

My priority for the next 50 years:

An online cultural dictionary

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Abstract

One of the consequences of the global spread of English has been a notable increase in the culture-specific content of everyday conversation among fluent L2 speakers. Despite excellent competence in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, communicative breakdowns often occur when speakers of different English varieties fail to grasp the meaning of an utterance that one of them has taken for granted. The talk illustrates the kind of culture-specific items encountered, discusses the problems in current approaches, describes a fruitful taxonomy, and suggests how it might be implemented. Using the Internet, the lexical-cultural identities of emerging Englishes around the world could be captured, collated, and presented as a teaching resource.

Keywords:

English, language, communication, Internet, culture, identity

Increasingly, over the past ten years, I've come to take the view that a cultural perspective is intrinsic to the future of language teaching and learning, especially in the case of English, as it becomes increasingly global. Once upon a time, I saw this perspective as a marginal or advanced feature of a curriculum – as I think most courses did – something that learners would 'add on' after achieving a certain level of competence. Not any more. A cultural perspective needs to be there from day one. Here's an illustration, from one of the most elementary of conversations.

I'd just returned from several months in The Netherlands, and although it wasn't my first visit, it was the first time I'd experienced Dutch as a daily routine. At one point I had my first complete Dutch conversation in a local baker's shop. I had fallen in love with appleflaps – a gorgeous concoction of apple in a slightly sugared, triangular

casing made of puff pastry – and I wanted my daily fix. The conversation was very simple:

Me: Een appelflap. (One appleflap)

Shop lady (laughing): Zeer goed ... Een euro vijftig. (One euro fifty)

Me: Dank je wel. (Thank you very much)

Shop lady: Alsjeblieft. (Please)

This conversation, basic as it is, is full of cultural content. It is firstly, an informal exchange, as shown by the choice of ‘Dank je wel’ (vs more formal ‘Dank u wel’) and ‘Alsjeblieft’ (vs more formal ‘Alstublieft’). But it is not just informal: there’s a pragmatic difference. In normal English I wouldn’t say ‘Thank you very much’ for the first exchange in a trivial shop purchase. I would say simply ‘Thank you’ – and leave a ‘very much’ for a moment when I felt the server had done something special. But in Dutch, ‘Dank u wel’ is the routine expression of thanks.

Then there’s the distribution of ‘please’. You’ll have noticed that I didn’t use it, following my observation that Dutch people usually don’t when they’re asking for something over the counter. On the other hand, when the lady gave me the appleflap, it was she who said ‘please’, where clearly the word was functioning more like a ‘thank you’ – ‘thank you for your custom’ or ‘here you are’. Immigrant waiters in English restaurants who say ‘please’ as they give you something are clearly unconsciously transferring their first-language habits into their new setting.

I have a grandson in Amsterdam who is growing up bilingually. One of his biggest challenges is sorting out the politeness differences between the two languages/cultures. We keep haranguing him to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ as much as possible – this is, after all, the British way, instilled by parents into English children’s brains from around the age of 3. ‘Can I have a biscuit?’ asks the child. ‘I haven’t heard that little word yet’, says the parent. ‘Can I have a biscuit, PLEASE?’ repeats the child.

But this isn’t the Dutch way, so when my grandson forgets, he is constantly sounding abrupt to our ears. Nor, for that matter, is it the way in several other languages. One of

the common traps for a British tourist is to keep saying ‘s’il vous plaît’ in French or ‘por favor’ in Spanish, in contexts where a native-speaker would never use them. The British speaker often sounds too insistent, as a consequence: ‘Una cerveza, por favor’ – ‘A beer, if you please!’

And we are not yet finished with the culture of my tiny Dutch exchange. For why did the lady laugh, when I asked for an appleflap? It was because she recognized me as a foreigner, but one who had learned to appreciate what is a quintessentially Dutch food. Her laugh basically said ‘you’re becoming one of us now’. Indeed, on another occasion, someone asked me how my Dutch was coming on, and I said I’d got all the vocabulary I needed, namely ‘appelflap’. She nodded in agreement, but then pointed out that if I wanted to be really fluent in the language I needed the plural form, ‘appleflappen’.

