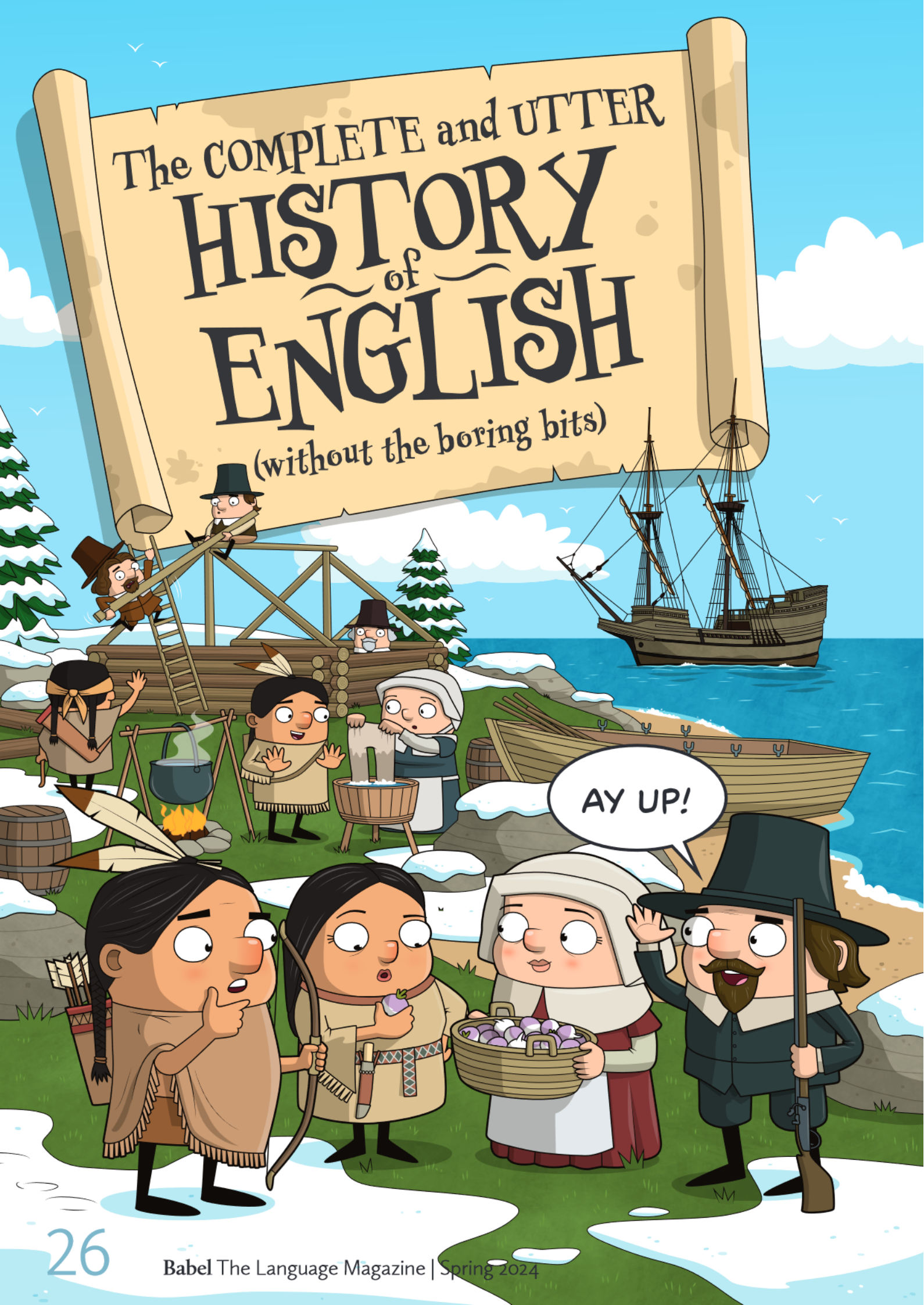
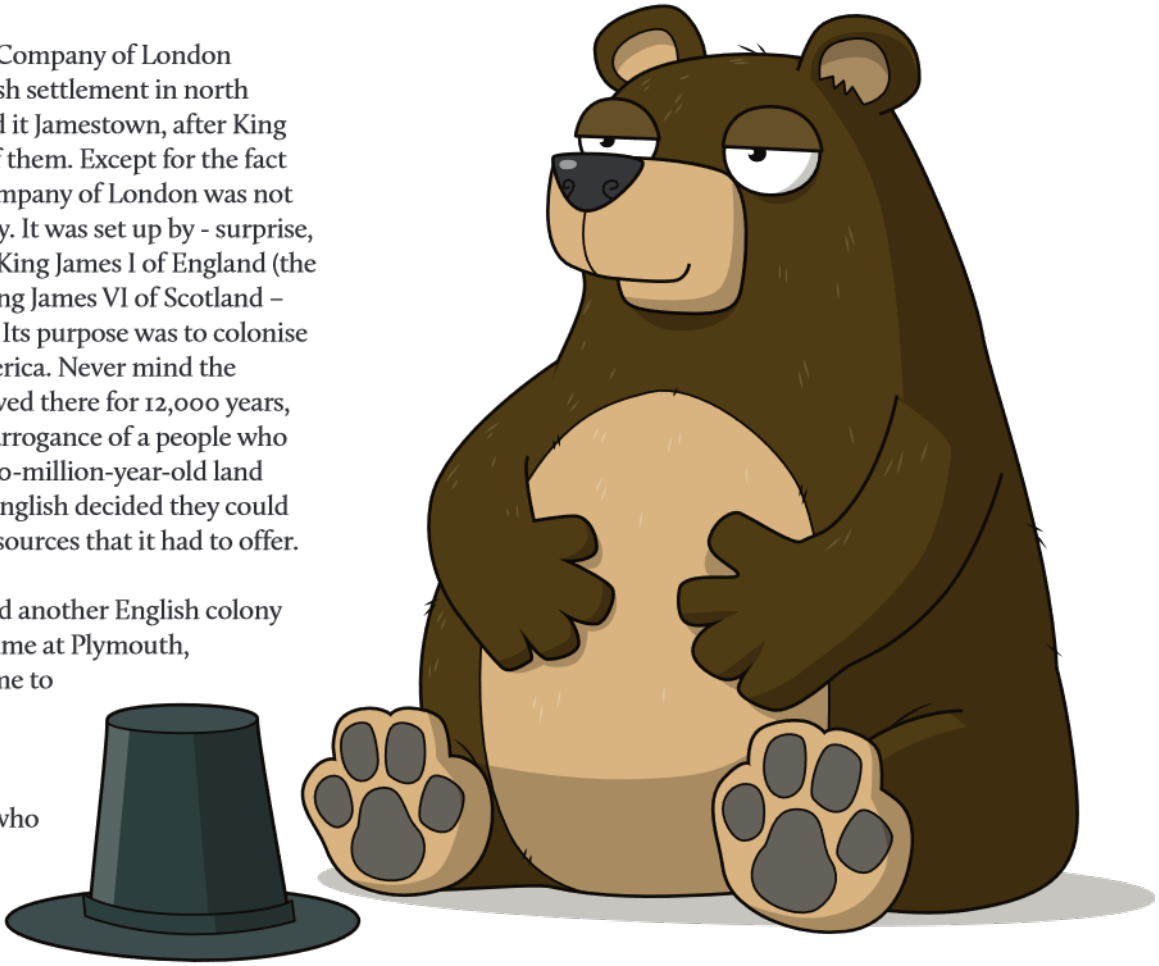

