Part one: Conversation codes

THE WEATHER

Any discussion of English conversation, like any English conversation, must begin with the Weather. And in this spirit of observing traditional protocol, I shall, like every other writer on Englishness, quote Dr Johnson's famous comment that 'When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather', and point out that this observation is as accurate now as it was over two hundred years ago.

This, however, is the point at which most commentators either stop, or try, and fail, to come up with a convincing explanation for the English 'obsession' with the weather. They fail because their premise is mistaken: they assume that our conversations about the weather are conversations about the weather. In other words, they assume that we talk about the weather because we have a keen (indeed pathological) interest in the subject. Most of them then try to figure out what it is about the English weather that is so fascinating.

Bill Bryson, for example, concludes that the English weather is not at all, fascinating, and presumably that our obsession with it is therefore inexplicable: 'To an outsider, the most striking thing about the English weather is that there is not very much of it. All those phenomena that elsewhere give nature an edge of excitement, unpredictability and danger - tornadoes, monsoons, raging blizzards, run-for-your-life hailstorms - are almost wholly unknown in the British Isles.'

Jeremy Paxman, in an uncharacteristic and surely unconscious display of patriotism, takes umbrage at Bryson's dismissive comments, and argues that the English weather is intrinsically fascinating:

Bryson misses the point. The English fixation with the weather is nothing to do with histrionics — like the English countryside, it is, for the most part, dramatically undramatic. The interest is less in the phenomena themselves, but in uncertainty . . . one of the few things you can say about England with absolute certainty is that it has a lot of weather. It may not include tropical cyclones but life at the edge of an ocean and the edge of a continent means you can never be entirely sure what you're going to get.

My research has convinced me that both Bryson and Paxman are missing the point, which is that our conversations about the weather are not really about the weather at all: English weather-speak is a form of code, evolved to help us overcome our natural reserve and actually talk to each other. Everyone knows, for example, that 'Nice day, isn't it?', 'Ooh, isn't it cold?','
'Still raining, eh?' and other variations on the theme are not requests for meteorological data: they are ritual greetings, conversation-starters or default 'fillers'. In other words, English weather-speak is a form of 'grooming talk' - the human equivalent of what is known as 'social grooming' among our primate cousins, where they spend hours grooming each other's fur, even when they are perfectly clean, as a means of social bonding.

**THE RULES OF ENGLISH WEATHER-SPEAK**

The Reciprocity Rule

Jeremy Paxman cannot understand why a 'middle-aged blonde' he encounters outside the Met Office in Bracknell says 'Ooh, isn't it cold?', and he puts this irrational behaviour down to a distinctively English 'capacity for infinite surprise at the weather'. In fact, 'Ooh, isn't it cold?' - like 'Nice day, isn't it?' and all the others - is English code for 'I'd like to talk to you - will you talk to me?', or, if you like, simply another way of saying 'hello'. The hapless female was just trying to strike up a conversation with Mr Paxman. Not necessarily a long conversation - just a mutual acknowledgement, an exchange of greetings. Under the rules of weather-speak, all he was required to say was 'Mm, yes, isn't it?' or some other equally meaningless ritual response, which is code for 'Yes, I'll talk to you/greet you'. By failing to respond at all, Paxman committed a minor breach of etiquette, effectively conveying the rather discourteous message 'No, I will not exchange greetings with you'. (This was not a serious transgression, however, as the rules of privacy and reserve override those of sociability: talking to strangers is never compulsory.)

We used to have another option, at least for some social situations, but the 'How do you do?' greeting (to which the apparently ludicrous correct response is to repeat the question back 'How do you do?') is now regarded by many as somewhat archaic, and is no longer the universal standard greeting. The 'Nice day, isn't it?' exchange must, however, be understood in the same light, and not taken literally: 'How do you do?' is not a real question about health or well-being, and 'Nice day, isn't it?' is not a real question about the weather.

Comments about the weather are phrased as questions (or with an interrogative intonation) because they require a response - but the reciprocity is the point, not the content. Any interrogative remark on the weather will do to initiate the process, and any mumbled confirmation (or even near-repetition, as in 'Yes, isn't it?') will do as a response. English
weather-speak rituals often sound rather like a kind of cate-chism, or the exchanges between priest and congregation in a church: 'Lord, have mercy upon us', 'Christ, have mercy upon us'; 'Cold, isn't it?', 'Yes, isn't it?', and so on.

