

An Approach to English Culture and Idiosyncrasy for Spanish Speakers

Rosa María Donati*
Universidad del Salvador

I would like to make my introduction to the study of the English language and its close connection with the culture and idiosyncrasy of its native speakers by doing something MOST un-English, which is talking about me.

The reason why I feel the need to do so is because I do not only intend to lecture on the subject from acquired knowledge, but also from my own experience. Being Argentine by birth as well as by culture, I have been raised in an “English” household by my English mother, and my father who (like his own father) was educated at an “English” bilingual school where they became acquainted, not only with the English language, but also with its culture.

To put it in a nutshell, I was an English speaker before I was five, though totally unaware of the fact.

This brief account is most relevant to the topic in question, since I wish to refer to the important role culture and idiosyncrasy play when teaching and/or learning a foreign language.

It would be fitting to begin by defining a language. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a language is “the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way.”

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines a language as:

- “The system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other.”
- “Any one of the systems that are used and understood by a particular group of people.”
- “Words of a particular kind.”

That is “the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them and using them, used and understood by a community.”

Richard Nordquist, Grammar and Composition expert defines a language as: “A human system of communication that uses arbitrary symbols such as voice sounds, gestures, or written symbols.”

All these definitions are incontestable yet, is it possible to acquire a foreign language by merely considering it as a “system of communication”?

The choice of the shortest route to success in the teaching of English to Spanish speakers is a controversial matter, since new methods and teaching aids are continually being developed, each being replaced by the next –as though all adult or elderly foreign English speakers had acquired their knowledge spontaneously!

I believe that the real issue is the way the teaching is approached. The preconceived idea is that a mastery of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation of a second language (English in this case) is enough for a person to be considered bilingual. Yet, why then do we so often come

* Sworn Translator and Interpreter of English graduated at Universidad del Salvador (USAL), tenured professor of English Language in all the courses of study of the School of Modern Languages (USAL), and English Language Tutor at the Faculty of Social Sciences (USAL). She also teaches English Language and Culture at St. Trinnean’s University College (San Isidro). She has taught English Language, Literature, and Diction in USAL’S post-graduate course for English teachers (Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa - Plan B), and was Language coordinator at the former Faculty of Philosophy and Arts (USAL), between 1992 and 1998. She was Head of the English Department of bilingual Primary and Secondary private schools till 2007. She lectured at the “Primeras Jornadas Internacionales de Lengua Inglesa”, organized by the School of Modern Languages (USAL), 2009, and has been summoned by Universidad de Lanús (UNLA) to form part of several Assessment Boards. She has published translations of articles for the Faculty of Social Sciences (USAL) and for the Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad Nacional de Lomas de Zamora.

across an utterance which is grammatically and semantically correct, and yet “not English”?

The answer is: because a language is a system of communication that responds to the needs of people who share not only a territory but also a history, a culture, and who have an idiosyncrasy of their own. Therefore, before even attempting to teach a foreign language, one should begin by acquiring and transmitting awareness of the intrinsic differences between the idiosyncrasy of the prospective learner and that of the native speakers of the language he wishes to acquire. If we apply this to a native Spanish speaker who wishes to learn English, we should begin by trying to identify the differences between the two languages, which will unerringly point to the idiosyncrasies of their native speakers. Long and clumsy sentence constructions, for instance, are the natural consequence of this lack of awareness.

This leads us to a concept that sums up one of the main differences between Spanish and English descendants. In Spanish speaking communities people are garrulous, outspoken, and extroverted. The Spanish language, therefore, suits their temperament. We Spanish speakers need to reaffirm everything we state –we are fond of long words, and make a greater use of adjectival and adverbial phrases and clauses.

The English, on the other hand, are naturally shy, self-contained, detached and have therefore developed an onomatopoeic, even musical language, with words rich in connotations in order to suit their reticent nature, thus allowing them to be accurate and precise but also capable of painting vivid word pictures in very short phrases.