I have had dozens of experiences like this, as I expect most of you have. And when one starts to collect examples for a ‘dictionary of language and culture’, as I’ve done in workshops in several countries, it’s amazing how many instances of cultural identity a class can generate in half an hour. This is the first step, it seems to me: to build up a sense of what makes our own culture unique. We’re then in a better position to predict the likely differences with other cultures. It’s best done in a group where there is at least one person involved from a different cultural background. Left to themselves, native speakers usually have a poor intuition about what their cultural linguistic distinctiveness is.

The Internet can help enormously in this respect. No longer is it necessary for learners to be physically present in another culture before they can learn something about it. If I want to experience a language, or a different variety of English from my own, all I have to do is go online. Thanks to Skype and other such options, interaction is now practicable. Hitherto, most of this experience has been with written language, but with the increasing audio-ization of the Internet, the development of a more sophisticated cultural awareness is going to become a more practicable outcome. A little while ago I saw a group of primary-school children in a classroom talking to a group of French children in their classroom via the Internet, and learning about favourite things to eat and what to call them. This was linguaculture in practice.

My view has evolved mainly as a reaction to the way English has become a global language. There are two ways of looking at this phenomenon. One is to focus on the importance of international intelligibility, expressed through the variety we call standard English or some notion of English as a lingua franca. The other is to focus on the regional features which differentiate one part of the English-speaking world from another. And it is this second perspective which is becoming more noticeable as English 'settles down' within a country. We now happily talk about British, American, Australian, South African, Indian, Singaporean, and other 'Englishes'. Much of the distinctiveness is in the area of lexicology, and it is this domain which most closely reflects culture. Dictionaries have been compiled of distinctive local lexicons, and some of them contain many thousands of words. Culture, in this context, is simply everything that makes a community (or country) unique, different from other communities.

I've written about this in several papers, over the past few years, but the point deserves repetition. When a country adopts a language as a local alternative means of communication, it immediately starts adapting it, to meet the communicative needs of the region. Words for local plants and animals, food and drink, customs and practices, politics and religion, sports and games, and many other facets of everyday life soon accumulate a local wordstock which is unknown outside the country and its environs. And the reason I say this perspective is intrinsic to language learning is because it is virtually impossible for people to engage with speakers of other languages in everyday conversation without cultural issues needing to be taken into account.

When a group of people in a country (such as students, teachers, or businessmen) talk to me in English about everyday affairs, the subject-matter of their conversation inevitably incorporates aspects of their local environment. They talk about the local shops, streets, suburbs, bus routes, institutions, businesses, television programmes, newspapers, political parties, minority groups, and a great deal more. They make jokes, quote proverbs, bring up childhood linguistic memories (such as nursery rhymes), and recall lyrics of popular songs. All this local knowledge is taken for granted, and when we encounter it – such as in newspapers – we need to have it explained. Conventional dictionaries don't help, because they won't include such

localisms, especially if the expressions refer to local people, places, institutions, and suchlike. And casual cultural references that authors bring in to course-books only help to a limited extent.

Every English-speaking location in the world has usages which make the English used there distinctive, expressive of local identity, and a means of creating solidarity. From this point of view, notions such as 'Dutch English' or 'Chinese English' take on a fresh relevance, going well beyond traditional conceptions of English spoken with a Dutch or Chinese accent, or English displaying interference from Dutch or Chinese. Dutch English I define as the kind of English I need to know about when I go to the Netherlands, otherwise I will be unable to converse efficiently with Dutch speakers in English. It would be amazingly useful to have a glossary of the English equivalents of Dutch cultural references, but this seems to be a neglected area for any language. And the same point applies the other way round: Dutch people need a glossary of English cultural references. Few such texts exist.