It is not always quite that obvious, but all English weather conver-sations have a distinctive structure, an unmistakable rhythmic pattern, which to an anthropologist marks them out instantly as 'ritual'. There is a clear sense that these are 'choreographed' exchanges, conducted according to unwritten but tacitly accepted rules.

The Context Rule

A principal rule concerns the contexts in which weather-speak can be used. Other writers have claimed that the English talk about the weather all the time, that it is a national obsession or fixation, but this is sloppy observation: in fact, there are three quite specific contexts in which weather-speak is prescribed. Weather-speak can be used:

- as a simple greeting
- as an ice-breaker leading to conversation on other matters
- as a 'default', 'filler' or 'displacement' subject, when conversa-tion on other matters falters, and there is an awkward or uncom-fortable lull.

Admittedly, this rule does allow for rather a lot of weather-speak - hence the impression that we talk of little else. A typical English conversation may well start with a weather-speak greeting, progress to a bit more weather-speak ice-breaking, and then 'default' to weather-speak at regular intervals. It is easy to see why many foreigners, and even many English commentators, have assumed that we must be obsessed with the subject.

I am not claiming that we have no interest in the weather itself. The choice of weather as a code to perform these vital social functions is not entirely arbitrary, and in this sense, Jeremy Paxman is right: the change-able and unpredictable nature of the English weather makes it a particu-larly suitable facilitator of social interaction. If the weather were not so variable, we might have to find another medium for our social messages.
But in assuming that weather-speak indicates a burning interest in the weather, Paxman and others are making the same kind of mistake as early anthropologists who assumed that certain animals or plants were chosen as tribal 'totems' because the people in question had a special interest in or reverence for that particular animal or plant. In fact, as Levi-Strauss eventually explained, totems are symbols used to define social structures and relationships. The fact that one clan has as its totem the black cockatoo is not because of any deep significance attached to black cockatoos per se, but to define and delineate their relationship with another clan, whose totem is the white cockatoo. Now, the choice of cockatoos is not entirely random: totems tend to be local animals or plants with which the people are familiar, rather than abstract symbols. The selection of totems is thus not quite as arbitrary as, say, 'You be the red team and we'll be the blue team': it is almost always the familiar natural world that is used symbolically to describe and demarcate the social world.

**The Agreement Rule**

The English have clearly chosen a highly appropriate aspect of our own familiar natural world as a social facilitator: the capricious and erratic nature of our weather ensures that there is always something new to comment on, be surprised by, speculate about, moan about, or, perhaps most importantly, agree about. Which brings us to another important rule of English weather-speak: always agree. This rule was noted by the Hungarian humorist George Mikes, who wrote that in England 'You must never contradict anybody when discussing the weather'. We have already established that weather-speak greetings or openers such as 'Cold, isn't it?' must be reciprocated, but etiquette also requires that the response express agreement, as in 'Yes, isn't it?' or 'Mmm, very cold'.

Failure to agree in this manner is a serious breach of etiquette. When the priest says 'Lord, have mercy upon us', you do not respond 'Well, actually, why should he?' You intone, dutifully, 'Christ, have mercy upon us'. In the same way, it would be very rude to respond to 'Ooh, isn't it cold?' with 'No, actually, it's quite mild'. If you listen carefully, as I have, to hundreds of English weather-conversations, you will find that such responses are extremely rare, almost unheard of. Nobody will tell you that there is a rule about this; they are not even conscious of following a rule: it just simply isn't done.

If you deliberately break the rule (as I duly did, on several occasions, in the interests of science), you will find that the atmosphere becomes rather tense and awkward, and possibly somewhat huffy. No one will actually complain or make a big scene about it (we have rules about complaining and making a fuss), but they will be offended, and this will show in subtle ways. There may be an uncomfortable silence, then someone may say, in piqued tones, 'Well, it
feels cold to me,' or 'Really? Do you think so?' - or, most likely, they will either change the subject or continue talking about the weather among themselves, politely, if frostily, ignoring your faux pas. In very polite circles, they may attempt to 'cover' your mistake by helping you to re-define it as a matter of taste or personal idiosyncrasy, rather than of fact. Among highly courteous people, the response to your 'No, actually, it's quite mild' might be, after a slightly embarrassed pause, 'Oh, perhaps you don't feel the cold — you know, my husband is like that: he always thinks it's mild when I'm shivering and complaining. Maybe women feel the cold more than men, do you think?'

