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## Creating networks, creating in-groups - choice of vocabulary in *The Economist* editorials.

Intervention au colloque GERAS "Réseaux" en mars 1999.  
Paru dans *Anglais de Spécialité* N° 23/26 pp253-267 1999

John Mullen,

### Résumé

On a souvent suggéré que l'anglais international des affaires est d'une nature simplifiée, et s'est séparé de ses racines culturelles. Pourtant, dans les discussions stratégiques pour les hommes d'affaires dans *The Economist*, nous avons remarqué une complexité lexicale très marquée. Notre article examine les choix lexicaux dans les éditoriaux de cette revue, et propose des explications possibles dans des termes de légitimation d'un discours.

### Summary

It has often been suggested that international business English is simplified English, and/or that international business English is bound to lose its cultural roots altogether. Yet in the strategy discussions of *The Economist*, a high level of lexical complexity is found. This paper examines the choice of vocabulary in the *Economist* editorial and proposes explanations for their choices in terms of the need to legitimize their position and discourse.

**Key words:** International business English, lexis, journalism, style, babu, referee design, in-group.

**Mots clé :** Anglais des affaires, anglais international, journalisme, style, analyse de discours, babu, conception d'arbitre, élite.

The dominance of English in world business is massive and the growing internationalisation of production ensures, for better or for worse, that this trend will continue. Already in 1986, McCrum could write that three quarters of the world's mail was written in English and "*nearly half of all business deals in Europe were conducted in English*". Claude Truchot (1994) described the situation within the scientific research communities (95% of researchers in Strasbourg claimed to give papers in English) and within some international companies.

What can be said about the nature of international English? In specific areas or technical specialities, careful work has allowed the beginnings of a description of the language used. Academic English and the English of research papers have been

particularly examined. (among many others, Swales 1990, Sturge Moore 1997, Lerat 1997). But what of English in a business context ?

English is used in business for communicating product orders, technical specifications, timetables, financial reports, complaints or technical back-up in the whole world, between non-native speakers most frequently, or between native and non-native speakers. It is also used for other purposes of communication both within and between companies: persuading, proposing, analysing, negotiating, and discussion of strategy. Already, certain international companies, such as the Swedish company, Ericsson, (Hollqvist 1984) impose English as the language of business meetings, even when all staff present have the same mother tongue (in this case, Swedish). In Italy, the company Bari has attempted to make English the only language used even for internal memos, and other examples have been known.

For the carrying out of routine business tasks (ordering spare parts, sending out bills, setting up appointments, and various standard forms of business letter) a restricted vocabulary and a text heavily marked by set forms is sufficient. This is illustrated by the frequent use within firms of such aids to communication as technical phrase books, collections of form letters in English, automatic translation programmes, and so on. Such phenomena have led many people to speculate that international business English in general is becoming or will become "simplified".

Another hypothesis one frequently hears concerning English in international business is that the language will become completely detached from its cultural roots. The British Council sponsored major work, *The Future of English* speculates that soon English will no longer be dependent on those countries which have it as a mother tongue.

*The main areas of development in the use and form of English will undoubtedly come from non-native speakers. Native speakers may feel the language 'belongs' to them, but it will be those who speak English as a second or foreign language who will determine its world future.* (From *The Future of English*)

Dr. Merton Bland, intervening in an e-mail discussion on the cultural roots of English, suggested that

*Yes, we can still talk about the "sticky wicket" or "fourth and goal," so culturally-bound. But, increasingly, we use a technical vocabulary that, itself, is international.*

In this way, it has been suggested, global English will have succeeded where Zamenhof's Esperanto failed, in becoming a language independent of particular cultures. One often hears, and perhaps particularly among professionals of English language teaching, negative opinions about such developments. The following quotation from a contribution to an English language teachers' e-mail discussion list is quite typical:

*Well, I'm not sure I'd want to see a world English. Or rather, I have mixed feelings about it. Teaching World English (after we've somehow defined it) means teaching an English that has no native speakers, an artificial dialect if you will. [...] and it wouldn't change over time very easily. (And then, the changes would be abrupt, not natural, etc.)*(10.11.98 on TESL-L, a discussion list for English as a foreign language teachers.)