It takes a while for the speakers to realize that there is a problem, and often a problem of cultural misunderstanding is never recognized. People readily sense when someone's linguistic knowledge is imperfect, and may go out of their way to accommodate to a foreigner by speaking more slowly or by simplifying sentences. But they are not so good at cultural accommodation. There is too ready an assumption that foreigners will know what they are talking about. People always tend to underestimate the cultural knowledge of their non-native listeners and readers, whatever the language and whatever the setting. Because the words and phrases are so familiar and routine, people are usually not aware that they are using something which foreigners will not understand. They take things for granted. And that's why I think a cultural perspective needs to be treated more systematically in language teaching. It's not that it's been overlooked: it simply hasn't been treated as systematically, within a language-teaching programme, as it needs to be.

My impression is that teachers are keen to teach culture-specific items, once they are aware of the extent to which they exist. A teacher workshop I sometimes do will illustrate this point. After explaining the issue, we take 30 minutes to begin collecting data for a culture dictionary, using no more sources than the intuitions of the

participants. It only takes a few minutes before they have listed dozens of items – names and nicknames of political parties and politicians, what things particular suburbs in the city are famous for, favourite television programmes and personalities, and so on. I (or other British people in the room) provide equivalences in the UK, and if there are participants from other parts of the English-speaking world, they make their contributions.

What emerges from this is that some of the cultural linguistic observations are easily generalizable. The ‘please’ phenomenon, for example, turns up in several other language settings: it isn’t restricted to Dutch. And the discussion soon turns to the general question of how politeness is handled in language, which is a universal. I suspect that all the cultural points identified can be explored in a general way, although some are easier to investigate than others. Simply to say ‘We do X’ is to invite the response ‘Do we do X too? And if not, what do we do instead?’ Everywhere has politics, and traffic, and suburbs, and leisure activities, and so on.

I mentioned ‘casual cultural references’ above. What I meant by that is the sort of thing we encounter in a textbook. Chapter 15 teaches ‘Questions and answers’, shall we say, and the author uses as a dialogue a visit to Oxford Street in London. The focus is on the grammatical point being taught, and the vocabulary of shopping. But why Oxford Street? This would be an ideal opportunity to introduce a cultural perspective. This is a special street. Why? If someone were to say, in December, ‘I’m keeping well away from Oxford Street’ or ‘Aren’t the lights splendid this year?’, what does the speaker mean? The hidden topics are all to do with crowds of shoppers and the specially erected overhead Christmas decorations. The point is fairly obvious, perhaps, but what cultural equivalents would I encounter if I were to find myself talking in English about festival shopping to people in Amsterdam, or Delhi, or Beijing? And where could I look these things up?

It’s the random nature of the cultural focus that I think we need to avoid. Chapter 15 introduces the reader to Oxford Street. But Chapter 16 might be about a visit to the zoo, or visiting the dentist, or anything. Would there be anywhere in the course that completes the cultural picture, with respect to shopping? Whatever kind of shopping we encounter in Oxford Street, that is not the whole story, as far as shopping in

London is concerned. Where in the course is the reader introduced to street markets, to ‘downmarket’ streets, to streets more ‘upmarket’ than Oxford Street, to barrow-boys, and so on? The list is not infinite. With a bit of thought, it would be possible to assess the semantic field of shopping and come up with a series of topics suitable for presentation to learners that would constitute one element in what we might call a cultural syllabus. Such a syllabus would be the equivalent, in pedagogical terms, of the kind of universal taxonomy that we see in library classifications (such as Dewey), content hierarchies on the Internet, and other places where the aim is to obtain a broad view of human knowledge. Several useful taxonomies already exist. The challenge is to adapt them to meet language learner needs.

Localities form only one small part of a knowledge taxonomy. I’m not thinking here of speech acts such as ‘requesting’, which were well handled when people began to talk about communicative language teaching years ago. No, any principled cultural syllabus needs to take on board the whole ‘universe of discourse’ – that is, anything that can be talked about in a culture. Here’s an example of a taxonomy, to show what I mean. It’s the one I developed for an enterprise called the Global Data Model, devised in the 1990s as a means of classifying the Internet, and which was eventually adopted and adapted by various companies as a system for dealing specifically with online advertising. This had ten top-level categories:

