

## Linguistically challenged

Chris Goddard

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*Every day, health and welfare workers translate the needs of the disadvantaged into words that communicate those troubles to others. Such translations (or interpretations) run the risk of reducing or changing the experiences to allow them to fit with the expectations and demands of organisations and bureaucracies. This column draws upon the author's reflections on a complex and important, but rarely studied, aspect of social welfare practice.*

William Hazlitt, in his nineteenth century *Notes of a Journey through France and Italy*, wrote that 'In travelling we visit names as well as places'. When I first started travelling, it was the names of faraway places, and their associations, that seized my imagination. Mandalay, Madras, Kabul, Kuala Lumpur, and many others all created images of places where things were different. Many of the images, built as they were out of half-remembered pieces of Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham and E.M. Forster, proved to bear little resemblance to the reality.

Even in the places that somehow failed my strange expectations, there were other unexpected delights in store. Listening to people and hearing what they do with – and to – their languages was and is one. In India, their versions of English gave me many hours of pleasure. I am not sure that the pleasure was mutual.

Visiting the Andaman and Nicobar Islands may be more straightforward today but, twenty years ago, special permission had to be sought from the Indian equivalent of the Home Office. An 'Inner Line Permit' was required, either because there was a huge naval base on the islands or because the tribespeople needed protection, according to which of the two stories circulating at the time you believed.

The islands are in the Bay of Bengal and closer to Burma (Myanmar) than to India. Flying into Port Blair in those days meant taking an ancient plane with a limited range that forced a re-fuelling stop in Rangoon. When I tried to purchase a ticket for the flight from Indian Airlines, I was told that the Inner Line Permit was required. When I returned to the airline office with the permit from the Indian Home Office, I was informed that I also needed a visa for Burma 'in case the plane broke down'.

Needless to say, when I first made the journey to the Burmese Embassy it was closed for a public holiday. On the next day, I was told that such an emergency visa was not only unnecessary but also non-existent. I went back to the Indian Airlines office who refused to sell me a ticket until I obtained this visa that did not exist. I returned to the Burmese Embassy where, after much persuasion, an employee typed a letter saying that they could not give me such a visa.

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This brief description of what were several days of heat, queues, wrangling and frustration does not convey the state of mind I was in when, once again, I was refused a ticket. I exploded. I ranted and raved and, I am ashamed to say, banged the desk in sheer frustration. The forceful approach worked. After handing over my money, and promising to carry the Burmese Embassy letter with me, I received my ticket. Just as I was about to leave, the harassed clerk asked my permission to ask me a question. Sheepishly I agreed, embarrassed at this stage by the demonstration of rudeness I had provided for the queues behind.

'Tell me, what is your native place?'

'England', I replied, thinking that I was about to receive a comment on the fact that India had escaped such behaviour from its colonial rulers some 30 years before.

'Then, tell me, why is it that you speak your native tongue so badly?'

I laughed, and he laughed, and soon everyone was laughing at me and my poor attempts to speak English.

This experience came back to me at a case conference I attended some time ago. A foster parent was explaining why she and her family could no longer care for a particularly disturbed adolescent boy. His behaviour was itemised in detail by the worried and worn foster carer. He had, if I remember rightly, regularly stolen her money, attempted to sell drugs to her own son, poured petrol on the guinea pig that belonged to her daughter, acquired an air rifle and shot the next door neighbour's cat (an understandable aberration in my view, but that is another story), attempted to steal the foster father's car, and rounded off his stay by setting fire to his room and retiring to the bottom of the garden to get a better view of the resulting flames and the arrival of the fire brigade. There were other actions, equally concerning, that I have now forgotten.

The chair of the case conference, in an unsuccessful attempt to summarise and convert her experiences into the correct language, said that he understood her frustration at the 'challenging behaviour' of the foster child. This phrase was akin to giving petrol and matches to the young pyromaniac.

'Challenging behaviour? Challenging behaviour?' The foster mother's rage was far more frightening than my outburst in India. She stood up. 'Challenging behaviour? It's your \*\*\*\* challenging language that's the cause of this bloody problem!' With that insightful analysis, she left the room and, for all I know, the agency for good.

India is a large country with at least a dozen major languages and scores more minor languages and dialects. I never found out what languages the original inhabitants of the Andaman, let alone the Nicobar, islands spoke. The Indians have adapted the English language that was imposed on them, and used to govern them, to their own ends. They have done it so thoroughly and creatively that they have (perhaps deliberately) created a communication barrier between them and those that claim English as their 'mother tongue'.

