamation mark on a life well spent.

Scott's biography of Gower sits in a series sub-titled *Understanding Governance* and as one who has spent over 25 years in the Australian Public Service I found moments in reading where I cheered at the revelation and insight that leapt from the pages. □



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## Tales of Hi and Bye: Greeting and Parting Rituals around the World

The author and illustrator of this book specialises in telling the unexpected stories behind mundane objects and habits that we take for granted. His previous book, *Quirky Qwerty*, reviewed in *Australian Style* 10.1, gave us potted histories about each of the symbols on the keys of that ubiquitous modern tool, the computer keyboard. The current, similarly pocket-sized volume, takes on the expansive topic of how different cultures greet and farewell each other.

While the range of areas for discussion on a keyboard are naturally circumscribed by the number of keys, the scope for treating this fundamental form of human interaction is almost boundless. Lundmark doesn't limit himself to any particular area of the world, or merely to the verbal. His book is divided into three sections: "Gestures and Signals", "Customs and Behaviours" and "Names and Addresses". Under these headings we discover that a form of the Nazi (originally Roman) salute was used to honour the Stars and Stripes up until 1942; the Damin language from the Mornington Peninsula has two sounds not found in any other language in the world (technically described as the "ingressive lateral fricative" and the "ejective bilabial stop"; in Chinese there is a specific term for "my mother's brother's son who is older than I am" – *jiubiaoxiong*).

These headings do not always successfully delineate the material, so we are told more than once about methods for avoiding greeting, or about the decline of the use of "you" in Swedish. But we can forgive these occasional repetitions as the by-products of the collector's enthusiasm. This is not meant to be either an exhaustive or an academically systematic study of greeting and

parting rituals. Lundmark's approach is that of the bower bird, honing in on the attractively curious – such as the Eskimo version of the handshake, the shoulder-strike – as well as the familiar.

The author is Swedish born, but resident in Australia, so these cultures feature heavily, alongside customs from China, Japan, Britain, the US, Poland, Africa and the Pacific Islands. The subject matter sometimes gives rise to stereotypes, as with the Englishmen whose sense of reserve dictates that they pass each other after weeks in the desert without a word of greeting. But the warmth and humour of Lundmark's writing make these examples celebrations of quirkiness rather than social criticism.

This is not a scholarly work, and there is the occasional factual error (such as the suggestion that Shakespeare's *As You Like It* was written before *Love's Labour's Lost*), or generalisation. But the scope of the material and references indicate the author's pleasure in research and desire to communicate this with his audience. It is a hospitable book, eager, like the typical Chinese host described in its pages, to detain its reader with another tempting morsel, and gently importuning you to "come back" after you have put it down. □

*Adam Smith reviews Torbjorn Lundmark's Tales of Hi and Bye, Cambridge University Press, 2009. ISBN: 9780521117548*



# FEED BACK

## Report

This is the first AS FEEDBACK survey to be carried out online, in keeping with the new format for the magazine. Being online, it could ask a lot more questions than on a single printed page, and we were able to pose a total of 35, all issues of variable punctuation, grammar, editorial setting and number style, which are pertinent to the next (7<sup>th</sup>) edition of the Australian Government *Style Manual*.

The FEEDBACK 31 questionnaire was posted with *Australian Style* 16:1 (April 2009) on the Macquarie University website. It was great to receive responses from over 210 online readers of AS who took time to do the FEEDBACK 31 survey, and we're very grateful to all of you. This report summarises the most striking results in relation to issues in punctuation, where everyday usage seems to diverge from the recommendations of the current (6<sup>th</sup>) edition of the *Style Manual*, published in 2002. Some of the responses suggest the need to fine-tune and/or the *Manual's* recommendations, especially in relation to the type of publication (whether the text is an official government document or a publication for a general Australian readership). The *Manual* is certainly used by many editors outside the circle of government.