Universe	space and space exploration.
Earth science	structure and surface of the Earth.
Environment	land care and management
Natural history	plants and animals
Human body	physical and psychological make-up of the human being, including medical care
Mind	knowledge, beliefs, science, technology, arts, and communication
Society	social organization, including politics, economics, military science, and law
Recreation	leisure activities, including hobbies, sports, and games
Human geography	world geography, travel, and geography of countries
Human history	world history, archaeology, and history of countries

Of course, at this level, they don't mean very much; but as we break them down we see the power of the classification. For example, art subclassifies into the various artistic domains, as in the case of music (the codes show the hierarchy):

MI ART MUSI	Music
MI ART MUSI CMPS	Musical composition
MI ART MUSI CMPS CLSSC	Classical music
	composition
MI ART MUSI CMPS CLSSC NSTRT	Instrumental music
	composition
MI ART MUSI CMPS CLSSC PRMSC	Opera composition
MI ART MUSI CMPS CMPSM	Popular music composition
MI ART MUSI MSPR	Technical production of
	music
MI ART MUSI PSNT	Presentation of music
MI ART MUSI PSNT CLSCL	Classical music
	presentation
MI ART MUSI PSNT CLSCL NSTRM	Instrumental music
	presentation
MI ART MUSI PSNT CLSCL VCLMS	Vocal music presentation
MI ART MUSI PSNT MDRN	Modern music presentation
MI ART MUSI PSNT MDRN FKCTW	Folk music
MI ART MUSI PSNT MDRN JZZMS	Jazz
MI ART MUSI PSNT MDRN MDFTR	Media music
MI ART MUSI PSNT MDRN MSCLC	Musicals
MI ART MUSI PSNT MDRN PPLRM	Popular music presentation
MI ART MUSI PSNT RLGSP	Religious music

MI ART MUSI RCRDM	Recording of music
MI ART MUSI STDY	Musicology
MI ART MUSI STDY TXTSM	Visual representation of music

It's at this level that we can begin to see specific points of cultural contrast – different types of instrument, famous folk-singers, well-known concert halls and events.

Each of these subcategories can be of potential cultural significance for language teaching, in the sense that there will be points of difference that learners need to take on board. Here are some musical examples from British English conversations:

I managed to get a ticket for the last night of the Proms.

Not the sort of thing I'd expect to hear on Radio 3. Radio 1, more like.

[of a new club] It's like a London equivalent of the Cavern.

[of a visit to Edinburgh] Bagpipes everywhere!

The everyday task, put simply, is to explain what on earth the speaker means. The intercultural task is to find what equivalents there would be in other languages. Is there an iconic summer music festival in your country? Music-specific radio channels? Famous popular music clubs? National instruments? The research task is to identify, classify, and present these differences, exploring the taxonomy in a systematic way. Only then can teachers make selections in terms of relevance, and begin the task of grading them in terms of teaching difficulty. From a semantic point of view, some topics will be lexically more difficult than others. From a grammatical point of view, some will involve more complex constructions than others. Some topics will be inappropriate for young learners. And so on. And there will of course be cultural sensitivities – some topics simply cannot be talked about comfortably at all, for religious, political, or other reasons.

It's a large task, but not an infinite one. There are only so many subcategories that need to be considered. There are around 1,500 categories in my taxonomy, which was designed with advertising chiefly in mind. For ELT, it would be necessary to add

some extra subcategories, extra levels of detail, but the overall total would probably not be much above 2,000.

I've looked at the language teaching courses I have on my shelves, which suggest that course books are more impressionistic in their coverage than taxonomically systematic – in other words, based on the author's intuition about the situations most likely to be often encountered by learners. I don't recall seeing a structural approach. Let me explain what I mean by that with an analogy.

In relation to vocabulary, for a long time people taught individual words and idioms. But after structural semantics arrived, it was clear that this wasn't enough. Far better was to teach vocabulary in terms of the words that cluster in semantic fields and the sense relations that they display, such as antonyms. So, we would not teach 'happy' in lesson X and 'sad' in lesson Y, but the two together. This kind of teaching is of course often done instinctively, but the message of the structural semantic approach was: 'do this systematically', and not just for 'opposites' but for lexical sets of all kinds.

