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David Crystal's 50 Questions about English Usage

David Crystal



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Contents

Acknowledgements and Thanks	vii
Why I wrote this book	vii
A: Words and idioms	1
1 How many words are there in the English Language?	2
2 How many new words come into English every year?	4
3 Why is English vocabulary so varied?	6
4 Why do I hear two forms used in a sentence like <i>Talk among(st) yourselves?</i>	8
5 What's the difference between <i>a cup</i> and <i>a mug</i> ?	10
6 Why do people say <i>phonetic</i> and <i>grammatical</i> and not <i>phonetical</i> and <i>grammatic</i> ?	12
7 I hear people adding <i>-ish</i> to words a lot. What does it mean?	14
8 What should we call the meal in the middle of the day: <i>lunch</i> or <i>dinner</i> ?	16
9 Why is everyone these days saying <i>you're welcome</i> in response to thanks?	18
10 What does it mean when someone adds <i>at all</i> at the end of a question?	20
11 Why do English speakers sometimes use pidgin English, as in <i>long time no see</i> ?	22
12 Is it all right to say <i>she looks well in a black dress</i> rather than <i>looks good</i> ?	24
13 Why do people say the same thing twice, as in <i>it takes what it takes</i> ?	26
14 What is happening in new expressions like <i>well good</i> ?	28
B: Grammar	30
15 Can <i>a</i> be used before an uncountable noun?	31
16 Why is the article dropped before some nouns, as in <i>look what baby's doing</i> ?	33
17 Why do some teachers tell me I shouldn't begin a sentence with <i>and</i> ?	35
18 Why do we say <i>I am</i> , <i>am I</i> and <i>I'm not</i> , but <i>aren't I</i> instead of <i>amn't I</i> ?	37
19 Are the conjunctions <i>because</i> , <i>since</i> , <i>as</i> and <i>for</i> interchangeable?	39
20 Why do we see the past tense of some verbs spelled in two ways, such as <i>burned</i> and <i>burnt</i> ?	41
21 Why is <i>go</i> being used these days instead of <i>say</i> in reporting speech?	43
22 I've just seen a film called <i>Marley and Me</i> . Shouldn't it be <i>Marley and I</i> ?	45
23 Why do people say <i>whatever</i> on its own?	47
24 <i>What will be the result?</i> or <i>What will the result be?</i> Which should I use?	49

25	I keep coming across <i>Team GB</i> . Shouldn't it be <i>the GB Team</i> ?	51
26	Why is <i>went</i> the past tense of <i>go</i> ? (And <i>was</i> the past of <i>am</i> and <i>is</i> ?)	53
27	Is there a difference between <i>I liked the story which you told</i> and <i>...that you told</i> ?	55
28	Is the third person singular <i>-s</i> going to disappear?	57
29	Why is a possessive sometimes used before an <i>-ing</i> form, and sometimes not?	59
C: Pronunciation		61
30	Where did RP (Received Pronunciation) come from?	62
31	Have English accents changed in Britain in recent years?	64
32	What is this 'Estuary English' that I read about?	66
33	Why do some people say <i>afternoon</i> and some say <i>afteernoon</i> ?	68
34	Why do people drop the final <i>-g</i> when they say <i>good morning</i> ?	70
35	Why am I hearing so many high rising tones on statements these days?	72
D: Spelling and punctuation		74
36	Why is English spelling so irregular?	75
37	Why is <i>encyclopaedia</i> sometimes spelled <i>encyclopedia</i> ?	77
38	Why do we see a verb sometimes spelled with <i>-ise</i> and sometimes with <i>-ize</i> ?	79
39	Should I write words with accents, like <i>cliché</i> and <i>naïve</i> ?	81
40	Should I write <i>Past Perfect</i> or <i>past perfect</i> (and for other names of tenses)?	83
41	Why is there so much variation in the use of the apostrophe?	85
42	I've seen both <i>red, white and blue</i> and <i>red, white, and blue</i> . Which should I use?	87
43	Can I use an exclamation mark along with a question mark to add emphasis to a question, as in <i>What?! or What!?</i>	89
44	Are hyphens going out of fashion?	91
E: Genres		93
45	Why is Shakespeare difficult to read?	94
46	How has English changed in the last 400 years?	96
47	Has internet technology changed English?	98
48	Will text messaging harm learners' English?	100
49	Why are transcripts of spoken language so difficult to read?	102
50	Can I use grammar to identify online phishing?	104
Index		106

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Why I wrote this book

There comes a point, in the lives of language learners, when they become aware of two Great Truths. The language they're learning is changing, even while they're learning it. And the version of the language they're being taught isn't the only one. Sooner or later, everyone has to come to terms with *language change* and *language variation*. All languages change and vary. The only ones that don't are dead.

