

"At Least We've Had a Nice Day" : miscommunication and new politeness phenomena in global English

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“At Least We’ve Had a Nice Day”:
Miscommunication and New Politeness
Phenomena in Global English¹

Paul Skandera

Since the first expedition from England to the New World in 1584, through British colonial expansion in the 19th century and American economic and cultural domination today, English has become a true world language. In little over 400 years, it has spread from the British Isles to more than 70 countries or regions in six continents, ranging from, say, Australia to Zimbabwe. And the number of its speakers has increased from an estimated 6 million to over 320 million first-language speakers, possibly just as many second-language speakers (or more, depending on the level of achievement one allows to be acceptable), and some 60 million speakers of an English-based pidgin or creole. In the process, it has developed numerous distinct varieties worldwide, each characterized by a specific composition of features and functions. Such diversity notwithstanding, it might seem odd that using one and the same language should give rise to miscommunication between different speaker communities. After all, Global English – seen here as the entirety of all geographical varieties of the language – is generally acknowledged, and rightly so, to facilitate communication across the world, rather than hinder it. This paper will illustrate that the use of one and the same language can indeed give rise to miscommunication, especially between first-language speakers and second-language speakers, and thus ultimately between differ-

¹ Much of this paper has been adapted from various parts of chapters 1, 3, 7, and 11 by Skandera (in press) to suit the topic of the present volume. Thanks are due to Josef Schmied for encouraging the research reported here, and to many Kenyan friends and colleagues, above all to Serah Waitiki, without whose enthusiasm and resourcefulness this study would not have been possible. Three field trips to Kenya were funded through scholarships from the Free State of Saxony and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). A research permit was kindly granted by the Office of the President of the Republic of Kenya.

ent cultures. It will do so by using examples from Kenya, where English is a co-official language (along with Swahili) and a second language for probably more than 5 million people, making up 15 to 20 percent of the population.

A striking example is the semantic shift of the idiom *see red* from ‘become very angry’ in first-language varieties, or native varieties, to ‘become the target of anger’ in Kenyan English (a new sense that brings to mind the function of the red card in football, and might in fact be related to it). Sey notes the same phenomenon in Ghanaian English, and he cites three sentences (probably invented ones) to illustrate that, in his variety, it is *not* the angry person who sees red. One of them reads as follows:

“You’ll see red!” said the angry carpenter to the frightened boy. (117)

Bokamba, citing the same sentence (without explicitly referring to Sey’s work), labels this semantic change a semantic transfer because the new meaning of *see red* is radically different from the older one (88).

In order to investigate the use of *see red* in Kenyan English, and that of the other features discussed below, interviews were conducted with about ten Kenyan informants, all of them advanced university students aged roughly between 20 and 25, chosen from both sexes and from various ethnic backgrounds (the latter correlate with different mother tongues and usually also with different regional origins). Schmied points out, in connection with research on attitudes, that the relationship between interviewer and informants is of crucial importance to linguistic fieldwork in Africa (164). In another context, he notes more specifically that “where people have enough problems with their daily survival they are less inclined to make an attempt to answer ‘strange questions’” (201). In the case of the fieldwork for the present study, the many difficulties a non-African linguist expects to face were compounded, for example, by a student riot in Nairobi and the subsequent closure of universities, which made it impossible, for a time, to contact and meet informants, and by the widespread mistrust of Western researchers in general, partly inspired by a sensitive political climate. Therefore, an informant was as a rule only interviewed after the interviewer had known him or her for several months. Each of the informants was thoroughly familiarized with the procedure and aim of the study – which is imperative in a good relationship, and, contrary to general assumption, is hoped to have reduced the effects of the observer’s paradox. Several of the informants had already helped with other aspects of the fieldwork, and thus had even developed a personal interest in being interviewed.