I think the same approach is needed for the kind of thing we're talking about. To be 'culturally anchored', we need to look at the structure of the cultural relationships that lie behind a particular example of functional-situational discourse. This is what a cultural syllabus would reflect. To return to my earlier example, the semantic field of shopping involves an array of vocabulary which is organized into lexical sets, such as how much things cost, types of shop, city locations, and so on. Course books typically choose just one set of options from this field – such as 'A visit to Oxford Street' – and present the vocabulary needed. A more systematic approach would relate an Oxford Street experience to other kinds of shopping experience, where a different kind of vocabulary would be required. Only in this way can we begin to make sense of real-world sentences such as: 'You're more likely to find what you're looking for in Bond Street ... or Portobello Road...' I don't know how this would best be done (I am no materials writer), but I do see signs of writers moving in the direction of a more structured approach. The chapter headings in the *Global Intermediate English Language Teaching Coursebook* (Macmillan 2011) provide an illustration of antonymy: 'Hot and Cold', 'Love and Hate', 'Friends and Strangers', 'Lost and

Found', and so on. And several of the topics that are dealt with in these scenarios involve cultural as well as semantic considerations.

I still see many signs, as I travel around, of people 'dropping', as it were, their cultural background and accommodating (in the sociolinguistic sense) to the interpersonal (and thus, intercultural) needs of an international speech situation. In contexts where the participants are experienced professionals, this 'neutral' discourse is fluent and sophisticated, even though the cultural neutrality sometimes slips, so that someone unaware of a speaker's cultural background will temporarily be at a loss. The more informal and everyday the speech situation, the more people allow cultural knowledge to creep in (usually without realizing it).

I'm not thinking especially of the 'longer stay in a country' kind of situation. The sort of thing I encounter more often is in short-encounter situations – the international conference or business meeting, or in casual everyday conversations. During the formal meetings, when people are sitting around a table and discussing an agenda, often with supportive written documentation, formal standard English is the norm, and mutual intelligibility is generally achieved. But when the meeting has a break for coffee or a meal, then a totally different linguistic encounter emerges. That is where speakers, more relaxed, begin to introduce a colloquial mode of expression that they would never have used in the formal meeting, and this is characterized by the use of idioms and the kind of cultural assumption that I've been talking about. This is usually harmless, in relation to the goals of the meeting. The problem comes when, on returning to the formal meeting, people inadvertently introduce these features into the dialogue.

I remember one such occasion when a member of the British contingent, imagining that a degree of informality would help matters along, made a culture-specific pun (to do with cricket) which the other British participants immediately recognized, laughed, and reacted to (in the way we often do with language play, taking up the pun and trying to outpun the other person). But the non-British people around the table didn't recognize the allusion, didn't laugh, and thus felt excluded. This is a really frequent situation. I've often found myself in the same position, as I visit other countries, and

find myself in a conversation where all the locals are ‘enjoying the joke’, or becoming enthusiastic or annoyed about a topic, and I have no idea at all what is going on.

The problem exists in many kinds of everyday circumstance – in advertising slogans, newspaper headlines and references to local politics or sport. Here are two examples of the last two categories. A few years ago, I encountered the following sentence in a South African English-language newspaper: ‘It is interesting to recall that some *verkrampte* Nationalists, who pose now as super Afrikaners, were once *bittereinder bloedsappe*.’ I had to replace the unfamiliar words by glosses, using a dictionary of South African English, to get an intelligible sentence: ‘It is interesting to recall that some bigoted Nationalists, who pose now as super Afrikaners, were once die-hard members of the United Party.’ I now understood the semantics of the sentence, but I still didn’t really understand it, for I didn’t yet know anything about its pragmatic or cultural application. At a pragmatic level, just how forceful are such words as *verkrampte* and *bittereinder*? I had no idea if these were emotionally neutral or extremely rude. If I met such a person and called him a *bittereinder bloedsappe*, would he be delighted or angry? Can the words be used for both men and women? I had no sense of the pragmatic force of these words. Nor did I have a cultural sense, because I don’t know what the United Party was, in its politics then or now.

