“Where the bloody hell are you?”:  
Bloody hell and (im)politeness in Australian English

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Abstract

Controversy surrounds the Tourism Australia campaign catch phrase “Where the bloody hell are you?” Some think that the catch phrase shows light-hearted play on stereotypical characteristics of Australia such as “informality”, “casualness” and “friendliness”. Others say that, since the ad represents Australia, it should show more politeness and courtesy in standing for the country. This research first analysed based on corpus data how Australians use “bloody hell” in their casual conversation. Using ethnographic interviewing of Australian and non-Australian English speakers, the research then sought to uncover perceptions of the level of (im)politeness of these words. Lastly, the results of this analysis were used to explored how this phrase is used between speakers of different varieties of English. The research indicates that from an intercultural point of view, saying “bloody hell” is perceived differently when it comes to (im)politeness. It may be considered to be impolite in other cultures; however, it has been part of the ordinary discourse of Australian English speakers for a long time. Therefore, it should be respected as a common and casual Australian phrase used in their everyday life to show their characteristics of casualness and friendliness.

1. Introduction: “So where the bloody hell are you?”

This is the catch phrase of Tourism Australia’s marketing campaign encouraging tourists to visit Australia. The advertisement features images of Australians preparing for visitors to their country. It begins in an outback pub – the barkeeper says that he’s poured a beer; moves on to a young boy on the beach – he says he’s got the sharks out of the swimming pool; and then to partygoers watching Sydney Harbour fireworks, who say that they’ve turned on the lights. The commercial ends with a girl stepping out of the ocean asking “So where the bloody hell are you?”

In short, it features images of Australia, not only through its great scenic attractions of rainforests, beaches and Opera House, but also through the impact of the words “bloody hell” in the final question. It is said that the advertisement with its catch phrase shows a light-hearted play on stereotypical characteristics of Australia such as ‘informality’, ‘casualness’ and ‘friendliness’. However, when this advertisement first appeared on TV, there was a lot of controversy about its way of expressing casualness. Some thought that since it was sponsored by Tourism Australia, thereby representing Australia, it should show more
politeness and courtesy towards its audience in different countries. Others said that it was a valiant attempt to show the ‘real Australia’, with a proud attitude towards Australian culture. Those controversies triggered this study of the possibility of impoliteness from using the intensifier ‘the bloody hell’, which in Australia is commonly used in everyday conversation. In addition, this research includes the perceptions of the phrase by Australians and speakers of other varieties of English, which has implications for intercultural impoliteness in English.

2. Methodology

As indicated, this research aims to analyse and compare the notion of (im)politeness invoked by the spoken data among intercultural speakers. Therefore, the research used the methodology of ethnopragsmatics, which aims to ‘understand speech practices which make sense to the people concerned, i.e., in terms of indigenous values, beliefs and attitudes, social categories, emotions, and so on’ (Goddard 2006: 2). This involved both the analysis of a corpus of examples and ethnographic interviews.

First, the research analyses how English speakers use ‘bloody hell’ in their casual conversation by looking through the corpus data. Second, ethnographic interviewing is used, to find out what Australian English speakers think about that phrase in terms of (im)politeness, and then, by interviewing people from other countries such as the United Kingdom, to analyse their perceptions of these words, again in terms of (im)politeness. Lastly, based on the results of this analysis, the research explores an intercultural view of the interaction between speakers of Australian English and people from other countries.

3. Corpus data analysis

The first methodology used is corpus linguistics, which views a language as a social phenomenon which can be investigated on the basis of spoken texts (Mahlberg 2006). The research used two major corpus data sets available on the Web, the British National Corpus and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English. Since the analysis is mainly of the speech of Australians, it would have been more appropriate to use Australian spoken data; however, there was no corpus of Australian English freely available. The selected corpus data was searched using cultural keywords such as ‘bloody’ or ‘bloody hell’, which are said to be characteristic of the speech acts of Australian English speakers (Wierzbicka 2002).

The first word analysed through corpus data was the word ‘bloody’. Its actual lexical meaning is an adjective form of the word ‘blood’, which means ‘stained or covered with blood’; however, in terms of slang, it can be used as an intensifier to emphasise a speaker’s emotion or a situation itself. Nowadays it is
generally considered to be a very mild expletive, unlikely to cause offence in most circles. While it is a very common part of Australian speech in everyday conversation (Wierzbicka 2002), its usage in other varieties of English has not been well-documented This research analysed a random selection of 50 samples resulting from the search for ‘bloody’ in the British National Corpus. Firstly, it can be used as an intensifier implying positive meaning when it modifies the adjective ‘good’ or ‘well’ or ‘happy’. Secondly, it also can be used as an intensifier containing negative meaning with the adjective ‘stupid’, ‘fool’ or ‘rubbish’. Moreover, with a neutral adjective, neither positive nor negative, it can also be used as an expletive, for example in the examples below.

(1) It’s so bloody quiet here (GUU 3837)
(2) I was bloody livid! (KE6 4681)

As an expletive attribute, it implies a negative intention on part of the speaker. It is not an essential part of the sentence structure, but simply adding it can intensify the tone of a speaker. For instance:

(3) Turn off that bloody shower (BPA 2387)
(4) That bloody phone call! (HWM 2839)

It can also be used as the actual lexical meaning of the adjective form of the noun ‘blood’, meaning ‘stained with blood’. Finally, it can be used as a swear word.

