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English and Anti-English

Brian Richards:

There are all sorts of things that can be done with the English language: its vocabulary can be played around with and all rules of (fracas) grammar and syntax broken; and yet what comes out of the fracas is at once recognisable as English, and often ‘good’ English at that. In the hands of writers such as V S Naipaul (1), whose West Indian dialogues do great violence to the kind of English a language teacher would use, the language can find itself enriched. Denton Welch (2), a scrupulously careful writer, admitted a nostalgia for the pidgin-English spoken in pre-war China; for an English that was even further from the 'standard' than that of Naipaul’s Jamaicans. James Joyce’s experiments with the language are well-enough known to require no comment here.

I do not think I am saying anything new that readers will not have seen in many places before this; but I use the above platitudes in order to contrast them with what I can only call ‘Anti-English’.

The characteristics of Anti-English is that it does no violence at all to vocabulary, grammar or syntax; if anything it is servile in the attitude it takes towards these features. It is, in fact, most often to be found in text books which presume to teach the English language, and in texts where the elements above have been rigorously controlled, in many cases. In order to give a few examples of the kind of English I mean, and to discuss the implications of Anti-English in books which are specifically designed to help the student master the language, one only has to open a few text books
at random; and the instances I shall choose all come from text books which have a wide circulation in Japanese schools, although they have not been written—in all cases—only by Japanese 'experts' but by Americans as well. Since this is not a book review, I do not think I need mention titles or authors for which the latter should be grateful in view of the fact that the extracts themselves are hardly to their credit.

Before going on to examples, however, I think it might be useful very briefly to mention some special problems that affect the writer of text books. We can assume that what the text book writer of dialogue and simple narrative wants to create is a vivid piece of English which will, for its own sake, engage the reader's attention, and thus be comparatively easy to retain. This task, in itself, calls for a certain amount of purely literary skill; and it is not surprising that most text book writers are utterly deficient in this skill, since they are firstly pedagogues and not professional authors; and this fact accounts for the dreariness of most English language text books—few native-speakers would choose to read them for pleasure. (3) At the same time, however, the writer, as a teacher, must also present acceptable specimens of 'real' or 'everyday' English, in which the actual components correspond to the needs of the student at that particular linguistic level; and this calls, perhaps, for a little explanation. In modern language theory, we think that the very commonest and most useful everyday words, constructions, and so forth, should be taught first; and that the more 'difficult' or more 'advanced' aspects of the language should be taught later—at the appropriate stage; for instance 'He is eating bread' is clearly less 'advanced' than 'He is in the process of devouring a loaf'.
Therefore, it is clear that the textbook writer has two things to do: 1) write an interesting text; and 2) use 'appropriate' language elements. The Anti-English below comes from the writer's inability to reconcile the two tasks; and it especially comes from the writer's allowing the pedagogic part of the job to come first and foremost and outweigh all other considerations, including those of simple common sense.

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1) NONSENSE

In the extract below, the writer has allowed his concern for teaching certain vocabulary items to over-ride the demands of the most childish logic.

A says to B: 'Look at X. Do you see her? She has a red sweater. X, please come here. You have a red sweater. You're very pretty'.

There is nothing wrong with grammar and syntax here; in these respects the material is impeccable. What is wrong with it, then? If the reader will pause here, and translate it into Japanese, I think he will see at once what A says is absurd. (4)

In the first place, A asks B to look at X; and next asks if B can see her: how can B look at X unless he can see her? B is not blind: if he were, then A would not ask him to look at X. But now A tells B, who is not blind, that X has a red sweater. Could it be that B suffers from Daltonism? He doesn't, because we have learned earlier in the conversation from B himself that he likes 'the blue sky.... the green grass... red and yellow flowers... blue, green, red, and yellow'. Since, then, B is not blind, nor does he suffer from Daltonism, why does A tell him that X is wearing a red
sweater? A knows perfectly well that she is wearing a red sweater!

A, however, is not content merely to tell B what he knows already; he must now tell X, ‘You have a red sweater’. Surely she must know this, unless she too is blind or afflicted herself with Daltonism.

But colour blind or not, X’s reaction to the statement, ‘You’re very pretty’, is bizarre in the extreme:

‘Do you like me? Do you like my sweater? Thank you.

