The Identity of "World English"

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1. Languages and their identities

Strange as it might seem, languages have their own individual identities. At the very least, they are believed to possess distinct, inalienable identities. It is part of what we call "the politics of identity" to fix the identities of national languages and, with it, fix the identities of nations and peoples. Politics of language identity is part of language policy and language planning. Before the establishment of nation-states, no one really bothered about languages having fuzzy identities. In fact, most language identities were rather 'wishy-washy' until then. But all that changed overnight with the rise of nation-states and language policies were put in place all over Europe to make sure that national boundaries coincided with linguistic boundaries (or, as it would be more appropriate to say, the other way round!).

2. Globalization and its impact on language identities

But let us not forget that the goal of 'One nation, one people, one language' (an essentially European dream, transported over the years over to other continents) is currently coming under strain, thanks to the ongoing process of globalization. For one thing, national boundaries are crumbling fast to all intents and purposes and, in many cases, are still there simply to remind us of an order of things that no longer exists. Naturally, this is reflected in the identities of many languages. This is especially so in

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the case of languages that have spread far and wide, to regions not historically associated with them. Foremost among these languages is English or – as our discussion will soon make it clear – whatever we are accustomed to calling English.

3. The transformation of English into "World English"

What exactly is one referring to when one speaks of the meteoric rise of the English language right across the world, especially in the years following the end of World War II? To many, the question may sound either jejune or tongue-in-cheek, depending on how you look at it. Didn't the two world wars decide once and for all who the winner was and who was going to call the shots from now on? Isn't it true that the supremacy over the world was definitively transferred to the Anglophone countries, notably the U.S.A. and the U.K.? In her book *Language Policy and Language Planning: From Nationalism to Globalisation*, Sue Wright even puts a date on the establishment of English as the world's number one language: 1919 (the year of the end of World War I). In her own words,

> The Europeans' acceptance of the Wilsonian principle of self-determination is widely acknowledged as one domain in which the authority of the Americans was felt . . . It is less well known that Woodrow Wilson required that the Treaties of Versailles, Sèvres and Trianon be published in English as well as French. This, significantly was the first occasion when the use of French as the language of European treaties was challenged. This beginning of the end of the supremacy of French as the language of European diplomacy went hand in hand with France's loss of influence. (143)

But the triumphant march of English, according to Wright, was only just beginning.

> At the end of the Second World War, English was the language of the victors and of military might. The two other European languages that had been recently used as lingua francas were in eclipse. In defeat, German lost its role as the language of science and technology. French had lost prestige through the Vichy government's capitulation and collaboration, and was ousted as the main war of postwar negotiations,

treaties and diplomacy. In contrast to 1918, when the English speakers had to lobby for their language to be used, the French had to press their case in 1945-46 for French to be included as one of the six official languages of the United Nations Organisation. (143-44)

4. The "ownership" of World English

Now, no one can dispute the fact that the fortunes of the English language were decisively sealed by the allied victories in the two world wars of the last century and, more specifically, by the pivotal role played by the United States of America in those wars.

But those who still entertain the belief that the English language is what it is today, thanks to the rise of the United States in the wake of the Second World War are missing the whole point about the role of what I call "World English" in our world in the era of globalization. One immediate implication of that widely held view is that the fate of English is tied to the prestige of the U.S. and, at a more tangible level, to the strength of the U. S. dollar. In her book *World English: A Study of its Development*, Janina Brutt-Griffler identifies what leads us to conclude that this is how things turn out to be. In her own words,

> In the phrase "English spread," it is only natural to take *spread* as a verb – and a transitive one: the British (and Americans) *spread* English. Indeed, a central contention of the theory of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) is that English spread is in the postcolonial world represents the cultural hegemony of the most powerful English-speaking nations. English is therefore an imposed language in the periphery. An important implication follows from this notion: World English is the product of the "mother-tongue" English language nations, particularly the U.K. and the U.S.A. (107)

In other words, there are those among us who argue that the future of English is dependent on the likelihood or otherwise of the U.S. continuing to play its hegemonic role in world affairs. Since that possibility seems uncertain to many, especially in view of the much-talked-of ascendancy of emergent economies, many are of the opinion that English will soon lose much of its current glitter and cease to be what it is today, namely a

world language. And there are those amongst us who further speculate that, in fifty or a hundred years' time, we will all have acquired fluency in, say, Mandarin, or, if we haven't, will be longing to learn it.