Exceptions to the Agreement Rule

This sort of gracious fudging is possible because the rules of English weather-speak are complex, and there are often exceptions and subtle variations. In the case of the agreement rule, the main variation concerns personal taste or differences in weather-sensitivity. You must always agree with 'factual' statements about the weather (these are almost invariably phrased as questions but, as we have already established, this is because they require a social response, not a rational answer), even when they are quite obviously wrong. You may, however, express personal likes and dislikes that differ from those of your companions, or express your disagreement in terms of personal quirks or sensibilities.

An appropriate response to 'Ooh, isn't it cold?', if you find you really cannot simply agree, would be 'Yes, but I really rather like this sort of weather - quite invigorating, don't you think?' or 'Yes, but you know I don't tend to notice the cold much - this feels quite warm to me'. Note that both of these responses start with an expression of agreement, even though in the second case this is followed by a blatant self-contradiction: 'Yes . . . this feels quite warm to me.' It is perfectly acceptable to contra dict oneself in this manner, etiquette being far more important than logic, but if you truly cannot bring yourself to start with the customary 'Yes', this may be replaced by a positive-sounding 'Mmm' accompanied by a nod — still an expression of agreement, but rather less emphatic.

Even better would be the traditional mustn't-grumble response: 'Yes [or Mmm-with-nod], but at least it's not raining.' If you have a liking for cold weather, or do not find it cold, this response virtually guar antees that you and your shivering acquaintance will reach happy agree ment. Everyone always agrees that a cold, bright day is preferable to a rainy one — or, at least, it is customary to express this opinion.
The personal taste/sensitivity variation is really more of a modification than an exception to the agreement rule: flat contradiction of a 'factual' statement is still taboo, the basic principle of agreement still applies; it is merely softened by allowing for differences in taste or sensitivity, providing these are explicitly identified as such.

There is, however, one context in which English weather-speakers are not required to observe the agreement rule at all and that is the male-bonding argument, particularly the pub-argument. This factor will come up again and again, and is explained in much more detail in the chapter on pub-talk, but for the moment, the critical point is that in English male-bonding arguments, particularly those conducted in the special environment of the pub, overt and constant disagreement - not just on the weather, but on everything else as well — is a means of expressing friendship and achieving intimacy.

The Weather Hierarchy Rule

I mentioned above that certain remarks about the weather, such as At least it's not raining' on a cold day, virtually guarantee agreement. This is because there is an unofficial English weather hierarchy to which almost everyone subscribes. In descending order, from best to worst, the hierarchy is as follows:

- sunny and warm/mild
- sunny and cool/cold
- cloudy and warm/mild
- cloudy and cool/cold
- rainy and warm/mild
- rainy and cool/cold

I am not saying that everyone in England prefers sun to cloud, or warmth to cold, just that other preferences are regarded as deviations from the norm. In support of this (and as evidence of the importance of weather-speak) I would also cite the fact that of the seven synonyms for 'nice' in the Thesaurus, no less than five are exclusively weather-related, namely: fine, clear, mild, fair and sunny.

Even our television weather forecasters clearly subscribe to this hierarchy: they adopt apologetic tones when forecasting rain, but often try to add a note of cheerfulness by pointing out that at least it will be a bit warmer, as they know that rainy/warm is preferable to rainy/cold. Similarly rueful tones are used to predict cold weather, brightened by the prospect of accompanying sunshine, because we all know that sunny/cold is better than cloudy/cold. So, unless the weather is both rainy and cold, you always have the option of a 'But at least it's not . . .' response.
If it is both wet and cold, or if you are just feeling grumpy, you can indulge what Jeremy Paxman calls our 'phenomenal capacity for quiet moaning'. This is a nice observation, and I would only add that these English 'moaning rituals' about the weather have an important social purpose, in that they provide further opportunities for friendly agreement, in this case with the added advantage of a 'them and us' factor - 'them' being either the weather itself or the forecasters. Moaning rituals involve displays of shared opinions (as well as wit and humour) and generate a sense of solidarity against a common enemy - both valuable aids to social bonding.