What this paper aims to do is to look at the lexis of one example of English as an international language of business – the editorials of *The Economist*, and consider whether there is evidence that it is tending towards simplification or internationalisation in the sense of a separating of the language from its cultural roots. Potential explanations for the choice by *The Economist* of this type of lexis will then be explored, using some concepts taken from discourse analysis.

*The Economist*, published by the British press group Pearson who also publish the *Financial Times* is a highly respected magazine dealing with economic, business and other issues. According to its promotional material, it is read by "over 450 000 of the world's most prominent business figures" (sales leaflet May 1998) which, even allowing for a certain poetic licence, shows the audience it is aiming at – fundamentally, managers and shareholders.

There are several things that distinguish it from similar magazines around the world. Perhaps the first is its determinedly modern style. Humorous cartoons, rather than portraits of smiling shareholders, can often be found on the front page. The second is its capacity to be controversial. The editorial line is, for example, at the same time conservative and republican - that is, in favour of the abolition of the British monarchy, a rather unusual and heady mixture in British journalism.

Jacques Hennot writes

***The Economist*...imprimé en noir et blanc, doté d'une maquette sévère... est pourtant considéré comme un des plus influents dans les milieux internationaux. ...Très jaloux de son indépendance, il n'hésite pas à prendre des positions iconoclastes. Il fit sensation, voici quelques années, en défendant le libre commerce des drogues douces.**

Finally, *The Economist* is particular in that it doesn't allow its writers to sign any of its articles - the authors remain anonymous. It aims at convincing its readers of its analyses by careful documentation and evidence, and not by an appeal to the authority of well-known "experts".

*The Economist* is very much an international magazine. "The Economist *may be published in English, but it covers the world*" states its promotional material. The magazine is sold in local newsagents around the world. Poster advertising campaigns in France and Germany recently encourage the general public to buy it. Its cover price is stated in 35 currencies. Subscriptions (very unusually for a British magazine) can be paid for in cheques in any major currency.

The Sales Manager of *The Economist* was willing to give the latest audited sales figures.

Weekly circulation figures for January-June 1998

(communicated by e mail)

UK: 119,400

Europe: 147,539

Asia Pacific: 79,500

Middle East/Africa: 18,739

Latin America: 17,432

North America: 301,806

World: 684,416

*The Economist* is sold both to native speakers of English and to non-native speakers, but substantially different editions are not used for non-anglophone countries.

*We produce 5 editions round the world. The advertising is different in each edition, but the editorial is the same throughout, apart from the Britain section, which usually has 3 extra pages in the UK edition. Depending on the news, we do quite often have split covers which might mean, for example, that UK and Europe editions have one cover and the Far East and US another. However, this does not mean that the leaders are different, just that they would swap positions as the first leader always relates to the cover. (Interview with author)*

Within the magazine, we chose to look at the editorials, the "leaders". There are several of these in each issue. Other established newspapers such as *The Times* also have several per issue, but *The Economist* spends more pages on editorials than any

other magazine or newspaper we have seen. The editorials give a clear opinion on a subject of international or national business, diplomacy, economics or politics. They are the part of the magazine in which the writers address themselves most immediately to the readership to try to convince them of a viewpoint. From this point of view the language and vocabulary used would, we felt, reflect some aspects of the relationship between (anonymous) writer and reader.

We asked one of the editorialists of *The Economist* if they had any particular policy relating to the type of language preferred in their magazine. He assured us that they did not, but that their only aim was to be "*as clear as possible*" and to "*avoid jargon*". Comments related to this attitude appear frequently in the magazine: "*we are committed to plain English*". The word "*committed*" is normally reserved for ideological or ethical considerations, and its use to describe a style of language shows an emotional attachment.

