

FOCUS ON ENGLISH

Argentine English: a special, doomed language

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There has been considerable British influence on the development of Argentina. The traces are still noticeable today: bilingual schools preparing students for British school exams; Anglican churches; cricket, bowls, lawn tennis and polo played at such places as the Hurlingham and Jockey Clubs; etc. Commerce, agriculture and cattle-breeding in Argentina all owe a debt to British settlers and contract workers.

Many British people who were brought over in the first half of the last century stayed on when their contracts expired, joining other earlier settlers in establishing a substantial English-speaking community which, until the 1970s, preserved its language and culture, although there are now signs, especially since the South Atlantic Conflict of 1982, that the English they speak is irrevocably beginning to disintegrate. Few 'Anglo-Argentines' under the age of thirty are now truly proficient in English by comparison with the 1930s and 1940s, and today the 'bilingual' school with a child who speaks English at home considers itself lucky.

No doubt because of the lack of a vital and organic speech community, the language has tended to fossilise, crystallising the speech patterns and inflexions of the aforementioned 30s and 40s. Phonologically, one perceives a non-rhotic *quasi*-RP with no significant dialectal variation, and with no social pressures to conform to any other norm. Many Anglo-Argentines who travel to the United Kingdom are considered to have a vaguely 'colonial' accent; few today, unless they travel frequently or have lived in Britain, can pass for indigenous British.

It is in the area of vocabulary that one most notices local variation. Any attempted etymology is invariably hazardous; nevertheless, we might distinguish the following categories:

1 Local usage, holdovers

'Put the milk in the **ice-chest**' (*fridge* - some people still use the old word from the pre-electrical age)

'John's just arrived from the **camp**' (*farm/place in the country*, probably from S. Africa, via the Falklands/Malvinas)

'The station's about five **squares** from here.' (*streets/blocks* - Argentine towns are built on a regular grid system while usually in Britain the streets are irregularly spaced)

2 False friends

'We had to wait at the **barrier**' (Sp. *barrera* = level-crossing)

'Don't **inch**' (Sp. *hinchar* = to bother, harass)

'Can you **pinch** me one of those little sausages?' (Sp. *pinchar* = spike/impale)

3 Double language

These are often unconsciously done and increasingly common.

'Take all that **basura** out of the **pileta** and put it in the patio' (Sp. *basura* = rubbish, *pileta* = sink).

'I thought it wouldn't **alcanzar** and yet it **sobred**' (Sp. *alcanzar* = suffice, *sobrar* = be left over)

Pepperings are quite inevitable and ubiquitous.

Frequent use of such Spanish fillers as *bueno*, *che*, *este*, *o sea*, and a tendency to end questions with a rising tag *¿no?* to solicit agreement.

4 Interference from Spanish

These are insidious and impossible to avoid completely.'

'He lives **in front of** the cinema' (i.e. opposite)

'She's going to a **birthday** (for 'birthday party')' (Sp. *un cumpleaños*)

In answer to the question 'How are you?', either '**More or less**,' or '**Well**' (Sp. *Más o menos*, *Bien*)

It is very hard to separate the 'Spanglish' of the non-native speaker from the native English of the Anglo-Argentine. This is particularly noticeable in prepositional usage, as in sentences showing transfer from Spanish such as

* 'Then I'll tell you.' (i.e. I'll tell you later.)

* 'He's being operated next week.' (i.e. He's being operated on next week.)

* 'He got down from the bus.' (i.e. He got off the bus.)

which are just as common in both learners of English and many native-English-speaking Anglo-Argentines, not to mention more than the odd expat.

Another problem for Anglo-Argentines is that although speaking in 'English', it is usually known that the person to whom one is speaking also understands Spanish. We have to distinguish between on the one hand an Anglo-Argentine who says *I thought it wouldn't alcanzar and yet it sobred*, and on the other a child who is learning English at a bilingual school and says *it salirme the boton* (*it come off me the button = my button's come off). Both assume familiarity with Spanish on the part of the hearer, even if the first is obviously much more English in structure.

The phrase *I thought it wouldn't alcanzar* in the previous paragraph is indicative of another issue, one familiar to translators. There is an English word 'suffice' with the same meaning, but it is too formal, the wrong register. But the speaker has already started with *I thought it wouldn't ...* and cannot now repair it in English. Not to break the flow, and knowing his interlocutor understands Spanish he continues in that language. Of course, a native-speaker of English not exposed to the influence of Spanish would have started differently, with the more natural *I didn't think there was going to be enough ...*

These are subtle issues, and because of the difficulty in distinguishing between native and non-native deviation from 'Standard English' it is hard to devise a methodology to establish any standard syntactic characteristics of 'Argentine English'. It is probably in the long run a doomed variety, but it is still very much observable amongst older members of the Anglo Argentine Community.