

# The Macquarie South-East Asian English corpus: a note

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So much is written about English that it comes as a surprise to discover that there are Englishes which are still largely unrecorded to challenge the adventurous lexicographer. Such uncharted territory exists in South-East Asia, where apart from a few cursory and highly individualised accounts of the main features of the terrain, little systematic mapping has been undertaken. Singaporean and Malaysian English and Philippine English in particular are flourishing varieties that fall into this category.

The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd has now published a range of dictionaries for Australia, so it was with natural curiosity that we cast our eye to the other Englishes in our region. There we found such lexical riches as to delight the lexicographer —we found also some of the insecurities, ambiguities and inhibitions that haunt the language community that is without the benefit of standard language reference tools —the dictionary, the style guide, the spelling book— in their own variety of English. We too have lived our lives somewhere in the middle between a colonial English past and an American English present. We too were not quite sure if our spellings were acceptable, our pronunciation good enough. Could others understand the words that seemed essential to us to express ourselves as people who lived in this particular place?

Life before «The Macquarie» was published in 1981 was full of such linguistic uncertainties. It is therefore with a certain fellow feeling that we have undertaken some basic research on the Englishes of this region. We are compiling a corpus —comprising a sampling of newspaper texts with some fiction and non-fiction, depending on the usefulness of the non-fiction and the availability of the fiction.

The corpus covers not just the major Englishes but also samples of English in Thailand, Hong Kong and Indonesia. The dictionary that we hope to publish next year will be grounded in the corpus, although the corpus selection is then worked through by consultants and by readers who of course are native speakers of the particular variety.

The regional dictionary will provide an up-to-date coverage of World English with entries such as «ecotourism», «cyberspace» and «political cor-

rectness». It will also keep up to date with the jargon of such technical domains as computers, multimedia and business. But importantly, it will also cover items of English which is standard in the region, words such as:

- (1) **rojak** (Singaporean and Malaysian English) noun. 1) a type of mixed salad with a thick sauce made from shrimp paste or peanut paste. 2) an ethnic or cultural mixture, especially one that is unassimilated and crude. adjective. 3) displaying such unsophisticated mixing: *a rojak culture*. [Malay]
- (2) **aircon** (South-East Asian English Colloquial) noun. 1) airconditioning. adjective. 2) airconditioned.
- (3) **sticky rice** noun. *see* **glutinous rice**.  
**glutinous rice** noun. a type of rice, used especially in Asian desserts, that is sticky when cooked.
- (4) **dirty kitchen** (Philippine English) noun. a kitchen for everyday use or use by maids, as opposed to a kitchen used for show or by the owner of the house.

This dictionary is unique in that it recognises that an English speaker in South-East Asia needs that language not only for communication with the English-speaking world internationally, but also for communication at home. The dictionary captures that local English which reflects its Asian context.

Some of the material prepared for the dictionary will appear in the third edition of the complete «Macquarie Dictionary», to be published in November this year. The selection and the writing of the entries has in this case been done from an Australian point of view, but it is still a significant step, since many of these words will be appearing in a dictionary for the first time.

Dictionary projects, once begun, take on a life of their own. I hope that this one will now continue to grow and that we will build up our network of consultants throughout South-East Asia. Ten years from now we should have the major features of our language map of the region identified. Since attachment to language forms part of a sense of identity, the documentation of the lexicon provides something akin to a map of the culture as well. The English of the region is a guide to the greater meaning of the community that speaks it.