*The Economist tries to maintain a clear concise prose style [...] On the readability scale devised by Donald Hayes of Cornell University (which has a baseline of zero for "International English-language newspapers", and rises to +50 for the most difficult papers in research journals such as Nature)...The Economist scores minus two. (The Economist 7.11.98)*

Interestingly, Jacques Hennot in his study of the economic and financial press (Presses Universitaires de France 1993), also singles out the English used in The Economist for comment. He refers to it as "*écrit dans un anglais très pur*". "*Plain English*" and "*un anglais très pur*" are both intended to be high praise, but filtered through different cultural and intellectual sets of values.

For the purposes of this study, twenty editorials were selected at random, each approximately one page long, from twenty different issues of *The Economist* covering the period from 1994 to 1998. The themes covered are very varied, but deal in the main with international economy, business and politics. We aimed to examine the difficulty of the vocabulary for the non-native speaker, and whether or not the vocabulary was partially culture-bound or entirely international and "*culture-free*".

The lexical difficulty of a text is not something which can be easily measured, in particular for an international audience, since the similarity or dissimilarity of a lexeme to the words of their native language is a major factor (speakers of romance languages find Latinate vocabulary easier than Anglo-Saxon based vocabulary, for example).

The vocabulary was examined in two ways – first the impressions of a group of contacts were collected, in order to identify the lexical elements which cause difficulty, and secondly the frequency of these lexemes in a large general English

corpus was investigated. With the help of non-native speakers (who were not teachers of English, since teachers are a specific category not intended to be the target of the magazine), we read through the editorials and picked out as much as possible of such vocabulary. We divided it by grammatical category and added three categories more culture-based than grammatically based: foreign words, cultural references, proverbs and idioms.

Next a straw poll was carried out among foreign speakers of English. We asked a group of foreign contacts (again not English teachers), to list the words they were sure they understood, those that caused great difficulty but were not impossible, and those they were sure they didn't understand.

We asked two Danish contacts who are in the habit of participating in international conferences, a French contact married to an Englishman, who has lived for a year in Australia, two German contacts who have a good conversational level of English, and an Algerian who learned English at home. From our experience with managers in international firms, we consider that our contact group has a level of English much higher than the average target audience among non-native speakers, of *The Economist*. Nevertheless, a large number of lexical items posed problems for them. Between 19 and 89 lexemes were considered as "completely incomprehensible" and a similar number "caused severe difficulty."

Naturally, such results are impressionistic and are not amenable to statistical analysis. Nevertheless, this straw poll allowed a selection of lexical items for further examination. We decided to examine them from the point of view of frequency in modern English usage. It seemed to us that if "plain English" had a meaning, at a lexical level, it ought to be close to "everyday English". To carry out this investigation, we used the British national corpus, the largest corpus we could find.

The British National Corpus is a collection of texts of modern English, making up one hundred million words of text. This makes it considerably larger than most (the COBUILD corpus of British English contains less than 18 million words). It deals with British English, which seemed to us appropriate since *The Economist* is a British magazine. By a process of sampling, the BNC team ensures that the corpus is genuinely representative of modern English. The corpus includes many different styles and varieties, and is not limited to any particular subject field, genre or register. In particular, it contains examples of both spoken and written language. For written sources, samples of 45,000 words are taken from various parts of single-author texts. Shorter texts up to a maximum of 45,000 words, or multi-author texts such as magazines and newspapers, are included in full. Sampling allows for a wider coverage of texts within the 100 million word limit, and avoids over-representing idiosyncratic texts.

Looking first at nouns, we found that our sample of twenty editorials included the following words which some at least of our respondents claimed to find very difficult. For some of the words we have added the immediate context. After each word is a reference number which refers to one of the twenty editorials used, and a number which represents the frequency of apparition of this lexeme in the British National Corpus.

In measuring frequency within the British National Corpus, we attempted to include occurrences of any word which would sufficiently clarify the meaning of the lexeme. So naturally we included plurals, related adjectives or verbs if the meaning was essentially the same, etc. For example, we counted both the verb "to flip-flop" and the noun "a flip-flop", and for the item "bullying" we included "bully, bullies, bullied, (but not "to bully off", the technical hockey term). On the other hand, we eliminated from the frequency figures for "brace" meaning "pair" such occurrences as "a brace for his neck".

We came up with this list for nouns in the editorials. We have listed the words in order of "rarity": that is, at the beginning are the nouns used in the editorials that are least frequently found in the BNC.

