The International Spread of English

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Abstract

A language having such a wide geographical spread cannot be expected to be “the same” in places tens of thousands of kilometers apart. In other words, we cannot imagine that people in Sydney, Calcutta, Vancouver, Toronto, Los Angeles, Johannesburg, Glasgow, York, Manchester, London or Victoria speak the same “kind” of English. Differences between the varieties of English pertain, naturally, not only to the vocabulary or grammar, but, essentially, to pronunciation as well. They are never that important, however, to justify the identification of a different “language” and those speaking about an “American” language, for example, are doing it either out of ignorance, or of “patriotism”, or because of commercial interests (more people would be interested in being taught “American” than “English”, for instance). If variation in the case of individual languages is a natural and common phenomenon, institutionally and administratively it can hardly be accepted. If this is easier to achieve at the level of the written language, difficulties are much greater in the case of the spoken language.

1. Introducere

If there are people who claim that Chinese rather than English is the language that has the largest number of speakers in the world (though arguably so, since we can hardly speak about a unique language spoken by the 1.2 billion Chinese) English is indisputably the most widely spread language on earth, as it is practically spoken on all continents, either as mother tongue or first language or as a second language (often an official language in the respective countries) by hundreds of millions of people. A language having such a wide geographical spread cannot be expected to be “the same” in places tens of thousands of kilometers apart. In other words, we cannot imagine that people in Sydney, Calcutta, Vancouver, Toronto, Los Angeles, Johannesburg, Glasgow, York, Manchester, London or Victoria speak the same “kind” of English.

This is so because dialectal (or regional) variation is typical of any language, not only of languages having such a remarkable geographical spread as English. The fact that English came into contact – as a consequence of the worldwide extent of the British colonial empire – with a wide variety of languages spoken by native populations in various parts of the world only contributed to an even greater diversification of the varieties of English that are currently spoken all over the world. Differences between the varieties of English pertain, naturally, not only to the vocabulary or grammar, but, essentially, to pronunciation as well. They are never that important, however, to justify the identification of a different “language” and those speaking about an “American” language, for example, are doing it either out of ignorance, or of “patriotism”, or because of commercial interests (more people would be interested in being taught “American” than “English”, for instance). If variation in the case of individual languages is a natural and common phenomenon, institutionally and administratively it can hardly be accepted.

2. The variety of English

If this is easier to achieve at the level of the written language, difficulties are much greater in the case of the spoken language. Even at this level, however, the need for a standardized, more or
less universally acceptable and recognizable variant is even greater in the case of English than in that of other languages, since this is the official language of many countries in the world and is the most widely used language in international conferences, meetings, etc., being the main language used by UN organizations and having become since World War II a kind of lingua franca of contemporary world. A variety of English ignoring the natural diversity of various dialects or geographical/national variants of the language thus gradually established itself as the standard version of the language. This variety of English is largely based on the southern dialects of the language, around which the literary language had been formed, and its pronunciation is commonly known as Received Pronunciation. The emergence of a southern dialect to this predominant position can be historically explained by the political, economic and cultural importance of London ever since early Middle Ages. Being the language of the educated upper segments of the English society, it was perceived as the correct version of the language, in opposition to other accents that were consequently regarded as corrupted forms of the norm. The two traditional universities, Oxford and Cambridge and, in more recent times, the public schools largely contributed to the growing prestige of Received Pronunciation. The very term received suggests the idea of the general acceptance of this variety of English. The invention of the radio and the adopting of RP by the BBC also played an important role in the imposing of RP as the socially desirable norm for the pronunciation of the language. As mentioned above, more than other countries, England is a place where accent still represents an important index to the social and educational background of the speaker.

Irish people speak English with a very distinct accent. If we extend our outlook to varieties of English spoken outside the British isles in various regions of the world that were formerly included in the British Empire, American English will of course have an outstanding position, Americans forming the largest community of native English speakers in the world. Various labels will be attached to different varieties of the language, that have borrowed the name of the respective countries or geographical regions: Australian English, Indian English, Canadian English etc. Further subdivisions are, of course, possible, taking into account linguistic diversification even within the varieties mentioned above.

Their English speakers are thought to number around 350 million. Historically, they learnt the language in order to use it with its native speakers in the US and UK, though nowadays they are more likely to use it for communication with other non-native speakers.

The most influential model of the spread of English has undoubtedly been that of Kachru (1992: 356) which is reproduced below. In accordance with the three-way categorisation described in the previous section, Kachru divides World Englishes into three concentric circles, the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle.

