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ISSUES IN AUSTRALIAN STYLE AND THE USE OF ENGLISH IN AUSTRALIA

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The influence of Aboriginal English

Peter Wignell, lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Northern Territory University, makes some interesting observations about the influence of Aboriginal English in the vocabulary of the non-Aboriginal community in Darwin.

This article is not intended as a scholarly work. It is an anecdotal account based on observations and speculations made during five years of living and working as an applied linguist in Darwin.

Darwin is a culturally diverse place, with people from all over the place living here. Many people, however, like myself, migrate here as adults from either elsewhere in Australia or from overseas. Some stay long term and some come and go. After a time here, and having a touch of the Henry Higgins, I began to test myself by trying to guess who was "from here" and who was from somewhere else. Upon reflection I found that one of the features I was basing my guesses on was words and expressions that, being originally from "down south", I would usually have considered to be Aboriginal English.

From these initial observations I decided to test my hypothesis by observing more closely two groups of people who I had access to and who I knew to have lived in Darwin for all or most of their lives. One group was the children of my friends and their friends: children of primary school age attending local schools. The other group was young males (late teens


to mid twenties) who I knew from the gym and who I would characterise as being "blue-collar-sporty". For this paper I will concentrate on two things: a small group of idioms and terms of address.

Among primary age school children I have noticed that a number of idiomatic expressions which come from Aboriginal English are in common use. Two typical examples are the words *deadly* and *flash*. *Deadly*, said with lengthened vowels and an exaggerated rising/falling intonation contour is typically used to say that something is good or desirable: it has positive affect. For example, an 11-year-old girl when commenting on a school excursion which she enjoyed referred to it as "Deadly!". The same girl when showing me her new hockey stick referred to it as "Flash" (using the same rising/falling intonation contour). Variations on the same theme are also heard, such as *pretty bloody deadly* and *proper flash*.

It appears that *deadly* is used to refer to situations or events while *flash* is used to refer to objects. The word *proper* is also used to show positive evaluation of something, with things being referred to as a

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proper one or sometimes as a *proper job good one*. Also used is *gammin*, which, if said with a falling/rising intonation means the opposite of *deadly* and *flash*. However, if said with a rising/falling intonation, can also mean much the same as, *deadly* or *flash*.

Also very common is the use of the word *mobs* as a measuring expression. How many or how much of something it takes to make *mobs* depends on the context. If something came in one or twos, then, say, five might be *mobs* but if something usually came in hundreds then *mobs* might be several hundred. *Mobs* is used as a measure with both count and mass nouns: you can have mobs of people or mobs of rain. It can also be modified. For example, you can have *big mobs* or *biggest mobs*; or if you're somewhere between *mobs* and *big mobs* you can have *little bit big mobs*.

What these idioms have in common is that they are lexically English, have become part of Aboriginal English and appear to be being adopted by some "mainstream" English speakers in the Darwin community. They appear to be being adopted with the same "meaning" as they have in Aboriginal English and with the same intonation pattern. It should be noted that this adoption does not appear to be simply imitation of Aboriginal people. When I asked the 11-year-old referred to above and her sister about what she had just said they both looked at me quizzically and replied: "That's just how we talk." When pressed further they added, "That's how everyone at school talks." The adoption of Aboriginal English expressions appears to be largely unconscious: a part of "playground English".

I have also observed the use of all of the expressions noted above among young male adults (and to a lesser extent females). The idioms are used with the same "meaning" and said with the same intonation contour by adults as they are by children.

In addition, young males of the group mentioned above (and to a lesser extent females) use the term of address that I had never encountered before: *Bruz*. I have been told that the term is a contrac-

tion of an Aboriginal kinship term which translates roughly into English as *cousin-brother*. Contractions of brother (*Bro*) and cousin (*Cuz*) get combined into *Bruz*. The term does not appear to be a general term of address such as *Mate* but does seem to encode a degree of solidarity – some kind of insider status.

Such insider status could be along either of two related dimensions, both of which indicate solidarity. One is a local non-local distinction: whether you "come from around here" or not. The other is a kind of marker of acceptance by a group. For example, one of my interests is lifting weights at the gym. There is a group of serious powerlifters who train at my local gym. In a moment of madness I decided to enter a powerlifting contest. Before I had trained for the contest and competed I was generally addressed as *Mate*. In the latter stages of training and after the contest I noticed that I was now generally addressed as *Bruz*.

