

Writing English for an International Audience

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In 2003, the International Council for Technical Communication (INTECOM) published guidelines designed to help technical writers write English-language documentation for an international audience.¹ The guidelines—which you can find at www.intecom.org—make two main recommendations:

1. US spelling and usage are recommended for documentation that will be read primarily in countries where US spelling and usage are prevalent, and British spelling and usage are recommended for documentation that will be read primarily in countries where British spelling and usage are prevalent or were part of the country's history.²
2. US spelling and usage should be used in English-language documentation that will have worldwide use.³

Before considering these recommendations, let's formalise a fundamental principle of communication, technical or otherwise, a principle I'll call the *principle of maximal familiarity*. This is the principle that, to minimise distraction in communication, we should attempt to communicate in the language that is maximally familiar to our intended audience: familiar spellings, familiar word choice, familiar idiom, and so on. This principle underpins all good technical writing and is implied by the audience-centric approach that is the cornerstone of our profession. So how do the INTECOM recommendations fare in the light of the principle of maximal familiarity?

Recommendation 1: Adopt the prevalent English

On the face of it, recommendation 1 might pass a rushed muster. If our intended audience is, say, British automotive engineers, we would, as technical writers, adopt British English in our user documentation. And the guidelines provide a useful glossary of distinctly British terms to help non-British authors, contrasting these terms with their US equivalents, as in “car (Br); automobile (US)”.

But to the authors of the guidelines, recommendation 1 means much more than just writing in British English for a British audience, and American English for an American audience. They divide countries where there are English speakers into two camps:

- Countries where US spellings and usage are prevalent, being North and South America, the Philippines, Japan, China, North Korea and South Korea. (Let's call English speakers in these countries *A-people*.)
- Countries where British spellings and usage are prevalent or were part of the country's history, being the UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, many Caribbean countries, India and Pakistan amongst a few others. (Let's call English speakers in these countries *B-people*.)

And now comes a rather curious general recommendation: *if writing for A-people, we should use US spelling and usage, and if writing for B-people, we should use British spelling*

¹ *Guidelines for Writing English-Language Technical Documentation for an International Audience*

² *ibid.*, p. 3

³ *ibid.*, pp. 3–4

and usage.⁴ This is extraordinary advice. Since Australia is a B-people country, the advice, if followed, would have a technical writer adopting *British* spellings and usage if writing for an *Australian* audience. This means that the writer would write *current account* rather than *cheque account*, *pavement* rather than *footpath*, *motorway* rather than *freeway*, *dustbin* not *rubbish bin*, *antagonize* not *antagonise*, and so on.⁵

This advice is at odds with the principle of maximal familiarity. British spellings and usage might be *prevalent* in Australia (to use the language of the recommendation) but only in the sense that there are more similarities than dissimilarities. But as numerous published guides to Australian English attest, there is a distinctly Australian English, and its distinctiveness is sufficient to warrant its adoption when we are writing for an Australian audience.

Similarly, there is a distinctly Indian English, a distinctly South African English, a distinctly New Zealand English, and so on. A recommendation to adopt only British English despite this heterogeneity wrongly belittles the legitimacy of the numerous other variants of the English language.

Recommendation 2: Adopt US English for international documentation

The advice to those whose work might be read worldwide is equally unconvincing:

“...the Project Group [that is, those contributing to the guidelines] has mostly suggested using US spelling and usage for English-language documentation that will have worldwide use. Our rationale is simply that people who are accustomed to US spelling practices find British spelling to be strange or quaint, or may even think the writer cannot spell correctly. On the other hand, most people who use British spelling and usage have also been exposed to US spelling and usage, so that even though they don’t use it themselves...they recognize it and more readily adapt to it.”⁶

Just to underscore how extraordinary this advice is, note that no part of its “derivation” is based on how many A-people and B-people there are. For this reason, the advice is, in effect, tantamount to saying that, *regardless of whether A-people are in the minority*, the linguistic practices of A-people should prevail over those of B-people when you are writing for an international audience. And this is simply because A-people are *less* tolerant of linguistic diversity than B-people. This is starkly at odds with the principle of maximal familiarity. It is also crudely dismissive of A-people: are they really that ignorant, that intolerant of diversity, that they must be kept isolated from foreign tongues, even English ones?