**1. Quotation marks: single or double quote marks as the default system.** The majority of respondents (63%) endorsed *double quote marks* to set off the quotation in the sentence: *The premier replied: "I will fix the state's transport problems"*.

Asked whether their practice would depend on the type of text, e.g. whether it was fiction or nonfiction, the majority (c. 60%) said no, and for many the issue was simply that double quotes mark serve to indicate quoted speech in any kind of text. For some,

single quotes then marked 'highlighted items'. This was the chief rationalisation for using double (and single) quotes – except where one or other was mandated by the employer or a particular style guide.

The majority preference indicated in this 2009 survey is at variance with the *Style Manual's* current recommendation (2002:112) to use single quotes in government publications. The *Style Manual* does recognise that double quotes are widely used in Australia (they are the norm in newspapers and magazines, and well-used in online documents).

**2. Unspaced em rule/dash or spaced en rule/dash.** The majority of respondents (61%) endorsed the use of *spaced en dashes* for the parenthesis in the sentences like: *The premier thought – but had only one minute to consider – that it could not be fixed overnight*

Among respondents aged 45–64, the endorsement for *spaced ens* rather than *unspaced ems* ran much higher (74%). The survey respondents' overall preference run counter to the *Style Manual's* recommendation (pp106-7) to use unspaced em dashes, and it does not discuss the use of spaced ens as an alternative. Among the many who endorsed use the spaced en rule, its virtue is that the spacing around each dash puts visual separation between the last word before the parenthetical break and the first word after it. Some respondents commented on the fact that it is "less crowded" and "easier to read". Meanwhile the unspaced em rule seems to make too emphatic a connection (like a giant hyphen) between the two unrelated words on either side. The unspaced em was still endorsed by some for aesthetic reasons: that it was "tidier" and "looked better". Yet from both sides of this fence, some respondents indicated that they actually made use of a third option, that of using a pair of *spaced ems* to mark a parenthesis, which is the default in some software packages.

These findings suggest the need to revisit the *Manual's* current recommendation on the use of unspaced ems in parentheses, and to allow for the spaced ens and/or spaced ems which come with some editing and design software packages.

### 3. Types of bullets for second and third level divisions in a list.

Respondents were asked whether for the second level in a bulleted list they would use unfilled bullets (with filled bullets as the first level). This is in keeping with the default system in Microsoft Word. Only 43% said that they would do so, and the rest indicated that they had other practices. Asked about the third level, and whether they would then use square bullets for the third level, only 39% said that they would do so. Some indicated that they would use dashes or spaced hyphens (or diamonds/arrowheads) at this level of the hierarchy. Others responded with the comment that they would resist going to a third level of bullets, and would rather redesign the list.

The current *Style Manual* shows (pp143, 145) the use of dashes for the second level of the hierarchy, but the topic is not discussed.

### 4. Punctuation of individual items in bulleted lists.

In standalone bulleted lists of short items (no more than 2 words long), no punctuation is required according to the current *Style Manual* (2002:144). However some additional punctuation may be desirable in bulleted lists which are integrated with the text and consist of longer items. Presented with a list of items consisting of 4-8 words, a small majority of respondents (55%) said that they would use a final full stop (i.e. minimal punctuation only), which is in line with the *Manual's* "middle-path" recommendations (2002: 142-3), though not a resounding endorsement of it. The argument that such lists need "sentence punctuation" loses something of its force once the items are listed vertically on separate lines.

Only 26% of survey respondents endorsed the use of semicolons to mark off each item in such a list. Semicolons have traditionally been used in lists of items in official and legal documents, but this practice is no longer widely supported. Although the current *Manual* mentions the use of semicolons in lists (p.142), it does not illustrate or use the practice itself. The developing use of bullets as an initial punctuation device for items in lists makes final punctuation less crucial.