It shouldn't really be a surprise. After all, the learners' own mother-tongues change and vary too. But an unexpected encounter with a usage they've not been taught can be disconcerting. In the case of English, the changes and variations in usage are especially noticeable, due to its long and complex social and political history, as are the irregularities that have developed as a result. And one of the commonest questions teachers get asked, especially by young learners, is: Why?

Knowing the answers can be really helpful. It does more than satisfy a curiosity. It can increase learners' confidence, as they come to appreciate that the variation they've noticed isn't random, but reflects principles and practices that they can empathize with, for these operate in their mother-tongue too. And knowing why a usage has developed in English can help them consolidate it in their production and better appreciate it in their comprehension.

In this book I give my answers to some of the questions I've been asked about usage variation and change in English. While most of the questions begin with a specific example raised by the enquirer, the explanation usually leads to a number of related usages, and some general issues emerge as a result. The history of the language, and its literature, is a recurring theme.

I've grouped the questions into five broad areas – Words and Idioms, Grammar, Pronunciation, Spelling and Punctuation, and Genres – though of course there are numerous points of overlap.

Further reading on many of the topics in this book can be found in my *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (3rd edition, 2020). For the history of individual words, the online *Oxford English Dictionary* (oed.com) is an invaluable source. All the main corpora on English can be found, with convenient links, at the English Corpora website created by Mark Davies: www.english-corpora.org

A: Words and idioms

This section contains topics that at first sight seem very specific, but they raise general issues about the nature of change and variation that apply throughout the lexicon. I begin with the three questions most often asked about the general character of English vocabulary.

- 1 How many words are there in the English Language?
 - 2 How many new words come into English every year?
 - 3 Why is English vocabulary so varied?
 - 4 Why do I hear two forms used in a sentence like *Talk among(st) yourselves?*
 - 5 What's the difference between a *cup* and a *mug*?
 - 6 Why do people say *phonetic* and *grammatical* and not *phonetical* and *grammatic*?
 - 7 I hear people adding *-ish* to words a lot. What does it mean?
 - 8 What should we call the meal in the middle of the day: *lunch* or *dinner*?
 - 9 Why is everyone these days saying *you're welcome* in response to thanks?
 - 10 What does it mean when someone adds *at all* at the end of a question?
 - 11 Why do English speakers sometimes use pidgin English, as in *long time no see*?
 - 12 Is it all right to say *she looks well in a black dress* rather than *looks good*?
 - 13 Why do people say the same thing twice, as in *it takes what it takes*?
 - 14 What is happening in new expressions like *well good*?
-

1

How many words are there in the English Language?

And, even more intriguing, how many do you know?

The first question is easy to answer: nobody knows. You might think all we have to do is count the words in the biggest dictionaries. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, has over 600,000 entries. But there are lots of words that this or any other dictionary wouldn't include.

Even if we restrict our count to words in Standard English, the biggest dictionaries could never keep up with the idiosyncratic usages that we see all around us. Compound words are especially difficult to handle. In a newspaper article on the health value of red wine, I find *best-scoring grape*, *a mould-prone climate*, *barrel-ageing* and *bottle-ageing*. The writer talks about *heart-friendly* wines, supporting the *red-wine-is-best* theory. These are all clearly intelligible words, and some are going to be encountered quite often. *Heart-friendly*, for example, had 270,000 hits on a Google search engine last time I looked. But they are not going to be included in a dictionary because their meaning is obvious from their constituent elements.

The vocabulary of science and technology presents another problem. There are, apparently, some million insects already identified, with several million more awaiting description. This means there must be at least a corresponding number of lexical designations enabling English-speaking entomologists to talk about their subject. And similarly, unknown numbers would be found whatever knowledge area we looked at, as academics are always innovating conceptually and devising new terms, or new senses of old terms, to express their fresh thinking.

