

# The future for Global English: A versatile lingua franca or a collection of mutually unintelligible dialects?

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## Introduction

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the English language witnessed such phenomenal global growth that now it can claim to have achieved the status of a global language in a way that no other language in history ever could. This growth can be attributed to a variety of factors including migration, The British Empire with its subsequent opportunities for global trade and also a considerable amount of luck. While this global spread of English has been welcomed by many as a positive achievement and a factor to unify the world, the way in which English is changing has become a cause for concern amongst certain academics and has raised various contentious issues.

At a British Council conference in 1984, Randolph Quirk and Braj Kachru, both leading figures in the debate over the development of the English language both expressed opposing views. Quirk argued that there was a need to uphold standards in the use of English and he insisted that

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Standard English should be promoted across the world. Any tolerance in variation, Quirk claimed was educationally and communicatively damaging.

However Kachru (1982) on the other hand argued that a modified local form of English

"Provides both a new perspective and challenge" Within in a country, he claims it can be used as a medium of interchange between cultures and that the substance of the medium is not important. The importance is extralinguistic in what the medium actually conveys regarding developments in law, science, the arts and technology.

Kachru was taking a contrary viewpoint, from which he saw the emergence of local forms of English as a positive trait and he asserted that recognition should be given to the way in which the language was developing. Far from inhibiting education and communication he argued, a new standard variety could emerge that would be understood globally.

My aim in this analysis is to assess whether we should be alarmed by Quirk's claims and possibly consider the damage being done to the English language or whether Kachru's viewpoint holds sway and we are perhaps worrying unnecessarily. I will start by defining Standard English and Mutual Intelligibility, I will then assess how English is changing and attempt to make some predictions for the future regarding intelligibility.

## **What is Standard English?**

To properly assess the claims of Quirk it would seem that a clarification of what is understood by the term 'Standard English' may be useful. Kachru (1986) divides the English-speaking world into 3 circles. The Inner circle is comprised of the countries where English has a historic and linguistic base. English has been the primary dominant English for many years. These countries would include the UK, USA, Australia etc. Then there is the Outer circle where English has been used by colonial powers and is now an official medium of communication. This would include countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Singapore etc. The third circle is the Expanding circle. These are countries that have not been colonized by English speaking powers but have decided of their own accord to start learning English in large numbers. Such countries would include Japan and China.

In this context Standard English is viewed as a form of English spoken by inhabitants of an inner circle country. Strevens (1982) describes Standard English as being 'the only non-localized dialect of global currency without variation and universally accepted as the target form in English Language Teaching' and this would seem to correlate to a variety of English from the Inner Circle.

## **What do we mean by mutual intelligibility?**

Amid the concerns over future mutual intelligibility in the global English forum, it would probably be prudent to provide a working definition of intelligibility. Although it may initially seem a tangible concept, real

intelligibility is quite complex. According to Crystal it involves recognizing an expression, understanding the given expression and being able to interpret the expression in relation to the given socio-cultural context.

These distinctions albeit important are maybe a little too specific in the context of English being globally understood since as Bamgbose (1998, 11) comments 'Pre-occupation with intelligibility definitions has often taken an abstract form characterized by decontextualized comparison of varieties'

In any given situation the people, surroundings and a willingness to understand are probably going to be the largest contributors to intelligibility as much as the words themselves.

Kachru (1982, 35) has a more concise definition of intelligibility.

"Intelligibility in the real world quite simply put is the comprehension of the message in the sense intended by the speaker."

Such a definition would seem to have a more practical relevance for the purposes of this analysis.

## **How and why is English changing?**

Initially migration and also Britain's role as an empire nation were major factors in the development of English. Although enforced on native populations English quickly became seen as the language of the educated elite and was used as the medium of official communication even after these countries gained independence. Initially English was often learnt from native speakers, as the educated elite were the few who had access or the need to learn English seriously. However as the language grew in popularity the people charged with teaching English were often local citizens.

Many people also learned English for daily interaction without attending lessons. This has led to modified versions of English which differed from Standard English and developed lexis and grammatical standards of its own. These are often referred to as 'Localized Forms of English' (LFEs) (Strevens 1982, 23)

Gradually such varieties of English became more acceptable and in a modern day context in countries such as Ghana or Malaysia, both former British colonies, they have in all but the most official of contexts replaced Standard English (Platt, Weber, Ho 1984)

In these countries you can still hear some older people speaking a variety of English which sounds close to standard English but among younger people anybody speaking standard English would be viewed as pretentious or an outsider. This is telling in so much as that a mere 30 years ago speaking RP English in an informal situation would be an indication of intelligence and worldly knowledge. This would suggest that standards and perceptions of correctness are changing. Local forms of English are shifting from being viewed as pejorative to having a status where they are viewed as more suitable for the local environment.

