

The Status of the English Language in an Ever-Changing World

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Abstract

The current paper looks into the diversity of English varieties that have emerged given the unprecedented spread of English throughout the history of humanity and, from a geographical point of view, across the continents of the globe. It is not surprising then that an in-depth look is needed in order to provide a better understanding for the classification of such varieties and for the underpinnings governing the inner mechanisms which have lead to this segregation. Although it does not bring any major and truly original contribution to the field, the present endeavour is an attempt at offering a necessary background and a clear overview of the linguistic situation that is the direct result of the diachronic and synchronic diffusion of English. Delimitations between native varieties, non-native varieties and learner varieties will become, therefore, the focus of this undertaking. A special attention is given to second language varieties, with an emphasis on the so-called “New Englishes”.

Keywords

ENL, ESL, New English, characteristic, functional use.

1. The spread of English

The current language situation makes it hard to count the existing varieties of English and to categorize them, mainly because these varieties perform countless roles in an extraordinary range of contexts and domains. Nonetheless, despite the tremendous number of varieties and the variation within or between them, the linguistic explanations are comparable for all. For illustration, contact with other languages can be cited as a common cause for such variation in almost every case.

Crystal (2003a) argues that English has acquired a global status in nowadays society. This most certainly does not mean either that everyone in the world speaks English, or that every country in the

world recognizes, should recognize or adopt it as an official language. Notwithstanding, a language does achieve a genuinely global status when it develops a special role recognized in every country, to which I will refer in what follows, and which is obvious in countries where the overwhelming majority of speakers use it as a mother tongue (Great Britain, USA, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand etc.).

First of all, a language can be turned into the official language of a country, it is used as a medium of communication in official domains such as government, media, law courts, or the educational system (this stands for what we commonly refer to as English as a Second Language or ESL). However, Crystal (2003a:5) claims that it is noteworthy to mention that “there are several ways in which a language can be official”, in the sense that it can stand alone as the only official language of a country, or it can share this status with other languages from the same linguistic family or from different families of languages. Alternatively, a language can have a “semi-official” status, its use being adequate only for certain public domains, or by taking a second place to other languages while still performing certain official roles. Under this category fall most of, if not all, the new varieties of English.

Secondly, a factor of utmost importance in contributing to the global status of a language is whether it is one of the preferred languages in most of the countries’ choice of foreign-language teaching (i.e. when it does not have an official status and it corresponds to what we refer to as English as a Foreign Language or EFL). The reasons for such a choice can vary among the following: historical tradition, political needs or opportunities, the desire for commercial, cultural or technological contact and development.

We can argue that the reason for which a language acquires a global status has little to do with its number of speakers. Without having a strong power-base, regardless of its kind, no language can stand in the fight for becoming an international medium of communication. Similarly, the ease of learning it can be immediately dismissed as void. Crystal (2003a: 8) underlines how some have claimed that “the almost total disregard of the distinctions of gender excepting those in nature, the simplicity and precision of its terminations and auxiliary verbs” makes English prone to becoming a world language. To prove exactly the contrary, languages such as Latin and Greek for Antiquity or French during the Enlightenment,

which are heavily inflected both in the nominal and the verbal paradigms, have been once major international languages.

A language cannot or does not become a global/international language simply because of its intrinsic structural properties, the size of its vocabulary, or because it has been once the vehicle of a great literature or it has been associated with a great culture or religion. All these factors can drive someone to learn a particular language but none of them alone or corroborated can ensure the world spread of a language. The main reason for which languages have achieved an international status throughout the centuries is always the same: the political and/or military power of its people. The history of an international language can be traced through the successful expeditions of its speakers (be it soldiers or sailors). But military power alone cannot establish the international status of a language. It may be a militarily powerful nation to establish such a language, but it takes an economically powerful one to maintain it and expand it.

Crystal (2003a: 29) asks himself almost rhetorically “Why is English the global language and not some other?” And he is the same to answer that there should be two answers to this question: a geographical-historical one, having to do with the movement of the English around the world, and a socio-cultural one, in the sense that the English language is deeply rooted in various domains such as international political life, business, safety, communication, entertainment, media and education, so that peoples all over the world have come to depend on English for their economic and social welfare. There are currently around 75 territories in which English is used either as a first native language (ENL) or as a second language (ESL - which stands as a rather institutionalized official language used in different public domains).

The status achieved by English in our present-day world can be accounted for as the result of two main factors: namely, the expansion of colonial British power, which culminated around the end of 19th century, and not to a smaller extent, the other spread booster is the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the 20th century.

