

Reviews



BABEL LECTURE Given by Susie Dent

by Jeremy Scott

I've never seen Countdown. Let's get that shameful admission out of the way at the outset. I know about the music (de-do, de-do, didley-dee – booo), because sometimes people hum it at me when I take too long to answer a question. But not much else. So, when Susie Dent, our esteemed guest speaker for this year's Babel Lecture and regular Countdown lexicographer decided to pass the time during an outbreak of technical problems by offering the waiting audience a Countdown conundrum, I was at a loss. Apparently, it's a kind of anagram. And the fact that someone in the audience solved it before Susie even finished reading out the letters (how?) did nothing to leaven my inadequacy.

Nevertheless, this was impressive stuff. The lecture slot was already half an hour old when, in desperation, and all because of an absent audio cable and a stubborn microphone, Susie and our Chair, Dan McIntyre, embarked upon an impromptu question-and-answer interview session. Then, at last, after a heroic technical intervention by an unruffled man in a T-shirt, the lecture proper could begin.

The topic was American English, and, in particular, the kinds of irrational annoyance its regular incursions into British English cause for some. Say, John Humphreys, or Steve from Lancashire (more from him shortly). One of Humphreys' top linguistic bugbears is the American 'Can I get (a regular coffee)?' instead of 'Can I have?' I have to admit, this annoys me too – mainly because it's not what *I* say. Apparently, the use of 'Can I get' generates a huge number of complaints from listeners every time it is used. Indeed, it recently topped a BBC poll to discover the 50 most annoying Americanisms. Writes Steve from Lancashire:

'It infuriates me. It's not New York. It's not the 90s. You're not in Central Perk with the rest of the Friends. Really.'

Come on, Steve. Languages change and evolve, in the ways that Susie describes, and cultural imports such as Friends contribute to the process in fascinating but difficult-to-quantify ways. But still, Steve's right.

Susie went on to make an interesting point about what might be (but probably isn't)

termed 'linguistic utility': the way in which a language evolves to suits its environment (both physical and cultural). She used an excerpt from a Michael McIntyre routine to illustrate how American English often produces nouns that are more overtly descriptive of their targets than their British equivalents. McIntyre lists examples such as 'eyeglasses' (instead of just 'glasses', or the archaic 'spectacles'), 'sidewalks' instead of 'pavements', 'racket ball' instead of... I don't know, actually. 'Squash?' Susie's contention was that there is a literalness to American nouns that is often absent in British words – a quest for perfect transparency of the signifier, if such a thing were possible. A version of English characterised by specificity and utility emerged to suit the unforgiving landscape discovered by the European colonists.

Susie talked next about another linguistic bone of contention: spelling. 60% of British English words, she reported, have a silent letter, and the American version of the language has sometimes managed to eradicate these – a process that again, for some reason, riles the British. It was interesting to learn that many of the silent letters to which we cling (like sailors on broken planks as they are swept away by the prevailing wind) are in fact the results of historical accidents or arbitrary decisions. For example, the silent 'h' in 'ghost' was put there, seemingly at random, by William Caxton's typesetters. Perhaps they thought it looked nice. In 'doubt'



Dan McIntyre does an impromptu interview with Susie Dent during the hunt for the missing audio cable.

and ‘plumber’, the addition of the silent ‘b’ came about as a result of a kind of neo-classical snobbery. Even the American spellings that provoke the most ire in British speakers – the omission of the ‘u’ in words such as ‘honour’, ‘colour’ and so on – are in fact older than the standard British versions. The ‘non-u’ spellings of the words were around long before the Pilgrim Fathers set sail from Rotherhithe, and can even be found – ghasp! – in the first folio of Shakespeare. ‘Honour’ appears 372 times, ‘honor’ 493. So there. Incidentally, Shakespeare rarely spelled his own name the same way twice, so these kinds of orthographical inconsistencies were rife in the early history of the language.

And so, enter Samuel Johnson, be-wigged, be-frocked and soon to be befuddled, on a mission to fix English and freeze it for posterity. He soon found out, however, that to chain syllables is as futile as lashing the wind (as he probably would have said). Before you can arrive at the point of ‘capturing’ the language, of keeping it still as it wriggles beneath your grip, it will have moved on again. You are perpetually playing catch-

up. In particular, Johnson saw the American version of the language as a threat, saying, famously and fatuously, that he was willing to love all mankind except an American. For the US, their own version of English became a symbol of identity, of ‘otherness’ from the British. Rejecting the King’s English was just one more way of rejecting the King. America’s own only slightly less corpulent version of Johnson, Noah Webster, duly set about on his own long journey of attempting to capture the shimmering new language, leading to the publication of his American lexicon in 1828, a project predicated on bringing the disparate voices of the new continent together.

Susie Dent’s central argument, then, was, first, that American English begins as a hybrid of the old and the new and, second, that the old and the new are still, today, in constant dialogue and interchange with one another. US slang (particularly Afro-American) was very popular in Britain from the 1930s into the 1960s (and beyond): ‘cool’, ‘heavy’, ‘far out’. Its contemporary manifestations, interestingly, often involve

inversion: ‘sick’ is good, ‘wicked’ is also good – even ‘bad’ is not bad. Similarly, British slang is gaining currency stateside, with imports like ‘bloody’, ‘autumn’ and ‘bum’ appearing along the eastern seaboard. And that’s ‘bum’ as in ‘fanny’, not ‘tramp’. Some people have even reported hearing New Yorkers say ‘cheers’ for ‘goodbye’. Makes you proud, doesn’t it.

This was a fascinating hour-and-a-half, and this reviewer in particular learned a great deal. To round off, and as a riposte to those who continue to resist the beautiful and captivating evolution of our language, we should hear from a Shakespearean character who knows a little about being maligned and misunderstood: ‘You taught me language,’ says Caliban in *The Tempest*, ‘and my profit on ‘t is – I know how to curse.’ ¶

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