Is ‘Do you like me?’ a ‘normal’ response to ‘You’re very pretty’? And why does X say ‘Thank you’ before A has answered? And what does this ‘Thank you’ mean? Is X thanking A for telling her that she is wearing a red sweater, or because he says she is very pretty? A himself seems not to know what he is being thanked for, since he changes the subject and now says:

‘Look at us, X. We have blue sweaters. Our shoes are black. Do you like us?’

We are back to Daltonism again. Why does he need to tell X that he and B are wearing blue sweaters and black shoes? Is this the kind of thing we tell people? And this ‘Do you like us?’ Do we go around asking people if they like us? Is that how things are done in daily life?

To my mind, the only adjective that fits this behaviour is ‘lunatic’.

If we now remember that this dialogue is intended to be studied in Japanese schools; what sort of people will the Japanese student, after reading this palpable nonsense, think that native-speakers of English are? How will he think he should behave when meeting
native-speakers? Is it surprising that he will be tempted to say, ‘Look at me. I am wearing a white shirt’; or ‘My mother isn’t wearing a hat now’; or ‘Your suit is blue’; when the sort of rubbish quoted above will have encouraged him to believe that this is the kind of repartee that western speakers indulge in? Is it to be wondered at that some Westerners find the Japanese slightly defective after meeting conscientious students of this kind of book? If this is what English conversation is, wouldn’t it be better not to learn English at all, but instead spend one’s time playing shogi or even trying one’s luck at pachinko? Is this what the English language is reduced to today—a public convenience for imbecilities?

2) NONSENSE AND MISREPRESENTATION OF FACTS

In another series of text books, the English language is not only used as a vehicle for near-gibberish, but is also employed to give a wholly false picture of what things are. Here is an exchange about life in modern Sweden, and it refers to Stockholm:

A  ‘I’ve heard that white bears can be seen on the streets. That isn’t true, is it?’

B  ‘Of course not.’

The question here is: What imbecile really thinks that the modern capital of one of the most ‘advanced’ countries in the world will have ferocious animals roaming at large in it? Because this is just the question we should ask ourselves if we had read: ‘I’ve heard that Japan is a small island in the Mediterranean. That isn’t true, is it?’ Why does the writer feel he must record such inanities?

The next exchange is incredible:
A 'Is English spoken there, Mr B?'
B 'No, it isn't.'

The object here, no doubt, is to get the student to practise that wonderful old construction 'Yes it is / No it isn't / Yes we are / No you’re not' etc etc ad nauseam. The writer of this passage has been so engaged by the need to get a construction across that he has completely forgotten that English is the second language in Sweden and that most educated Swedes speak it very well indeed: it is taught in primary school.

At best, this is irresponsible writing; at worst it gives a wholly false picture of a country. The very fact that the questioner needed to be reassured that wild animals did not possess the freedom of Stockholm; and the 'fact' that English is not spoken there; leaves the student with more than a vague idea that Sweden is a rather backward place, to say the least.

3) SELF–CONTRADICTION

Perhaps one’s students know nothing of Sweden, and perhaps the lie about its inhabitants being ignorant of English (together with the suggestion that they dine on hunks of raw meat) can get by.

What about—from this series of books—this statement?

'In the center of New York City is Central Park, in which there are small lakes, trees, and flower gardens. There you may feel you are in the country'.

There is nothing to object to in this, as far as the text is concerned. Some readers may find it a little odd to be told that Central Park is in Central New York—would we expect to find it on
the outskirts? Well, perhaps; because the centres of cities do shift; and what is the centre now may not have been the centre when the park was laid out or given its name. Anyhow, I have not been to New York, nor do I feel impelled ever to go there, but I am prepared to believe the text when it says that 'There you may feel you are in the country'.

However, when I look at the photograph of Central Park which is given above the text itself, I can't somehow believe that I would feel myself 'in the country' there. Would the reader, I wonder, feel that he was in the country if he looked up and saw some building like the Empire State one or the Pan-Am one towering above him? If the author of the book really believes that we are 'in the country' in Central Park, just what sort of 'country' is he thinking of?

He isn't thinking of any 'country', of course. He has just written a lot of nonsense, and then has been unwise enough to put a photograph just above the nonsense, a photograph that flatly contradicts his text. And since nonsense—I am beginning to think—is the essence of a great proportion of English Language teaching, he is merely following standard practice.