An equally acceptable, and more positive, response to weather at the lower end of the hierarchy is to predict imminent improvement. In response to 'Awful weather, isn't it?', you can say 'Yes, but they say it's going to clear up this afternoon.' If your companion is feeling Eeyorish[For those unfamiliar with English culture, Eeyore is the gloomy, pessimistic donkey in Winnie the Pooh.] however, the rejoinder may be 'Yes, well, they said that yesterday and it poured all day, didn't it?', at which point you might as well give up the Pollyanna approach and enjoy a spot of quiet moaning. It doesn't really matter: the point is to communicate, to agree, to have something in common; and shared moaning is just as effective in promoting sociable interaction and social bonding as shared optimism, shared speculation or shared stoicism. For those whose personal tastes are at variance with the unofficial weather hierarchy, it is important to remember that the further down the hierarchy your preferences lie, the more you will have to qualify your remarks in accordance with the personal taste/sensitivity clause. A preference for cold over warmth, for example, is more acceptable than a dislike of sunshine, which in turn is more acceptable than an active enjoyment of rain. Even the most bizarre tastes, however, can be accepted as harmless eccentricities, providing one observes the rules of weather-speak.

**Snow and the Moderation Rule**

Snow is not mentioned in the hierarchy partly because it is relatively rare, compared to the other types of weather included, which occur all the time, often all in the same day. Snow is also socially and conversationally a special and awkward case, as it is aesthetically pleasing, but practically inconvenient. It is always simultaneously exciting and worrying. Snow is thus always excellent conversation-fodder, but it is only universally welcomed if it falls at Christmas, which it almost never does. We continue to hope that it will, however, and every year the high-street bookmakers relieve us of thousands of pounds in 'white Christmas' bets.

The only conversational rule that can be applied with confidence to snow is a generic, and distinctively English, 'moderation rule': too much snow, like too much of anything, is to be deplored. Even warmth and sunshine are only acceptable in moderation: too many consecutive hot, sunny days and it is customary to start fretting about drought, muttering
about hose-pipe bans and reminding each other, in doom-laden tones, of the summer of 1976.

The English may, as Paxman says, have a 'capacity for infinite surprise at the weather', and he is also right in observing that we like to be surprised by it. But we also expect to be surprised: we are accustomed to the variability of our weather, and we expect it to change quite frequently. If we get the same weather for more than a few days, we become uneasy: more than three days of rain, and we start worrying about floods; more than a day or two of snow, and disaster is declared, and the whole country slithers and skids to a halt.

The Weather-as-family Rule

While we may spend much of our time moaning about our weather, foreigners are not allowed to criticize it. In this respect, we treat the English weather like a member of our family: one can complain about the behaviour of one's own children or parents, but any hint of censure from an outsider is unacceptable, and very bad manners.

Although we are aware of the relatively undramatic nature of the English weather - the lack of extreme temperatures, monsoons, tempests, tornadoes and blizzards - we become extremely touchy and defensive at any suggestion that our weather is therefore inferior or uninteresting. The worst possible weather-speak offence is one mainly committed by foreigners, particularly Americans, and that is to belittle the English weather. When the summer temperature reaches the high twenties, and we moan, 'Phew, isn't it hot? we do not take kindly to visiting Americans or Australians laughing and scoffing and saying 'Call this hot? This is nothing. You should come to Texas [Brisbane] if you wanna see hot!'

Not only is this kind of comment a serious breach of the agree-ment rule, and the weather-as-family rule, but it also represents a grossly quantitative approach to the weather, which we find coarse and distasteful. Size, we sniffily point out, isn't everything, and the English weather requires an appreciation of subtle changes and under-stated nuances, rather than a vulgar obsession with mere volume and magnitude.

Indeed, the weather may be one of the few things about which the English are still unselfconsciously and unashamedly patriotic. During my participant-observation research on Englishness, which naturally involved many conversations about the weather, I came across
this prickly defensiveness about our weather again and again, among people of all classes and social backgrounds. Contempt for American size-fixation was widespread - one outspoken informant (a publican) expressed the feelings of many when he told me: 'Oh, with Americans it's always "mine's bigger than yours", with the weather or anything else. They're so crass. Bigger steaks, bigger buildings, bigger snowstorms, more heat, more hurricanes, whatever. No fucking subtlety, that's their problem.' Jeremy Paxman, rather more elegantly, but equally patriotically, dismisses all Bill Bryson's monsoons, raging blizzards, tornadoes and hailstorms as 'histrionics'. A very English put-down.

The Shipping Forecast Ritual

Our peculiar affection for our weather finds its most eloquent expression in our attitude towards a quintessentially English national institution: the Shipping Forecast. Browsing in a seaside bookshop recently, I came across an attractive large-format picture-book, with a seascape on the cover, entitled Rain Later, Good. It struck me that almost all English people would immediately recognize this odd, apparently meaningless or even contradictory phrase as part of the arcane, evocative and somehow deeply soothing meteorological mantra, broadcast immediately after the news on BBC Radio 4.