If we follow the steps of McArthur (1998), we can roughly summarize the history of the spread of English as follows:

a) the Germanic roots; development in Northern Europe by Germanic peoples (before c. 500 AD);

- b) the development in the British Isles of Jutes, Angles, Saxons, Celts and others, before the Norman Conquest (c. 500-1150);
- c) the period of expansion following the Norman Invasion, under the influence of the English, French, Celts (who gradually learned more and more the English language), Danes etc. (c. 1150-1450);
- d) the period of the consolidation of the people and the nation out of the heterogeneous elements of the previous earlier phase, which is often referred to as the “Early Modern” period of English (c. 1450-1700);
- e) what followed was the epoch known as “Modern English”, during which changes and spreading continued within the British Isles, whereas, meanwhile, new outposts of English-speaking communities emerged, namely in North America and Australia¹ (c. 1700-1945);
- f) the most recent period of development is an ongoing process, which coincides with the spread of English around the world, led by the English themselves or by the former colonized Africans or Asians and so many others, resulting in a plurality of ‘voices’, known today as native and non-native varieties of English (c. 1945-).

The diffusion of English can be traced back in the history of humanity by its two main dispersals which are frequently identified as the two “diasporas” (Jenkins 2009), whose spreading branches (most of them) originate in the modern phase of McArthur’s historical model of English. The first diaspora corresponds to the English migrations to North America, Australia and New Zealand, whereas the second diaspora coincides with the colonization of Africa and Asia and the emergence of second language varieties of English.

2. Types of varieties of English

The spread of English, unprecedented by any other language, has brought with itself consequently tremendous variation, induced by the need of its new speakers to make it sound more familiar to what they knew or the need to level its irregularities, so that the issue of ‘standardness’ has arisen.

¹ This period was also the dawn for many of the varieties known today as ‘non-native’ (for some even much earlier), considering that the colonial empires reached their peak of prosperity and exploitation during about the same period of time (my note).

Crystal (2003b) finds five major characteristics to stand for the quintessence of what the literature has defined as being Standard English: it is a variety of English which is made up of a distinctive combination of linguistic features playing a particular role and which has no local base; it is the variety which carries the most prestige; its overt prestige makes the adult members of the speaking community recommend it as a desirable educational target; despite its being widely understood, only a minority of speakers actually use it on a regular basis, and it is noteworthy to mention that he underlines that it is not a matter of pronunciation (it can be rendered in a wide variety of accents).

In approaching the degree of usage and the role English plays in the countries of the world today, scientists and researchers have developed a tripartite model which was very well illustrated in 1970 (17-18) by Strang's description, as follows:

At present time, English is spoken by perhaps 350 to 400m people who have it as their mother tongue. These people are scattered over the earth, in far-ranging communities of divergent status, history, cultural traditions and local affinities. I shall call them A-speakers, because they are the principal kind we think of in trying to choose a variety of English as a basis for description. The principal communities of A-speakers are those of the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. There are many millions more for whom English may not be quite the mother tongue, but who learnt it in early childhood, and who lived in communities in which English has a special status (whether or not as an official national language) as a, or the, language for advanced academic work and for participation in the affairs of men at the international, and possibly even the national level. These are the B-speakers, found extensively in Asia (especially India) and Africa (especially the former colonial territories). Then there are those throughout the world for whom English is a foreign language, as part of their country's educational curriculum, though the language has no official, or even traditional, standing in that country. These are the C-speakers.

The three categories of speakers identified by Strang correspond to a three-way separation or distinction which has been operated on English between: English as a Native Language (ENL, corresponding to the A-speakers), English as a Second Language (ESL,

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corresponding to the B-speakers), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL, corresponding to the C-speakers). I will turn to these in what follows.

2.1 Native varieties (ENL)

Native varieties of English are those spoken by the people who were born and brought up in one of those countries where English has been, historically, the first language to be acquired. To put it in Kachru's (1992: 356) terms, we refer to "the traditional cultural and linguistic bases of English". These countries include the United Kingdom and the ones belonging to the first diaspora (the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). In ENL countries, English is the major language of almost all or, at least, of the majority of the population, even if multilingualism may play an important role in the respective societies.

2.2 English as a Second Language (ESL)

English as a Second Language refers to the non-native users of English, living in territories where English has come to be used as a result of the second diaspora, users who currently outnumber the native speakers, if we make a simple computation of the figures in Table 1. It is mostly represented by the countries of Kachru's Outer Circle (see subsection 1.3.3) with "institutionalized non-native varieties" (Kachru, 1992: 356). In ESL countries, English co-exists with various indigenous languages and it assumes significant intranational communicative functions, but it is also the linguistic vehicle in public domains such as media, jurisdiction, administration, higher education, politics and so on.