Whereabouts on the political spectrum is it? How does it relate to the names of other political parties? Here, the encounter with the English of a community other than your own doesn’t automatically mean understanding: rather, it shows us just how much we do not understand.

And a sporting example, again from Dutch. A couple of years ago I was lecturing in Leiden. The country was in the grip of exceptionally cold weather. The canals were frozen and people were skating on them. The previous time the canals had frozen over like this, it seems, was 1997. So it wasn’t surprising that after the lecture the dinner-time talk – four Dutch colleagues, my wife and me, with a conversation entirely in English – at one point turned to the ice-skating. Which bits of the ice were safe? Which weren’t? Under the bridges was dangerous, for it was warmer there. Our knowledge of ice-skating was increasing by the minute. It was a lively and jocular chat, and the exceptional weather formed a major part of it. Then one of them said something that I didn’t quite catch, and the four Dutch people suddenly became very

downcast and there was a short silence. It was as if someone had mentioned a death in the family.

I had no idea how to react. Somebody commented about it being such a shame, about the – I now know how to spell it – Elfstedentocht. One of the four noticed my confused face. ‘The 11-cities tour was cancelled’, he explained, adding ‘because of the ice’. Ah, so that was it, I thought. Some sort of cultural tourist event taking in 11 cities had been called off because the roads were too dangerous. I could understand that, as the roads were so slippery that I’d had to buy some special boots a few days earlier to keep myself upright. But why were my colleagues so upset about it? ‘Were you going on it?’ I asked. They all laughed. I had evidently made a joke, but I’d no idea why. ‘Not at our age!’ said one of them. I couldn’t understand that answer, and didn’t like to ask if it was a tour just for youngsters. Then I got even more confused, for someone said that it was the south of the country that was the problem because the ice was too thin. But why was thin ice a problem? That would mean the travelling would be getting back to normal. I was rapidly losing track of this conversation, as the four Dutch debated the rights and wrongs of the cancellation. It might still be held...? No, it was impossible. It would all depend on the weather... And eventually the talk moved on to something else.

What I’d missed, of course, was the simplest of facts – and cultural linguistic differences often reduce to very simple points – which I discovered when I later looked up Elfstedentocht on the Internet. It firstly referred to a race, not a tour (tocht in Dutch has quite a wide range of uses) and moreover an ice race, along the canals between the eleven cities. It is an intensive experience, only for the fittest and youngest – hence the irony of my remark. But the semantics of the word was only a part of it. The cultural significance of the word I had still to learn. I discovered it in the website of the Global Post.

It’s hard to overestimate the grip that the Elfstedentocht has on the Dutch psyche. For sports fans in the Netherlands the epic 200-kilometer (125-mile) skating race is like the World Series, Super Bowl and Stanley Cup combined. Its mythical status is enhanced by the fact that it can only be held in exceptional winters when the canals are covered by 15 cm (6 inches) of ice along the length

of the course...

If the Elfstedentocht, or “11 cities tour,” goes ahead, organizers expect up to 2 million spectators – one in eight of the Dutch population – could line the route. The race has only been held 15 times since the first in 1909, and winners become instant national heroes. The legendary 1963 contest was held in a raging blizzard. Just 136 finished out of 10,000 starters.

‘It’s hard to overestimate the grip that the Elfstedentocht has on the Dutch psyche.’ A stronger cultural affirmation is difficult to imagine. The fact that it was an ice race was so obvious, to the Dutch people at the table, that they took it completely for granted, disregarding the fact that for me, coming from Wales, the significance of the thickness of ice on canals would totally escape me.

Here’s another example, from a different language. During a visit to a film festival in a small town in the Czech Republic, I had a conversation which went something like this. We were talking about coincidences, and P was telling me about Q, who had just got a job in P’s office:

P: Me and Q both live in ZZ street. And what’s even more of a coincidence is that he lives in 355 and I live in 356.

Me: So you can wave to each other, then!

P (puzzled): No.