In my experience, keen observation of English behaviour and the analysis of literary work have proved to be invaluable tools. I have been greatly inspired in my analysis of the English character, as opposed to that of native Spanish speakers, by George Mikes and, lately, by the English social anthropologist Kate Fox –Co-director of the Social Issues Research Centre in Oxford; for these authors’ keen observation of English behaviour has done nothing but confirm that cultural awareness is a “must” if we wish to acquire a language in every sense of the word.

George Mikes, critic, broadcaster, and writer –who was sent to London to cover the Munich crisis and never returned– has very humorously depicted the differences, between England and the Continent (the latter, in direct allusion to the French), in his widely known book *How to Be an Alien*. In the *Warning to Beginners* he definitely shows the foreigners’ outspokenness and extroversion as opposed to English reticence by wittily pointing out that “On the Continent public orators try to learn to speak fluently and smoothly; in England they take a special course in Oxonian stuttering...”

I have used Mikes’ book for years and, considering that it was first published in 1946, I sometimes wondered whether his observations (and my own) had not become slightly outdated, to say the least... And then, an inspired student brought to my attention the existence of *Watching the English* by Kate Fox (published in 2004), and I rejoiced, not only because it is a most enlightening work, but because this 21st century English social anthropologist wholly coincides with Mikes, and has furthermore included his work in her bibliography.

Insularity is clearly exposed by Mikes in his constant reference to the differences between England and the Continent; likewise, Kate Fox, when referring to the English as a classist society, quotes George Orwell’s belief that class differences “fade away the moment any two Britons are confronted by a European.” Scottish, Welsh, and Irish national identities merge into a British one, adopting English behavioural patterns and language when living in a foreign country. This is very obvious in Argentina, for instance, where these people are all “*los ingleses*” to us. We can hardly tell their national identities apart, and Fox’s “grammar of Englishness” certainly applies to all, when confronted with another culture.

In his novel *Flowers for Mrs. Harris*, Paul Gallico introduces us to an English charwoman who has discovered man-made beauty in a couple of Dior dresses she has seen in one of her clients’ closets and her life changes for she feels the urge, the craving for one. But this would not only mean saving a lot of money, but also actually going to Paris! When the moment comes, “Mrs. Harris realized that she was leaving England behind her and was about to enter a foreign country, to be amongst foreign people who spoke a foreign language and who, for all she had ever heard about them, were immoral, grasping, ate snails and frogs, and were particularly inclined to crimes of passion and dismembered bodies in trunks.”

On the other hand, in his screenplay *Shirley Valentine*, Willy Russell introduces us to a housewife from Liverpool who refers to her husband's reluctance to travelling: "No... he'd never go abroad. He hates travellin'. He gets culture shock when we go to Chester!"

This *insularity* probably explains the reticence that Kate Fox defines as "social dis-ease", "lack of ease, discomfort, and incompetence in the field (minefield) of social interaction."

This dis-ease is "treatable", she says, by means of certain facilitators such as "weather talk," moderation (fear of fuss), humour, hypocrisy, empiricism, (distrust of 'airy-fairy' Continental theorizing and rhetoric). Incredibly enough, a Hungarian depicted these same traits back in the 1940s, exhibiting a very English sense of humour.

But, before delving into these aspects of the English character, I would like to focus on the way this "dis-ease" is reflected in their language. For the English language is characterized by its word economy, in other words, its key difference with Spanish, the feature which has led me to discover the enormous potentiality of the short story as a tool for English language teaching.

The very nature of the short story calls for word economy. That is a careful choice of words, which will allow the author to convey full ideas, impressions, feelings, character traits, with superb brevity –this not only requires a mastery of semantics but also of sentence structure. Furthermore, the short story calls for the students' perspicacity in reading between the lines, an aspect that turns it invaluable for the development of their comprehension.

In a short story not a single word is left at random. Quoting Edgar Allan Poe, "every word tells, and there is not one word that does not tell." This seemingly simple assertion should be, in my opinion, the *motto* of every English teacher and learner, as it is to every short story writer and native speaker because it represents the very essence of this language. I must say, however, that word economy is present in other literary genres, as we shall later see.