The BBC's John Simpson wrote an excellent piece on this subject for *The Spectator* a few years ago (reprinted in *The Australian*, 1992). His article, 'India, where English sings', is full of the delight of wandering around India where shops

have names such as 'Gupta Suitings and Shirtings'. He describes the delights to be found in the Indian print media

...criminals are not arrested but nabbed, proposals are not criticised but flayed, politicians are not asked for reasons but issued with a show-cause notice, and they do not fly to conferences but air-dash to meets.  
(Simpson 1992)

The vividness of India is so clearly evoked by Simpson:

Words are used in Indian English in the manner of colours, clashing yet harmonious, raw and uncoordinated, with a lavish interest in their tone, for pure pleasure. Indian English is not a pastiche of the original; its vibrancy is entirely its own.  
(Simpson 1992)

Welfare English, by comparison, appears to me to lack all these qualities and more. It is verbose but not veracious, euphemistic and not enlightening. Every day, health and welfare workers translate, interpret, and commit to record the experiences of the vulnerable. As every social worker knows, some of these translations, interpretations, and recordings become labels (Lemert 1967; Raynor 1985) and those labels are sticky.

Knowledge is power, as Francis Bacon concluded, and language may be used both to share that knowledge and restrict access to it. On a lighter note, *Community Care*, one of my favourite social welfare publications, has long recognised the willingness of welfare workers to be circumlocutional. Unfortunately, over the years, I have lost most of the exact references but here are some of the treasures I have collected from *Community Care*, colleagues and students:

'I hear what you are saying' = 'Don't shout, I'm not deaf'

Sibling = The obnoxious child on your caseload has an equally appalling brother or sister

Planning meeting = A meeting of social workers and other health and welfare agencies, all of whom are trying to pass the buck

'I empathise' = 'You think you've got problems. Wait until you hear mine'

Offending behaviour = Anything a particular client says or does

Involuntarily undomiciled = Homeless

Involuntarily leisured = Unemployed

Considerable case work support and intensive family counselling has been offered = The social worker visited once a month

Considerable case work support and intensive family counselling was been offered without success = The social worker visited once a month when s/he knew father was at the pub.

He is subject to adverse peer group pressure = The other kids beat him up

Excessive nocturnal hyperactivity has been observed by foster parents = The little bugger never stays in bed

Considerable casework support (see above) has effected no change in his behavioural responses = He must be deaf

The child responds well to strict limit-setting = A clip round the ear works wonders

The child displays a health respect for authority = A second clip round the ear is often necessary

This young man requires a well-structured, controlled environment where the boundaries are clearly defined = Send him to prison

The father is motivationally challenged = He is slack

I have given him permission to explore his difficulties = I have no control over his behaviour

(Shoreman 1980; others include *Community Care* undated; communications from colleagues)

I am sure that there are plenty of examples that readers can contribute. (Perhaps there are some in this edition of *Children Australia*.) I would welcome contributions.

George Bernard Shaw presciently described England and the USA as 'two countries separated by the same language'. Given the inexorable advance of English as the world language, and the regional interpretations added to the language in countries like India, it is possible to envisage a world where translators are required to facilitate communication between people who are ostensibly speaking English. Indeed, this day may have arrived. A friend told me that, when she went to see a Ken Loach film *Riff Raff* in New York a few years ago, she was amazed to see sub-titles on the screen. This might say as much about Americans as it does about Newcastle and Liverpool accents.

While I find Indian English delightful, and enjoy the messages I get about human difference, the translation and interpretation of human experience into 'welfare English' concerns me. I was told recently of a health meeting where the representatives of the bureaucracy of Victoria's Department of Human Services (How many times have they changed the name of the Department and why?) referred to the 'patients' of doctors as 'clients' throughout. John

Passmore (1997) wrote an excellent piece on this subject for *The Australian* recently. The term 'customer' is also creeping into universities, replacing 'student' in some quarters. What does this mean for relationships between doctor and patient, student and teacher?

For those with troubles, for those suffering disadvantage, for children, the language we use to respond to them will affect outcomes – and the way they see themselves. Brian Martin (1992), a scientist, has described how jargon is used 'to police the boundaries of disciplines'. With social workers described by some in the UK as 'soft police', perhaps 'welfare English' is following reality. On the other hand, it might be creating it, just as in India their versions of English created confusion for me out of a common language. □

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