Racing the virus

While the plague took three years to infect Europe, SARS crossed the world in as many weeks. Anne Hyland looks at the inexorable spread of disease in the 21st century and why it’s unlikely to stop.

It is April and grey outside as a caller to radio Hong Kong’s RTHK 3 station dials in to request Queen’s Somebody to Love. The DJ flips on Queen’s melancholic track, but he isn’t happy about it – the request doesn’t fit the Blues Buster theme he is supposed to be playing in an effort to cheer up the city’s 6.9 million residents. And they do need cheering up. Since the deadly pneumonia-like virus called

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Prism

Going nuclear over ‘nucular’

Andy Lamey

I used to be a language bully. When I was in university, my friends and I thought attacking everything that came out of people’s mouths proved our vast learning. If someone said “irregardless”, we’d launch into the distinction between “regardless” and “irrespective”, and how you can never mix the two.

Strangers could clear the table in dining hall by using “quote” as a noun. News stories contained quotations, some poor first-year Wally would be informed in the most condescending way possible. God help anyone who began a sentence with “hopefully”. That was a hanging crime.

These days language bullying is on the rise. I blame George Bush. His status as both a genuinely poor speaker and the initiator of a widely unpopular war has made an interest in grammar fashionable again.

It is increasingly common to see columnists go after the President’s pronunciation: “Bush, who still pronounces it ‘nucular’, doesn’t understand what a nuclear weapon can do.” Grammatical correctness has become political correctness.

This is ironic. Language bullying – or prescriptivism, as it’s more politely called – is conservative in the worst sense. It advances a stuffy and old-fashioned view of language, the rules of which it considers set by supposed experts rather than common usage. It is deeply anti-populist and snobby, not to mention plain wrong and cranky. There are good reasons to criticise Bush. But holding his – or anyone else’s – grammar to dubious standards isn’t one of them.

Most “rules” cited by bullies are highly suspect. We’re told to stop the practice of splitting the infinitive, as in the old Star Trek line, “to boldly go where no man has gone before”. But this prohibition is based on the fact that in Latin it’s impossible to split infinitives – a ridiculous basis for a rule in marvellously flexible English.

Don’t end a sentence with a preposition? To cite Churchill, that is a rule up with which we should not put.

Quote for quotation? Lots of words – parent, contact, showcase, chair – function as both noun and verb. Never begin a sentence with a conjunction? But why not? Starting a sentence with hopefully is as unremarkable as starting one with any other sentence-level adverb, as in “Frankly, Mr President, I don’t support your war.”

As for irregardless, the extra syllable comes trippingly off the tongue because it resembles similar words such as “irrelevant” and “irrespective”, and has, at this point, made it into dictionaries.

Language bullies have a bloody-minded and literal understanding of how speech works. I once read an entire article denouncing the phrase “there you go”. It can be used in...
Observing this insidious new disease, they will be the next one to succumb. Foundations are built on the fear around the globe sum up the attitude pervading the community. The pictures that have been beamed around the globe sum up the attitude – Hong Kong has become a fortress whose surgical masks, a fortress whose foundations are built on the fear shared by hundreds of thousands that they will be the next one to succumb to this insidious new disease.

Back on the airwaves, the caller is plugging a song, requesting Somebody to Love. The choice of song is apt. Hong Kong is feeling unloved. The usually joyous, nothing-stressed city is relatively quiet as few people venture out, a symptom of the SARS hysteria which some say could cost 10,000 firms to go out of business. It’s not just locals who are staying home. The number of foreigners arriving in Hong Kong has plummeted since the World Health Organisation blacklisted the place, an act which itself has bruised the pride of “Asia’s World City.”

Sadly, that is not the only slogan that tourism spinners have applied to the sky-blue neon lights this town. The local tourism board chose this month to launch an international advertising campaign around the line: “Hong Kong will take your health away.” It must have sounded like a good idea at the time, but it’s turned away. Take a look at yourself, take a look in the mirror and cry: Lord what are you doing to me?"

Back on the airwaves, the caller is not the only one being heard. The usually jostling, jumping off the ritzy Mandarin Hotel a local pop star killed himself by depression deepened after an adored son was killed in a traffic accident.

An underwriter stands next to the coffin of a victim of SARS in Singapore. Photo AFP

Everyone wants to know how big this epidemic is going to be. It’s not the sort of question that science is very good at answering, because it depends on a million different things.

Kong is the worst-affected SARS zone after mainland China, and together they make up more than two-thirds of the 3200-plus SARS cases worldwide. With a global total of more than 130 people dead from the disease already, the race is on to find a cure before it takes an even bigger toll on human life, air travel, transport and commerce.

