Cats and dogs

It's a sad day when someone who says she abandoned a holiday site 'because it was raining cats and dogs' is said to 'give a linguistic clue' that she was not a native speaker (Michael Rundell, 'The word on the street', *ET*43, Jul 95).

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As a native speaker who acquired the expression 'raining cats and dogs' from her parents (also local, native speakers) I disagree with Michael Rundell's assumption that the lady he met in Scotland was probably not a native speaker (*ET*43, Jul 95). Rundell may be interested to know that a popular '60s song – 'In the Wet' – includes the lyrics '... it's raining cats and dogs/And I can't stand croaking frogs'; but, to confuse the issue, the song was sung (and probably written) by Rolf Harris, the Australian entertainer!

Kate Ducker,
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'Raining cats and dogs' and native-speakerhood

I enjoyed reading Michael Rundell's article on the British National Corpus ('BNC') (*ET*43, Jul 1995) and learned a great deal from it. I am not satisfied, however, with his argument that the idiom 'raining cats and dogs' automatically identifies the speaker as non-native.

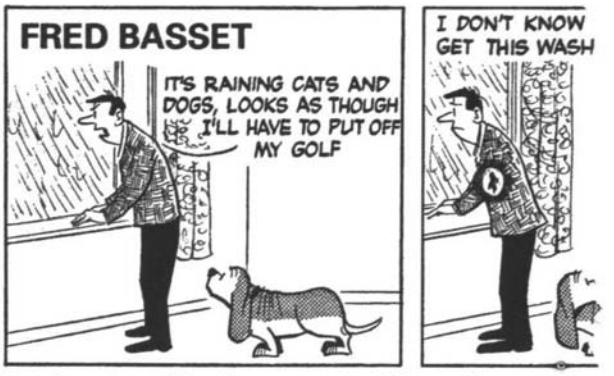
According to Rundell, the BNC is made up of 90 million words of written text and 10 million words of speech. But the phrase 'raining cats and dogs' does not appear even once in the spoken text (and only once in the written text). Rundell cites this corpus evidence as 'almost the first linguistic clue that' the fluent speaker he had then been talking with in Scotland 'was not after all a native speaker'. There are several problems with Rundell's argument: (1) the frequency of idiomatic phrases, and the corollary of (1), the representativeness of the corpus BNC, and (2) the definition of Native-Speaker of English.

Now, idiomatic phrases are known to be notoriously uncommon in various corpora. The original Cobuild Corpus of 7.3 million words, for example, had only one or two instances of *set in train, set in hand, set in order, set in a (traditional) mould, set in front of, set in juxtaposition to*, and *set in the balance* (Sinclair 1987: 154). Concerning these phrases Sinclair confesses that '[t]hey all seem common enough, and it is a slight shock to see how rare they are'. Again, in the foreword to their dictionary of idiomatic phrases Mackin (Cowie *et al.* 1985: vi) states that 'no useful statement could be made about the "frequency" of the kind of idiomatic expression I was collecting. For most of the expressions likely to appear in the dictionary one or two authentic examples might be enough to qualify them for entry, provided they could be elicited with ease from native speakers'.

It appears that extra care was taken to make sure that the BNC is representative not only demographically but also contextually, but I wonder how many words are used for talking about rain in the BNC Spoken Text. Without doubt collocations such as 'raining hard' or 'raining heavily' might be observed, but if so, how much and how frequently, I wonder? Is the BNC large enough for each and every idiomatic phrase that native speakers actually use to be fairly represented in it? Wouldn't it be possible that the phrase 'raining cats and dogs' is missing from the BNC spoken corpus purely by accident? Corpora, after all, cannot tell us what the language does not do no matter how large they are, they only can tell what it does.

Rundell admits that 'there may well be varieties of English in which speakers do say "raining cats and dogs"'. If that is indeed the case, could the woman speaking 'accent-free English' have been a native-speaker of some variety of English other than British, say, American, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand or South African? Would the use of that

Proof positive?



'Raining cats and dogs' appears to be doing well at least with British cartoonists: from Alex Graham's *Fred Basset* strip in the *Daily Mail* (14 Oct 95)

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idiomatic phrase really serve as one of the distinctive features which distinguish those alleged varieties of English from British English? Or, did Rundell imply by his statement simply that she could not have been a *British* Native Speaker just because she uttered 'raining cats and dogs'?

I suspect that the idiom 'raining cats and dogs' coming from the Dutch speaker's mouth must have jarred on Rundell's native ears, even if slightly, and he had resorted to the BNC to corroborate his 'gut-feeling'. I sometimes wonder if idioms are not to be spoken but only to be heard by non-natives, who are by definition unable to handle them appropriately. Idioms may in fact be biblical shibboleths.

In any event, defining 'Native Speaker' of English is no easy matter (cf. Davies 1991), and identifying native speakers based solely on the corpus evidence should be no less easy. I wish Rundell had been more cautious in using corpus evidence for identification of the 'Native Speaker' in his otherwise informative article.

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Captain Cook's names

I enjoyed the article by Laurence Urdang in *ET*43 (Jul 95) with its study of onomastics illustrated by Captain Cook's naming of places. I think that I can identify the sources of three of those about which he was uncertain – they are all names of eminent admirals of the time.

Mount Edgcumbe would be after George Edgcumbe, first Earl Mount Edgcumbe (1721–95). As a comparatively junior officer, he did good work in fighting around Minorca and Gibraltar in 1756, when Admiral Byng was accused of failing in his duty and subsequently shot.