Furthermore, the use of some of the features discussed here was investigated by means of elicitation tests. For three groups of respondents, three questionnaires were devised, each containing preference tests, evaluation tests, substitution tests, and completion tests. If a feature was examined by two or three tests, then these tests appeared in different questionnaires so that a respondent was never confronted with the same phenomenon more than once. Some 40 copies of each of the three questionnaires (a total of about 120) were distributed by a Kenyan lecturer in an alternating order among Kenyan university students of both sexes and various ethnic backgrounds, which, like the choice of informants described above, takes account of user-related variation within Kenyan English to the greatest possible extent. The students were asked to fill out the questionnaires at home, and within one week, between 30 and 40 completed copies of each questionnaire (precisely 103 altogether) were returned to the lecturer. Schmied remarks – again in connection with attitudes toward English in Africa, but what he writes undoubtedly has broader applications – that “methodologically, it is very difficult to reach the high standards that have been set by recent sociolinguistic research in Britain or the USA,” and at the same time he believes that “in countries with [. . .] a population unused to questionnaires [. . .], test techniques need to be as direct [. . .] and simple as possible” (163). Directness and simplicity, then, were striven for in the wording of the test sentences, as will be shown by the test sentences cited below. Nevertheless, some of the responses in some of the copies were not interpretable, and therefore had to be disregarded.

As far as the use of *see red* is concerned, none of the Kenyan informants interviewed was familiar with the older sense found in first-language varieties, and the informants’ introspection was confirmed by a preference test.

I’m warning you! If I catch you again around here, *I’ll see red / you’ll see red!*

Of 33 respondents, not a single one indicated that he or she would use *I’ll see red* in this context, 28 (85 percent) indicated they would use *you’ll see red* (16 of whom crossed out *I’ll see red* to indicate a strong sense of unacceptability), and 5 (15 percent) indicated they were not familiar with either construction.

Many other similarly striking examples could be given here: *beachboy*, in Kenyan English, refers to a boy or man who is trying to entice tourists along the Kenyan coast into staying at a particular hotel, going on a safari, or buying handicrafts, rather than to a male beach attendant, as it does in native

varieties; *service charge* can denote a tax to be paid to the local governments for the provision of public services, rather than an amount of money added to a bill in a restaurant or hotel, or a fee charged by a financial institution; *zero-grazing* can refer to fidelity to one's wife, husband, or partner, rather than to a method of livestock raising; *by all means* can mean, literally, 'by any or every possible means,' rather than, figuratively, 'yes, of course' or 'certainly'; and *hot drinks* can signify distilled alcoholic beverages such as whisky or gin, rather than beverages with a hot water base such as tea or coffee. No time and effort will be expended here in constructing situations in which these features might cause misunderstandings between Kenyan speakers and, say, British or American speakers. This does not take much imagination, although one might rightly argue, of course, that the linguistic or extralinguistic context, in the vast majority of situations, is likely to resolve such misunderstandings almost instantly. Other features, however, might cause cross-cultural misunderstandings that are not so easily resolved. How deceptive these misunderstandings can be is hinted at in the following quotation from Milroy and Milroy:

If we return to Saussure's famous analogy of the game of chess and use the analogy in a different way, we can compare language use to a game of chess in which different people may occasionally play the game by different rules. In chess, it would clearly be inconvenient and irritating if one player moved his pawns diagonally instead of vertically, and even more inconvenient if, in the course of time, one player unilaterally and silently changed his own rules of play in some particular ways. This is what does happen in language use. Different people and different communities play to some extent by different rules and the rules change (silently) in the course of time. (24)

If one player changes the rules of a game but slightly, or if one speaker community changes the norms of a language only marginally, then the resultant misunderstandings – in contrast to those arising from the use of *see red*, for instance – will be difficult to pinpoint, and might sometimes escape the players' or speakers' notice entirely.

All the features discussed below, exemplifying the potential for such subtle misunderstandings, were also investigated through text analyses, besides informant interviews and, in some cases, elicitation tests. The text compilations used are the British component and a modified version of the East African component of the International Corpus of English. That corpus comprises a number of largely comparable components, or subcorpora, containing whole and partial texts from first-language and second-language varieties across the world. Each subcorpus consists of roughly 1 million run-

