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### ***The 'Native Speaker' and the power of English***

The purpose of this paper is simple. It is to argue that countries where English is not spoken either as a first or second language no longer need to rely on models of English drawn from external sources and, in particular, that they certainly do not need to employ foreign 'experts' or EFL teachers. However, such an argument touches on a number of different issues, not all of which can be investigated in the depth I would wish. These include the grammatical descriptions of English that exist; what exactly is meant by a 'native speaker'; the functions of English in the world and its status as an international language; the relationships between language and culture; and the implicit 'linguistic imperialism' underlying the spread of UK and US varieties of the language.

There seems little argument that English is the most widely used language for international communication, and it is at least likely that (if only in the short term) it will be even more widely used with the development and spread of electronic communication. Such use does not imply any intrinsic linguistic superiority. Rather, the spread of English has resulted from a complex mix of colonialism and trade. One consequence of this spread has been the development of a wide variety of different dialects both socially and functionally and attempts to describe these different Englishes have been made by Kachru (1985) who distinguishes between three different 'circles' in which English is spoken. The inner circle contains those countries in which English is a mother tongue, and in which it is multifunctional and can be used in all domains. The outer circle consists of countries where it is largely learned at school as a second language but where it also has a societal role. The expanding circle is effectively the rest of the world. Here, English is learned as a foreign language either for educational purposes or as a means of international communication. The boundaries between the outer and expanding circles are fluid in that countries may shift between them.

Kachru's characterisation is useful as far as it goes, but it tends to ignore the basic question of what we mean when we talk about English. Elsewhere (1986: 159) he refers to English as pluricentric, arguing that different countries appeal to different models as their standard. There is, then, a tension between the centripetal forces which allow us to regard all these Englishes as dialects of 'a language' and the centrifugal forces which are driving these Englishes apart as they develop more localised forms to express particular cultural identities.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Kachru acknowledges that the development of English as an international language is likely to ensure some degree of mutual intelligibility between these different dialects. The problem, at least for those who wish to use English as an international language, is how to maintain and nurture this mutual intelligibility.

One solution would be to adopt a purely *laissez faire* attitude and assume that the pressure of communicative needs will create its own solution. To some extent, I am in sympathy with this position, but it is of little help to governments who wish to nurture the teaching of English

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. the disintegration of Latin into such 'languages' as Spanish, Italian and Romanian.

in their schools and universities. They need some model to appeal to and which they can offer to their pupils as 'correct'. For countries in the inner and outer circles this seems largely non-problematic. There is a range of internal models which are perceived as more or less 'correct'. For countries in the expanding circle, however, there are no such models so they have to appeal to some external model and usually one drawn from the inner circle. But, as Kachru points out, native speaker models are not necessarily those which will obviously lead to mutual intelligibility in an international context:

... in the case of English, we must be clear about whom we have in mind when we talk of participants in a linguistic interaction. What role does a native speaker's judgement play in determining the intelligibility of non-native speech acts that have intranational functions in, for example, Asia or Africa

ibid: 94

Needless to say, Kachru's view has not been universally accepted. There is a body of opinion, most recently articulated in John Honey's *Language is Power* (1997), that asserts that there is one (or two, if one distinguishes between the UK and the USA) variety of English which is multifunctional and can serve as a model both for mother tongue teaching as well as for EFL teaching. This model derives historically from the East Midlands dialect as used in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and its syntax is predominantly based on the written language. Typically, it is referred to as 'standard' English. If, however, it can be shown that 'standard' English does not exist, at least as a linguistically describable variety, then Kachru's functionalist arguments will be further supported by evidence of a different kind.