This feature is particularly significant to native Spanish speakers whose aim is to acquire the English language and, particularly, to those who wish to become translators or interpreters. Thus, if we were to make reference to the "clack-clack approach of a sightless man", or to the same man "thumping his way before him" our listener/reader would get an instant mental picture of a blind man working his way with a cane. This could not be easily replaced by a single word in Spanish (nor do I believe a native speaker of Spanish would care to make the attempt, for word economy is not the essence of that language).

The use of prefixes and suffixes is another way of "economizing," especially when it comes to coining words which will give the exact idea one wishes to transmit. In his essay "Selected Snobberies", Aldous Huxley uses terms such as "low-browism" (as opposed to "culture snobbery"), or "up-to-dateness" as a synonym of "modernity snobbery." How can these terms possibly be improved on? And how useful they are to satisfy English directness and straightforwardness! It would be practically impossible to find a single word in Spanish to express these ideas.

This is obviously idiosyncratic, and it is where cultural awareness comes in. Kate Fox mentions "deeply ingrained impulses" of the English "cultural equivalents of laws of gravity" which I have already mentioned regarding what she calls the "central core of Englishness," these "chronic inhibitions and handicaps". She calls them "reflexes" because they are automatic ways of being/doing things.

Fox considers humour to be one of the most important "basic reflexes" the English have as a resource to counteract their social inhibitions. Moreover, it is part of their everyday lives and culture. Satire, wit, irony, sarcasm, understatement, are some its characteristic forms.

While in other cultures there is a time and place for humour, among the English it is always there, it pervades their lives. They refuse to come across as sentimental they shirk pomposity and self-importance (and even tend to distrust those who are like that).

D. H. Lawrence's opening paragraph of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a most controversial novel set in post First World War England, clearly shows the deepest pain concealed beneath an ostensibly cynical surface. He wrote:

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened; we are among the ruins; we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future;

but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.

This was more or less Constance Chatterley's position. The war had brought the roof down over her head. And she had realised that "one must live and learn."

Her husband, Clifford Chatterley, had been sent to Flanders "to be shipped over to England again six months later, more or less in bits... He didn't die, and the bits seemed to grow together again. For two years he remained in the doctor's hands. Then he was pronounced a cure and could return to life again with the lower half of his body, from the hips down, paralysed for ever."

The English tend to define self-importance and pomposity in a single word: "cleverness," which they utterly dislike and distrust and, when detected, immediately counteract with irony and sarcasm. George Mikes wrote: "This pompous, show-off way of speaking is not permissible in England. The Englishman is modest and simple. He uses but few words and expresses so much –but so much– with them."

This is very wittily shown in a section of *How to Be an Alien* under the title "How not to be Clever." Thus, when briefing "aliens" on how to be rude, G. Mikes highlights the different reactions to an obviously untrue story. According to him, "on the Continent you would remark: 'You are a liar, Sir, and a rather dirty one at that.' In England you just say 'Oh, is that so? That's rather an unusual story, isn't it?'"

English humour, as Kate Fox points out, "is not a special, separate kind of talk... it is like breathing." The English can't function without it. This "reflex" manifests itself whenever they wish to avoid discomfort of awkwardness. "When in doubt, joke."

Going back to Shirley Valentine, she is caught out talking to the wall, by her husband Joe:

JOE: Who the bloody hell are you talkin' to?

SHIRLEY: To the wall.

JOE: To the *what*?

SHIRLEY: The wall. Any objections?

JOE: Never mind the bleedin' wall. It's nearly six o'clock, get on with getting me tea.

SHIRLEY: Oh, my God! It's six o'clock and his tea isn't ready. Will the Government collapse? Does this mean the end of civilisation as we know it?

JOE: I always have me tea at six o'clock.

SHIRLEY: So just think how excitin' it would be if for once you had your tea at quarter past six. It'd make the headlines: 'World Exclusive. Joe Eats Late!'

Though Shirley and Joe are an ordinary Liverpudlian couple leading monotonous lives, we may clearly detect this pervasiveness of English humour in their everyday conversations; this refined sarcasm. Instead of reacting temperamentally to Joe's unkind remark, Shirley settles on cynical irony instead. "Humour is all in context."

