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Broadening the vernacular with a trip to Oz



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

TRAVEL broadens the mind, they say, and it is certainly true that we learn a lot by exposure to other cultures and languages.

Even a trip to Oz can be valuable, extending appreciation of linguistic variation and widening our vocabulary. Escaping for a week from the worst winter I can remember, I took a warm break in Australia. I had a great time, and I learned a lot.

Pretty high on my agenda was good coffee. Unlike just about anywhere in Britain or the United States, most Australian cities can match Wellington in this area.

But when I first ordered a “trim flat white” I was given two flat whites. The term “trim” is not familiar to Australians and my New Zealand pronunciation of trim was misinterpreted as “two”. I quickly learned to order a “skinny flat white”.

Instead of the Kiwi “no probs” I heard “no worries” everywhere; it was used for a wide variety of functions: for example, “thanks”, “that’s fine”, “good”, and “yes” in a wide variety of contexts. It was also a popular way of closing any interaction.

There were also many new words relating to the flora and fauna. I discovered that electric ants referred to invasive termites.

Stingers is the generic term for the many varieties of jellyfish which, despite my love of swimming, made venturing into the sea very unappealing. Wetlands were referred to as swamp, bush was rainforest, and the descriptive

“wait-a-while” turned out to refer to a stand of eucalyptus trees.

Though we have all encountered the word billabong in *Waltzing Matilda*, it was an education to see the rich bird life at some of these precious lakes, which steadily diminish in size as the heat rises. The reality was much richer than the waterhole evoked in the song.

The fauna encountered also included of course the distinctive kangaroo, the first borrowing of an Australian Aboriginal word into English.

James Cook’s 18th century diaries record his first close encounter with a kangaroo: “To compare it with any European animal would be impossible as it has not the least resemblance of any one I have seen. Its fore legs are extremely short and of no use in its walking, its hind again as disproportionately long; with these it hops seven or eight feet at each hop.”

Thus the word kangaroo entered the English language and was recorded in Samuel Johnson’s renowned *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755. The word now has many productive extensions.

So the “Kangaroos” identify the Australian international rugby league team, kangaroo route refers to the Qantas route to London via Singapore, and kangaroo start describes a car jerking into action rather than starting smoothly.

I learned the names of many distinctive birds, including the endemic jabaroo. These are black-billed storks about the size of a pukeko — but they can fly.

I also saw a cassowary, a big

bird like an emu, which can apparently disembowel you with ease.

Warning notices suggest that if you encounter one of these you place your backpack in front of you and back off slowly. Fortunately, I was in a car when a cassowary lolloped across the road so disembowelling wasn’t likely.

Some lexical items introduced new concepts. A “road train”, for instance, is something I have never yet encountered in New Zealand, thank goodness. It comprised a truck with three or four articulated units behind it and it is just about impossible to pass.

Finally, I could hardly avoid noticing that whereas New Zealanders describe people with words ending in “ie”, such as postie and rellie, Australians prefer words ending in “o”, for example, muso, garbo and fruito. We seem to have adopted “journos” in New Zealand but not any others as far as I know.

And, as in New Zealand, I heard young people using the word gay to mean boring or rubbish, rather than carefree (very old fashioned!), or homosexual.

The “boring” meaning is clearly spreading, though there is no research indicating the origins of this meaning that I can find.

Some argue that it derives from the US and some from Britain. It provides an obvious area for further research.

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