From a descriptivist's point of view, establishing what is 'standard English' involves first describing what is meant by English, and then identifying the specific grammar and lexis of that variety which is to be regarded as the standard form. The first of these tasks is fraught with difficulty. Quite clearly, no language has a specific immanent grammar. All grammatical codifications are *post hoc* and based on utterances that have already occurred. Although there may be regularly occurring patterns, we cannot be confident that they will remain unchanged. In the history of English, we have observed the loss of inflections and the developing importance of word order. We are contemporary witnesses to word class change leading to the lexification of *out* as a verb (*to out someone*), and *best before* as a compound noun (as in *for best before see bottom of bottle*). We may claim that, in spite of these changes, there is a basic invariant core, but even this is open to considerable dispute. Recent research (Carter and McCarthy, 1995; Toolan, 1995; Carter, in press) suggests that the grammar of spoken English contains a number of constructions which are not well described in traditional grammars. This is hardly surprising, since most speakers in informal situations track their utterances for communicative effectiveness rather than grammatical accuracy. As Cumming and Ono (1997) state in their extremely useful introduction to discourse grammar:

the actual production of syntax is locally managed - that is, transpiring in real time, second-by-second, and always contingent on negotiation with the other participants in the speech event. Moreover, although the grammatical patterns resulting from this process would often be considered 'syntactically ill-formed' in traditional accounts, interactants are extremely tolerant of such constructions.

p. 132

Of course, this is not to argue that grammar does not exist. There may well be a universal semantic grammar which identifies processes, participants and circumstances, but in any

particular language the items (and their inflections) which can fill these slots are not predetermined but are subject to the exigencies of the communicative event. Thus, the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole* dissolves since *parole* is *langue* as it undergoes a process of grammaticalisation (Hopper and Traugott, 1993; Toolan, 1994).

If the description of any one language's grammar is difficult, it suggests that the distinction between languages will also be problematic. Nevertheless, for practical purposes, we can adopt the useful principles of *Abstand* and *Ausbau*. Joseph (1987: pp. 2-3) describes the *Abstand* of English as the structural difference from 'German and any other language of equal or higher prestige, of which one might otherwise consider it a dialect', and *Ausbau* as the prestigious functional diversity which a language possesses. He observes that American English has developed considerable *Ausbau* 'over the last two centuries, but never enough to overcome its low *Abstand vis-à-vis* other English dialects and achieve independent status'.

But if it is logically difficult to distinguish linguistically between different languages, it is even more difficult to distinguish between different dialects and varieties within a language. By and large, such distinctions tend to be made according to speakers. Thus, Honey (1997) argues that 'standard English', apart from being based on written forms of the language<sup>2</sup>, is that used by 'educated' speakers. His definition of "educatedness" involves:

. . . graduation from (often famous) universities, of literary reputation, or the ability in all other respects to use the language in highly acceptable ways - or who are in some other way high-status figures (like royalty) . . .

pp.161-2

This is puzzling for a number of different reasons. In the first place, although it is quite clear that Honey's characterisation of 'standard English' is as a class dialect (something that he denies elsewhere), it is unlikely that all the speakers he lists adopt similar locutions even in similar communicative situations. Secondly, I presume he would include James Joyce and Irvine Welsh as having achieved 'literary reputation' but they have little in common either with each other or with other novelists. Finally, when he argues that these people use 'the language in highly acceptable ways', he forecloses the debate by not indicating who regards such uses as 'acceptable'.

Although Honey's position is untenable, he does represent a body of opinion that believes there is a linguistically describable 'standard English' which should be taught to all pupils, and that should also form the basis of EFL teaching. It is true that when we enter the pedagogical debate, we are faced with a conundrum since language education, and especially foreign language education, is by its nature prescriptive. We are therefore obliged to select a set of grammatical rules and persuade our pupils that they are 'correct'. But this begs the question of where these rules come from. I have suggested that the view that there is a 'standard English' which can be used as a model is not viable. On the one hand, it is difficult if not impossible to describe in purely linguistic terms. On the other, to the extent that it exists as a social 'myth' (Milroy and Milroy, 1991) or ideology, it is the variety used by a small, class-based group of speakers largely based within the British Isles. Nevertheless,

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<sup>2</sup>It is worth pointing out that it is impossible to establish even a written 'standard English' (see Bex, 1996)

there are some theorists who argue that, for pedagogical purposes, we can assume the existence of 'standard English' while recognising that it has not yet been adequately described (e.g. Carter; Cheshire, in press). For these people, the task is to construct a more inclusive grammar which takes into account the spoken features which have tended to be ignored in existing grammars. McCarthy and Carter (1995; see also Carter, 1998) have extended this argument by suggesting that these usages should be included in EFL syllabuses.