The Shipping Forecast is an off-shore weather forecast, with additional information about wind-strength and visibility, for the fishing vessels, pleasure craft and cargo ships in the seas around the British isles. None of the information is of the slightest use or relevance to the millions of non-seafarers who listen to it, but listen we do, religiously, mesmerized by the calm, cadenced, familiar recitation of lists of names of sea areas, followed by wind information, then weather, then visibility - but with the qualifying words (wind, weather, visibility) left out, so it sounds like this: 'Viking, North Utsire, South Utsire, Fisher, Dogger, German Bight. Westerly or southwesterly three or four, increasing five in north later. Rain later. Good becoming moderate, occasionally poor. Faroes, Fair Isle, Cromarty, Forties, Forth. Northerly backing westerly three or four, increasing six later. Showers. Good.' And so on, and on, in measured, unemotional tones, until all of the thirty-one sea areas have been covered — and millions of English listeners,[Not just the nostalgic older generations: the Shipping Forecast has many young devotees, and references to the Shipping Forecast have recently turned up in the lyrics of pop songs. I met a 19-year-old barman recently with a dog called Cromarty, after one of the sea areas, the gloomy, pessimistic donkey in Winnie the Pooh. most of whom have no idea where any of these places are, or what the words and numbers mean, finally switch off their radios, feeling strangely comforted and even uplifted by what the poet Sean Street has called the Shipping Forecast's 'cold poetry of information'.}
Some of my foreign informants - mostly immigrants and visitors who had been in England for some time - had come across this peculiar ritual, and many found it baffling. Why would we want to listen to these lists of obscure places and their irrelevant meteorological data in the first place - let alone insisting on hearing the entire pointless litany, and treating anyone who dared attempt to switch it off as though they had committed some sort of sacrilege? They were bemused by the national press, radio and television headlines, and fierce debates, when the name of one of the sea areas was changed (from Finisterre to FitzRoy), and would no doubt have been equally puzzled by the national outcry when the BBC had the temerity to change the time of the late-night broadcast, moving it back by a mere fifteen minutes ('People went ballistic' according to a Met. Office spokesman).

'Anyone would think they'd tried to change the words of the Lord's Prayer!' said one of my American informants, of the hullabaloo over the Finisterre/FitzRoy issue. I tried to explain that the usefulness or relevance of the information is not the point, that listening to the Shipping Forecast, for the English, is like hearing a familiar prayer - somehow profoundly reassuring, even for non-believers - and that any alteration to such an important ritual is bound to be traumatic for us. We may not know where those sea areas are, I said, but the names are embedded in the national psyche: people even name their pets after them. We may joke about the Shipping Forecast (the author of Rain Later, Good observes that some people 'talk back to it, "Thundery showers good? I don't think so") but then we joke about everything, even, especially, the things that are most sacred to us. Like our Weather, and our Shipping Forecast.

WEATHER-SPEAK RULES AND ENGLISHNESS

The rules of English weather-speak tell us quite a lot about Englishness. Already, before we even begin to examine the minutiae of other English conversation codes and rules of behaviour in other aspects of English life, these rules provide a number of hints and clues about the 'grammar' of Englishness.

In the reciprocity and context rules, we see clear signs of reserve and social inhibition, but also the ingenious use of 'facilitators' to overcome these handicaps. The agreement rule and its exceptions provide hints about the importance of politeness and avoidance of conflict (as well as the approval of conflict in specific social contexts) - and the precedence of etiquette over logic. In the variations to the agreement rule, and sub-clauses to the weather-hierarchy rule, we find indications of the acceptance of eccentricity and some hints of stoicism — the latter balanced by a predilection for Eeyorish moaning. The moderation rule reveals a dislike and disapproval of extremes, and the weather-as-family rule exposes a perhaps surprising patriotism, along with a quirky appreciation of understated charm. The Shipping Forecast ritual
illust­rates a deep-seated need for a sense of safety, security and continuity - and a tendency to become upset when these are threatened - as well as a love of words and a somewhat eccentric devotion to arcane and appar­ently irrational pastimes and practices. There seems also to be an under-current of humour, in all this, a reluctance to take things too seriously.

Clearly, further evidence will be required to determine whether these are among the 'defining characteristics of Englishness' that we set out to identify, but at least we can start to see how an understanding of Englishness might emerge from detailed research on our unwritten rules.