G’Day Mate: A Greeting from Down Under

Rachasak Jirawat
Bangkok University

Introduction

With the English language being one of the major languages widely used all over the world, we the English language learners have been dutifully studying this global language for many years; some have even attended English classes since kindergarten. Broadly speaking, most of us are familiar with American and British English which have strongly dominated and influenced the use of English throughout the world. However, as an old Hindi proverb states that ‘Language changes every eighteen or twenty miles.’, the English language cannot escape from this fact; it has changed socially and regionally.

Australian English is another variety of English which has gradually been recognized. Although it diverged from British English, many people find it hard to understand when they have a conversation with the Aussies (Australians) due to its distinctive features of vocabulary and pronunciation. It might even sound humorous to the ear of a non-native of Australia. Nevertheless, there is no harm in learning this variety of English. It may come in handy one day if you happen to be among the Aussies.

Having spent a few years in Australia, I would like to take this opportunity to share some of the Aussie words and phrases with you, readers. However, please bear in mind that this article is not written to promote any style of English in particular or make a judgement about the correct form of English. Instead, it simply presents a unique style of language used by Australian people. In this article, we mainly discuss the origin of Australian English, slang words and phrases as well as pronunciation.

A Very Brief History of Australian English

Australian English is believed to have begun when the first English settlers arrived in New South Wales in 1778. These settlers were British and Irish convicts as well as Cockneys from London. As a result, they brought over English to Australia. Besides, Aboriginal words have played a crucial role in shaping and characterizing Australian English. For instance, Aboriginal words like jumbuck (sheep), billabong (water hole), and boomerang are very common in the Australian way of life. The influence of Aboriginal words can also be seen from the naming of some native plants like bindiye and mallee or animals like kookaburra, wallaby, and wombat. Also, many people in the rural parts of Australia have been given Aboriginal names like Wagga, Bondi, and Yakadanda.

Getting to Know Strine

Strine is a word coined in 1964 referring to Australian slang and pronunciation. It is a syncope of the pronunciation of the word ‘Australia’ in an Australian accent. There are many unique characteristics of Strine.

To begin with, Australian people tend to use the contracted forms of words or phrases. This may result from their easy-going personality and simple way of life. The words are usually shortened to one syllable and a suffix is added to the end. Examples are as follows:
What is more, people’s names, especially children’s, are often shortened. For example, Angela is shortened to Angie, Elizabeth to Lizzie, Jonathan to Jonno, Sharon to Shazza or Shaz and so on.

In addition, when you run into your Aussie friends, they probably greet you with this uniquely colloquial expression: G’day mate! How are you today? (The native pronunciation may sound surprisingly shocking like Gidday my! How are you to die?) It surely sounds strange to those who are familiar with American or British English, but it is a very common expression in Australia.

G’day is a shortened form of ‘Good Day’ and it is the equivalent of ‘Hello.’ Mate means friend or buddy and it can be used to address your friend or a total stranger. So, everyone can be your mate in Australia.

If you do your Aussie friends a favour, do not be puzzled when they say ta to you as the word ta means ‘thank you.’

Another shortened word I would like you to know is uni. Certainly, it comes from the word ‘university.’ In Australia, the university students tend to say “I’m going to uni” instead of “I’m going to university.”

Another notable feature of Australian English is its vocabulary. Apart from the official name Australia, Down Under is another term referring to this vast country. This is because it is located in the southern hemisphere. Outback is generally used when referring to the remote areas which are far from the coast. Bush means a forest. Thus, when the Aussies talk about forest fires, they preferably use the term bush fires.

Besides Brisbane or Brissie, this state capital of Queensland is locally called Brisvegas. This nickname is believed to have originated from its unsophisticated nightlife ironically compared with Las Vegas. Big smoke is the term used to refer to big cities like Sydney and Melbourne. It is thought to have come from Aboriginal people.

When talking about a place to visit in Sydney, one often thinks about the Sydney Opera House. The Sydney Harbour Bridge, however, is one of the must-see tourist attractions that should not be missed. Before paying a visit, it might be more interesting to know its nickname. The bridge is locally dubbed coat hanger because of its shape.

Now, let us talk about words that refer to people. When the Aussies call someone banana bender, bear in mind that he/she is from Queensland. Also, sandgroper is the term used to call a person from Western Australia and crow eater is a person from South Australia. Surprisingly, the Aussies use the word sheepshagger to refer to a New Zealander (This is just for the sake of knowledge. Please do not use this very term in everyday conversation).

Furthermore, there are many idiomatic expressions...
that always baffle a non-native of Australia. Here are some examples:

Wanna shoot through? = Do you want to leave now?
He decides to nick off. = He decides to go away.
Save me pozzie. = Will you save my seat (position)?
Woddid that set ya back? = How much did that cost you?
Jeez, it’s brass monkey. = It’s very cold.
Jeez, it’s frigginot today. = It’s very hot.
Jeez, it’s pissin down. = It’s raining.
I’ll shout yer a beer. = I’ll buy you a beer.
He is half-cut. = He is drunk.
He had a buck’s night the night before the wedding. = He had a stag party the night before the wedding.

The Aussie Accents

Australian accents, for the non-native speakers of Australian English, are quite incomprehensible. However, those who have been living in Australia for some time might get familiar with them and find them easy to understand. Technically speaking, linguists have classified Australian pronunciation into three types: Broad, General, and Cultivated.

First, Broad Australian English is the most familiar pronunciation to English speakers. This is because in non-Australian films, Broad Australian English is used by Australian characters in order to identify their nationality. It is also spoken by many Australian television personalities, such as Paul Hogan and the late Steve Irwin (a.k.a. The Crocodile Hunter). What is more, this accent is said to be associated with Australian masculinity. That is why very few women use it.

Second, General Australian English is spoken by the majority of Australians and can be found in modern Australian films and television programs. Speakers of this accent include Nicole Kidman, Kate Blanchett, Russell Crowe, and Kylie Minogue.

Last, Cultivated Australian English is considered similar to British Received Pronunciation. Around ten percent of Australian people speak with this accent. Examples of speakers are Judy Davis and Geoffrey Rush.

In addition, vowel sounds in Australian English are pronounced differently when compared to those in other varieties of English. Thus, this distinctive pronunciation often leads to misunderstanding and confusion among the non-native speakers of Australian English. The following six sounds show the differences between British vowel sounds and the Australian ones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>British</th>
<th>Australian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/æ/</td>
<td>/a/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɔ/</td>
<td>/o/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ə/</td>
<td>/ə/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɒ/</td>
<td>/o/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ɒ/</td>
<td>/ɔ/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ʌ/</td>
<td>/ɔ/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ex., day → die
Ex., row → now
Ex., me → more
Ex., boot → boat
Ex., cow → cœw
Ex., buy → boy
Conclusion

With unfamiliar pronunciation and difficult-to-guess words and expressions, Australian English has been like a complete stranger to the non-Australians. However, this variety of English has steadily been recognized and spread throughout the world, especially in the English-speaking countries thanks to its uniqueness and the popularity of some Aussie television and film celebrities in the mainstream media.

So far, we have discussed the Aussie slang words and phrases as well as pronunciation. We have seen that many words are shortened and suffixes like -ie, -y, and -o are added to the end. This word-shortening process has become a distinctive quality of Australian English. Plus, words like G’day, mate, down under, and outback help define the characteristics of the people, culture and geography of this country. Moreover, the Aussie accents always give the non-Aussies headaches because of the vowel shift.

Although there are still plenty of slang words and expressions that are not mentioned here, I hope this article may help you understand the Aussies better and have a nice and smooth conversation with them.

References