I believe this is both naïve and potentially dangerous. Leaving aside the question as to whether there is a 'standard English' which can ever be satisfactorily codified, and recognising that some form of codification is essential for any kind of syllabus, we need to ascertain why people wish to learn English as a second language and then develop a syllabus which is appropriate to their communicative needs. Although I have no certain evidence, I would assume that most non-native Englishes are used for business, the dissemination of scientific information, diplomacy and tourism. Casual observations from numerous trips to Japan indicate that much of the business that is conducted in hotel lobbies takes place in English regardless of the speakers' first languages. It therefore leaves me wondering whether it is appropriate that these speakers should learn the kinds of spoken grammatical constructions that McCarthy and Carter wish to teach them and which have developed to meet particular communicative needs.

Interestingly, McCarthy and Carter point out that:

speakers make different grammatical choices according to the context in which the language is used . . . it is also significant that speakers regularly make choices which reflect the *interactive* and *interpersonal* nature of the communication. (1995: p.211)

If context is a determining factor in grammatical choice, it follows that the context in which communication between non-native speakers takes place should also determine the grammars adopted. If they follow native-speaker norms, then they are implicitly signalling that they wish to convey the values of such native speakers. This may seem a large claim, but it is relevant here precisely because all linguistic exchanges take place in a cultural context, and native-speaker exchanges are imbued with the cultures of their origin. Thus, I am suggesting that any syllabus which follows Carter and McCarthy's recommendations will be inadvertently inviting the learners to become mini-British or American. This seems to me not only undesirable but also insulting, since non-native speakers of English surely wish to represent their own cultures even if they are doing so through the medium of English. Cubans, for example, will wish to signal their Cuban identity and one of the best ways of doing this will be to speak English like a Cuban.

A further consequence of McCarthy and Carter's proposal is that it privileges native speaker teachers for they are the most likely people to be comfortable with this grammar. However, this is dangerous for two reasons. To the extent that this grammar is not yet codified, it means that the textbooks and the teachers will be out of step. There will therefore be a dissonance between what learners hear from their teachers and what they read in their books. Of course, this is relatively trivial since successful classroom practice would be able to resolve the potential problems created by this dissonance.

More important is the implicit linguistic imperialism inherent in the proposal. Phillipson (1992) has pointed out the very real dangers of linguistic imperialism as English becomes more and more widespread, while Pennycook (1994) has illustrated how the British Council has used its teaching operations as a hegemonic practice which bypasses the needs of the countries in which it operates. It is arguable that Phillipson overstates his case, and it is certainly not clear to me how we can resist the spread of English so long as the rest of the world regard it as a valuable resource. However, there are ways in which the increasing McDonaldisation of the world can be resisted, and one of these ways is for those countries in which ELT occurs to take complete control of the syllabus and to teach a variety which is appropriate to their needs.

Earlier, I argued that countries within Kachru's expanding circle were necessarily exonormative in their search for an appropriate variety of English. Initially, it seems reasonable for such countries to look to places within the inner circle to supply a model. By extension, it also seems appropriate to hire 'experts' and even teachers from the inner circle so that the variety of English is appropriately modelled. However, I have also argued that, for various reasons both linguistic and social, this may not be the best way of proceeding. On the contrary, I am suggesting that it is better for such countries to avoid the importation of inappropriate cultural models and avoid the economic costs of hiring expatriate 'experts'.<sup>3</sup> However, it remains to indicate how this can best be done.

