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What Did He Say?

by Tim Pratt

To communicate effectively, it is important to understand your audience, to think like them, to speak to them so that they can understand you. These days, many of us are communicating with people from different countries. You would expect this to be a challenge when dealing with people who speak English as a second language. However, American-Australian communications, for example, can sometimes be just as challenging. Take it from me, an Aussie who moved to London and later (now) to New York. Let's start with an example. See if you can figure out why this is humorous (I explain toward the end of the article):

Q. Why did the nose cross the road?

A. Because it was off its face.

Four years ago when I moved from Sydney to London, I expected England to be different from Australia. However, I found huge similarities—sports, religion, government, financial system, social interaction (ok, maybe not that), just to mention a few. Admittedly, the weather was different, but everyone already knew that.

As time rolled on, I started to think that everything was exactly like home, only to come to a crashing halt when things were not. You expect this when you move to an obviously foreign country—say, Italy or Spain—where the language, attitude, environment, etc., is totally different. You expect things to be different and so you don't get thrown for a loop when they are.

Last year, when I moved to the United States, I expected things to be similar to Australia. Australia imports so much American television and other types of culture that I expected to understand Americans better. Oh boy was I wrong!

Spelling

I am starting to believe that Thomas Jefferson, after polishing off the last draft of the Declaration of Independence, must have thought to himself, "Okay, this piece of paper is a good start, but we really have to make ourselves different from the English. I know—let's change the language. I never really liked the letter 'u' so let's cut it from "colour," "harbour," etc. I think the letter 'z' is under-utilised, so we'll start spelling it 'utilized.' The English will get confused if we call the ground floor the first floor. We can change 'car boot' to 'car trunk' ..." The list is seemingly endless.

Common Phrases

Almost everyday I find another word that is in every day common usage back home that I just cannot use here. I am getting very used to identifying the blank look on someone's face when I use a word that they do not understand. For example, here is a very short list of commonly-used Australian words with the American equivalent in (parentheses):

- Jumper (pull-over)—and a jumper is not a tee-shirt, we call a tee-shirt a tee-shirt
- Rug (afghan or throw blanket)
- Chook (chicken)
- Crook (ill)
- Flat out (as fast as possible)
- Hire a car (rent a car)

When I'm at the supermarket, I have to stop myself from asking for a barbeque chook (chicken). I had to make the same change in England—they did not understand what a chook was either. And no one understands when I use the word "stuffed" as in "I really stuffed that one up."

(continued on next page)



Tim Pratt, FIAA, is senior manager at Deloitte Consulting in New York, N.Y.

timpratt@deloitte.com

What Did He Say? • continued from prior page

Slang Expressions

When I moved to the United States, I thought I could start using my stock of slang expressions again. I had trained myself to avoid using them when speaking with the Germans or French, because English was their second language. However, I quickly learned that Australian slang does not translate well here either. Another short list:

- A dog's breakfast (something that is really messed up)
- Don't come the raw prawn (don't try to fool me)
- Do your nana (lose your temper)
- Fair crack of the whip (give someone a chance or an opportunity to do something)

The Australian language is also a function of our linguistic laziness—we always shorten things:

- Brekkie (breakfast)
- Possie (position)
- Aussie (Australian)
- Journo (Journalist)

Pronunciation

I even have to change how I pronounce words, and it is not just the accent. I know Australians that have just given up and started to speak with an American roll to their "R"s. I had to drop the "o" from mayonnaise and pronounce it "may-naise." I was discussing this with another Aussie last week who developed a special American accent just because it got too hard talking to people that could not understand her. I have memorized the NATO phonetic alphabet just to overcome the issue of spelling my name (people hear 'I' when I say 'A' and I don't like being called Mr. Pritt).

Lost in Translation

Finally, what is the reaction from home to my newly found knowledge? I recently sent an e-mail to my family and typed "Mom" instead of the correct Australian spelling "Mum." I got two replies (and still counting) that didn't discuss the content of my e-mail. They just told me to escape while there was still a chance.

The Upside

So, what are the good parts? Well, for one, my vocabulary is increasing, especially when I need a synonym. I am getting lots of daily practice at describing everyday (well, *to me* it is everyday) items in non-technical language. This helps me identify with my audience and talk to them in a language that they understand rather than teaching y'all my language (and no, we do not use "y'all"—I'm just trying to talk to you in your language).

Getting the Joke

And this brings me back to my Q&A. It is my favorite joke and is a clever play on words. The only problem is that it just doesn't work here in the United States. In Australia, "Off your face" is a euphemism for drunk. So the nose was crossing the road because it was literally off its face (i.e., off by itself) while also staggering across the road drunk.

Talking the Talk

So, now that you have an appreciation of the difficulty from the *Aussie possie*, next time you encounter one of my *mates* from Australia (we never say "down under"), please try not to *flat out* stare so blankly when you hear one of these expressions. You may even want to select a choice phrase or slang expression from my list above and work it into your everyday dialogue. But if you do try, be sure not to turn it into a *dog's breakfast*. Nothing gets as *stuffed* as an American trying to say "g'day" —well, except maybe my attempt at saying "coffee" like a New Yorker.

For those interested in learning more about your friendly Australian native, go to <http://www.uta.fi/fast/us1/reflaust-eng.html>. □

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