5. The old order changeth …

In my previously published work (Rajagopalan, "Linguistics," "Review of 'The English'," "Review of 'Resisting'," "The Politics," "The Concept," "Language Politics," "South American," "Revisiting"), I have been insisting that such dooms-day talk is purely alarmist and sensational and is based on a number of incorrect impressions of actual facts on the ground. For one, the English language that we say can truly be regarded as the language of communication across the world has little to do with the language of England where it is believed to have sprung up somewhere around the year 450 C.E. (King 21). It is "World English," a completely different ball-game. It is fairly easy to see why it is so. Consider the following argument: a language such as English can only be claimed to have attained an *international* status to the very extent it has ceased to be *national*, i.e., the exclusive property of this or that nation in particular (Widdowson). In other words, the U.K. or the U.S.A. or whosoever cannot have it both ways. If they do concede that English is today a world language, then it only behooves them to also recognize that it is not their exclusive property, as painful as this might indeed turn out to be. In other words, it is part of the price they have to pay for seeing their language elevated to the status of a world language. Now, the key word here is "elevated". It is precisely in the process of getting elevated to a world status that English or what I insist on referring to as the "World English" goes through a process of metamorphosis.

Wimal Dissanayake puts it eloquently when he writes:

> Whether we examine the fictional writings of older novelists like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutola, G.V. Desami and Albert Wendt, or relatively younger writers like Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Taroor, Arundhati Roy, M.G. Vasanji, Mongane Serote and Cathernine Lim, the complex relationship between self, narrative, and language becomes evident. These writers are seeking to gain entrance to their

multifaceted subjectivities by "decolonizing" the English language and the sedimented consciousness that goes with it. (558-59)

6. World English: a completely different ball game

Whereas, as we have just seen, the argument for conceding that the English language that is circulating in the world today is a far cry from its 'namesake' that is closely associated with countries of the so-called "inner circle" (Kachru, "Standards") may seem straightforward and hardly in need of any further supporting arguments to back it up, the message does not appear to have 'sunk in' amongst the members of the scholarly community to the extent one would wish it had. And scholars who have taken up the challenge of theorizing the role of English in the current scenario have often assumed positions that contribute to the formation of a distorted image of what is happening. In what follows I shall take a close look at some of these stances.

In his book *The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality*, Davies dismisses the whole idea of World English and says that when one speaks of "English as an international language," one has actually in mind either British or American variety of English as it is currently being used speakers other than those belonging to either of these countries. Here is what he has to say in this respect:

> The question is . . . whether International English means a special variety of English with its own norms which are distinct from any national official Standard English, or whether it means a use of English in a number of international conferences, settings, for example the United Nations, academic conferences, trade missions, business negotiations. My own view is that International English usually means using one or the other Standard English in international settings. (214-215)

Just how out of step with the times Davies's position is can be judged from the fact anywhere between two thirds and three fourths of those who regularly use English across the world fall under into the category of 'non-natives speakers,' i.e., people who belong to countries

where English is either a second language – Kachru's "outer circle" countries – or a foreign language – Kachru's "expanding circle" (Kachru, "Standards"). And it is totally unrealistic to expect that the English they speak will continue to obey the norms established for the so-called Standard English (Rajagopalan, "Revisiting").

The idea of English as an International Language (EIL) has also been addressed by Jennifer Jenkins in her recent book *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity*. But her view of EFL (English as a Lingua Franca) is in large measure opposed to that of Davies and similar ones which she brands as representative of the "standard language ideology." However, in her earlier book *The Phonology of English as an International Language* she is widely perceived as having espoused a view for which she has been severely criticized on the grounds that it is centered around the figure of the native speaker – an accusation vehemently denied by her in her recent work. The problem with the idea of a minimum of intelligibility for all that she pleads for is that it inevitability brings in the idea of a nucleus, because it immediately raises the question of "intelligibility for whom?" (Rajagopalan, "Review of English"). Surely, the expected answer can only be (or, so it would seem) that it is someone who is considered to be the speaker most entitled to such a privileged position – another description of a native speaker.

Another term that has gained some currency is "Global English." Like the term "English an International Language / a Lingua Franca," this too is open to conflicting interpretations. What exactly are we referring to here? Is it the good old English language as it has gone global or is it a new language in the making? In his book *English as a Global Language,* Crystal is celebratory about the rise of English to a global status. He does admit that, under the umbrella of English, a whole "family" of languages may be emerging. But what makes them members of the same family is that they all have sprung from one and the same source – namely, the tongue originally spoken in England. In other words, despite his condescending attitude towards the new varieties of English, Crystal seems to be of the opinion that what guarantees their unity is their common origin. In a scathing review article, Phillipson ("Voice in global English") picked on this latent triumphalism apparent in Crystal's stance.