ning words from hundreds of texts spoken or written in the 1990s by educated language users. In order to take account of use-related variation within a variety, the texts were chosen from about 32 different text types, arising from distinct communicative situations. Thus the subcorpora are intended to be maximally representative cross sections of educated English usage in the respective countries or regions. While the actual East African subcorpus contains texts from both Kenya and Tanzania, the modified version consists exclusively of Kenyan texts, and is therefore henceforth referred to as the Kenyan subcorpus, or component. The replacement of the Tanzanian texts by further Kenyan ones did not affect the size of the component, but it did shift the emphasis from the spoken to the written medium. This was brought about mainly through the sharp increase in published texts, like newspaper reports, through the decrease in spoken texts belonging to text types that often favor indigenous languages in Kenya, like direct conversations, and through the complete omission of several spoken text types that play, at best, only a marginal part in the everyday life of an average Kenyan, like telephone conversations. It becomes clear, then, that these structural changes to some extent reflect the specific sociolinguistic situation in Kenya: whereas English has to compete with numerous indigenous languages in speech, it is by far the predominant language in reading and writing.²

One of the features that might cause the kind of subtle cross-cultural misunderstandings referred to above is the broader use of *whereby*. In native varieties, it is a rather formal word, and one rarely used in speech. Its use in Kenyan English, on the other hand, is illustrated by a comparison of the numbers of tokens in the two text compilations analyzed. The conjunction occurs 89 times in the Kenyan component of the International Corpus of English as compared with only 21 times in the British component. The tokens in the Kenyan subcorpus are distributed almost evenly over 12 different text types spanning all levels of formality, from direct conversations and personal letters to parliamentary debates and published academic writing. The proportion of tokens in spoken text types to those in written text types is 6 to 4, and the proportion of spoken to written text in the subcorpus is roughly 4

² The International Corpus of English is described in numerous publications, most comprehensively in the various contributions edited by Greenbaum. The most detailed description of the East African subcorpus specifically is given in the accompanying manual by Hudson-Ettle and Schmied; background information is also available on-line at the following address: <http://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/english/real/eafrica/index.htm>. The East African subcorpus itself is available on CD-ROM from the International Computer Archive of Modern and Medieval English at the University of Bergen. The British subcorpus, also available on CD-ROM, can be obtained from the Survey of English Usage at University College London.

to 6, which suggests that *whereby*, in Kenyan English, is more common in speech than in writing. Its relatively high frequency may either be taken to contribute to the oft-mentioned formal character of Kenyan or East African English (cf. Hancock and Angogo 318; Zuengler 117-8), or, conversely, be seen as evidence that *whereby* has changed its register, and cast off its formality. The two positions can easily be reconciled, however, if one takes into consideration that Kenyan English, or certain features of it, might be perceived as formal only by speakers of native varieties: the Kenyan informants interviewed for this study did not regard *whereby* as formal at all. This, then, would certainly pave the way for subtle misunderstandings as to the perceived formality of entire communicative situations.

The specific use of *whereby* in Kenyan English can undoubtedly (partially) be attributed to a disproportionate exposure to the written medium, such as Shakespeare and the Bible in language learning, which Schmied (52-7) sees as one of several factors that facilitate the development of characteristic features of African English in general. Another factor seems to be particularly relevant to the purpose of the present study, namely interference from African substrate languages, which is most noticeable in the form of borrowings and loan translations denoting elements of local flora, fauna, cultures, and societies. Apart from that, however, and much less noticeably, substrate interference is likely to influence a cultural style that reflects behavioral norms at the discourse level, mainly in the form of new politeness phenomena, even if one-to-one correspondences between Kenyan English and an African language cannot always be ascertained (cf. Schmied 91-3, 185). The remainder of this paper will discuss four such politeness phenomena – although, as will be seen, the first three appear to be too elusive to be convincingly proven or disproven by means of the methodology used here, and the evidence will therefore have to remain largely impressionistic.

One of these very elusive features is the broader discourse function of the sequence *thank you* in Kenyan English, for example as a reply to *good-bye*. This semantic change is mentioned by various authors, yet none of them seems to have investigated it systematically. Angogo and Hancock (77) were the first to note the characteristic meaning of *thank you* in both eastern and western Africa. They attribute it to interference from African substrate languages, through loan translations of, for instance, Swahili *asante* or Yoruba *a dúpé*. Similarly, Platt, Weber, and Ho (157) and Schmied (90-1) see the broader use of *thank you* as a feature of African English at large whereas Bokamba and Todd (in McArthur 22) regard *thank you* as a reply to *good-bye* as specifically Kenyan.

