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China vs Chinese, Belgium vs Belgian

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Shorter Article

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Abstract

In reply to a recent article in English Today by David Li, it is pointed out that the use of a noun as a premodifier rather than an adjective appears to be increasing in English, perhaps particularly in the area of sports. The Australia team seems to be gaining ground at the expense of the Australian team, for example. Just why this should be happening is obscure, but multiple factors appear to be involved in the change. There are also instances where the change appears to be blocked.

I read with interest David Li's recent paper in *English Today* on the naming of varieties of English (Li 2024). Although I understand the importance of the examples Li considers for the ELT world and do not wish to detract from his findings in that regard (see, e.g., Seargeant 2010), I found it disappointing that Li had focussed exclusively on naming varieties of English; the relevant construction is used far more widely than to name varieties of English, and the wider usage might cast some light on the examples in which Li is interested. Li, rightly in my view, discards the hypothesis that the name of the country as opposed to the adjective from the name of the country is used when the country is viewed as small or unimportant. He also makes some positive suggestions which would appear to have merit. If we look at some examples that he does not cite, I would be surprised to find *Thailand English* or *Switzerland English* rather than *Thai English* or *Swiss English* and I am sure we would hear *Manx English* rather than *Isle of Man English*. So Li's suggestion that the comparative length of the name of the country and the corresponding adjective is a relevant factor seems to be a very reasonable one. However, it seems unlikely that that is the only factor involved.

The first piece of evidence we have on this matter is the fact that since most toponymic adjectives are derived from the names of the relevant country, they are therefore longer than the name of the country (in number of segments, if not in number of syllables). If length were the only relevant factor we would expect to find *Iceland English* rather than *Icelandic English*, *Japan English* rather than *Japanese English*, *Spain English* rather than *Spanish English*, and so on, for a non-trivial number of examples. I do not have independent data to check these, but I would expect to find the adjective in the cases cited (and Li confirms it at least for *Spanish English*). Li fails to find a relevant example from Peru, but I would bet on *Peruvian English* rather than *Peru English*, despite the length difference. If length (and the examples cited here all have adjectives which are longer than their bases by at least one syllable) is not the motivation in naming the form of English, then some other factor must be involved.

One of these Li himself draws attention to, though he does not seem to recognize the importance of the data. Some countries have no toponymical adjective derived from the name of the country. New Zealand is one. It is true that Orsman (1997) lists *New Zealandese* and *Zelandian*, but these are no longer in general use. Li (2024: 36) adds *Cayman Islands English* and *Cook Islands English*, and puts the use of the country name down to the fact that the countries have compound names. Li does not mention *Hong Kong* which, whatever its status in Chinese, is probably not a compound in English, and which does not seem to have a corresponding adjective (Li is better placed than I am to verify this), though Li suggests that the language of Hong Kong might be called *Hongkongese* (no doubt with variable spelling). If there is no adjective, then there is no adjectival form to use.

It is important to recognize, though, that the variation between country name and adjective in attributive position is not limited to the names of varieties of English. The earliest example of this I have, which may be totally coincidental, is the use of *Belgium* for *Belgian* in New Zealand. Orsman (1997) says that *Belgian* was the original usage for the adjective, as in Britain, but there is evidence of change at least by the 1980s where *Belgium biscuit* and *Belgium sausage* were replacing *Belgian biscuit* and *Belgian sausage*.

One more general area in which the use of the country name appears to be gaining ground is in sports. The examples below are all taken from the internet.

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> The Brazil national football team, nicknamed Seleção Canarinha, represents Brazil in men's international football and is administered by the Brazilian Football Confederation ... (Wikipedia n.d.a)

> The Canada men's national ice hockey team (popularly known as Team Canada; French: Équipe Canada) is the ice hockey team representing Canada internationally. (Wikipedia n.d.b)

> Australia national rugby union team (Wikipedia n.d.c)

> Glamorgan chief executive says Wales cricket team makes 'no sense' (14 June 2018) (BBC 2018)

> Australia Cricketers (ESPN Cricinfo. n.d.)

We might be able to envisage multiple reasons for this usage. For example, it might be in the era of professional sport, the Australia team is not comprised entirely of Australians, or it might be a rewording of *the team representing Australia*, etc. What is clear is that this usage is relatively new, and, at the moment, lies alongside the more traditional usage with an adjective. But such usages are not restricted to sport.

> The England Flag is also known as the British, UK, United Kingdom and Union Jack Flag (Flagworld n.d.)

> THE SCOTLAND FLAG. The Scottish flag is not just one of the most recognisable flags in the British Isles (The Flag Shop n.d.); [Note the use of both *Scotland* and *Scottish* in this example, LB]

Examples with *flag* might be related to the sports usage, with the *England flag* being the flag used by supporters of the *England team*, but the usage seems wider than that. The next example does not seem to fit into any such generalization.

> Peru economy chief: improvement possible despite months of contraction (15 Nov 2023) (Reuters 2023)

What this example suggests, particularly as the article talks about *the Peruvian economy* or *the economy of Peru*, is that the usage is one related to headline styles (see also the example with the Scottish flag above). This is, then, another factor to bring into the mix in trying to explain what is going on here.

Other recent examples from New Zealand radio broadcasts are listed below, none of them easily explicable.

> The Slovakia Prime Minister (16 May 2024)

> The important North America business... (22 May 2024)

> That's our Australia correspondent (22 May 2024)

Yet another is a naming factor: A *Canada goose* is a type of goose, while a *Canadian goose* is one which happens to inhabit Canada.

While I am unable to explain this linguistic innovation, the two things to notice are that it is not limited to naming varieties of English, and it is not caused by any one single factor. One factor that must not be ignored is the feelings of the people using the language (whether or not they are native speakers). If speakers of these varieties of English start to believe that use of the adjective is demeaning in some way, then it will become so. We already have a precedent. The use of the definite article with, for instance, *The Solomon Islands*, *The Ukraine* (and even *The United States*, although such usage can scarcely be thought of as demeaning) seems to have become associated with colonization and low status as a country. As far as I have been able to ascertain, this was not, historically, an association with definite article usage, but it has become one, with news readers in public media, for example, omitting such definite articles (not only in country names, but in other geographical usages), and Ukrainians (who do not have a definite article in their language, but who associate it with a different Slavic linguistic usage) demanding that the article be omitted in naming their country. What we see here is English being changed by contact with external linguistic forces, in ways that we cannot predict. Perhaps the use of country names is following a similar path, and naming varieties of English is the tip of an iceberg.

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