SARS could become the first new disease of the 21st century with global epidemic potential, WHO experts have warned. Consequently, it has sparked an unprecedented global collaboration between scientists as they exchange information and data daily, including microscopic pictures of samples from patients and trade advice and expertise in the search for clues to survive the SARS riddle. What is it? Where did it come from? How does it spread? How is stopped? Where did it come from? How does it spread? How is stopped? Where did it come from? How does it spread? How is stopped?

It is the mysterious spread of SARS and its deadly results that have made it the most talked about and written about medical menace since AIDS. While AIDS changed the way much of the world’s population approaches sex, it didn’t get the rapid response and global collaboration between scientists that has been afforded to SARS.

Indeed, it took years for scientists to co-ordinate research on AIDS, according to Bell.

Nor did SARS creep out of the African jungle like Ebola. It originated in southern mainland China last November. Another outbreak of Ebola was reported in Africa earlier this month, killing 120, which was also significantly more than Ebola, which, when it struck, had almost 30 dead from SARS.

However, Ebola doesn’t qualify as a genuine epidemic because it remains confined to a geographical area such as a network of African villages and does not threaten a whole country, says Watts. "Everyone wants to know how big is this epidemic going to be," says Duncan Watts, a sociologist and mathematician at New York’s Columbia University.

Sending doctors to Hong Kong with his wife. They were forced to change their plans to fly to Malaysia for Easter after that country’s government slapped a travel ban on visitors from Hong Kong and mainland China in an effort to halt the spread."

Can you believe it?" Patrick explodes. "Fortunately, we’ve been able to change – the Indonesians will take us and then fly to Singapore."

Jones’s attitude is that SARS is graduating from being epidemic to endemic, meaning it has acquired a permanent foothold into the human population. However, Ebola doesn’t qualify as a genuine epidemic because it remains confined to a geographical area such as a network of African villages and does not threaten a whole country, says Watts. "Everyone wants to know how big is this epidemic going to be," says Duncan Watts, a sociologist and mathematician at New York’s Columbia University.

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migrated to Hong Kong in an elderly doctor who had been treating SARS patients in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong. He went to Hong Kong to attend a wedding and stayed at Hong Kong’s Metropole Hotel, where he infected at least five other guests. Soon the hotel guests would get on a plane to carry the virus to Toronto and Singapore. Vietnam, a third major epicentre of the epidemic, contracted the virus after it migrated from China to Hanoi through a Chinese-American businesswoman.

Modern transport may have broken down geographical borders and provided a dilemma for the containment of the disease but the counter has been the enormous leap in scientific knowledge and the ever-improving quality of health procedures. However, Hong Kong has been criticised by WHO for not being vigilant enough in containing the disease. Its status was one of the world’s most densely populated major cities may have complicated control. Watts hypothesises that if SARS had started in Hong Kong instead of China and existed for a month without being identified then Hong Kong would be the largest. “It would have been all over the place,” Watts says. “Maybe the fact it started in rural China was a real blessing in a way.”

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chronic ailment. SARS is such a challenging disease initially causes itself through flu-like symptoms such as a dry cough, aches and then worsens with a fever. The problem with identifying SARS is that it has a long incubation period, which was initially thought to be up to 10 days but can in some patients be as long as two weeks. First it was assumed that SARS was transmitted only through direct contact with droplets exhaled by coughing or sneezing. However, clusters of SARS in some Hong Kong housing estates, such as the now infamous Block E of Amoy Gardens, have proved this wrong and deepened the seam of fear.

From Amoy Gardens came the knowledge that there was more than one mode of communicating the disease. It is known that a coronavirus can last for several hours on surfaces such as door handles. It also exists in faeces. But did the SARS patient who the Prince of Wales Hospital mistakenly diagnosed with influenza really cause close to 300 people to be infected when he visited his brother at Block E of Amoy Gardens? And did another man infect more than 150 people at a different Hong Kong location? If these fears prove true, it would seem to indicate the existence of SARS “super spreaders”, the like of which was seen in the US in 1907 which has been another positive in containing the virus. It is unlikely that science, even with the best resources, will find a quick solution to SARS. What this means for governments is that they will have to prepare to fight a war against SARS through containment. Fortunately, they can take comfort from the fact that no matter how fast a disease spreads, most epidemics usually have a peak when the number of susceptible targets for the virus dwindles.

Hong Kong, Singapore and Canada, which have large numbers of SARS infections, have accelerated the epidemic’s peak by shutting schools temporarily and establishing quarantine measures to isolate individuals who may have had contact with the disease. A virus like AIDS shows how successful human intervention can be, with the number of cases declining in countries where there has been the promotion of safe sex practices and needle exchange programs.