Point Rodney George Brydges, Earl Rodney (1719–92) had already been distinguished by his capture of Martinique from the French in 1762 and went on to further successful naval exploits.

Point Pococke Sir George Pococke or Pocock (1706–92) was also prominent in the fighting around Martinique and later engagements.

Laurence Urdang might like to have this information for his record.

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Job interviews in Hong Kong

Having taught in both China and Hong Kong for some years, I was disappointed in the article by Boyle and Tomlinson (*ET*43, Jul 95) on job interviews in Hong Kong. Apart from anything else, the list of "Real-life examples of Hong Kong business English" reminded me of snigger-provoking lists in the staff rooms of multi-racial schools in the sixties and seventies; no doubt teachers of foreign languages to British students could find equally hilarious examples of our inability to use their languages correctly. At least these errors resulted in intelligible communication; would the same be true if a learner of Cantonese made a mistake in one of the nine tones of that language?

Apart from my reservations about the value of such lists, I was not quite clear about the main thrust of the article. Was it to reveal the low level of English among Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong, to look at the interviewing system for Cantonese candidates, or to warn prospective ex-pat employees that fluent English was no longer enough to secure them a good job in the erstwhile Mecca of the aspiring but as yet unemployed young British professional? I should have thought that most people would realise that, in view of the changes to be expected in 1997, there will be increasing emphasis, both at the linguistic level and in the interviewing panel, on Mandarin. Perhaps ex-pat candidates and interviewers will experience the same embarrassment at having to speak a foreign language in front of native speakers which local people in Hong Kong have suffered for years.

It would, I feel, have been much more illuminating and rewarding if the writers had explained a little of the background of English learning in Hong Kong. I was appalled to realise how poor the standard of teaching is in what has been a British Colony for so long. But there are historical, if not satisfactory, reasons for this.

Many parents of now "upwardly-mobile" Cantonese are from poor working class families; many were refugees from Communist China, and many left school (if indeed they ever attended) barely able to read and write their own language. Would we expect the children of illiterate workers in this country to become fluent French or German speakers in one generation as a result of learning the language at school?

Many students are taught in

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Chinese medium schools – it is only the wealthy and prestigious schools which are normally able to employ native-speaker teachers, and consequently many Cantonese students never have the opportunity of speaking to native speakers until they face their HKCEE oral exam.

Many of the teachers in these Chinese medium schools are not really qualified to teach English, and lessons will probably be conducted in Cantonese; text books may or may not be in English, and are often written by non-native speakers. All these factors can help to explain the low level of English among many Cantonese students, even at sixth form level.

Unfortunately, I am not a Mandarin or Cantonese speaker, but I know that many so-called errors result from constructions in those languages. We are expecting our Cantonese students not only to acquire a new language, but also to develop a new way of looking at the world; European countries share certain basic concepts, but we cannot take these for granted in other parts of the world. Shades of tense to express time are not significant for Mandarin and Cantonese speakers; plurality is not expressed in the same way as in the West. Too many English language teachers appear to believe that the Western model is the universal model, and that any deviation is odd, if not incorrect. What I found so interesting when discussing language with my Chinese or Hong Kong friends was *why* certain expressions which are different from those used by native speakers have become so widespread, both in Mandarin and in Cantonese learners of English.

But there is also the emotional barrier. Yes, Cantonese students are surrounded by English language – notices, newspapers, films, ex-pat speakers. But English was very much seen as the language of foreign authority in time gone by, and as such to be rejected; though that prejudice diminished as the Cantonese people realised that English was a genuinely international language, recently there has been an increasing swing away from English and towards Mandarin. So there has been little genuine desire among many students to study English at depth.

What amazed me was the high standard of English and the enthusiasm shown by many students in Hong Kong despite these problems; teaching them was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Yes, they make the most basic mistakes, but there are more important things in life than the ability to remember which preposition follows a particular verb. There is now a general acceptance that there are different forms of English, each with its own usage and characteristics. Why should there not be a Chinese English in which there are usages which would not be accepted in a native speaker but which are acceptable in the Hong Kong or Mainland China context? Unless we are going to argue that language is inflexible and unchangeable, then we must be prepared to admit new usages developed by other speakers; there are modern English usages which I was taught to see as incorrect, but they are now in general use in this country. How then, can we criticise people from other cultures who adapt our language to their way of thinking?

I apologise at writing at such length, but I was irritated by the tone of the article. Having taught English to native speakers, ESL in this country, and EFL abroad, I cannot see that such an approach is going to encourage language learning or acquisition, yet surely this is the aim of language teaching? We can all find examples of mistakes – not always by foreign students – but surely we don't need to dwell on them.

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Linguistics and departments of English

I greatly enjoyed John D. Battenburg's "Linguistics in the English Department: Irreconcilable Differences?" in *ET*43 (Jul 95). I, too, am a linguist in an English Department. My fate was triggered by so-called downsizing (I was in a Linguistics Department at a sister university campus to Cal Poly, the author's home institution, California State University, Fullerton, for over 20 years, even serving for many years as Head of the Department), whereas Battenburg's position was spared this traumatic experience. While I agree with Dr. Battenburg's points almost in their entirety, I would like to go one step further than the author. The suggestion to rename American departments of English to *Departments of English Language and Literature* (p. 42) should, in my opinion, really be renamed to read *Departments of English Language, Literature, and Linguistics*, or *Departments of English Language, Linguistics, and Literature*. This move would inform administrators, students, and members of the community at large that linguistics is indeed an old scientific discipline and is definitely here to stay.

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