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ASIAN ENGLISHES AT LARGE

**“They felt sorry about our Sorry”:
Indigenising English by Aboriginal Australians**

Farzad SHARIFIAN

After coming into contact with Europeans in Australia, Aboriginal people came to adopt English as a means to communicate with each other as well as with the new settlers. Aboriginal people must have realised that the English language spoken by the white settlers did not provide them with all the tools that they needed to express their conceptualisations the way they did in their own languages. However, Aboriginal people managed to indigenise English and use it to express their cultural conceptualisations in language varieties that were developed out of their contact with Europeans. These contact varieties include Aboriginal Creole varieties and Aboriginal English. Today, Aboriginal English communicates the dynamic systems of the cultural conceptualisations of Aboriginal people as these conceptualisations have continued to evolve. To give a quick example here, Aboriginal people use the English word *sorry* to mean *sorrowful*, *mourning*, and *empathy/worry/care for other people*. This word can also be used in Aboriginal English to refer to special mourning rituals only performed by Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people needed a word to refer to these culture specific rituals and adopted the English word *sorry* for that purpose. Take the following example:

Sometimes Kardiya [i.e., non-Aboriginal] people, they feel sorry for Yapa [i.e., Aboriginal] people when they're in Sorry and that means that they share their sorrows with us and that's really good. (*Reconciliation Australia*, n.d.)

In this example, the first use of the term *sorry* means *sorrowful* and suggests sharing the mourning, whereas the second usage refers to the rituals performed when a death has occurred. Hence, the whole excerpt could be paraphrased as “sometimes non-Aboriginal people feel empathy for Aboriginal people and share their grief when they are mourning a death during their own special rituals”. It is to be noted that in writing, Aboriginal people capitalize the second occurrence of the word *sorry* to mark its specific meaning. In this sense, the word is usually used within the construction “in Sorry”, which is not common in Australian English.

In Australian English, the word *sorry* is predominantly used to express several forms of apology and in some cases these carry legal implications, as well as sympathy. In Aboriginal English, the speech act of *apology* may be enacted through non-linguistic means such as silence. The differences between the meanings of the word *sorry* in Aboriginal English and Australian English took on a special significance in the context of the issue of the apology demanded of the Australian government towards the Aboriginal people who became known as “the Stolen Generations”. In Australia, over a number of decades, government authorities took Aboriginal children the Stolen Generations away from their parents and placed them into white institutions. A common practice was simply to remove the child forcibly, often in the absence of the parent but sometimes even dragging the child from the mother’s arms. During the 1990s, a campaign was launched in Australia demanding an apology to be offered to Aboriginal people who had suffered from the child removal policy. Among Aboriginal people, this issue mainly focused upon a demand for a *sorry* statement to be made to them.

The former Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, refused to make an official apology, arguing that the current generation should not be viewed as responsible for the mistakes of the past. In 2008, the Prime Minister of the time, Kevin Rudd, at last issued an official apology to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the Australian Government.

In the context of the differences between the meanings of the word *sorry* in Australian English and Aboriginal English, it appears that what was meant by a demand for a *sorry* on the part of Aboriginal English speakers was more an expression of empathy than a statement of guilt, although some were demanding restitution. A statement issued by *Reconciliation Australia*, which is the peak national organisation that is building and promoting reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, made it clear that it did not need an expression of personal responsibility or guilt by individual Australians. What was needed was a gesture of compassion which would allow the victims of a bad policy to have their pain and suffering acknowledged. The statement made by *Reconciliation Australia* included the following passage, which reinforces the differences between the meanings of *sorry* in the two varieties of English in question:

The word ‘sorry’ holds special meaning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. In many Aboriginal communities, *sorry* is an adapted English word used to describe the rituals surrounding death (Sorry Business). *Sorry*, in these contexts, is also often used to express empathy or sympathy rather than responsibility. (*Reconciliation Australia*, 2011)

A lack of understanding of the differences between the meanings of words such as *sorry* in Aboriginal English and Australian English has often disadvantaged Aboriginal Australians. For example, in the context of the removal of Aboriginal children by the government authorities, Aboriginal *sorry* silence seems to have often been misunderstood. This misunderstanding is explained in the following excerpt from the book *Many Voices*, a collection of narratives about the removal of Aboriginal children from their families:

Parents often dealt with their loss by trying to forget or by burying memories deep in their hearts or, in traditional cultural environments, by imposing a ‘sorry’ silence, usually reserved for the dead. Sometimes this silence attracted the mistaken assumption from non-Indigenous observers that the children were not important to their families. (Mellor & Haebich, 2002, p. 8)

It can be seen here that for the Aboriginal people involved, the silence and the refusal to mention the lost children was associated with the concept of *sorry*, that is with mourning, whereas for some non-Aboriginal observers it was a sign of indifference. It reinforced a belief that the removal of their children was not important at all to their parents and other members of their families.

Cases like the one discussed in this article make it clear how unfamiliarity with cultural differences that exist between different varieties of English can have damaging, and even irreparable, consequences. English has been adopted by a large number of speech communities around the world to express their cultural conceptualisations (Sharifian, 2011). This has resulted in the development of more and more varieties of English that we refer to as *World Englishes*. An understanding of the cultural conceptual dimensions of different varieties of English, thus, will be invaluable to contributing to harmony through lack of misunderstanding in intercultural communication. This is something which is needed today more than at any previous stage in the history of humankind.

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