#### Nouns

grouplet (D15) 1

a patsy (D13) 5

soft-headedness (D8) 7

Give-and-take (D5) 11

jet-setting (D4) 11

back-peddalling (D5) 11

wooziness (D13) 14

war-weariness (D15) 15

basket-case (D3) 18

shilly-shallying (D5) 19

dotage(D20) 20

*geek-hero* (D20) 20

*whoops* of delight (D17) 22

backsliding (D5) 29

more *politicking* than policy making(D1) 29

tittle tattle (D9) 30

scrutineer (D9) 33

hoodlum (D15) 36

a dreary *has-been* (D13) 44

a stop-gap (D13) 45

stooge (D1) 56

a bromide (D16) 59

a flip-flop (D5) 71

a *brace* of regional governors (D13) 74

stakeholder (D6) 77

Nice *pickings*(D20) 112

an inkling (D12) 159

externalities (D6) 202

a pundit (D8) 207

a showdown (D11) 232

a backlash (D20) 269

a blight (D7) 308

a spur (D14) 482

big-power *bullying* (D17) 716

The main categories of difficulty seemed to be

- complex nouns (soft-headedness, jet-setting, back-peddalling, give-and-take war-weariness, shilly-shallying, has-been, tittle tattle, stop-gap, flip-flop). This category causes problems because of the large variety of semantic links possible between the two or more elements of the complex noun (weariness [of] war, but [be] ing [part of the] jet set, and a hero [for] geeks).
- informal or occasionally slang words (wooziness, shilly-shallying, geek, whoop, flip-flop.)
- Elements of irony (brace, grouplet, basket-case). Irony is particularly interesting in this context in that avoiding ironic expressions is a basic tactic for increasing comprehensibility when addressing non-native speakers.

## Adjectives

Among the difficult adjectives identified by our contact group were the following:

hair-trigger (D17) 4

*clunky* circuits (D14) 6

gridlocked 20

*skin-deep* (D14) 12

uncool (D19) 15

cornered (D5) 29

a *groggy* boxer 33

*gung-ho* investors (D14) 33

rough-hewn (D13) 38

stodgy (D13) 51

*swingeing* penalties (D17) 52

*trumpeted* expectations (D17) 53

a *go-it-alone* country (D11) 91

outlandish (D9) 103

crass (D16) 103

arcane (D6) 119  
limp (D1) 120  
grudging(D1) 147  
stunted.(D18) 147  
bestly (D19) 148  
flailing (D5) 158  
bloated (D17) 169  
awash (D19) 173  
muddled (D4) 249  
aloof (D16) 290  
gruesome (D19) 209  
half-hearted (D19) 231  
*skinny* copper wire (D14) 319  
far-reaching (D15) 438  
dizzying(D1) 550  
*over-mighty* (D9) 1030  
elder (D18) 1355

Looking at these adjectives, we found some identifiable sources of difficulty

- a number of complex adjectives (Carriage-borne, hair-trigger, gung-ho, go-it-alone, skin-deep, over-mighty, half-hearted, rough-hewn, far-reaching, skin-deep). Again, the variety of semantic structures causes difficulty (deep [as the] skin but [with a] trigger [like a ] hair, [with] half [of a] heart, hewn [in a] rough[manner] and so on).

- a group of adjectivally used present participles

Swingeing, dizzying, flailing, grudging,

- several formal or literary adjectives

Aloof, arcane, awash, elder

- some slang or informally used adjectives

Groggy, stodgy, limp, skinny , clunky

- the ironically used, out-of-date informal adjective, beastly

Looking now at verbs , we found

to floor (D7) 3

to tinge (D13) 4

to bedevil (D5) 11

to mob ( a building) 17

to sack (a city) 31

to recoil (D18) 36

to laud (D8) 38

to trounce (D6) 46

to nibble(D1) 53

to tut-tut (D1) 56

to ditch (D6) 82

to tinker (D17) 91

to bestow (D8) 103

to lumber (D14) 112

to assuage 114

to dash (D16) 191

it was *marred* (D19) 121

to bolster (D17) 223

to swamp 261  
to tick. (D18) 262  
to *haul* home 567  
to sneer (D6) 530  
to enshrine (D15) 376  
to *nudge* the balance (D4) 404  
to unravel (D15) 406  
to dwindle (D15) 495  
to underpin (D10) 690  
to scrape 732