The COMPLETE and UTTER
HISTORY of ENGLISH
(without the boring bits)
AY UP!

Part 8: English goes international



In 1607, the Virginia Company of London established an English settlement in north America. They called it Jamestown, after King James I. How nice of them. Except for the fact that the Virginia Company of London was not just any old company. It was set up by - surprise, surprise - none other than King James I of England (the King formerly known as King James VI of Scotland – don't ask, it's complicated). Its purpose was to colonise the east coast of north America. Never mind the indigenous people who'd lived there for 12,000 years, of course. No, with all the arrogance of a people who could comfortably call a 200-million-year-old land mass the New World, the English decided they could do a lot with the natural resources that it had to offer. Like steal them.

Fast-forward to 1620 and another English colony has been established, this time at Plymouth, Massachusetts (when it came to naming towns, these early settlers were not big on creativity). This one was populated by the Pilgrims who had arrived on the ship the Mayflower. Given that the vast majority of the first Jamestown settlers had died within the first two years, the Pilgrims were nothing if not optimistic.

What does all this have to do with the history of English, you might well ask? Well, it wasn't just the Pilgrims who ended up in America. It was the English language too. And what's important is it wasn't the standard variety of English that was emerging back in England. There's a good reason for this. You don't become an immigrant if you're having a jolly nice time of things back home. If you're wearing a rather fetching doublet and hose combination and dining on quail's eggs and pigeon pie before taking a sedan chair for an evening at the theatre, you're unlikely to give up this lifestyle for a perilous Atlantic crossing and the prospect of death by starvation once you arrive. The people who decided to settle in these new colonies were, by contrast, people who felt they didn't have much to lose. And these were people speaking regional varieties of English. What you would have heard in those early settlements, then, was a melting pot of regional accents and dialects. And the stigmas that were increasingly associated with regional forms back home were not there in the colonies. Here, then, was a chance for English to reinvent itself – lexically, grammatically and socially. New World? New words, more like. ¶