However, a comparison of the frequencies of *thank you* in the Kenyan component and the British component of the International Corpus of English does not point to a broader use of the combination in Kenyan English at all: *thank you* occurs 129 times in the former, and 215 times in the latter. The difference is all the more striking considering that the proportion of letters, which often begin with an expression of thanks, is higher in the Kenyan subcorpus. Therefore, if anything, the comparison points to a more restricted use of *thank you* in the new variety.³ Yet the numbers do not say anything about the use of *thank you* as a reply to *good-bye*. Since the Kenyan subcorpus does not contain a single token of *good-bye* or a similar formula in a context where a reply could reasonably be expected (virtually all of the tokens occur at the end of radio broadcasts or personal letters), the acceptability of this usage was investigated in informant interviews and through an elicitation test.

The Kenyan informants were not quite unanimous in their judgments. While the majority of them found *thank you* as a reply to *good-bye* unacceptable, and claimed to have never heard it, one said he had heard it once, but had been very surprised, one said it is used, but not common, and one speculated that it is used only when talking to a white person. All of the informants agreed, however, that their mother tongues do not have a separate word or phrase for 'thank you.' In fact, the English *thank you* seems to be borrowed into several indigenous Kenyan languages, for example into Kikuyu as *thengiu*. This makes the possibility that the use of *thank you* is more restricted in Kenyan English seem plausible, and it casts doubt on Angogo and Hancock's substrate hypothesis referred to above. Swahili does have *asante* for 'thank you,' which the authors cite to illustrate their point, and *asante* is used as a reply to *karibu*, which means literally 'welcome,' but may also be used to bid someone farewell. However, *asante* cannot be used as a reply to *kwa heri*, literally 'with good fortune,' which is the far more common equivalent of *good-bye*. Moreover, it emerged during the informant interviews that, in Kenyan English, *good-bye* is usually used only when parting for a longer period of time, and that it is therefore seldom heard. Thus the informants were surprised that *any* lexeme used as a reply to *good-bye* is

³ That the use of *thank you* is more restricted in Kenyan English was confirmed impressionistically during the fieldwork for this study: for example, the phrase *that's OK* was often heard where *yes, thank you* was expected. Also, after months, a Kenyan colleague finally took the present author into his confidence and reproached him for thanking people too much. This, the author was told, is not done in Kenya. For comparison, in Nigerian English, according to one Nigerian, the usual formula to express gratitude is *you have tried*.

regarded as characteristic of their variety. Seen against the background of the informants' introspection, the result of an evaluation test is somewhat puzzling.

A: "Good-bye John. I'll see you next week."

B: "Thank you!"

Of 27 respondents, 12 (44 percent) indicated that they found the whole passage acceptable, 12 (44 percent) indicated they found *thank you* as a reply to *good-bye* unusual, and 3 (11 percent) left the task unattempted.

Depending on how one assesses the reliability of the different methods used here, and the meaningfulness of their results, one might conclude that *thank you* is indeed used as a reply to *good-bye* in Kenyan English, but only by a (sizable) minority, and it is not inconceivable that this usage is misinterpreted by native speakers as displaying inordinate humility and subservience. Curiously, these two attributes are used by Mehrotra (165) to characterize Indian English. The reason why Andersen rejects, almost ridicules, Mehrotra's characterization is quoted here because what he writes may equally well apply to Kenyan English and other second-language varieties:

As for the display of "humility and subservience," I suspect that much of it is an empty mannerism used in situations where status differences are strongly marked, such as between lecturer and student and in the strict pecking-order of the Civil Service. At times the "humility" might be an expression of genuine respect, something which might appear strange to those brought up in the self-conscious informality and feigned egalitarianism of British and American society. (220)