2.3 English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

English as a Foreign Language is associated with the variety of English learned by the speakers for whom this language serves no purposes within their own countries. This kind of English is acquired almost exclusively via formal education, and despite the fact that it performs no official internal function, it is still widely used in various domains such as the media or education due to its international value in business, technology, academic encounters, scientific proceedings and developments etc. EFL is spoken in countries belonging to the Expanding Circle in Kachru's terms (see subsection 1.3.3), which

includes countries such as the Netherlands, Japan, Germany or the Scandinavian countries. Jenkins (2009: 16-17) argues that it has become increasingly common to find EFL speakers referred to as speakers of English as an International Language (EIL) because they tend to use it for international communication or for interaction with each other rather than with native speakers of English, which was the original purpose for which the language has been taught in EFL countries.

2.4 New varieties of English

For almost three decades, linguists have been using the term 'New Englishes' to refer to the localized forms of English to be found in parts of Africa, Asia, Australia or the Caribbean. Bolton (2003: 2) argues that before the 1980s in the societies where English was taught as a native language (such as Great Britain or the United States), it was assumed that the target primary model was English in a '«plural singular» sense', which was either the standard English of the United Kingdom or the General American of the United States. Obviously, this popular idea that there is only one standard variant, a correct and monolithic form of English, while treating all the other realizations as being deviant, incorrect or aberrant seems at least far-fetched nowadays. We are urged to admit that every language has a wide pool of features, of linguistic options to choose from and in order to express the same idea a speaker has multiple choices at the level of vocabulary, pronunciation, word forms and even the arrangement of sentence constituents (Mufwene 2001).

2.5 The English-based pidgins and creoles

In situations of language contact, when a simplified, mixed and reduced form of language comes to be very useful as a means of communication between groups of people who do not share the same native language, the pidginization phenomenon occurs. When a language has undergone simplification, mixture and reduction, specialists say that it has been subjected to the process of pidginization. When the respective language develops over time a rather fixed form, with a set of norms (established and shared by the regular use of a majority of speakers), it is referred to as a *pidgin* (Trudgill and Hannah 1994). Such an example is the West African Pidgin English which functions as a lingua franca among different

groups of indigenous population who speak mutually unintelligible languages. It is noteworthy to mention that a pidgin is a language which does not have, by definition, native speakers.

When a pidgin becomes the most important language, if not the only one, used by a linguistic community and it is passed onto the next generation so that it becomes the native language of the descendants of the respective community, then we speak of a creole. Despite the fact that a creole has native speakers and it covers a full range of socio-linguistics functions, it is still, when compared to the source language (English in our case), a mixed and simplified variety.

Both in the cases of pidgins and creoles, the phonological and grammatical structures have undergone significant restructuring so that they are very different from their source language – English – and despite the fact that they are historically related to English, they are now treated as totally separate languages.

3. The new varieties of English

The parts of this section aim to delimit conceptually and terminologically the new varieties of English. In the first subsection I deal with the terminological issues regarding the choice of the most suitable label for these varieties, whereas the second subsection is focused on defining them without identifying their characteristics, the latter being the purpose of the following section. Finally, the last part of this section is dedicated to establishing the place of new varieties of English among the rest of the varieties of English in the world by using some other models than the chronological type introduced in the first section dedicated to the spread of English, namely some biological/genealogical and geopolitical models.

3.1 Concept of *New English*

The term itself is of recent popularity and it has been used alongside other labels such as: ‘global English(es)’, ‘international English(es)’, ‘World English(es)’, ‘localized varieties of English’, ‘indigenized varieties of English’, ‘non-native varieties of English’, ‘new varieties of English’ etc. However, every term has its shortcomings in a way or another: the first three are quite inappropriate as they cover practically the whole range of possible uses of the English language (ENL, ESL, EFL), the following three terms listed can be easily quoted and used for designating the English-

based pidgins and creoles, and, last but not least, the label „new” admits or implies at least two deformations: on the one hand, the assumption that from the point of view of their formation they are of recent date (although some of them, such as Indian English, have appeared historically earlier than some native ones, such as Australian English), and on the other hand, that they are still in an undefined, forming phase, a “maturation” phase cf. Anchimbe (2009), as if they had to grow and evolve towards a higher, better status. However, I choose to denominate them hereinafter ‘new varieties of English’ or ‘New Englishes’ as they seem the least ambiguous and most suitable terms despite the abovementioned deformations that these labels might imply.