In addition there is a small number of "Aboriginal" words which have been adopted in varying degrees. One example is *Balanda*, used by Aboriginal people (and to a lesser extent non-Aboriginal people) in the Top End of the Northern Territory to refer to people who are not of Aboriginal descent. It is most typically used to refer to people of European descent. The term is derived from the word *Hollander*.

Another is a Larrakia word, *budju*. (The Larrakia people are the original inhabitants/owners of the Darwin area.) I have been told that *budju* was originally a secret women's word which referred to female genitalia. It is now typically used as a euphemistic synonym for *cunt*; as in *You budju!*. It is also used by late primary and secondary school age children with a kind of meaning-reversal as a synonym for *spunk* or *hunk*; as in *She/he's a real spunk*.

I have concentrated on two groups of people because they are where my observations come from but, to generalise a little, some commonalities can be drawn. Both groups consist of people who have spent either all or the majority of

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their lives in Darwin and, perhaps more importantly, both groups consist of people who interact with (or have interacted with) Aboriginal people of their own age group on a regular, if not daily, basis.

School children mix with each other and talk with each other, they are in the same classes and share the same playground: idioms which are "catchy" catch on. The young males I refer to all participate in sport, in many cases in a variety of sports where they interact regularly with team-mates and fellow competitors. Both the school and sport involve people interacting in a combination of structured and informal activity. That is, they do things together in school and at training or in the game and they socialise together either in the playground or after the game. This type of social arrangement appears ideal for linguistic experimentation and hybridisation.

This article has been based on observations of a small number of people. Even allowing for this and for the anecdotal nature of the evidence, a number of further possibilities suggest themselves. It would be interesting to examine if the features noted above were more generally spread throughout the Darwin community. My observations suggest that they are to some extent, but that the main concentration of both frequency and users is in the two groups discussed here. It would be worth testing the observations with older long-term residents and with females of the same age group as the young males.

Another possibility would be to look at whether use decreases with age: if school children who unself-consciously use Aboriginal English expressions change how they speak as they get older.

One further speculation, based on observing young children, is that there appears to be little male/female variation. However,

there could be a pattern where males continue using Aboriginal English expressions while females either reduce or discontinue them. Given that the context of the sample of young adults was in a predominantly male environment, further observations of females would be necessary.

Whether what I have observed is a regional dialectal trend – or something that has "always" been here but in some of the locally born population decreases with age is still to be seen. □

Editor's note: Readers may like to follow up the history of the use of the words discussed above in Jay Arthur's *Aboriginal English: A Cultural Study*, published in 1996 and reviewed later in this edition of *Australian Style*. The book confirms, for example, that *deadly*, in the sense described above, has citations in Aboriginal English going back to 1984.



Style Council News

The next Style Council will be held at the State Library of New South Wales rather than the traditional NSW venue, Macquarie University. The State Library is situated in Macquarie Street (so some connection remains), near to the Botanical Gardens, so interstate visitors will be well placed to sample the city's attractions.

The conference will be held on the weekend of 22–23 November, with a workshop on the new Third Edition of the *Macquarie*

Dictionary taking place on the afternoon of the previous Friday.

The Style Council theme will be the Language of the Media. The program is not finalised but there are likely to be papers on the ABC's Standing Committee on Spoken Language (SCOSE), film scripting, the language of advertising and of the Internet and the writing of film subtitles and autotitles for television. Full details will be mailed within the next two months.

How well do we speak?

Who are our best communicators? These and other questions arise out of a letter from Richard Kidby (QLD), and the suggestion that public awareness of speaking might be enhanced by the declaration of a National Speech/Communication Day. It could take up where National Book Day has left off.

We could perhaps celebrate the sheer variety of communication that takes place in Australia, across many languages and cultures, and in a variety of media. Or you might nominate someone for a "great communicator" award — someone who seems to get through most effectively to wide audiences, for the benefit of all. If you have ideas along these or similar lines, do write to AS, and we may be able to get the ball rolling . . .