Then there's slang. By its nature slang changes rapidly and is difficult to track. Few of the dozens of words for being drunk, for example, will appear in a dictionary – *lagered*, *boxed*, *treed*, *bladdered* ... – and of course nobody can be sure whether any of these items are still in use.

Above all there's the problem of capturing new words that arise as a result of English becoming a global language. Most of the adaptation that takes place when a 'new English' emerges is in vocabulary, as speakers adapt the language to meet their communicative needs. We need only think of a country's fauna and flora, food and drink, mythology and religion, oral and written literature, local laws and customs, leisure and the arts, social structure So, when a community adopts English, and starts to use it in relation to all areas of life, there's inevitably going to be a great deal of lexical creation. To take just one example, there are some 20,000 entries in the *Dictionary of Caribbean English* (1996).

What about the second question: how many words do educated native-speakers know – their *passive vocabulary*? How many do *you* know? A difficult question, but one that can be researched. All you have to do is go through a desk dictionary and tick the words you know! More realistically, take a sample of pages and make an estimate. I've done this many times with native-speakers, and the total is usually between forty and fifty thousand, and often twice this number. That may seem a lot, but remember it includes word families, such as *happy, happiness, happily, happy-go-lucky* The total builds up quite quickly. I've also done it with fluent second-language learners, and – surprise? – the figures also approach 40,000+, especially if the learner is an avid reader of English literature and is online a lot. We know more than we think we know.

Active vocabulary is much more difficult to count, as it varies so much from one time and situation to another. (Think of all the words we use at a festival, that are never used at other times of the year.) It includes the words we write as well as speak. Estimates suggest that our active vocabulary is about a third lower than our passive vocabulary. That's still more than most people think. Vocabulary sizes always tend to be underestimated.

Allsopp, R. (1996) *Dictionary of Caribbean English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2

How many new words come into English every year?

Where do they come from? And do they all stay?

Vocabulary change means two things: the loss of old words and senses and the arrival of new ones. It's difficult to arrive at any accurate figure. We never know which of the new words we hear around us are going to be permanent features of English, and which are transient – the slang and fashionable usage of the moment. A study of the new words and phrases used in English during the 1970s suggests that as many as 75 percent of them ceased to be used after quite a short period of time.

Collections of 'new words' made by various publishers and dictionary-providers, based on words which have been seen in print, indicate that hundreds of new expressions appear each year. For example, the Oxford University Press publication, *Twentieth Century Words*, contains a selection of about 5,000 items such as:

- from the 1990s: applet, Blairism, cool Britannia, Dianamania, docusoap
- from the 1980s: AIDS, backlash, bog-standard, cellphone, designer drug
- from the 1970s: action replay, Betamax, cashpoint, club class, detox.

The average is 500 items a decade – roughly one a week – and this is only a *selection* from everyday written language. The *Longman Guardian Original Selection of New Words* collected words which had come to prominence in written English in 1986: it contained around a thousand. No one has yet devised a technique for capturing the neologisms that enter the spoken language, and which are rarely (sometimes never) written down. And it's even more difficult to capture new meanings of old words, as when *text* and *tweet* developed online uses.

That there should be so many new words entering the language should come as no surprise when we consider the many walks of life which motivate them, such as the arts, business, computing, the environment, leisure, medicine, politics, popular culture, sports, science and

technology. In early 2020, for example, words and phrases listed in the Cambridge Dictionary's 'New Words' website included:

- *fearware* – a cyber attack that exploits an existing sense of fear
- *xenobot* – a very small robot created from living cells
- *blue mind* – a calm state of mind caused by being close to water.

Plainly, the array of new words reflects the trends, inventions and attitudes seen in contemporary society. But this raises an interesting question: how do we define 'contemporary society', from the viewpoint of vocabulary change? During the 1980s, it's safe to say that virtually all the new vocabulary people heard in Britain – whether generated within Britain or introduced from elsewhere (e.g. the USA) – would have come from British sources – newspapers, magazines, radio, television, or the local worlds of occupational idiom and street slang. But since the arrival of the internet in its various manifestations, it is now possible for anyone (who has the electronic means) to directly encounter English in its worldwide lexical variety. A decade ago, it would have been extremely difficult for me to have explored the extensive regional vocabulary of, say, South Africa, without actually going to the place. Now it's just a mouse-click away.