The second feature that is too elusive to be proven or disproven here – and, in fact, one that might also be misinterpreted as displaying humility and subservience – is the semantic expansion of *gentleman*. During the fieldwork for this study, *gentleman* was perceived to be widely used in Kenyan English as a euphemism for *man*, and all the Kenyan informants agreed that the lexeme is prevalent in their variety because *man* is often thought to be crude or unpleasant. For the same reason, *lady* seemed to be frequently substituted for *woman*. If these observations are correct, they may be linked with the assumption that politeness strategies and the expression of respect are more important in African than in Western cultures (cf. Schmied 91-3). Nevertheless, Hocking – an expatriate English teacher writing specifically for East Africans – warns his readers against these usages, and his examples suggest

that they may give uninitiated first-language speakers a wrong impression of the judgment of a person's character:

Lady and *gentleman* can really only be applied to people of good character, if you are speaking seriously. If you spoke of a thief as *this gentleman*, or of a prostitute as *this lady*, that could only be intended as a joke (that is, it could only be intended sarcastically). Also, neither of these words is ever used with an adjective in front of it, except adjectives of nationality like *Chinese*, and occasionally *natural* or (still more occasionally) *true* or *real*. The proper words to use after adjectives are *man* and *woman*: *My mother was a very kind-hearted woman*; *My father is a hard-working man*. There is nothing at all disrespectful about *man* and *woman* under these circumstances; it would be perfectly respectful to say to your own mother, for instance, *You have always been a very hard-working woman*. Do not overdo *lady* and *gentleman*; they can sound ridiculous. (242)

One might expect, then, that the words *lady* and *gentleman* occur much more often in Kenyan English than in Hocking's variety, British English. While *lady* will not be considered here, *gentleman* does not seem to fulfill this expectation. If tokens of the phrase *ladies and gentlemen* are left uncounted because of its formulaic character, then *gentleman* occurs only 13 times in the Kenyan component of the International Corpus of English as opposed to 106 times in the British component.⁴ These numbers are not yet comparable, however, because of a peculiarity of two of the text types contained in the subcorpora. In Kenya, the chairman of parliamentary debates and legal cross-examinations is addressed as "Mr. Speaker, Sir," but in Britain the form of address is "Gentleman." This convention accounts for 83 tokens in the British component. Yet if these are subtracted, there still remain 23 tokens in the British component as compared with 13 in the Kenyan component. And, significantly, none of the occurrences in the Kenyan component was considered unusual by several British speakers who were asked to judge their acceptability.

The results of three elicitation tests do not point to a far-reaching semantic expansion of *gentleman* in Kenyan English either. In a preference test, only 6 of 34 respondents (18 percent) indicated that they would use *gentleman* while 31 (91 percent) indicated they would use *man* (note that three of the respondents circled both options because they found both acceptable).

⁴ With the exception just stated, numbers expressing frequencies comprise all inflected forms, contractions, and spelling variants, including every conceivable misspelling.

My father has always been a hard-working *gentleman / man*.

In a substitution test, only 2 of 30 respondents (7 percent) replaced *man* with *gentleman*.

My father has always been a hard-working *man* (_____).

And in a completion test, not a single respondent filled in *gentleman* while 28 of 38 respondents (74 percent) filled in *man*.

My father has always been a hard-working _____ .

The data from the two subcorpora and the results of the elicitation tests are puzzling because they starkly contradict both the (admittedly random) observations made during the fieldwork for this study and the introspection of the Kenyan informants. Thus it cannot be proven that *gentleman* is “overdone,” as Hocking puts it, or widely used in a broader sense in Kenyan English. Moreover, even if politeness and respect are more important in African cultures, as was speculated earlier, and consequently more extensively expressed in African languages, it cannot automatically be assumed that this behavior is transferred to African varieties of English. Those who have first-hand experience of Kenyan English may nevertheless find it difficult to believe that the use of *gentleman* in that variety does not differ significantly from its use in native varieties. Yet, for the time being, all the evidence gained from systematic research points in that direction.