Me (confused, thinking that they’ve perhaps had an argument): I mean, you could keep an eye on each other’s house, if one of you was away.

P (even more puzzled): Not very easily. I can’t see his house from where I live. It’s the other end of the street.

Me: But I thought you were neighbours.

P: Not really.

Me: Ah.

I didn’t know what to say next, and we moved on to some other subject.

The next day I made enquiries, and discovered what had gone wrong. It transpired that P’s system of house numbering operates on a totally different basis from what I

was used to in the UK. In Britain, houses are numbered sequentially in a street, usually with odd numbers down one side and even numbers down the other. So 355 and 356 would probably be opposite each other – or maybe even next to each other (for some streets have linear numbering). But where I was in the Czech Republic, the houses were numbered using a ‘conscriptio numbering’ system that dates back to the eighteenth century, on the basis of when they were built and registered. House number 356 was built (or registered) immediately after house number 355. So it was not necessarily the case that 355 and 356 would be opposite or adjacent to each other. That is why P thought it such a coincidence.

I don’t know how widespread this principle of house numbering is. Nor do I know how many other systems of house numbering there are, in the countries of the world. I am regularly confused by addresses in the USA such as 23000 Mulholland Highway. But as English comes to be increasingly used in countries with hugely different cultural histories, I do know that this kind of cultural communicative misunderstanding is going to become increasingly frequent, unless we anticipate the growing problem and solve it.

Any approach to language learning, sooner or later, has to cope with this kind of thing. And at some point these approaches have to find ways of overcoming these cultural barriers. There’ll always be a modicum of personal and idiosyncratic cultural difference, of course. Even within a language, people don’t always understand each other! Those who have written books on the gender divide (men from Mars; women from Venus) illustrate this perfectly. So a cultural awareness approach will never eliminate all problems of interpersonal communication. But I think it will reduce the kinds of problem that arise out of cultural difference to manageable proportions.

Thanks to the evolution of the Semantic Web, we now know that certain aspects of underlying knowledge can be incorporated into an automated system. The Semantic Web aims to capture the kind of knowledge we have about the world and our place in it. It has already begun to formalize some of our intuitions, and the signs are promising. You’ve probably experienced it. For example, in a dialogue about travelling from A to B, a system can ask us whether we have any preferences or constraints, any difficult days to travel, any dietary problems, and so on. It can

anticipate difficulties that an individual user may not have thought about. Because there are so many variables, it can outperform a human adviser. But everything depends on someone first having worked out what the relevant options are. And, as we all know, if we've used them, these systems still don't anticipate all the individual differences, so that we often find ourselves – after answering all the questions in an online dialogue – still having to approach a human being to sort out our problem. But it is early days.

The options in a travelling scenario are relatively easy to identify. They're far more difficult to identify in the case of intercultural relationships. But analysis of the kinds of discourse which illustrate different ways of thinking suggests that even here we're not talking about a very large number of variables. Just as discourse analysts have shown that all the stories that can be told reduce to a small number of basic 'plots', so I suspect some of the kinds of interpersonal difficulty illustrated in cases of intercultural misunderstanding will be capable of sufficient formalization to be able to be incorporated into software.

The time is right to use the Internet to develop a Cultural Web, in which the growing number of lexical-cultural identities of 'New Englishes' around the world would be captured, collated, and presented as a teaching resource. A taxonomy of the kind I illustrated earlier is a starting-point. To take my opening example: appleflaps are a symbol of an intimate Dutch encounter, so this would be listed in the relevant taxonomy category (the Bakery section under Nutrition under Human Beings). That would then act as a prompt for other users of the taxonomy, from different countries, to add their own local examples. It is an ongoing task, as culture never stands still, and keeping pace with areas of rapid cultural change (such as politics) is a challenge. It has to be a Wiki-like approach. But it is not an infinite task. There are fewer than 200 countries in the UN, and only a couple of thousand categories, not all of which are at the same level of cultural significance. It won't take for ever. All we need is for some organization (or organizations) to take a lead, and to have some lexicographically minded people in charge of development who are not scared of Big Data.