The cumulative impact of global English vocabulary is already very noticeable on the internet and must eventually make an impact on our linguistic consciousness, wherever we live. Our comprehension of foreign vocabulary will grow, and in due course some items will enter our spoken or written production. It is not, after all, an entirely passive situation. The millions of (predominantly younger) Britons who now routinely enter chatrooms, write or respond to blogs, play virtual-reality games, and actively participate in social media are encountering an unprecedented range of varieties of English. In just one chatroom there may be participants from any part of the English-speaking world. Different dialects of English become neighbours on the same screen, as do different levels of competence in the use of English. As a result, accommodation will be widespread – and operate in any direction. British people may be influenced by South African English – and of course vice versa. It will be a brave new lexical world.

Ayto, J. (1999) *Twentieth Century Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mort, S. (Ed.) (1986) *Longman Guardian Original Selection of New Words*. London: Longman Higher Education.

Why is English vocabulary so varied?

When people ask this question, they're usually thinking of pairs or groups of words such as *royal* and *regal*. Why do we have both, when the meaning seems to be the same?

Lexical choices like these reflect the colourful political and cultural history of the English-speaking peoples over the centuries. My favourite metaphor is to describe English as a linguistic vacuum-cleaner of a language, whose users suck in words from other languages whenever they encounter them. And because of the way English has travelled the world, several hundred languages have contributed to its lexical character. Although it began as a Germanic language, some 80 percent of English vocabulary isn't Germanic at all.

But English was never a purely Germanic language. On the mainland of Europe, the Germanic languages had already incorporated words from Latin, and these arrived in Britain with the Anglo-Saxons. Latin then continued to be an important influence, introducing everyday words to do with plants and animals, food and drink, buildings, household objects and many other domains – *butter, mile, wall, street, cat, wine ...*. This vocabulary continued to expand, with the growing influence of missionary activity reflected in an increase in words to do with religion and learning. The Celts lived in Britain before the Anglo-Saxons arrived, and Old English also contains a few Celtic words, such as *crag* and *brock* (a badger).

The Vikings attacked Britain in the 780s, and an area of eastern England was for a while subject to Danish laws. A few Old Norse words are found in Old English writings, but the vast majority aren't seen until the 13th century. Middle English literature shows hundreds of Norse loanwords, such as *take, get* and *egg*.

But the Latin and Norse elements in early English are small compared with the huge impact of French in the Middle Ages – the result of French power in England after 1066 and of French cultural pre-eminence in mainland Europe. Anglo-Saxon words couldn't cope

with the new domains of expression introduced by the Normans, such as in law, architecture, music and literature. The new words usually replaced the old ones, but the old words often survived, sometimes developing a different meaning or stylistic use.

Then came the Renaissance, with a massive influence of vocabulary from Latin and Greek. And this is what led to the ‘doublets’ illustrated by *royal* and *regal*. In Old English, the only way of describing a king would have been *kingly*. Now we find *royal* from French and *regal* from Latin. Similarly, we find such ‘triplets’ as Old English *ask* supplemented by French *question* and Latin *interrogate*, and Old English *fire* supplemented by French *flame* and Latin *conflagration*. The Latin words look and sound more scholarly or specialized, especially by comparison with the down-to-earth feel of the Anglo-Saxon words. The French words often add an aristocratic tone, as with Old English *clothes* and French *attire*, or Old English *house* and French *mansion*.

An interesting development was when two words with different origins came together into a single idiom. So today we say that something is *fit and proper* or has gone to *wrack and ruin* (combinations of Old English and French). If we want some *peace and quiet* we are joining a French and a Latin word. This is very common in the English used in law, in such pairings as *null and void*, and the well known *to have and to hold* (in the marriage ceremony) and *last will and testament*.

All these lexical options are especially exploited in English literature. Shakespeare couldn’t have created the range of his characters without them. But they will be found in everyday English too, especially when we switch between formal and informal styles. And it’s rarely possible to substitute one for the other: a *royal residence* belongs to the Queen or a member of her family; a *regal residence* (that is, a magnificent or stately one) could belong to anybody.