The third very elusive feature is the specific use of the combination *not mind*. In first-language varieties, it usually means ‘not object (to),’ as in *I don’t mind the noise*. It can also mean ‘quite like (to),’ as in *I wouldn’t mind a drink*, but when used in this sense, it is a rather weak or casual way of expressing a desire or accepting an offer or invitation. In Kenyan English, on the other hand, *not mind* often means ‘very much like (to),’ and is typically used to express a desire or accept an offer or invitation gratefully or politely. This discourse function was noted impressionistically throughout the fieldwork for the present study. For example, a Kenyan badly struck by malaria replied to the question whether he wanted a malaria medicine by saying, “I wouldn’t mind,” and the same reply was given by another Kenyan when asked whether he wanted to keep an expensive Swiss pocketknife, which he was obviously eager to use. Platt, Weber, and Ho observe the same use of *not mind* in Malaysian English and Singapore English, where they claim the combination “has a more positive and definite meaning than in other varie-

ties,” and they see a parallel to the somewhat dated (or today ironic) Britishism *I don't mind if I do*, which means ‘yes, please,’ and is used when accepting something, especially food or drink (159). As regards Kenyan English, the anecdotal evidence given above cannot be corroborated with data from the Kenyan subcorpus. This should not be surprising, however, because one of the contexts in which *not mind* is typically used in its new sense – the acceptance of an offer or invitation – is not likely to occur often in the text types the International Corpus of English contains. Several tokens of *not mind* used in other contexts might illustrate the new sense, but it is, of course, impossible to decide whether a speaker or writer likes something merely to some extent, or very much. The problem is illustrated in the following excerpt from a personal letter:

I am a Christian and I don't usually mind socialising in fact it falls to be one of my hobby. Presently I am pursuing a B.A. course in Maths, Geog, and Econ at “Eger” [Egerton University] in first year.

Nevertheless, when asked to describe the use of *not mind* by Kenyan speakers, several expatriate native speakers said that they often perceive it as connoting indifference, sometimes even ungratefulness or impoliteness, in situations where such an attitude is not expected. This confirms, though again only impressionistically, that *not mind* has a characteristic meaning in Kenyan English, and it demonstrates how a new politeness phenomenon in a second-language variety can cause cross-cultural misunderstandings, and might even create cultural stereotypes.

Much the same can be said of the last feature discussed in this paper, the specific use of the combination *at least*. In first-language varieties, it is used to indicate that something is the minimum that can be done or expected, or to indicate a small advantage that exists in spite of a greater disadvantage or a generally unfavorable situation. Conversely, in Kenyan English, *at least* can be used to indicate that something is the maximum that can be done or expected, or broadly to indicate optimum circumstances. As before, the new discourse function was noted throughout the fieldwork for this study. For example, the present author was more than perplexed when, after what he thought had been a most pleasant time spent together, a Kenyan friend said, “At least we've had a nice day.” Also, several expatriates said they often perceive the combination as connoting indifference where it seems inappropriate. Unlike the characteristic meaning of *not mind*, this feature is not recorded in the literature on second-language varieties. But this time, the impression gained can be corroborated with data from the Kenyan subcorpus.

The problem remains, however, that it is not usually possible to gather from the context which of the functions is intended by the speaker or writer, nor is it always clear which element in the text *at least* refers to. Nevertheless, the following three citations from the Kenyan subcorpus can reasonably be assumed to illustrate the new, Kenyan use, and they suggest that this feature occurs in diverse text types. The citations are taken from a broadcast discussion, a personal letter, and published academic writing:

Uh Street children are children who really need to be helped. So as you're passing along and see a s child a street child, it is very wise for you at least to give him all you have.

As [name] already told you, I got the scholarship. Isn't that very good news! We are both very excited about it and we are already making plans on what to do now and when I get there. At least we didn't cross our fingers for nothing. Thanks a lot for the good words you put in for me to [name] and [name]. I am sure they contributed to my getting this very wonderful award.

A research on newspaper readership should focus on people who in a way can come across a newspaper to skim through at least daily. Students at the University can at least read a newspaper provided in the main library and other departmental libraries.