In Spanish, when we write or speak seriously, even ceremoniously, we MEAN IT! When we wish to make serious criticism, we're DEAD serious.

Another feature of the English character which is clearly reflected –especially in their satirical writings– is the use of an elaborate style, as a roundabout way of expressing a critical opinion (while incidentally showing moderation and avoiding open unpleasantness). Paradoxically enough, garrulous Spanish speakers resort to simplicity and straightforwardness whenever they wish to tell someone where to get off, whereas formality is clearly meant, both in literature and in speech. Tragedies are treated tragically and the style matches the mood.

In literature this can be achieved through the use of hyperbole (exaggeration), long sentences, and a formal register. Caricatures are a clear example of this elegant form of criticism. The Author's note introducing Peter Mayle's *A Dog's Life* may well illustrate this point.

"My story is based on actual events. However, following the current autobiographical custom adopted by politicians in their memoirs, I have adjusted the truth wherever it might reflect unfavourably on myself."

Noël Coward, again, was captivated by "...the verbal adroitness of Saki's dialogue and the brilliance

of his wit." In this century, the wit might seem laboured and the language old fashioned yet, he believed Saki does not belong to this category of writers. "His stories and novels appear as delightful and, to use a much abused word, sophisticated, as they did when he first published them."

His caricature of Cornelius Appin in the short story "Tobermory," which Coward defines as a masterpiece, paints a clear picture of the Edwardian high social society and their prejudice and distrust of those who did not actually "belong" –especially if they insisted on showing off their achievements.

"Of all her guests, he was the one who had come to Lady Blemley with the vaguest reputation. Someone had said he was 'clever' and he had got his invitation in the moderate expectation, on the part of his hostess, that some portion at least of his cleverness would be contributed to the general entertainment. Until tea-time that day she had been unable to discover in what direction, if any, his cleverness lay. He was neither a wit nor a croquet champion a hypnotic force nor a begetter of amateur theatricals. Neither did his exterior suggest the sort of man in whom women are willing to pardon a generous measure of mental deficiency."

It may be pointed out that, in this particular quote, English class-consciousness is also alluded to and satirized by the author. English humour is not a synonym of "good humour"; in many cases it is quite the opposite. In fact, quoting K. Fox "...we have satire instead of revolutions or uprisings."

In English, an elaborate style is one of irony's greatest allies in the achievement of verbal wit through euphemisms, parodies, caricatures.

Going back to "Selected Snobberies," Huxley makes use of the euphemism as a subtle means of satirizing the young adolescents of his time whom he categorizes as "disease snobs," who thought it would be "romantic to fade away in the flower of youth like Keats..." in direct allusion to consumption: an incurable disease, in those days, which had taken the lives of many highly admired artists and poets.

English cultural traits are constantly coming up, both in spoken and written language; thus, proverbs or popular sayings, as well as nursery rhymes, are a typical source of verbal wit.

In *Blithe Spirit*, a hilarious play by Noël Coward, he spices up the dialogues between the protagonist, Charles Condomine, and the ghosts of his two late wives who, tired of bickering and competing with each other, join forces against him; and also tired of Madam Arcati's (the medium) vain attempts to send them back to the "Other Side", they complain:

RUTH: And now, owing to your idiotic inefficiency, we find ourselves in the most mortifying position. We're neither fish, flesh, nor fowl, nor whatever it is.

ELVIRA: Good red herring.

The actual saying is: "Neither fish, flesh nor good red herring," with reference to someone whom others find hard to understand. "Red herring," on the other hand, refers to a fact, argument, etc. that leads attention away from the matter being considered.

In another part of the play, Charles and Elvira (his first wife), argue about infidelity (especially his):

CHARLES: On looking back on our married years, Elvira, I see now, with horrid clarity, that they were nothing but a mockery.

ELVIRA: You invite mockery, Charles. It's something to do with your personality, I think. A certain seedy grandeur!

CHARLES: Once and for all, Elvira...

ELVIRA: You never suspected it, but I laughed at you steadily from the altar to the grave, all your ridiculous fussings and fumings.