Diametrically opposed to Crystal's triumphalism is David Graddol's view that, although English is most likely to be a force to reckon with for

the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that it will be a domineering force. Graddol also predicts that monolingual speakers of English are going to face more and more difficulty in finding jobs in a globally competitive job market where bi-(multi-)linguals have already started to outnumber them. Perhaps more interestingly, he also prophecies that, with the spread of English taking place at this impressive rate, the days of English as a *foreign* language may well be numbered. Now, this is an interesting idea in itself, because, if true, it will have serious implications for the whole business of English language teaching (more on this, at the end of this paper).

"World Englishes" is a term that has become fashionable, thanks mainly to the journal by that name and also due to the recent publication of *The Handbook of World Englishes* (Kachru et al.). Noteworthy here is the use of the plural "Englishes." Likewise, McArthur speaks of the "English languages." Once again, in the plural. On the face of it, this tactic is meant to draw attention to the argument that all the different varieties of English are on an equal footing as far their linguistic status is concerned. But there is a snag here. Implicitly, the different varieties of English are being compared to different dialects of a language. But we know that the different dialects of a given language do not all enjoy the same status, especially from a social or political perspective. Also, for many practical purposes such as foreign language teaching, one would think it reasonable to choose one specific dialect to the relative neglect of the others. If this is the case, then what other dialect would qualify for this purpose other than one that is deemed to be central rather than peripheral? So, the standard language ideology is sneaked in, only this time through the back door.

7. The case for "World English"

My principal reason for preferring the term "World English" in the singular is that, despite the inevitable "nativization" of the different "Englishes" and their consequent distancing from one another, the centripetal forces at work in our globalized world far outweigh the centrifugal ones. This argument alone should lay to rest the thesis that English will follow in the footsteps of Latin in the Middle Ages. A more likely scenario to emerge with the passage of time is the development of two distinct varieties of the language in each country, one for internal use and the other for

international communication. The rise of "Hinglish" – a mixture of English and Hindi – is illustrative of the trend. The interesting thing about this curious linguistic phenomenon is that those who regularly use it in their day-to-day lives are also capable of speaking a variety of English that is especially reserved for conversing with foreigners.

"World English" is conceptually a mind-boggler. It has no parallel in human history. Attempts to find parallels with languages such as Latin, Arabic, Sanskrit etc. run aground for the simple reason that there was no impetus in those times for interaction on a global scale. In other words, English, or rather "World English," is in a class by itself. As of now, one can only make some wild guesses as to what might await us in the future. But one thing is for sure: we are dealing with a linguistic phenomenon (what else should one call something that has all the trappings of a language but has no native speakers?) that is still in the making. Furthermore, it has no center. Instead, it is polycentric (Blommaert).

8. The challenge ahead

It must be fairly obvious from the discussion in the foregoing paragraphs that the very concept of "world Englishes" throws a number of challenges at all those of us who are in one way or another involved in it. For ELT professionals all over the world, it means, among other things, having to take a fresh look at many of the things that have been taken for granted for long.

Consider, for instance, the following. World English is not the mother-tongue of *anyone* – and this includes even those who used to rejoice in their status as the "native-speakers" of their own varieties of English. This is so because world English is a language that is in the making and, from the looks of it is bound to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Incidentally, any temptation to consider World English a pidgin would be totally misguided in that it is not a make-shift language, nor one that is progressing towards a full-fledged language in its own right. Nor, for that matter, is it gathering a new generation of native speakers. Rather, it is resistant to the very terminology that the linguists resort to in describing conventional 'natural" languages.

This means that world English presents a set of hitherto unimaginable challenges to the descriptive linguist. But then modern linguistics itself, it has been argued, is the brain-child of the 19th century mindset (Hutton, Errington). As I have argued elsewhere (Rajagopalan, "Repensar o papel"), there is an urgent need to resuscitate it from its current moribund state and make it relevant to the emergent realities and challenges of the 21st century.

The biggest challenge to ELT professionals, I think, will be that of having to rethink our traditional ways of going about teaching it. Traditionally, the native speaker served as a kind of "loadstar" in English language teaching, something to be aimed at, though admittedly unattainable – whereof the whole idea of the "near-native" (Rajagopalan, "Non-native Speaker"). Well, that is all going to be a thing of the past. It is time to start thinking of setting up fresh goals for the ELT enterprise across the globe. In my forthcoming text "The English Language," I suggest that the countries of the Outer Circle may have a lesson or two to teach those of the Expanding Circle.

Acknowledgements

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