The three circles ‘represent the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition, and the functional allocation of English in diverse cultural contexts’, as the language travelled from Britain, in the first diaspora to the other ENL countries (the Inner Circle), in the second diaspora to the ESL countries (the Outer Circle) and, more recently, to the EFL countries (the Expanding Circle). The English spoken in the Inner Circle is said to be ‘norm-providing’, that in the Outer Circle to be ‘norm-developing’ and that in the Expanding Circle to be ‘norm-dependent’. In other words, English-language standards are determined by speakers of ENL, but while the ESL varieties of English have become institutionalised and are developing their own standards, the EFL varieties are regarded, in this model, as ‘performance’ varieties without any official status and therefore dependent on the standards set by native speakers in the Inner Circle. The Inner Circle refers to the traditional historical and sociolinguistic bases of English in the areas where it is the primary language (native or first language; UK, Ireland, Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand). The Outer Circle comprises regions colonized by Britain; the spread of English in non-native settings, where the language has become part of the country’s chief institutions, and plays an important
"second language" role in a multilingual setting (India, Singapore, Malawi). The Expanding Circle involves nations which recognize the importance of English as an international language, but they do not have the history of colonization, nor does English have any special status in their language policy. In these areas, English is primarily a foreign language.

The term "new Englishes" is used for the varieties which have developed in the Outer Circle, have been transplanted and, therefore, can also be called "diaspora varieties". In a historical and linguistic sense, these varieties are not new. They are called "new" because it is only recently that they have been linguistically, and literaturewise, recognized and institutionalized, although they have a long history of acculturation in geographical, cultural and linguistic contexts different from the English of the Inner Circle. There is a decline of competence from educated English to "broken" English (which is considerably mixed with local languages).

A number of other scholars have proposed different models and descriptions of the spread of English, sometimes in an attempt to improve on Kachru’s model by taking account of more recent developments. Tripathi (1998:55), for example, argues that the ‘third world nations’ should be considered as ‘an independent category that supersedes the distinction of ESL and EFL’. Yano (2001: 122–4) proposes that Kachru’s model should be modified in order to take account of the fact that many varieties of English in the Outer Circle have become established varieties spoken by people who regard themselves as native speakers with native speaker intuition. He therefore suggests glossing the Inner Circle as ‘genetic ENL’ and the Outer as ‘functional ENL’. His model also takes account of the social dialectal concept of acrolect (standard) and basilect (colloquial) use of English, with the acrolect being used for international communication, and for formal and public intranational interaction, and the basilect for informal intranational communication. This is problematic in that it does not allow for the possibility of basilect use in international communication, whereas such use is becoming increasingly common. On the other hand, the attempt to remove the genetic element from the definition of ‘native speaker’ is very welcome.

The oldest model of the spread of English, even predating Kachru’s three circles, is that of Strevens. His world map of English, first published in 1980, shows a map of the world on which is superimposed an upside-down tree diagram demonstrating the way in which, since American English became a separate variety from British English, all subsequent Englishes have had affinities with either one or the other. Later in the 1980s, both McArthur and Görlach proposed new circle models of English: McArthur’s (1987) ‘Circle of World English’ and Görlach’s (1988) ‘circle model of English’. These are similar in a number of ways. Görlach’s circle (not shown here) places ‘International English’ at the centre, followed by (moving outwards): regional standard Englishes (African, Antipodean, British Canadian, Caribbean, South Asian, US), then semi-/sub-regional standard Englishes such as Indian, Irish, Kenyan, Papua New Guinean, then non-standard Englishes such as Aboriginal English, Jamaican English, Yorkshire dialect and, finally, beyond the outer rim, pidgins and creoles such as Cameroon Pidgin English and Tok Pisin.

McArthur’s circle has at its centre ‘World Standard English’ which, like Görlach’s ‘International English’ does not exist in an identifiable form at present. A much more recent attempt to take account of developments in the spread of World Englishes is that of Modiano (1999). He breaks completely with historical and geographical concerns and bases the first of his two models, ‘The centripetal circles of international English’, on what is mutually comprehensible to the majority of proficient speakers of English, be they native or non-native. The centre is made up of those who are proficient in international English.
Figure 1 – Kachru’s three-circle model of World Englishes

Figure 2 – Strevens’s world map of English
That is, these speakers function well in cross-cultural communication where English is the *lingua franca*. They are just as likely to be non-native as native speakers of English. The main criterion, other than proficiency itself, is that they have no strong regional accent or dialect. Modiano’s next band consists of those who have proficiency in English as either a first or second language rather than as an international language. In other words, they function well in English with, respectively, other native speakers (with whom they share English as an L1) or other non-native speakers from the same L1 background as themselves. The third circle is made up of learners of English, i.e. those who are not yet proficient in English. Outside this circle is a final band to represent those people who do not know English at all. There are still problems. For example, the difficulty of distinguishing between core and non-core varieties remains.

**Figure 3 – McArthur’s circle of World English**

In addition, some will find unpalatable the fact that Modiano equates native speakers with ‘competent’ non-natives, implying that all native speakers of English are competent users of English, which is patently untrue. There may also be objections to the designation of all the native varieties as ‘major’ but established Outer Circle varieties such as Indian English as ‘local’. We will return to Modiano in strand 6, when we look in detail at English as an International Language.

**References**


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