Yet *at least* seems to fulfill a further discourse function in Kenyan English, one that is very different from the one discussed above, but may also be relevant to the question of cross-cultural miscommunication. This function is best seen against the background of a hypothesis put forward by Schmieid:

Second-language speakers may need and receive more audial encouragement when they use English; that may be the reason why phatic words and sounds (*eeeh*, *ahaa*, etc.) appear to be more frequent in African than British English. They assure the speakers that they are still being understood, whereas native speakers do not need such encouragement and silence in their conversations is more acceptable as it is not taken as a signal of incomprehension so easily. But the issue is whether the same phatic encouragement is equally commonly used by the same speakers when they use African languages, because then it would be a cultural and not a second-language phenomenon. (95)

It would be difficult, of course, to prove that pragmatic particles like *eeeh* and *ahaa* are more frequent in African English (or any other second-language variety for that matter) than in British English (or native English as a whole) – not least because of the likelihood of inconsistencies in the recognition, analysis, and transcription of such particles even in the unlikely event

that these tasks are performed by only one person. It will also not be speculated here on whether a possible higher frequency is a cultural phenomenon, that is, caused mainly by interference from African substrate languages, or whether it is a more general second-language phenomenon, that is, caused mainly by language-learning strategies. The hypothesis, however, that phatic encouragement is more important in second-language varieties than in native varieties may be substantiated on other grounds. It may be substantiated by the observation that *at least*, which has a clearly defined meaning or function in native English, appears to be often used without any real meaning in Kenyan English speech, in which case the function of the combination seems to be merely to maintain social contact, and to fill what might otherwise be an undesirable pause.⁵ That *at least* is used as a filler is suggested by numerous occurrences in the Kenyan subcorpus. As before, however, the intended function cannot always be determined with certainty, and an assignment of all the tokens to the different functions will therefore not be attempted. Nevertheless, the few citations given below may suffice to make the point.

Yet these citations also allow an alternative interpretation, and again one that may give rise to cross-cultural miscommunication, namely that the combination functions as an intensifier (heightening the meaning of the following element), rather than or besides as a filler. The Kenyan informants were unsure how to describe their use of *at least*; thus the question of the exact function(s) cannot be answered here. The first two citations are taken from a direct conversation and a classroom seminar:

This is a problem that faced African countries on the eve of independence. Instead of these leaders sitting down and discussing how to reconstruct this culture that has been that had been at least destroyed by all those years of colonialism, they embarked on trying to achieve economical dreams, for example industrialization, without taking into consideration that these people have to be sensitized that they are black. They have to be sensitized that they have a common cause with the other blacks in all those spheres.

Uh It's difficult all right, but what we are saying is it's something that needs attention. At least especially drugs that get to a limit of spoiling a family, an individual, is something that should concern [stammering] should concern us.

The last citation, from a personal letter, shows that *at least* can function as a filler or as an intensifier in writing as well:

⁵ The same appears to be true of *for example* and *maybe*, discussed by Skandera (in press).

On the eve of Christmas Day I went out to the Carnivore to watch stand-up comedy and left at 2300 hrs for home. On Christmas Day me and my friends joined a family friend for a Christmas potluck luncheon. Funnily at least every member of my family had been invited to go somewhere, so we did not get to have dinner together as a family.

In this paper, some more and some less conspicuous parallels were seen between Kenyan English on the one hand and Ghanaian English, Nigerian English, African English at large, Indian English, Malaysian English, or Singapore English on the other. These parallels seem to confirm an impression gained from reading the monograph by Platt, Weber, and Ho on the "new Englishes," namely that all second-language varieties develop along similar lines. Therefore, if the use of *whereby* by Kenyan speakers is misinterpreted by native speakers as signaling formality, the use of *thank you* and *gentleman* as displaying humility and subservience, and the use of *not mind* and *at least* as connoting indifference, then that may be indicative of many more features of second-language varieties that bear the potential for miscommunication in Global English (incidentally, often between the first world and the third world). Milroy and Milroy (24) point out that cross-cultural miscommunication has hardly been investigated at all. Thus it is unclear whether one should go so far as to side with Teliya, Bragina, Oparina, and Sandomirskaya, who contend, with respect to phraseology specifically, that systematic research "would ultimately help to overcome what might be called 'cross-cultural deafness,' a barrier that now hinders the development of a postmodern, multicultural world community" (75). Much less radically, Görlach proposes that the study of English as a world language, entailing investigations of mismatches, discrepancies, and misunderstandings, "must be part of a wider science of the 'humanities' of foreign cultures" (33). The examples discussed here are too few, and the results too inconclusive, to be taken as a significant contribution to this end. It is hoped, however, that the discussion has raised the awareness of cross-cultural miscommunication, and that it is regarded as a modest step in the right direction.

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