We looked separately at phrasal and prepositional verbs, a category that always causes difficulty to non-native speakers of a language, and one of the first elements of vocabulary one avoids when there are communication difficulties. Such verbs are of course, almost exclusively non-Latinate, and cause difficulties of comprehension due to their similarities, due to the large number of phrasal and prepositional verbs with more than one meaning, and due to the fact that it is often not possible to calculate the meaning of a phrasal verb by adding the meanings of its component parts. In fact, knowing some of the senses of the component words can be a brake on understanding. People who understand the word "crop" are perhaps less likely to be able to handle "to crop up" than those who do not! Similarly with "to tuck in" ( in the sense of to begin eating).

#### Phrasal verbs

to *breeze into* subjects (D5) 1  
to peel off ( from allies) (D17) 4  
to gulp down (D5) 12  
to dart about (D14) 10  
the wooziness of barely diluted power is *getting to* him. (D13) 16

to rein back (US capitalism)(D12) 20

to ride out (a crisis) (D13) 34

to snap at (someone) (D5) 37

to snip away at (the deficit) (D5) 42

to *chip away* at (our institutions) (D9) 47

to clamp down (D1) 69

to tuck into (D11) 82

to fall out with (someone) (D10) 87

to fork out (D4) 122

to fend off (D13) 140

to bail someone out (D18) 129

to back this up (D10) 171

to write off ( a debt) (D18) 272

to crop up (D16) 302

to *stand up to*\_(SE Asia's elder statesman) (D18) 367

There were a number of proverbs and idioms in the documents.

to go nuclear (D17) 2

men with *beetle brows* (D13) 2

collateral damage (D17) 4

*Dyed-in-the-wool* monarchists (D9) 4

to cut and run (D11) 12

to line one's pockets (D4) 18

to throw in the towel(D1) 42

a bushel of carrots and one very big stick (D7) 33

to call the shots (D13) 39

a moot point (D12) 53

a tall order (D14) 59

He will *cut no ice* with the students (D18) 20

to walk tall (D17) 21

to come a cropper (D16) 34

to loom large (D19) 76

to turn a blind eye (D10) 151

hold no *balm* (D19) 183

Naturally the most difficult among these are the ones where the original expression or proverb is twisted for ironic effect ( as in " a bushel of carrots and a very big stick".)

Apart from the above categories of vocabulary, we identified a series of culturally based expressions difficult to categorise – forms of intertextuality which depend heavily on a knowledge of British culture.

parts that money cannot reach(D1) 0

(various references to original quotation "the parts other beers cannot reach" 15)

A billion Chinese won't be wrong (D8) 0

(in its original form : "a million housewives can't be wrong" 3)

An idea whose time has passed (D9) 0

(as the original quotation "an idea whose time has come) 8

There's no such thing as social product (D10) 0

(as its original quotation from Margaret Thatcher "There's no such thing as society 8)

*deadbeat* dads (D7) 5

That view would be harmless if it were limited to Troubled of Tunbridge Wells or Bothered of Baltimore. (D8) 0

checks and balances (D9) 58

goodbye to all that (D15) 3

Some of these examples of intertextuality involved texts which are almost never available to foreign speakers of a language. "A billion Chinese won't be wrong" is a reference to an advertising slogan from the 1960s for Heinz "A million housewives can't be wrong." "The parts that money can't reach " refers to an advertisement for Guinness – the beer which " refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach ". "Troubled of Tunbridge Wells or Bothered of Baltimore" (D8) is a reference to stereotypical eccentric habitual writers of letters to the Editor.

Some of the references to US or British politics ("checks and balances" in D9) might be considered to be readily available to those with a passing knowledge of US civilisation. Nevertheless, some reference required a close knowledge of domestic politics in Britain or the US - thus "deadbeat dads" (D7), a recently coined phrase used to refer to fathers - especially divorced or separated ones - who do not carry out their parental responsibilities.