Elvira's remark is a parody of the idiom "from the cradle to the grave", i.e. from birth to death. The result is, obviously, satirical humour.

Like proverbs and sayings, nursery rhymes are a structural aspect of the English language. In fact, most of them may be traced many centuries back, and are closely related to English history.

Towards the end of the play, Madam Arcati has finally stumbled across the solution to the

problem of sending Elvira and Ruth back. Edith, the maid, had been the natural force that had enabled the medium to conjure them up, in the first place. Though Elvira and Ruth are still sceptical, she decides that the step to follow is hypnosis.

MADAM ARCATI: Here Edith –this is my finger. Look! (She waggles it). Have you ever seen such a long, long, long finger? Look, now it's on the right – now it's on the left – backwards and forwards it goes – see – very quietly backwards and forwards – tic-toc, tic-toc, tic-toc.

ELVIRA: The mouse ran up the clock.

This last rejoinder is a clear allusion to the nursery rhyme “Hickory, Dickory, Dock.”

As you have surely noticed, these witticisms would be clearly wasted on anyone who has no knowledge of these cultural features.

It is essential that a translator or interpreter should be acquainted with these cultural traits.

Hypocrisy

The English are, as Kate Fox puts it, “rightly renowned for their hypocrisy.” Just like humour, it is another omnipresent trait of their behaviour.

In our Spanish speaking culture, hypocrisy is a negative feature, for it is automatically related to deceit. Yet, as in the case of “cleverness” (which has a negative connotation for the English, defying every definition in the dictionary), hypocrisy is not as odious a feature of Englishness as it might appear to the naked eye for, in most cases, it is a form of politeness to avoid causing offence or embarrassment. Hypocrisy comes naturally to the English, particularly because of their “social dis-ease” which causes them to become inclined, in Fox’s words, to “polite pretence rather than honest assertiveness.”

George Mikes very subtly, though effectively, reaffirms this: “On the Continent people either tell the truth or lie. In England they hardly ever lie but they would not dream of telling you the truth.”

W. Somerset Maugham, like Saki, unravels this feature of the English character revealing it as indispensable to social interaction, as well as to avoid unpleasantness.

In the short story “The Luncheon,” he describes the ordeal he had had to go through during a luncheon, as his guest kept ordering expensive dishes, while he could not bring himself to even suggest that they were far beyond his means.

I was startled when the bill of fare was brought, for the prices were a great deal higher than I had expected. But she reassured me.

“I never eat anything for luncheon”, she said.

“Oh, don’t say that!” I answered generously.

“I never eat more than one thing. I think people eat far too much nowadays. A little fish, perhaps. I wonder if they have any salmon”.

Well, it was early in the year for salmon and it was not on the bill to fare, but I asked the waiter if there was any. Yes, a beautiful salmon had just come in, it was the first they had had. I ordered it for my guest. The waiter asked her if she would have something while it was being cooked.

“No,” she answered, “I never eat more than one thing. Unless you had a little caviare. I never mind caviare”.

My heart sank a little. I knew I could not afford caviare, but I could not very well tell her that. I told the waiter by all means to bring caviare. For myself I chose the cheapest dish in the menu and that was a mutton chop.

In another of his stories, “Louise”, he shows a rather darker side of English hypocrisy, though still elegant and subtle.

I could never understand why Louise bothered with me. She disliked me and I knew that behind my back, in that gentle way of hers, she seldom lost the opportunity of saying a disagreeable thing about me. She had too much delicacy ever to make a direct statement, but with a hint and a sigh and a little flutter of her beautiful hands she was able to make her meaning plain. She was a mistress of cold praise.

These two passages speak for themselves and, in the latter, a word combination such as “cold praise” strengthens the ironic effect even further.

Understatement is another literary resource which points to English negative response to earnestness. Kate Fox points out that it is permanently used in context, in key phrases like: “Oh, come off it!” which she defines as their national catchphrase along with “Typical,” or “A bit of a nuisance” (meaning disastrous, traumatic, horrible), to say the least.