Another approach

INTECOM’s recommendation 2 addresses an uncommon scenario. Few technical writers ever need to write for a worldwide audience. A much more likely scenario is writing for an audience composed of speakers of a limited number of English variants. An example is writing a user guide to accompany a product that will be sold in Australia and in the USA. How should we decide on the English to use if localisation is not an option?

⁴ *ibid.*, p.2: “If ... writing for an audience solely in the UK, the Scandinavian countries, Australia, New Zealand and [*sic.*, read *or*] South Africa, then British usage is appropriate.” Amplified on page 3.

⁵ The British words are taken from the INTECOM guidelines.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 3–4. No reference to any empirical, statistically-significant, research is given to support this claim.

One argument might be that since there are more US-English speakers than Australian-English speakers, we should write the manual in US English. This might sound fair, but would such an approach always accord with the principle of maximal familiarity?

Suppose that the company in question expects to sell 10,000 units in Australia but only 1,000 units in the USA. If we based our decision on what English to use solely on population size, then 10,000 customers would encounter an English that is not their own, and only 1,000 an English that is. But if we apply the principle of maximal familiarity—with the democratic imperative that it implies—we would choose to write the manual in Australian English, since 10,000 would then encounter language that is their own and only 1,000 would not.⁷

This method has general application: every exporting business has, through market analysis, a good idea of how many units of a product they expect to sell in other countries. (No business would manufacture products for export without a clue as to which countries they were to be exported to.⁸) So, the technical writing team needs only ask the marketing team which countries the product to be documented is to be exported to and how many units they expect to sell in each such country. An application of the principle of maximal familiarity, in the manner outlined above, would then determine the variant of English to use (which is not to say that the task will always be as simple as in our example).⁹

The principle is no less relevant to worldwide documentation, that is, to documentation that the authors expect will be read in *every* country where there are English speakers. The authors could ascertain the number of English speakers in each country and the characteristics of the particular variant of English used before deciding on the variant or hybrid of English that would give maximal familiarity. Had the INTECON team concentrated on gathering such information—instead of relying on spurious national stereotypes—the results of their efforts might have been of wide-ranging value: not just to writers, but to all who have an interest in the many-branched evolution of the English language.

Conclusion

It is an axiom of technical writing that we write for our audience: we give them what they need to know, based on what we know they know, and in a language that informs with minimal distraction. Language cannot inform with minimal distraction if it employs words, spelling, punctuation and idioms that the intended audience is not accustomed to. And thus is derived the principle of maximal familiarity.

By giving insufficient weight to the fact that there is a multitude of legitimate English variants, the advice that we should shoehorn our language into just one of two variants is obviously at odds with the principle of maximal familiarity. So too is advice that we should give primacy to the customs of one language group over all others irrespective of the size of that group in our total audience. Hence the INTECOM guidelines are best ignored if we are to maintain our customary audience-centric focus. Instead, we should attempt, wherever practicable, to quantify our likely audiences and their particular language customs, and then submit our findings to the calculus of maximal familiarity.

⁷ And to fully maximise familiarity, we might, in addition, choose to use international words for words that might be understood only in the majority language (for example, *fuel* rather than *petrol*).

⁸ Even companies that sell via the web will have a fair idea of, or can make educated guesses about, the sales they are likely to make in countries with English speakers.

⁹ Indeed, in some cases, the English rightly chosen will not be the English spoken in the highest-selling country, for expected sales in the highest-selling country might be out-numbered by the expected *total* sales in a number of lesser-selling countries whose *shared* language is different to that used in the highest-selling country.