Along the same lines, the documents contained a small number of non-English expressions, which gave the following results:

vaterland/Vater(D1) 1

pour mieux sauter (D16) 3

pro bono work 4

folies de grandeur (D9) 5

complaisant (D3) 13

largesse (D3) 81

coteries (D13) 84

frissons(D1) 106

Examining the vocabulary of our sample of editorials and its frequency within the British National Corpus allowed us to draw some conclusions about lexical choice of the journalists concerned. It is clear that the journalists, while considering that they are "committed to plain English" are quite ready to employ words and expressions, which are extremely rare in real modern English.

Just how rare are these words ? Obviously a precise measure of what is a rare word is impossible, but to give an idea, there are 6,318 words in the BNC which occur

more than 800 times. In our list, it is very rare for one of the words to occur more than 300 times, and a large number occur only a handful of times in this hundred million word corpus.

We have already mentioned that our contact group who identified problematic vocabulary had a level of English much higher than that of the target audience of *The Economist*. For several other reasons, the account of vocabulary given above considerably underestimates the difficulty involved for the target audience.

Firstly, to measure the frequency of apparition of the lexemes within the British National Corpus is to measure their frequency in native English. However, everyday native English is not the English experienced by non-native managers in their work. They are much more likely to be involved in international meetings with other non-native speakers than with British people. We can imagine then, that vocabulary which is rare in the BNC is far more rare in the everyday non-native English that the *Economist*'s readers hear every day. This must in particular be true for the complex adjectives and nouns, and the phrasal and prepositional verbs which are common in the sample of lexis we examined.

Secondly, our sample of *The Economist* writing takes only one page per issue, twenty pages in all. Each issue of *The Economist* contains 108 pages, including seven or eight editorials, and the magazine is published every week. Readers are therefore expected to be able to handle very large quantities of such text.

It seems that contrary to the claims of *The Economist* to be "committed to plain English", and in spite of frequently expressed fears among English Language professionals that "global English" will mean "simplified English", the lexis of these editorials contains a large number of words and expressions which are at best problematic and at worst incomprehensible for the type of people at which they are aiming.

What could be the reason for this ? The first element to look at is the intrinsic complexity of the subject matter. The discussion of general global strategy for businessmen and state governments, and the attempt to persuade the reader of the appropriateness of particular measures obviously require a high level of complexity in the expression of opinion, and of interpretation. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the nature of the language used is in the main due to the functional necessities attached to discussing complex strategic issues. It would be perfectly possible to avoid slang and cultural references, phrasal verbs and complex adjectives.

It seems more likely that the reasons for the choice of vocabulary by the journalists of *The Economist* lie outside the domain of the practical needs of communication. Firstly, we should look on the *Economist*'s "commitment to Plain English" objectively. It is a statement that has to be taken as having an ideological content, rather than being simply a description of the language they use. "*Plain English*" can

be taken as one of the weapons recommended by *The Economist* team against those elements of modern society ( bureaucracy and excessive rule making) which they consider to have caused so much damage. The free-market politics of the magazine have an indirect link with the type of English they believe is most important. Free-market politics has frequently – especially in the last twenty years - been linked in the Anglo-saxon world with a demand for "pragmatism" or "common sense" .

In this context, the frequently expressed rejection of "jargon" by the writers of *The Economist* is interesting. In reality, as any in-company trainer in English as a Foreign Language knows, "jargon" is by far the easiest vocabulary for non-native businessmen. "Re-engineering", "Brand enhancement" "Benchmarking" "Customer delight" are jargon terms which rapidly spread around the world of international business, much more easily than do the type of heavily culture-based expressions we have seen above. The rejection of jargon is the rejection of the discourse of "the expert" and the underlining of the assumed superiority of the ordinary, down to earth person-in-the-board room. This links up with the use of anonymous articles in the magazine.

