

## Sina English and American Dictionaries — A New Partnership

by Robert Oliphant

Call it Sina “Chinese” English or Standard Worldwide American Pronunciation English (SWAPE)—either way our new international language owes its current shape to American dictionaries. As currently featured in China’s Expo 2010 in Shanghai, Sina English uses American spellings, standard headword-definition combinations, and standard Midwest pronunciations—all available via electronic lexicography to offshore learners, including audio-phonetic help.

Most of us have already had plenty of telephone contact with offshore speakers of SWAPE, sometimes including troubleshooting contact of more than 10 minutes. In my own case this led to a suggestion by an affable SWAPE-fluent contact-professional (physically located in the Philippines) that what I needed was a new computer.

This suggestion led step by step to my purchase of a new HP computer from my trouble shooter, now morphed into a “close the deal” salesman, before I rang off. Stunned by my pliability, it took me a couple of hours to realize that MY language had become an international offensive weapon for anyone willing to learn it.

To be more specific: Most lexicographers will certainly agree that basic pronunciation fluency can be quickly tested via questions like “For TRACK and TRACE, please indicate which spelling comes measurably closer to its dictionary-based phonetic transcription.” [answer: TRACK /trak/: 4/5 matching letters, as opposed to TRACE /trays/: 3/5]

The same quick-testability feature also applies to standard-definition fluency via “spelling bee” questions like, “Please spell the 6-letter headword listed in the *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary* whose phonetic transcription is /floo eunt/and whose fourth definition is “flowing or capable of flowing.”

More ambitiously, since the Random House college dictionary contains 56,000 headword-definition combinations, we can thriftily determine vocabulary size via the percentage correct in a random-sample test of these combinations. A 90% score, for example, would indicate a personal vocabulary of roughly 50,000 such combinations, along with a very high level of crossword puzzle fluency, e.g., finishing the *Los Angeles Times* Monday crossword in five minutes or less.

I estimate that our affable contact professionals in the Philippines and Pacific Rim would earn vocabulary-size scores averaging about 70% and roughly equivalent to a knowledge of roughly 40,000 SWAPE headword-definition combinations. My estimate, of course, can be put to the test, and should be. And, so should professional estimates of the average vocabulary sizes of American high school and college graduates.

I raise my put-to-the-test point to urge the importance of American electronic dictionaries as tools for acquiring and measuring the same listening and speaking skills that many offshore students now possess. Practically considered, this means access to standard American Midwest pronunciation via audio sound and keyboard friendly phonetic transcriptions. Certainly the use of American Midwest pronunciation in the Scripps National Spelling Bees justifies a return to the dictionary-based “platform speech” standard prevalent prior to 1961.

Overall I hope what’s here comes across as filled with practical optimism. Simply put, it’s clear that as Americans we are now the prisoners of our own linguistic success, since it’s American Midwest pronunciation that has been conquering the planet, not our military weaponry.

Recognizing this change does not call for ignoring America’s multi-dialectal and multi-cultural identity. Far from it. All it means is that each of us truly has a world identity now: practically so and lastingly so.

Where, after all, do classical Latin and Greek live now, if not in the dictionaries of Angloid strangers?

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Robert Oliphant’s best known book is *A Piano for Mrs. Cimino*, [the film version of which](#) won a Golden Nymph Award at Monte Carlo for Bette Davis. He is a WWII air corps veteran, and his eBooks are available from the [Nonpartisan Education Review](#).