3.2. Defining new varieties of English

McArthur (1992a: 688-689) defines ‘New Englishes’ as ‘a term in linguistics for a recently emerging and increasingly autonomous variety of English, especially in a non-western setting such as India, Nigeria, or Singapore’.

According to Platt and colleagues (1984: 2-3), a *New English* is a variety of English which must fulfill the four criteria below:

- a) it has developed and has been learned through the education system, which implies that it has been taught as a main subject or used as a medium of communication when teaching other subjects;
- b) it has developed in geographical areas where the main languages were some other than English and where English had not been the native language and, hence, not spoken by the majority of the population;
- c) it has been used for a range of functions *among* those who speak or write it in the region where it is used.
- d) it has become ‘localized’ or ‘nativized’ by adopting some language features of its own, such as sounds, intonation patterns, sentence structures, words and expressions.

Bamgbose (1998: 3-4), on the other hand, underlines that there are five internal factors in establishing the status of an innovation in English:

- 1) *the demographic factor* → associated with how many speakers along the cline of proficiency use it (acrolect vs. standard);

- 2) *the geographical factor* → referring to how widely it is dispersed;
- 3) *the authoritative factor* → indicating where its use is sanctioned;
- 4) *codification* → correlated with its reference in specialty books such dictionaries and grammars;
- 5) *the acceptability factor* → connected to the attitude of its users but also the non-users towards it.

Among the abovementioned five factors, the author himself underlines that the crucial ones are codification and acceptability, without which the innovations would be otherwise considered and treated as errors rather than a legitimate form which is characteristic of a certain New English variety.

3.4 Characteristics

The new varieties of English must be discussed in terms of “the context of situation” (cf. Kachru 1982), i.e. the historical context and the educational frame in which they have been acquired and shaped. Only in these terms we can refer to proper models for these new varieties, which explain the new standards and norms that have emerged and whose integrity has been recognized at the same time with the recognition of their existence and distinctiveness.

Due to its unparalleled spread, which is unique in its cutting across political boundaries (Fishman et al. 1977, Smith 1981), English has a large range of varieties, about whose forms and functions we can discuss in several, mutually non-exclusive ways. They all display peculiar features in terms of acquisitional patterns, socio-cultural settings, motivational grounds and functional characteristics. I will enlarge upon these issues in the following subsections.

3.4.1 Characteristics of the acquisition process

In terms of the acquisitional process, a distinction has been operated between: first language, second language and foreign language, but the most relevant one for the non-native varieties of English is the one between English as a second language and English as a foreign language. In this sense, Kachru (1982: 37) operates a distinction between the two by labeling them as “performance varieties” (EFL) and “institutionalized varieties” (ESL), terms which are very illustrative of their actual role. The performance varieties are

restricted to specific contexts, their functional spectrum covering mainly domains such as: tourism, commerce and other similar international affairs. The institutionalized varieties, on the other hand, have a rather ontological status, being encapsulated by its main traits: a) they cover a wide range of uses for the nations who use them; b) they cover a diversity of registers and styles; c) there is a certain *nativization* at the level of these registers and styles, both at the formal and contextual levels; d) there is a significant body of English literature which has a local colour, the so-called *nativized* English literature, which has precisely the features that have emerged at the same time with the nativization of the registers and styles.

What is characteristic to the institutionalized varieties is that they always start as performance varieties, but, diachronically, many of their characteristics have changed giving them a different status. According to Kachru (1982: 39), the institutionalized varieties seem to have the following characteristics: (i) a significant timespan of use; (ii) the extension in use; (iii) the emotional attachment of L₂ users with the variety; (iv) functional importance, and (v) sociolinguistic status.

3.4.2 Socio-cultural characteristics

In terms of socio-cultural characteristics, Kachru (1982) makes the difference between transplanted varieties and non-transplanted varieties of English. This distinction is very important in order to understand the acculturation and nativization of the transplanted varieties, American English included. There is a bond which connects all the so-called transplanted varieties of English, justified among others by the fact that their speakers had to go through more or less the same processes in order to establish their linguistic identities.

The idea of corruption and barbarity of transplanted kinds of English became accepted by the end of the eighteenth century. The evaluation of different kinds of transplanted English is based on the fate of American English, the first transplanted variety to be despised. According to Bailey (1991: 133), “attitudes toward transplanted varieties of English have taken many forms, from categorical denunciation of an entire national variety to niggling criticism of minute details of local usage...Received wisdom declares that

transplanted English must be somehow different, and probably worse; the image, in short, anticipates the evidence”.