The link between Thatcherist politics and "plain English" has been seen elsewhere. Margaret Thatcher herself, according to her biographer Hugo Young

*was impatient with what she regarded as pretentious intellectual language. One reason she mistrusted the Foreign office was its habit of employing a 'frenchified' vocabulary. In her mind, English nationalism seemed to have a close link with plain English usage.*

If our sample of editorials shows the very opposite of "plain English", and certainly the opposite of any form of simplified English, how can we view it. One might see in it a form of **Babu English**. Widdowson ( 1979:202ff) defines Babu as a type of language which has diverged in the opposite direction from Pidgin English. Pidgin English he defines as a style of discourse in which the referential force - the need to refer to the outside world - is paramount. For example, traders or insurance salesmen neither of whom are native speakers of English may resort to Pidgin English as sufficient for their aims.

Babu is the opposite of Pidgin - when the poetic force of a discourse outweighs its referential force.

*In babu, it is the expression which receives primary emphasis. Here how you say something is more important than what you say  
... (Widdowson 1979:202)*

Widdowson continues

*Just as we recognise that pidgin characteristics appear in 'normal' kinds of communication like telegrams and newspaper headlines...*

*where the referential force is dominant, so we can recognise kinds of language use which have some of the characteristics of babu, where the poetic force is dominant. Examples abound in political speeches, sales patter, and the kind of prepared commentary given by guides showing people round places of historic interest. ( p203)*

It seems to us that *The Economist* editorials do have elements of babu English. Showing the (anonymous) writers as sophisticated men of the world wielding sharp edged irony and "straight no-nonsense speaking" is an important part of the role of an editorial.

Yet there is a concept from discourse analysis developed by Alan Bell ( Bell 1991) which seems to us to be more useful still for analysing the reasons for the lexis chosen by *The Economist*. It is that of "referee design". In his 1991 book, Bell explains :

*Referee design is a rhetorical strategy by which speakers use the resources available to them from their speech community... Referee strategies may be limited to creative use of the linguistic repertoire of styles or languages which a speaker herself [sic] normally employs. Or the strategies may draw on a wider speech community. (Bell 1991:127)*

Fundamentally, referee design amounts to treating the addressee as if they were someone else, for rhetorical purposes. In the simplest form of referee design  
*...speakers can persuade a stranger by shifting to the style normally reserved for intimates.*

It may be that the editorialists of *The Economist* are following a form of referee design, bringing the reader into a "referee group" – an in-group to all intents and purposes. That is, that rather than addressing the international readers in a style chosen for ease of communication, they are addressing them in a way that suggests they the readers master the subtleties of the English language totally, and can easily take in complex cultural references and intertextuality in English.

To give just one example, the expression "geek-hero" as a description of Bill Gates at the beginning of his career could have been replaced by an expression such as "the hero of antisocial computer enthusiasts". It would certainly lose some literary colour ( an "enthusiast" does not necessarily wear glasses and an anorak), but more important, it would subtly change the design of the referee group in the communication process.

Explanations for the presence of babu and for the design of such a referee group are necessarily speculative, since they are almost certainly unconscious. One possible explanation is that of legitimisation. *The Economist* represents its readers as "world

leaders" – the people who take humanity forward. This image requires that the in-group also be presented as culturally worthy of being the leading group. Highly sophisticated styles of communication, and design of an in-group are part of this process of legitimisation.

Other elements of this same legitimisation are to be found in the choice of contents of *The Economist* magazine, where Art, Science, and occasionally Rock music and cinema help to design the in-group in question – a sort of new Renaissance Businessman.

This study of the English of The Economist editorials confirms the close relationship between the communication task and the lexical characteristics of the English used in the business world (see Mullen 1998). It also tends to suggest that a "world business English", simplified for mass use, is not likely to occupy all the roles of English within business. Discussion of business, economic and political strategy, at least, seems to be well protected from any such trend. The language of international business magazines certainly offers much further scope for study, whether from the point of view of rhetoric or of discourse analysis.

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### **Electronic sources**

The British national Corpus can be consulted on-line at <http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookup.html> This site allows a simple search query. More sophisticated searches can be carried out with software purchased at this site.

The plain English campaign has its website at <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>., which was a useful source for examining the ideology and significance of "plain English".