Welcome to ABC Radio National.

[ABC Home](https://www.abc.net.au/)

[**ABC Radio National**](https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/)

[**Lingua Franca**](https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/linguafranca/)

**Australian English: Australian Identity...**

Saturday 27 November 1999 3:45PM

At the launch of the Australian Oxford Dictionary, last month, the editor, Bruce Moore, spoke of the way the history of Australia's republican and federation debates - in the 1890s and one hundred years later, in the 1990s - parallels the history of the development of Australian English.

In this week's Lingua Franca, entitled Australian English:Australian Identity, Bruce Moore shows how language, and national dictionaries, are central to on-going debates over national identity.

**Transcript**

Jill Kitson: Welcome to Lingua Franca. I'm Jill Kitson. This week: lexicographer Bruce Moore on Australian English, Australian Identity.

With language one of the most significant markers of national identity, it's not surprising that post-colonial societies like Australia, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, should want to distinguish their language from that of the mother tongue.

Writing soon after the American Revolution, Noah Webster declared:

'As an independent nation our honour requires us to have a system of our own in language as well as in Government. Great Britain, whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be our standard: for the taste of her writers is already corrupted and her language on the decline.'

Hence Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language, published in 1828.

In the convict colony of New South Wales, language was both a marker of Australian, or native-born identity, and a social marker, as Bruce Moore, editor of The Australian Oxford Dictionary, explained at the recent conference on post-colonial Englishes in Canberra, where the Dictionary was launched.

Here's Bruce Moore now to talk about Australian English, Australian Identity.

Bruce Moore: Peter Cunningham had been Surgeon Superintendent in five convict transports before he took up land on the Hunter River in 1825. In 1827, in his book 'Two Years in New South Wales', he wrote:

'Our Currency lads and lasses are a fine interesting race, and do honour to the country whence they originated. The name is a sufficient passport to esteem with all the well-informed and right-feeling portion of our population; but it is most laughable to see the capers some of our drunken old Sterling madonnas will occasionally cut over their Currency adversaries in a quarrel. It is then, 'You saucy baggage, how dare you set up your Currency crest at me? I am Sterling, and that I'll let you know!'

In 19th century Australia the distinction between native-born Australians and migrants was played out lexically as a battle between currency and sterling. In the early days of the colony there were coins and notes of many kinds, from various countries. These were called currency, whereas English gold pieces were called sterling - sterling being the genuine thing in sharp contradistinction to the mixty-maxty mongrel currency. By the 1820s these two terms had widened their application and were being used to describe two groups of people in the colony. Currency applied to those native to Australia, that is, those born here. Sterling referred to non-convict, British-born residents.

These native-born currency lads and lasses began to speak a new language. Outsiders comment on their accent and the 'colonial phraseology'. Some of this colonial language was borrowed from Aboriginal languages, and some of it was generated internally. The irony is that many of the expressions which are contemptuously categorised as 'colonial' are in fact English. But they are not sterling English, not the language of the now respectable London or polite society. These Australian words are a mongrel breed, some of them are underworld terms, and many are words from British dialects, which remained dialectal in Britain, but which became mainstream in Australian English. There developed here a language that was in subversive opposition to the now-emerging Received British English. Shifts in the meaning of standard English words - 'mate' is a good example - reflected Australian social ideals which differed from the British.

The period of greatest interest in Australian English in the 19th century is the 1890s. This coincides with various kinds of cultural nationalism, including debates about republicanism and federation. What interests me here is the way that the history of the republican and federation debates parallels the history of the development of Australian English.

As evidence of the interest in Australian English in the 1890s, we have Karl Lentzner's Dictionary of the Slang-English of Australia and of Some Mixed Languages (1892); Cornelius Crowe's The Australian Slang Dictionary (1895), Joshua Lake's dictionary of Australasian words in the Australian edition of Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language (1898); and, most importantly, E.E. Morris' Austral English: A Dictionary of Australasian Words, Phrases and Usages of 1898, a work whose scholarship would not be surpassed until the publication of the Australian National Dictionary in 1988. The Bulletin promoted Australian English, and it fostered writers who used a distinctively Australian idiom. On its pages will be found numerous articles, letters, and so on, dealing with the meaning of Australian words. This interest in Australian English is a manifestation of cultural nationalism, of the kind that produced writers such as Lawson, and painters such as the members of the Heidelberg school, and that also produced the republican and federation debates.

Here at the end of the 19th century, was a point in time when one might have expected an Australian Webster to arise. But it would be another 70 years before a comparable interest in Australian English was seen.