As far as understatement is concerned, Eeyore from A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner* always comes to mind. In fact, Eeyorishness is one of the features that Kate Fox describes as part of the English socio-cultural cosmology (and which I will later refer to, in particular). In the chapter called “Pooh Builds a House”, he and Piglet make a terrible mistake: they take Eeyore’s house for a pile of sticks and decide to use those sticks to make him a house in a part of the Forest which is “out of the wind.” When Eeyore discovers that the house he had built for himself is gone, he goes to see Christopher Robin:

“What’s the matter, Eeyore?”

“Nothing, Christopher Robin. Nothing important. I suppose you haven’t seen a house or whatnot anywhere about?”

“What sort of a house?”

“Just a house.”

“Who lives there?”

“I do. At least I thought I did. But I suppose I don’t. After all, we can’t all have houses.”

“But Eeyore, I didn’t know – I always thought – ”

“I don’t know how it is, Christopher Robin, but what with this snow and one thing and another, not to mention icicles and such like, it isn’t so Hot in my field about three o’clock in the morning as some people think it is. It isn’t Close, if you know what I mean – not so as to be uncomfortable. It isn’t Stuffy. In fact, Christopher Robin,” he went on in a loud whisper, “quite-between-ourselves-and-don’t-tell-anybody, it’s Cold.”

“Oh, Eeyore!”

“The Guardian” Books blog published an article on Eeyore in May, 2011, in commemoration of his 140th birthday. In literary terms he is described as an archetypal outsider living in his own Gloomy Place in the Hundred Acre Wood, where everyone else lives happily. He is described as the outsider unlike the rest of the animals who, in his own words “have no Brains... only grey fluff that’s blown into their heads by mistake and they don’t think.” He is in his lonely corner thinking to himself, “Why?” and sometimes “Wherefore?” and wrestling with these questions alone.

Still, he is a lovable character. According to this article, this is because he is the funniest of the characters and “his melancholy often teeters on the brink of absurdity” as in the chapter in *The House at Pooh Corner*, in which Tigger accidentally bounces him into the stream while playing Poohsticks, and he ends up floating round in circles, trying to “maintain his sombre demeanour.” His sarcasm, on the other hand, is glorious (though completely wasted on the other animals in the Wood). He is the embodiment of English “moaning” and taste for irony; and, while we enjoy the nuances of this essentially literary character, we unheedingly drink in these profoundly English features.

Kate Fox has tried to un-fathom the obscure reasons that may account for English behaviour, and has come to the conclusion that neither climate nor geography can entirely explain their disease, since other nations share similar conditions –and yet differ from them, completely.

When I read about Eeyorishness in her book, I was absolutely flabbergasted since, in my own household, we have been giving virtual “Eeyore Awards” to those of us who were forever feeling sorry for ourselves. My mother was usually the winner. To give a trivial example, after his retirement, my father –who was extremely active– used to arrange for meals at home. They would either have food delivered or eat out (with some exceptions, when my mother chose to cook). If, around lunch or dinner time, my father made no move, my mother would stoically ask: “We’re not having lunch/supper today, are we?”

These idiosyncrasies are definitely inbred and, like the others which I have already mentioned,

should be matter of study and source of awareness to all who wish to understand these people and their ways.

As English Language teachers at this University, we are absolutely conscious of this and work on these peculiarities in order to get our students to become literally immersed in the language –just as though they had been brought up among native speakers. In other words, to understand their sense of humour (which is not so different from ours), ever present in every aspect of their lives, no matter how tragic the circumstances may be; to understand how certain peculiarities of the English language such as word coinage by affixation or compounds, for instance, are much more unusual in Spanish; to identify and elicit irony or sarcasm through verbal wit, hyperbole, purple passages, or understatement; to express ideas with this elaborate simplicity that the English master so well (and which is so difficult to achieve in Spanish) –I am referring to word economy.

Throughout my exposition I have quoted passages from famous plays, essays, novels, and stories which have allowed me to make my meaning plain. This is what we do in our language classes, and the result is satisfactorily seen in our students' excellent production of essays and short stories, many of which reflect their understanding of "Englishness" to perfection –a clear proof that all of this is possible.