The bond which exists between all the transplanted varieties of English can be identified especially at the linguistic level, as they all have distinct pronunciations and a unique vocabulary adapted to and influenced by the local conditions. However, it is noteworthy to mention that there are some important historical, functional and linguistic differences. First of all, unlike the transplanted varieties which emerged as a result of colonization, the newer varieties (which are the object of this study) have emerged as a result of colonialism, i.e. English was not brought as the first language of large numbers of peoples who migrated for more or less adventurous reasons, but rather as the language of the colonial administration, which was to be learned as a second language for pragmatic reasons – in order to get a good education and a decent job. Secondly, differences in pronunciation seem to be the result of transfer phenomenon from the speakers’ first languages rather than from dialect mixing. The grammatical differences can also be accounted for by transferring patterns from the first language of the speakers or by phenomena characteristic to second language acquisition, such as the aforementioned need to simplify or to avoid the irregularities when learning a second language. Thirdly, the new varieties of English have been more heavily influenced by the local cultures and languages, in the sense that there are more culture-specific words from local languages when compared to the immigrants’ transplanted varieties, as well as much more meaning shifting, in such a way as to reflect the local cultural practices and values. And last, but not least, maybe the most important feature, the hallmark of the new varieties of English, is the fact that they have become “institutionalized”, as mentioned in the previous subsection. Because people in ESL countries switch back and forth between their first languages and English, or because they have not learned English completely, they produce forms of English which differ from any standard variety. Moreover, in most of the ESL countries, these rather non-standard ways of speaking are so common that people have become used to them and they are perceived as being quite normal, hence, local norms have emerged. The acceptance of these local norms is supported by their use in more formal context such as broadcasting, newspapers and literature. And what is more important maybe as a socio-cultural aspect is the fact that the

widespread use of the local features gives them legitimacy so that speakers' attitudes towards them change, in the sense that they are not perceived as being "incorrect" or "local slang", but rather a local standard and, why not, a part of their socio-cultural identity.

3.4.3 Motivational characteristics

The second language specialists have identified and delimited two kinds of motivational grounds for the speakers in the process of second language acquisition: instrumental and integrative. The motivational choice can be explained depending on the function which the L₂ learner attributes to the newly acquired language. Cf. Kachru (1982: 38), "the instrumental approach has been defined as basically «utilitarian»", the language being acquired rather as a linguistic instrument, and not as a means for cultural integration. On the other hand, the integrative approach implies that there is a desire of the speakers "to identify with the members of the other linguistic cultural group and be willing to take on very subtle aspects of their language *or even their style of speech*" (Prator 1968: 474, author's emphasis).

3.4.4 Functional characteristics

In functional terms, English has been found to fulfill in ESL countries either the role of a national "link" language or rather the role of an international language (Kachru 1982).

As an international language, English has helped tremendously to modernize the countries where it was spoken. Literatures in the local varieties have emerged and come to be known to the whole world via the commonly used communication tool. It allowed the countries which have adopted it to voice their needs and grievances in international forums and meetings. It has given them access to the new discoveries of science and technology. Their governments and language policy leaders have become aware of the fact that the world is making rapid strides in spheres of science and technology. Countries which can assimilate this ever-growing fund of knowledge can only survive and prosper. Besides, the rate at which the assimilation of world technology takes place in a nation is very critical. They could not therefore abandon English and thus cut their lifeline with world developments in science and technology.

As a link language, English was the language which has united them administratively. For most of, if not all, the ESL

countries which have adopted English as an official language, the Constitution and the laws are written in English. Its wide use in the public sector, private sector and the government also reveals its importance in making mutually intelligible affairs in public domains which would be otherwise impossible to express or incomprehensible for people who speak mutually unintelligible languages. This can be easily proven if we only take as an illustrative example the situation of India, fostering over 1600 living languages, belonging to two different families of languages (Indo-European languages and Dravidian languages). Hence, in a country like India, where there are so many cultures and languages in use, English which is already widely prevalent, can come in handy for fostering national integration.

4. Conclusions

This paper was meant to approach mainly the terminological and theoretical aspects regarding the defining, delimitation and categorization of varieties of English. The first section was, therefore, dedicated to aspects related to the spread of English, so as to set a background for the discussion about the possible types of varieties of English in the following section. In the next section of this paper, I have focused exclusively on the new varieties of English, so that the concept of „New English” has been discussed in more details by taking a closer look at the issues raised when trying to choose an appropriate label for it. The characteristics of the new varieties of English, treated throughout the subsections of section 3.4 are essential in understanding their behaviour at the level of the acquisition process, as well as their socio-cultural, motivational and functional peculiarities.

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