[a longer version of this report is available online]



# FEED BACK

## —32—

With the turn of the millennium and the first decade of the twenty-first century, it's timely to revisit some of the burning questions of nomenclature posed in 1999, while we were still anticipating it and not sure what it would bring. Remember the Y2K bug! Some of the others below revisit issues of numbers and quantities which have proved swingers in earlier questionnaires, which we'd like to pursue in greater detail.

There is a version of this questionnaire available online but if you would prefer to send in hard copy you can print and fax this form to (02) 98509199, or mail to Adam Smith, Linguistics Department, Macquarie University, NSW 2109.

1. How do you refer to the first decade of the twenty-first century? As:

the twenty Os  the two thousands  the noughties

2. How do you refer to the year 2005? As:

two thousand and five  twenty O five  two double O five

3. How will you refer to the second decade of the twenty-first century? As:

the two thousand and tens  or the twenty tens

4. How will you refer to the year 2015? As:

two thousand and fifteen  or twenty fifteen

5. When citing historical dates with eras, do you give them as:

5a) BC 450  or 450 BC  5b) AD 450  or 450 AD

6. Do you use BCE and CE as replacements for BC and AD?

Yes  Sometimes  No

If you do use BCE/CE please comment on the kinds of writing in which you would use them

7. How do you quote mobile phone numbers? Grouped as:

4/3/3 e.g. 0406 664 666  4/2/4 e.g. 0406 66 4666  3/3/4 e.g. 040 666 4666

Is there a rationale for your customary way of doing it?

8. How would you write the following spans of numbers?

8a) 105-7  or 107-07  8b) 115-7  or 115-17

8c) 125-7  or 125-27  8d) 1345-7  or 1345-47

Is there a rationale for your customary way of writing spans? (Are there different conventions for page numbers/dates/house numbers?)

9. When writing five digit numbers e.g. 30 000 with space as the separator, the two parts need to be linked by means of a special kind of space character that ensures the wordprocessor keeps them together. What do you call that space character?

hard space  non-breaking space  unbreakable space

10. As the abbreviation for gigabyte, do you use:

Gb  or GB

11. Do you write the time for half-past midnight as:

00.30  or 12.30

Do you refer to that time as am or pm?

12. Do you write the time for half-past midday as:

12.30  or 00.30

Do you refer to that time as am or pm?

13. When writing measurements and quantities, which do you make it:

10kg  or 10 kg

Would you please indicate your age bracket and sex:

10-24                      25-44                      45-64                      65+                      F/M

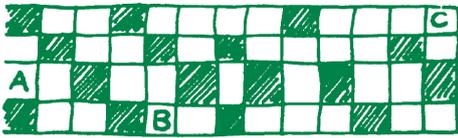
your place of residence:

ACT    NSW    NT    QLD    SA    TAS    VIC    WA    Outside Australia

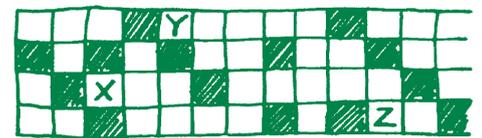
your place of education (all or most of it):