Why do I hear two forms used in a sentence like *Talk among(st) yourselves?*

A remarkable range of factors influences our usage.

This is where exploring a corpus is essential, to supplement our poor intuitions. There's certainly a regional difference. In the Corpus of Contemporary American English, I found only 2,405 instances of *amongst* compared to 144,461 instances of *among* – 1.66 percent. In the British National Corpus there were 4,449 instances compared to 22,385 of *among* – 20 percent. But *among* is still overwhelmingly the norm wherever you go.

Where did the *-st* ending come from? It was originally a development of the Old English inflectional ending: *among* + genitive *-es*. We can see an echo of that old ending still in *besides*. Then, in the 16th century, people evidently felt this was related to the *-est* superlative form, as gradually we find the *-st* ending used. We see it also in *against*, where it's the standard form, and in *amidst* (v *amid*) and *whilst* (v *while*), where usage varies. There's also a less used *unbeknownst*, meaning 'unknown', which began as a dialect form and crept into more general use. 'I often am sitting in the rocking-chair unbeknownst to you,' wrote Mrs Gaskell in 1848. A related form, *unknownst*, found mainly in Irish English (as in *unknownst to you*), remained regional.

Is there any difference in meaning? Every modern sense of *among* has a parallel use of *amongst*, as in these examples:

- in relation to local surroundings: *The water rushed among(st) the stones.*
- in relation to a surrounding group: *I stood among(st) the crowd.*
- in relation to a non-surrounding group: *It's popular among(st) my friends.*
- in relation to a particular class: *She is one among(st) many writers who ...*
- in relation to division: *We have five pounds among(st) us.*

The only hint of a semantic difference is suggested by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in its entry on *amongst*, describing a nuance not found in *among*: ‘generally implying dispersion, intermixture, or shifting position’. So, *I walked amongst the crowd* would suggest a rather more active moving about than *I walked among the crowd*. This would predict that *talk amongst yourselves* would be more frequent than *talk among yourselves* – and indeed it is (seven times more in a Google search).

Perhaps usage is influenced by pronunciation? *Amongst*, *amidst* and *whilst* all close with a three-element consonant cluster. In colloquial speech, if a consonant begins the following word, as in *amongst people*, the /t/ would usually be dropped. This wouldn’t be noticed in informal settings, but it would if, say, a BBC newsreader were to drop it. Speakers on formal occasions would thus be *more* likely to articulate *-st* words carefully, which would promote an association with formality.

The variation in Standard English seems to be chiefly stylistically conditioned: some people just like the sound of *-st* words; others don’t. There’s also a chronological factor: the *-st* forms are commoner in older texts and among older people. And there’s a great deal of regional dialect variation too. But the reasons people give for their like/dislike are conflicting. Some sense its association with regional dialect and feel it’s colloquial – ‘It sounds northern,’ said one person from the south of England. Others find it formal – ‘It sounds posh,’ said someone from the north who claimed he didn’t use *-st* forms at all.

Situations like this soon lead to feelings of uncertainty about what is ‘correct’. Long-standing practice might then be changed. I can’t otherwise explain why the traditional usage we see in signs, such as *Shoes repaired while you wait* should have been altered to *Shoes repaired whilst you wait*. Fashion soon removes such feelings, though, and today I see *whilst you wait* signs all over the place. But when I typed that string into a Google search engine I was asked ‘Did you mean *while you wait*?’ So it’s not there yet.

What's the difference between a *cup* and a *mug*?

The way in which these two words interact was a topic of national interest in 2015, explored by 25 regional radio stations across the UK.

This is a perfect example of the way words interact and change their meaning as a result of regional, social and cultural factors. Exploring the history behind semantically related words is always fascinating.

In the beginning, there was only the cup. The Anglo-Saxon word was *cuppe*, borrowed from Latin *cuppa*, meaning simply a drinking-vessel. The form of the vessel then developed in two directions: without a stem (as in the modern *teacup*) and with a stem and foot (as in a *wine-cup*), reflecting a diversity of functions. It had a strong religious connotation in Christianity, used in the sense of 'chalice' in a 14th-century translation of the Bible and thus into modern usage (as in *communion cup*). In the 17th century, it also developed an ornamental sense, naming a prize in a contest, which is the commonest modern application. Colloquially, it became a replacement for the liquid a cup might contain, as in *cuppa* ('cup of tea'), and that in turn led to idioms, as in *That's not my cup of tea* ('not something I like').

