

Some lexical variations of Australian Aboriginal English

TROY VINSON*

Abstract

*This report explores the variety of English known as Australian Aboriginal English. It analyses some lexical variations uncovered through studying realistic Aboriginal English language usage from two films; *Blackfellas* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. It confirms that Aboriginal English has its own grammatical and semantic systems enabling its users to express things that can be expressed with Standard English alongside things that can not be expressed with Standard English. The report points out that for many Aboriginal Australians, Aboriginal English is a link to tradition and community and that it is often used as a solidarity marker and an expression of Aboriginal identity. It shows that almost all lexical variations in Aboriginal English mark solidarity and that Aboriginal English is a symbol of cultural maintenance. It explains that for many Aboriginal people, gestures and vocal articulations are interchangeable within Aboriginal English. The report describes how Aboriginal English has arisen. It posits that, due to either linguistic imperialism or the unwillingness of the British colonisers to adopt any of the 250 Aboriginal languages or approximately 600 dialects as a common language, the indigenous population over generations grafted their grammatical and semantic systems onto British Standard English.*

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the variety of English known as Australian Aboriginal English. Aboriginal Englishes are the varieties, or more technically, dialects of English spoken by Aboriginal people throughout Australia (Eades 1995). Although Aboriginal English is to some degree similar to varieties of Australian English, there are clear differences, as this paper shows. The analysis in this report covers some of the lexical variations of Aboriginal English from the films, *Blackfellas* (1993: Ricketson: Australia) and *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002: Noyce: Australia). Both films adequately represent realistic Aboriginal English language usage and were chosen as the elicitation of substantial natural language examples were beyond the time constraints and the scope of this project. According to Williams (1988), "Aboriginal English varies across the [country] due to the people, their culture and communities." Hawkins (cf. Groome 1995) states that "Aboriginal English has its own distinctive grammatical and semantic systems [and] enables its speakers to express anything that can be expressed in Standard English. Its speakers also use it to express ideas that are not often expressed in Standard English [and must] be seen as different [but] not deficient" (p.79). This

analysis of lexical variation indicates that, for many, Aboriginal English is a connection to tradition or is used to mark solidarity within a particular linguistic community. It can be a subtle but powerful medium for the expression of Aboriginal identity (Eades 1995).

Prior to the British invasion of Australia the Aboriginal people had some 250 different languages (e.g., Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara, Jaggarra) with approximately 600 dialects. As the British were unwilling to learn any of the Aboriginal languages, as is often the case when an invading force takes over a country (i.e., linguistic imperialism), it was left to the Aboriginal people to bridge the communication gap, first with a basic Pidgin English and later with what is now known as Aboriginal English (Eades 1995).

Aboriginal English developed over a few generations when the Pidgin English that was used to communicate with the British was used to communicate across the various Aboriginal language groups in Australia. This linguistic development gave rise to Aboriginal dialects of English, hence Aboriginal English, throughout most of Australia, including two Creole languages in the far north of Australia (Eades: 1995). In other regions where no Pidgin languages were used, Aboriginal people turned Standard English into Aboriginal English by overlaying their accents, grammar and ways of speaking and their lexical selections on the language. The next section examines some of the lexical variations of Aboriginal English.

2. *Unna* as a solidarity marker

In example (1), the lexical variation focus is on the word 'blackfellas' (from the title of the film) and the word 'unna' in lines 2, 4, and 8. 'Blackfellas' is the title of a film portraying contemporary Aboriginal life. The function of a film title is that of a headline, to attract attention and to inform. The Aboriginal English title 'Blackfellas' varies from Standard English in three ways: (i) spelling; (ii) structure; and (iii) phonetics. 'Blackfellas' in Aboriginal English is spelt 'Blackfellas' and in Standard English is spelt 'Black fellows'. The Aboriginal English form is one word while the Standard English is two words. Phonetically, the Aboriginal English version requires less effort in term of articulation. Therefore, for these reasons, 'Blackfellas' is a lexical variation, not only used for the title of a film but also used by Aboriginal people as an Aboriginal word to refer to one another and to mark solidarity.

(1) *Excerpt from 'Blackfellas'*

- 1 Pretty Boy: I'm sorry bro
- 2 Dougy: yesterdays history (pause) **unna**
- 3 Pretty Boy: I was gunna get ya some roses bro but I
- 4 decided to get ya the whole fucken bush **unna** ha ha ha.
- 5 Dougy: fuck you Boy.