Federation under Empire was the late 19th century version of the late 20th century's minimalist republic. The collapse of republicanism at the end of the 19th century goes hand in hand with a diminished interest in Australian English in the public sphere. The political swing was back to Empire. With Federation, it would seem, Australia could once again act as if it were a colony. And in a world where Empire reigned there was little room for Australian English. There are some criticisms of Australian English in the 19th century, but nothing which matches the vehemence of the first half of the 20th century. In this period the lexical and pronunciational elements were regarded as mongrel currency, indubitably sub-standard. There is therefore a paradox here: what was recognised as characteristically Australian (and therefore central to the process of constructing and expressing concepts of identity, citizenship, and nationhood) was at the same time (with reference to a British standard of social-cum-linguistic correctness) second rate and sub-standard. Monoculturalism was the ideal; monolingualism (with British English as the standard) was also the aim of government.

During the 1960s there are signs of change in the public sphere, as the links with Empire weakened. The massive post-war migrations had altered the demographic makeup of Australia. When the Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies suggested that the new Australian decimal currency should be called the 'royal', no-one took the suggestion seriously. Sterling had weakened in value. The mongrel currency was again in the ascendant.

1966 is a significant year. Sir Robert Menzies retired in 1966. There were in that same year three major publications on Australian English: Bill Ramson's Australian English: An Historical Study of the Vocabulary 1788-1898; the second edition of Sidney Baker's The Australian Language; and George Turner's The English Language in Australia and New Zealand. Also in 1966 appeared Geoffrey Dutton's edition of a collection of articles on republicanism and the monarchy, titled Australia and the Monarchy. This was the first book-length study of republicanism in Australia since George Black's 1891 book Why I am a Republican (although the issues had been raised by Donald Horne in 1964 in his book The Lucky Country). While there was a renewed interest in republicanism, the movement was slow in gathering impetus. Yet the election of the Whitlam government in 1972 signalled a significant change in Australian society, and brought with it a wave of cultural nationalism comparable to the 1890s.

Attitudes towards Australian English were rapidly changing. In 1976 there appeared the first general Australian dictionary, edited in Australia, and representing the Australian language. This was Graeme Johnston's Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary. It is extraordinary that an Australian dictionary was so late in coming. The Macquarie Dictionary appeared in 1981. In 1987 the government report National Policy on Languages stated:

'Australian English is a dynamic and vital expression of the distinctiveness of Australian culture and an element of national identity.'

In 1988 there appeared The Australian National Dictionary, including 10,000 Australian words and meanings, illustrated by more than 60,000 citations from Australian texts. Interestingly this dictionary was called The Australian National Dictionary rather than The Dictionary of Australian English. The title would have pleased the nationalists of the 1890s. Australian English had arrived.

In 1992, at a conference on the Languages of Australia, David Blair argued:

'Australian English is currently a self-confident dialect, reasonably secure in itself, and prepared to set its own standards. It is confident enough to be open to outside cultural influences, as is the society in which it functions.'

I agree with Blair that Australian English is now secure and confident. But just how secure and confident is the society which this newly secure and confident Australian English reflects?

The republican movement of the 1890s fizzled out; so, too, has the republican movement of the 1990s. Oh, of course, the republic is inevitable, it's just around the corner. That's what the defeated republicans of the 1890s argued!

In the 1890s, running parallel with republican and federation political issues, we had an exposition of the meaning and origin of Australian words. The 1990s equivalent has been a series of public debates about the meanings of words which are central to concepts of Australian identity. This phenomenon reached its climax in 1999 in the argument about 'mateship' in the draft preamble to the constitution. During the 1996 federal election campaign, the term 'dewogging' (meaning to go through an Australian naturalisation ceremony) emerged, highlighting competing views about the value of multiculturalism. The term 'black armband view of history' highlighted competing views of Australia's past: settlement or invasion, Australia Day or Day of Mourning. And, of course, there was Hansonism.

In this regard, one of the most interesting terms is 'sorry' and its relation to the report on the 'stolen generations.' 'Sorry' was the most discussed word of 1997. To many in the non-indigenous Australian community, Sorry Day (instituted in 1998) means a day of saying sorry to the indigenous people for what had happened in the past. In Aboriginal English however, 'sorry' is closer in meaning to standard English 'sorrowful', and is usually associated with grief and mourning. The two meanings of 'sorry' are not distinct, but they are not entirely coterminous either. Like the two peoples who voice them, they are not entirely reconciled.

These semantic debates and tensions emphasise the real uncertainty that exists about what we mean by the term 'Australian identity'. The irony is that while nationalism gave Australian English its confidence, Australian English now voices a crisis of national identity. Australian English is secure, currency no longer needs to define itself in relation to sterling. That is the end of the cultural cringe for Australian English, but perhaps only the beginning of the 're-casting' of the currency of national identity.

Jill Kitson: Bruce Moore, Editor of the Australian Oxford Dictionary, published last month.

And that's all for this edition of Lingua Franca.

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/linguafranca/australian-english-australian-identity/3562064>