It is unclear how fast the SARS outbreak has been in China where reporting on the outbreak’s peak is being delayed.
Notes of optimism: calvino in America

John Crowley finds in Italo Calvino’s letters about his 1959-60 trip across America a fascinating glimpse of a moment in the country’s history.

I n her preface to this collection of Italo Calvino’s autobiographical writings, journals and interviews Esther Calvino remembers suggesting to her husband that he return to writing The Road to San Giovanni, his autobiography. Calvino refused, saying: “Because that’s my biography, and my biography is not yet Not yet finished!” An autobiography by definition leaves out one key moment in a life, and Calvino might have been thinking of a way he might want to experience that moment before completing his own. In a Calvino story, it would certainly have been possible.

Instead, we have this collection of autobiographical writing and other pieces, which his wife found after his death, gathered in a folder that were presented here in the order in which they appeared in print. The centrepiece of the collection is a diary of Calvino’s trip to America in 1959-60, in the form of letters to a friend. Calvino was inclined to publish this diary as a book, the title of which was to be An Optimist in America, but he decided it was too slight. The title The Hermit in Paris comes from a very late piece in which Calvino describes his life as an outsider in Paris – which is odd, because the bulk of the volume describes his childhood, coming of age and maturity as an Italian and an Italian writer in Italy.

Calvino’s work is unique in the literature of the 20th century; it would be impertinent in this brief notice to try to characterise it, since almost interestingly different effect, as Calvino gets older.) He broke with the Communist Party after the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and thereafter grew more and more apolitical. The moral purpose, worthwhile work and humane vision that he continued to develop, are not the same as the aims he found, somewhat reluctantly, in writing.

In “American Diary 1959-1960”, though, we have Calvino not as a mature aspiring but as a younger optimist, who wanders the huge country he has known and read about all his life (he went fishing with Ernest Hemingway in Italy in 1948), becoming or revealing himself in the process to be – what else? – a Calvino character. “In America all the cars are enormous. I am very tempted to hire immediately an enormous car, not even to drive it, just for the psychological sense of being in control of the city.”

“The beatniks naturally fraternise (with Calvino’s travelling companion, Spanish writer Fernando Arrabal, who is also bearded . . . [Allen] Ginsberg lives with another bearded man as man and wife and would like Arrabal to be present at their beardy couplings.”

Calvino visits Sarah Lawrence College, near New York. “Girls in trousers and big socks and multicoloured jerseys, just like in films about college life, flutter down from dormitories. Lunch is very meagre because in any case the girls want to keep their figure.” In class they discuss The Brothers Karamazov, “but these young girls are so far from Dostoevsky as the moon. Seeing Dostoevsky and Russian religious novels, I am very tempted to become or revealing myself in the process to be – what else? – a Calvino character. “In America all the cars are enormous. I am very tempted to hire immediately an enormous car, not even to drive it, just for the psychological sense of being in control of the city.”


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number of cases has been spiking. Health officials have lambasted China for turning a blind eye to SARS and not educating its people, which is made evident by the belief in some mainland Chinese circles that SARS originated in Hong Kong. Indeed, the last two major flu pandemics did come from southern China and Hong Kong, in 1957 and 1968 respectively. Watts believes it is necessary to “think globally and act locally.” When it comes to epidemics and it is a point that should not be lost on China’s policy makers, who are keen to integrate their country with the rest of the world.

“When it comes to epidemics of disease, financial crises, political uncertainty or general dangerous ideas, we are all connected by short chains of influence,” Watts writes in his book. “To misunderstand this is to misunderstand the first great lesson of the connected age: we may all have our own burdens, but like it or not, we must bear each other’s burdens as well.”

While governments try to ring fence SARS, scientists have been working on a diagnostic test and vaccine. Preliminary diagnostic tests have been developed based on genetic refinement and will still need to be validated on thousands of additional specimens from SARS patients. A vaccine does remain years away and in the meantime doctors are using generic antiviral drugs to treat SARS sufferers with some success. Blood serum from convalescents has helped to save people in Hong Kong.

Science is optimistic by its very nature. Its purpose is problem solve and that means SARS will be researched until a solution is found. But even when the disease is cured another will come to the fore to take its place. Bell argues that there are many viruses in the environment that we have yet to learn about. “We are not necessarily getting new viruses but instead we are just recognising an increasing number of new ones. Our practices and surveillance are better than 50 or 100 years ago, Watts agrees. “But what we are seeing now is another emerging infectious-disease threat that may cause a major health problem. He sees the real problem for governments and scientists is that they continue to use history as a guide to an unpredictable future. Instead of trying to get to the future we’re trying to get to the future.” Watts argues that we should try to understand better why viruses manifest themselves and how the science of networks and connected systems allow them to propagate.

Next week in AFR Weekend: Disease Free - nine medical specialists give their best advice for a healthy life. Out Thursday, April 24.