I could quite easily illustrate my theme with many other examples and could find other categories of stupidity, but I do not wish to exhaust the reader's patience. From the examples of Anti-English we have just seen, however, I think that the implications—already hinted at above—are quite clear. Students taking material such as the above at its face value are going to have a very strange idea of the world and of the English language itself, and therefore of its users. I think I've made the point; but for my amusement
I should now like to labour it a little by illustrating the three categories from economics, and leaving it to the reader to decide if he would use any economics text book in which the specimens below were to be found:

1) This book about economics. It has a red cover, and the author likes its red cover. Other books about economics have covers in different colours: blue, black, yellow and vomit. But the author hopes that you will like this book and its red cover. The author of this book has written this book on paper. There is a photograph of the author at the beginning of this book. Look at the photograph. The author is wearing a suit and a black tie. He is also wearing a shirt. He likes you.

2) I have often been asked by my colleagues in the Faculty of Economics ‘I hear that J K Galbraith eats a freshly-killed infant for breakfast every morning. That isn't true, is it?' to which the answer ‘Of course not’ is the only possible one. My colleagues also want to know if J K Galbraith, who has lived many years in English-speaking countries, can understand spoken English. What else can I say to this, but ‘No, he can’t’.

3) Chart v:

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<tr>
<td>May 26, 1971</td>
<td>$38 5/8</td>
<td>+ 1/8</td>
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As will be seen from the above chart, RCA improved its position on the week by 5 1/4.

To conclude on a positive note, I think it is pretty obvious
that text book writers should take a little more trouble on the material they present as examples of 'living English'. But, to be quite fair to them, I think I ought to point out that the professional teacher hears so much nonsense said to him by his students that it is only too easy for him to fall into the trap they unwittingly prepare for him, and write nonsense himself.

Why should students talk nonsense? The answer is, I think, that the effort involved in speaking another language 'correctly' often obliges the student to concentrate more on the form than on the content of what he is saying; after all, the student is mentally juggling with constructions, difficult prepositions, irregular verbs and all the rest of it—and for many students this, in itself, is a considerable feat. Very often the student himself doesn't actually realise what he is saying, so intent is he on the purely mechanical aspects of the language; and I should now like to give some examples of this.

When I was teaching in Milan, a British colleague, who had spent some time in Spain, told me that he had often given lessons in 'English conversation' to high-ranking Spanish army officers; he was able to ask them, in English, questions about politics and so on that he would never have dared ask in Spanish itself; and he always got 'straight' answers. I can't say I believed him when I heard this story, but experience of my own made me change my mind when I went to live in Paris. Here I gave regular private lessons to a French Civil Servant at the Ministry of Economic Affairs, who was actively engaged in negotiations with Britain over the EEC; he told me many an 'inside story' which I later saw printed in the newspapers. It didn't, I think, occur to him that I might have made quite a lot of money by selling this 'inside
information'; and it didn't occur to me, for roughly the same reasons: he was busy learning English, while I was busy teaching him it.

The moral is, obviously, that we as teachers must think about what we're saying; and get our students to think about what they are saying; if only because it is so easy to talk Anti-English. Teaching material for English language studies actually needs to provoke thought, just as much as material used in other subjects.

In another article I should like to examine another aspect of what can be called 'language blindness'; and in this instance it is rather a spectacular case—that of Pierre Loti and his book about Nagasaki.

Notes

1) The English used in 'A house for Mr Biswas' is very funny indeed, and deliberately so.

2) Welch was a very fine, sensitive writer who is rather neglected in English-speaking countries, perhaps because he was hardly an engaging character.

3) An exception to this is the Longman Simplified Series. Many of the books in their 'boiled-down' form are quite pleasant to read.

4) Another example of absurdity is to be found on some radio and TV programmes which pretend to teach English. Often the 'interviewer' will ask the person he is interviewing questions to which he himself knows the answer! Language teachers, as a body, seem to find nothing odd about this.

5) I had just written this parody when I happened to glance at an advertisement by Kawasaki Kisen Kaisha, Ltd., in the latest edition of 'The Economist' (llth June). Part of it reads:
‘... but the spirit of the sea in our veins.

‘We love the sea. And we love you’.

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