The history of *mug* is totally different, arriving in the Middle Ages. It may be an adaptation of a Latin word for a measuring vessel (*modius*). From the outset it seemed to refer more to the physical object than to the content it might contain. It comes to be used with such adjectives as *large* and *half-pint*, and with words that describe its material, such as *silver* or *stone*. We also often find it used in relation to a location – a steaming mug of tea might be left *on the bench, by the fire ...*. Cups weren't so often 'located' in this way.

The early use of *mug* was mainly in regional dialects, and especially in Scotland, for any earthenware bowl or pot. It began to be used routinely for a drinking vessel in the 17th century, and gradually came to be distinguished from the tapering cup by its cylindrical shape and

larger size. But it was the social activity that led to the main difference between the two.

In the 18th century, the taking of tea became a mark of high society. The word *teacup* arrived. Saucers joined cups as the norm (to ensure that any spillage was contained). Mugs then became associated with lower-class activities, where spilling didn't matter so much, and where the larger size reflected the thirstiness of the drinker. Early examples of *mug* are almost all to do with beer. Mugs of tea were drunk by people who were either blue-collar workers or – later – those who wanted to be thought of as down-to-earth, ordinary types. These connotations remain today.

As the taking of tea became less class-conscious, and a more informal occasion, it led to the shortened form *cuppa* in British regional English. There seems to have been a need to get away from the formality of 'high tea'. By contrast, there is no word *mugga* – presumably because *mug* was always felt to be associated with less formal settings.

The usage of the two words now differs greatly, reflecting their different social history. When people talk of *cups*, they're more likely to be thinking of the contents rather than the object. We *sip* and *pour* a cup of tea. We talk about a *lovely cup of coffee*, a *perfect cup of tea*. The cup is associated with drinking as a social event: we *offer* someone a cup of coffee, and people *enjoy* a cup of tea together. It also marks the passing of time: we talk about an *early morning cup of tea*, my *third cup of coffee*. Try replacing the word *cup* with *mug* in these examples, and you can sense the difference. *Mug* is actually very rare in these circumstances: in the 650-million-word Bank of English corpus, *cup of tea* is fifteen times more common than *mug of tea*.

Why do people say *phonetic* and *grammatical* and not *phonetical* and *grammatic*?

There are dozens of words that illustrate the same usage issue.

In a specialist domain, the only thing you can do is identify and follow majority usage. In linguistics these days it is *phonetic*, *phonological*, *grammatical*, *syntactic* and *semantic* (but you'll find the alternatives in older usage). You can tell the difference between a specialist and a non-specialist by the ending: those who talk about *syntactical structures* or *semantical problems* or *linguistical issues* are not likely to be specialists in linguistics. A usage to beware relates to *dialect*: in linguistics, the adjective is *dialectal*, not *dialectical*, to avoid confusion with the sense in philosophy relating to *dialectic* (logic or reasoning). But with pairs like *alphabetic* and *alphabetical*, *analytic* and *analytical*, or *diacritic* and *diacritical*, there's no difference in meaning.

The issue goes well beyond the terminology of linguistics, as with *mystic(al)*, *poetic(al)*, *ironic(al)*, *rhythmic(al)*, *problematic(al)* Usually there's no difference in meaning, but there may be a stylistic or regional preference. Where the two forms are synonymous, people generally opt for the shorter alternative; but the extra *-al* syllable can sometimes produce a more euphonious utterance, avoiding a clash of consonants or promoting a better rhythm (compare *geographic contours* v *geographical contours*). The shorter form is more likely to be made into a noun, as in *a dialectic*, *a diacritic*, *a mystic*, *a comic*.

Collocations are likely to differ. In the sense of 'powered by electricity', we see *electric* used in the music domain (*electric guitar/keyboard*) and in relation to sensations (*electric shock*, *the air was electric*). When a broad notion is involved, or a person, we are more likely to see *electrical* (*electrical equipment/wiring experts*). If I ask someone, 'Have you brought your electrical equipment?' I mean all the tools to do with electricity needed to do the job; if I ask, 'Have you brought your electric drill?' I mean a drill operated by electricity (not by some other method).