- 6 [Brief physical exchange]
 7 Dougy: for ever and ever.
 8 Pretty Boy: brothers for ever and ever **unna**

In example (1), 'unna' is repeated three times by the speakers, who are engaged in a discourse that is basically an apology and the acceptance of that apology. The utterances are produced at the end of sentences without delay or hesitation. In this example, 'unna' appears to act as a grammatical tag, and therefore a small unit of talk tagged onto the end of a sentence to elicit agreement from the listener. While it may not be possible to arrive at a precise meaning or synonym of this lexical variation, one might argue that 'unna' roughly translates, some of the time, as 'isn't it so?' or 'isn't that right?' Further, in Example (1), 'unna' performs the role of a marker of solidarity, which Bales (1950: 78–80) claims is a "basic dimension of social relations within a group."

3. Lexical variation

In line 8 of example (2) and line 6 of example (3) the lexical variation focus is on the words 'deadliest' (the superlative form of 'deadly') and 'deadly' respectively. In line 8 below, 'deadliest' is used to show that something is very impressive or very good. In this example, Pretty Boy is an extremely good 'marker' (a football term for one who catches the ball on the full), and being the superlative form of 'deadly' it implies that Pretty Boy is the best 'marker'. A further example of this variation occurs in line 6 from example (3), when Polly expresses that a dress she is wearing is 'deadly'. Note also the previously described use of unna, here directly after 'deadly'. In this example 'unna' is used to mean 'isn't it so?' or 'isn't that right?' It also adds weight to the 'deadlyness' of Polly's dress. Some meanings or synonyms for 'deadly' in Standard English include lethal, toxic and fatal etc. Therefore, its usage in Aboriginal English has different meanings for the word 'deadly' from those of Standard English. However, according to Eades (1995), "it appears that this is a word which is spreading from Aboriginal English into general Australian usage, especially among young people."

(2) *Excerpt from 'Blackfellas'*

- 1 Pretty Boy: and another thing if it's a boy calling him after you
 2 Floyd Douglass
 3 Davy unna
 4 Dougy: what are ya gunna do about money.
 5 Pretty Boy: well if the worst comes to the worst, I'll go
 6 and play football, that coaches been on my back for 18
 7 months now to go and play for his team, reckon
 8 I'm the longest kicker and the **deadliest** marker hes ever
 9 seen ay.

(3) *Excerpt from 'Blackfellas'*

- 1 Polly: ya said we was goin to the movies
 2 Dougy: sorry Polly, Floyd picked me up but...
 3 Polly: oh fuck Floyd and fuck you to Doug, you and
 4 he might as well be boy friends for yuz both care about
 5 ya womens (pause) (softly) I got dressed up a every thing
 6 for ya (pause) Val got me this dress, **deadly** unna
 7 Dougy: **deadly** (pause) we'll go to the picture another night ok
 8 Polly: (nods head)

In example (4) (line 3) the lexical variation focus is on the word 'charge'. In the context of inviting Dougy to come and have a discussion, Pretty Boy states, 'we're gonna have a bit of a charge, and a talk'. In Aboriginal English a 'charge' refers to drinking alcohol. It is only related to the Standard English definition in the sense of 'to charge' like a battery, literally to keep filling it up until it's full, as this is what you do when you 'charge on': you keep drinking until you are full. Some non-related meanings and synonyms in Standard English include accuse, incriminate and to lay the blame on someone.

(4) *Excerpt from 'Blackfellas'*

- 1 Pretty Boy: Right o Doug right o lets go home and talk about it,
 2 Vals up playing cards tonight with Nana. So we're gunna
 3 have a bit of a **charge**, and a talk.
 4 Dougy: (shakes head).

In example (5) (line 5) the lexical variation focus is on the word 'digga'. In this example Dougy is explaining to Pretty Boy the Standard English animal husbandry expression pertaining to the mating of live stock 'to put to' or 'to put over'. While 'digga' has different meanings in Standard English and in particular Standard Australian English (e.g., a solder, possibly an ANZAC), the Aboriginal English meaning here refers to sexual intercourse. Therefore, this Aboriginal English expression, not used in Standard English, is definitely a form of lexical variation.