Elsewhere (Bex, 1993; 1994) I have argued that, although 'standard English' does not exist, there is a well attested 'core' English which has been codified in various grammars and which forms the basis for much English language teaching. This variety is typically used for non-threatening service encounters and adequately serves for such activities as tourism. Clearly, it is inadequate for business transactions or more specialised activities. Nevertheless, it serves as a useful basis from which learners can develop both more appropriate varieties as they come into contact with other English users and, if they so desire, a degree of personal idiosyncrasy which will allow them to express their own personalities. More importantly, it represents a variety which is likely to have been learned by the majority of other non-native speakers.

I recognise that this variety has been developed by native speakers and bears traces of their cultural background, but I would argue that so long as it is thoroughly expropriated by the country in which it is being taught, that cultural background will either be erased or become submerged under the new cultural conditions in which it is being taught. What is important is that reference to the inner circle for normative standards is reduced as far as possible to zero.

There is an apparent paradox in this suggestion, since by taking control of English language teaching to such an extent the maintenance of 'mutual intelligibility' (see above) would appear to be under threat. Again, I believe this risk to be more apparent than real. The variety that I have been describing has been codified largely from written forms, and the extent to which it is held in common by the majority of writers of English for non-specialised writing minimises the risk of non-intelligibility. It is clear that as writers explore their way into more advanced genres of writing, they will need to develop more sophisticated modes of expression,

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<sup>3</sup>These costs can be excessive when one takes into account housing, education, medical care, air fares, etc.

but these are shaped by their purposes and are not the preserve of native speakers the people engaged in the communicative acts.<sup>4</sup>

There is a potential problem with phonology, and it could be argued that native speakers particularly useful in modelling this feature of the language. But, again, this is overstated. When appeals are made to the native speaker in this area, one can use the question 'Which native speaker?' And it is inadequate to respond with British, American, etc. since within all these countries there are wide phonological divergences; only possible answer will be to appeal to a phonological model that is internationally comprehensible, but in doing this one is no longer necessarily referring to the phonology of any particular native-speaker since such a phonology can be manipulated by any speaker of English. It may retain traces of a Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, French accent, but these traces do not render it incomprehensible. Rather they serve to indicate the provenance of the variety in the same ways that a Scottish or New York accent indicates the geographical provenance of the native speaker.

In fact, from my preceding argument it becomes desirable to retain these variations of accent since they serve as a marker of cultural distinction. The view that a plethora of accents impede communication is almost certainly mistaken on other grounds. We have already seen that the grammar of utterances are part of the ongoing process of communication and that the grammar of any particular utterance is a function of trying to communicate a particular meaning. If this is true of native speaker interaction, then it will be equally true of non-native speaker interactions. In most linguistic exchanges there is a desire to transmit one's message as clearly as possible and to understand to the best of one's ability what is being communicated in return. This desire for mutual comprehension overcomes such local difficulties as accent and pronunciation and, where it seems not to be occurring, the interlocutors can always request a repetition or re-formulation. Thus, I am suggesting that Cubans and Chinese businessmen can negotiate both their business deals and their linguistic interactions quite successfully by using their own varieties of spoken English. In fact, going further and arguing that it is desirable that they should do so. If this means that they are speaking in ways that seem inappropriate to native English speakers, this is insignificant since what is important is that all users of English, so long as it remains an international language, should take control of the language and use it to express their own identities and cultures.

It may seem that this is a utopian suggestion. The alternative, adopting models derived from US or UK usages, is dangerous since it leads to the insidious spread of an alien culture which eventually runs the risk of dominating the cultures into which it comes in contact. However, this is not an inevitable consequence of appealing to native speakers both for modelling English and teaching expertise, there is sufficient evidence (Phillipson, 1992) to suggest that it has occurred in some African and South East Asian countries, is occurring in Greece (Prodromou, 1992) Turkey (Alptekin, 1993) and Morocco (Bentahila and Davies) and is likely to be resisted.

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<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the development of genres see Swales (1990)

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