ACT    NSW    NT    QLD    SA    TAS    VIC    WA    Outside Australia

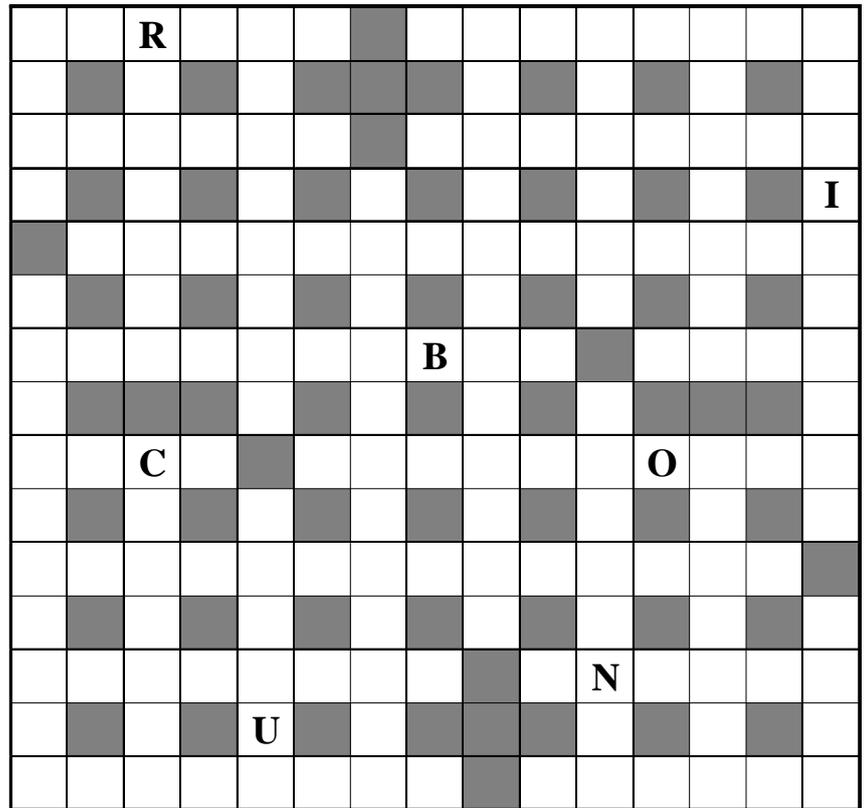




# RUBICON



RUBICON, devised by David Astle, is a hybrid of crossword, jigsaw and acoustic. First, solve as many clues as you can and begin to fit the answers inside the grid. (The scattered letters of RUBICON should give you a toehold.) When the grid is completed, arrange the *clues* from the first Across to the last Down – their 28 initial letters will hint at a rare quality that only six of your solution words possess.



- Yuman, Mayan or Aztec (6,8)
- Enervating disappointment experienced on the Titanic? (7,7)
- New Latin for a diplomat acceptable to a foreign government (7,5)
- Talked ad lib (12)
- Fellow tangled in apron strings? (7,3)
- GP's prescribed capsule (10)
- Grand term for concert producer (10)
- Ignominiously suffering embarrassment (6,4)
- Finish the stronger in an oratory contest (8)
- Heavenly confections combining nuts and caramelised sugar (8)
- Historic two-winged aircraft (8)
- Ratio can distort Mac? (8)
- Restaurant's overseers of waiting staff (8)
- VII-related (8)
- A guest of Her Majesty, euphemistically (7)
- Nerd lit twisted vine's offshoot (7)
- Phenomenon performed by Jesus (7)
- Transmitting light (7)
- Bedlam; refuge (6)
- Diaphragm spasm (6)

- Excessively sweet (6)
- Excruciating experience (6)
- Olle of Australian media (6)
- Ye old term for a rowboat's bench (6)
- Oxford or brogue (4)
- Sink alternative? (4)
- Impaired by lack of hearing (4)
- Nation; dash (4)

**Solution to Rubicon in last issue**  
 WORDS ENCLOSING  
 VARIETIES OF BERRY: Cranium,  
 slogans, grasped,  
 ability, fielder, formula

D	I	E	H	A	R	D		I	N	F	I	D	E	L
E		M		B		O		N		I		U		O
C	R	A	N	I	U	M		T	H	E	R	A	P	Y
A		N		L		I		E		L		L		A
F	I	C	T	I	O	N		R	A	D	I	C	A	L
		I		T		I				E		I		I
D	O	P	E	Y		C	A	S	T	R	A	T	E	S
E		A				A		P				I		T
P	A	T	A	G	O	N	I	A		F	A	Z	E	S
O		I		R				R		O		E		
S	L	O	G	A	N	S		K	O	R	A	N	I	C
I		N		N		M		P		M		S		E
T	W	I	D	D	L	E		L	A	U	G	H	E	D
E		S		M		L		U		L		I		E
D	O	T	B	A	L	L		G	R	A	S	P	E	D