(5) *Excerpt from 'Blackfellas'*

- 1 Dougy: ya know what Pretty boy, Tony Fowleys gunna give me a
 2 couple of old mares with good blood lines, I can put em to
 3 Serenity Bill.
 4 Pretty boy: put em to?
 5 Dougy: yeh ya know (razes arm at 45% angle and jiggles fist) **digga**
 6 Pretty boy: oooah, you mean that Serenity Bill gets to
 7 put it to them old mares unna. (laughter)

4. Gesture and lexical variation

In example (6), the lexical variation focus is on the word, or in this example, gestures, in lines 4, 6, 8 and 17. In this example gesture will be treated as an utterance. This is due to the use of gesture in many Aboriginal languages and its transfer to Aboriginal English. According to Caruso (1997), Aboriginal English features “aspects including the use of silence, eye contact and body language.” In the film *Rabbit Proof Fence* (line 3), Molly gestures with a hand, to two approaching Aboriginal Men ‘can you give us some food’. A short exchange of gestures follows between Molly and one of the Men, resulting in the exchange of food to Molly and her sisters. This is a lexical variation of Aboriginal English not seen, at least to this degree, in Standard (Australian) English.

In line 12 the lexical variation focus is on the word ‘country’. According to Eades (1995), “the word country which refers to land generally, [...] also has a more specific meaning of *place of belonging*” (italics added). The Standard English equivalent refers to state, nation state and realm etc. The use of ‘country’ in Aboriginal English can also mean a person from your ‘country’ and can be exchanged with ‘brother’ when greeting a person from one’s place of origin. It is another example of a solidarity marker.

(6) *Excerpt from ‘Rabbit Proof Fence’*

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | (girls hiding see two men with roo over shoulder |
| 2 | approach) |
| 3 | Dasiy: ask em ask em Molly ask em for something to eat. |
| 4 | Molly: (steps out from hiding and gestures with hand to the men) |
| 5 | Can you give us some food. |
| 6 | Man: (the man carrying the roo gestures back with his hand) |
| 7 | Who else is there. |
| 8 | Molly: (gestures to the other two girls in hiding) come out and |
| 9 | show yourselves. |
| 10 | Man: hey you’re from that More River place ay. |
| 11 | Youngest girl: we goin home. |
| 12 | Man: where your country . |
| 13 | Molly: Jigalong. |
| 14 | Man: Jigalong, proper long way |
| 15 | (hands Molly a packet of matches) |
| 16 | you know what your doin. |
| 17 | Molly: (nods head) yes. |

5. Conclusion

An exhaustive analysis of this topic would require a holistic approach beyond the scope of this report. However, the exploration of other levels of variation such as

spelling, structure, phonetics and body language/gesture have been employed to gain a deeper insight of lexical variation in Aboriginal English. In all, the lexical variations of eight items have been analysed and explained. It has been shown that Aboriginal English is technically a dialect of English spoken by Aboriginal people throughout Australia. That said, Eades (1995) observes that it would be 'an oversimplification to speak of one dialect of Aboriginal English, just as it would be to speak of one dialect of British English'. Further, it has been shown that almost all lexical variations in Aboriginal English mark solidarity and, according to Malcolm (2001 p.217), Aboriginal English 'is a symbol of cultural maintenance, [and is] the adopted code of a surviving culture'.

***Author notes**

Troy Vinson is of Australian Aboriginal and Anglo Australian descent. He is a mature age student currently studying for a Bachelor of Arts in Languages and Applied Linguistics at Griffith University Brisbane. His academic interests include Australian Aboriginal languages, the Chinese language, pragmatics and intercultural communication, and general linguistics.

Contact email: Troy.Vinson@student.griffith.edu.au

References

- Bales, R 1950. *Interaction Process Analysis: A Method for the Study of Small Groups*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Caruso, J. 1997. Aboriginal English is bad standard Australian English—NOT! *Practically Primary* 2, 4: 19-20.
- Eades, D. 1995. Aboriginal English. Available at <http://www.une.edu.au/langnet/definitions/aboriginal.html>.
- Groome, H. 1995. Working purposefully with Aboriginal students. Katoomba, NSW: Social Science Press. Available at <http://www.tesol.org.au/esl/whatis.htm>.
- Harkins, Jean. 2000. Structure and meaning in Australian Aboriginal English. *Asian Englishes* 3, 2: 60–81.
- Malcolm, I. 2000. Aboriginal English research: an overview. *Asian Englishes* 3, 2.
- Williams, M. ed. 2007. *The Nunga Code*. Adelaide: Education Department of South Australia. Available at <http://www.tesol.org.au/esl/whatis.htm>.