(5) Oh, bloody hell! (KB7 4826)

The second word analysed is ‘hell’, which means the place or state of punishment for the wicked after death. However there are a lot more usages of the word in combination with the definite article ‘the’. First, it can be used as an intensifier to express surprise, anger, or impatience.

(6) Why the hell couldn’t he remember it? (A73 1829)
(7) What the hell’s happening? (ARB 718)

Secondly, it also can be used sarcastically or ironically to express the opposite of what is being stated.

(8) Are you listening to me? The hell you are! (H9V 2147)

Third, as an intensifier, it implies a meaning with great speed, effort, or intensity.

(9) We ran like hell to get home before the storm. (FPB 2739)
And lastly, like ‘bloody’, it can be used as a swear word or an exclamation.

(10) **Hell**, the whole luggage is gone! (JYB 28)

The third phrase I looked through is ‘bloody hell’, as in the sentence ‘Where the bloody hell are you?’ First, it can be used as a swear word or exclamation meaning ‘Damn it’.

(11) **Bloody hell**, how did you think of it? (ADY 1860)

Also, it can be used as an intensifier as seen in the example below.

(12) What **the bloody hell** are you doing here? (BP7 684)

From these results of the searching through corpus data, it can be concluded that the intensifier ‘bloody hell’ is used in various situations and conversations in spoken English.

4. **Ethnographic interviews with English speakers**

Building on this conclusion, ethnographic interviewing was used to analyse the possibility of (im)politeness associated with saying ‘bloody hell’. Four Australian English speakers were interviewed individually, then five Australian English speakers who are students of Griffith University were interviewed in a group situation. Two British English speakers from the United Kingdom were also interviewed.

First, in the group-interviewing of five Australian English speakers – three male speakers and two female speakers – interviewees were asked if they use ‘the bloody hell’ often in their everyday conversation. One of the male speakers and one of the female speakers answered that they usually do not use those words, while the rest of them answered that they do. One interviewee added an opinion that it may be a personal preference to use those words.

They were next asked if they think those words are impolite to use in Australia. One of the male speakers who had answered that he does not use those words often said that some people, especially those who have a religion such as Christianity, would be offended if those words are spoken to them. Because in Christianity ‘hell’ means the place or state of punishment of the wicked after death, it is considered as a taboo notion. However, the other male speaker who said he uses those words very often argued that most Australians would feel alright to speak and to hear the words ‘bloody hell’. He insisted that in everyday conversation, even people of older generations also may not be offended if they heard those words because these words are very casual and are commonly used.
In another interview, a male aged 25 answered that he does not use the words very often but he does sometimes. However he said that he is not offended to hear other people use them, and often does not even notice when someone uses them. He added that those words are just like other common words to him in his casual conversation. In short, using the words ‘the bloody hell’ in Australia is usually not impolite in everyday conversation. In addition, most Australians are not offended when they hear them as well.

Table 1: How often do you use the words ‘bloody hell’ in everyday life?

Table 2: How do you perceive the words ‘bloody hell’ in everyday life?

Next, an English speaker from the United Kingdom was interviewed in order to analyse perceptions of (im)politeness of the use of ‘bloody hell’ in another variety of English. The interviewee was a middle-aged female English speaker from Oxford, United Kingdom. She was asked about the possibility of there being impoliteness associated with using the words ‘bloody hell’. First, she started her answer with the campaign of Tourism Australia saying ‘Where the bloody hell are you?’ She argued that there is a possibility that some Australians might even be embarrassed when they first saw the campaign. Moreover, she felt a bit irritated when she herself saw that advertisement, because she found its tone rude and impolite in saying that. She said it implied that if you are not in Australia now, you are an ‘idiot’. Literally, the campaign keeps asking where ‘the bloody hell’ are we (the potential tourists). Moreover, she related this to the brand naming strategy of FCUK (French Connection United Kingdom), one of
the famous fashion brands of United Kingdom. She insisted that the firm should stop its marketing strategy of its brand name looking ‘accidentally’ similar to the ‘f-word’. She said she was shocked the first time she saw the advertisement, and she was not very pleased to see that advertisement again.

Accordingly, there is the possibility of intercultural impoliteness arising when Australian English speakers and British English speakers here the words ‘bloody hell’. On the one hand, Australian speakers consider it just as a common word in the casual conversation; on the other hand, a British English speaker considered it as a rather impolite expression to use or to hear.

5. Conclusion

This research has attempted to sketch out the possibility of it being impolite to say the intensifier ‘bloody hell’ in Australian English. First, using corpus data system, the research collected and analysed the data of various usages of ‘bloody’, ‘(the) hell’, and ‘bloody hell’, finding these to be used in various situations and conversations in everyday spoken English. Second, using the methodology of ethnographic interviewing, Australian English speakers and British English speakers indicated how they consider the words ‘the bloody hell’ in terms of potential (im)politeness. Usually, Australian speakers do not think it is impolite to say or hear the words, however, the British speaker interviewed thought the words were a bit rude. Moreover, with these results, comparisons could be made between Australian and British notions of being impolite, with the finding that in this case intercultural impoliteness could exist.

Proceeding from what has been said above, it should be concluded that from an intercultural point of view, saying ‘bloody hell’ is perceived differently regarding (im)politeness. It may be considered to be impolite in other countries; however, in a point of view of cultural relativism, it is a part of long-standing Australian culture and life style. Therefore, it should be respected as one of their common and casual phrases used in their everyday life to express the casualness and friendliness characteristics they have.

*Author notes
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