The local form of English has also become a means of national identification whereby people can easily recognize fellow citizens abroad and the ability to speak the local variety indicates a form of kinship and harmony. Local forms of English have created, promoted and in many cases established a local cultural identity. In Malaysia, a multi-racial country, it could be argued that Malaysian English has played a large part in unifying the population. (Pennycook 1994, 192)

The popularity and use of local varieties of English is rapidly growing and

this has caused concern among some sociolinguists like Quirk. There is a worry that English will begin to vary so much that it will no longer be able to serve as a global language. In effect there will be a mutually unintelligible hybrid of languages. Writers such as Quirk (1982, 58) have expressed their dismay saying

"The divergence between one country's English and another's is seen to be in danger of growing much more seriously wide, with no common educational or communicational policy even theoretically applicable, but rather with nationalism strongly (if haphazardly and even unconsciously) endorsing a linguistic independence to match political and other aspects of independence"

In essence there is a fear that this issue of national unity attached to a national variety of English is championed without any concern for continuing mutual intelligibility. Quirk worries that without due care English could become a multitude of languages rather than a single entity. Academics such as Quirk would argue that far from being a trivial matter or positive linguistic feature of such countries, these issues have major implications for educational standards in influencing the future prospects of students. They may also from a viewpoint of global co-operation threaten future communication.

### **Is there a valid case for concern?**

To claim that Quirk's assertions are unfounded would be wrong since

undeniably Local forms of English are changing at a very fast rate and becoming more and more removed from RP English (Platt, Weber, Ho 1984). The cultural domain allows for the development of a whole new vocabulary in the areas of food, religion, technology, entertainment and geography. Sometimes these words are identical to Standard English but the meaning changes to suit the cultural context. Crystal (2000) describes how the word 'lounge' is used in South African English to talk about a restaurant or bar. He also mentions how in -multi-cultural countries words can be taken from several languages to create a particular sense. In fact recently when I was in Malaysia recently I overheard someone complaining about a foreigner in his office saying

**"That gwai-lo thinks he's damn terror".**

Now to understand this you'd need to realize that he has (possibly unknowingly) incorporated the Cantonese word for a foreigner and added it to 'damn terror' the Malaysian English phrase, which is generally understood in standard English as 'really good'. However to really understand the nuance of such a phrase requires an understanding of the culture and people. This is an apt example of language manipulation to suit the cultural context. Another interesting point is that the person who made this statement is in fact a Malaysian Indian, which would seem to support Crystal's assertion about multi-cultural countries combining a variety of languages to create an appropriate meaning. It also shows how quickly the vocabulary of one language can intersperse another since the chap in question does not speak Cantonese yet he is able to use certain

vocabulary in the correct context.

Malaysia is not an exception since if you go to other parts of the world one can encounter a similar phenomenon in other parts of Asia and the wider world. The concern with this phenomenon as expressed by Quirk is that as local variants take on a vocabulary and structure, which is distinct to the culture, many speakers are no longer able to express themselves in RP English.

Another impact on the local form of English is code-switching, the practice of using two or more languages to communicate effortlessly without any problems in communication. Gumperz (1978) estimates that the vast majority of English speakers globally, code-switch to some degree. Often code-switching was stigmatized and viewed as a base form of English but it is now frequently used in writing too. McArthur quotes a Hong Kong Bank leaflet given to Filipino maids. Throughout the leaflet English and Tagalog are mixed together. If code-switching is being used in a financial institution's leaflet then we can say that it has come into a role of its own.

Quirk can too easily be dismissed as been an imperialistic throwback wishing to continue empiric linguistic trends and stifling the natural and exciting development of the English language but he also expresses the concern that speaking only a localized form of English can damage ones future prospects. This can be witnessed in the recruitment procedures of Global firms. Companies such as Price Waterhouse when recruiting in the



developing world tend to employ only those who can speak a form of English resembling RP. The way people speak in the formal setting of work is very different to other settings so therefore they want people who can communicate in a form of English that will easily be understood by international client base. However in these countries those who are able to speak Standard English effortlessly tend to be of an economically advantaged background. So it could be claimed that Quirk's secondary concern is relevant too. So there are many positives of the local form of English but as Quirk highlights too there are many drawbacks and possible dangers.

### **The unique situation of the English Language**

However it would seem that many of the opponents to local forms of English forget quite how unique the position of English is in the global environment and the global impact English has had. Often people cite Latin as the language, which fragmented and eventually disappeared and speculate whether the same will happen to English. Many people forget that in that era there was not that global need to communicate on a daily basis. Graddol (2000) talks about English having the primary function of providing 'a vehicular language for international communication' Internationally people have an unprecedented need to understand each other. A Standard English is developing that an international audience understand. In speech, due to business transactions, pilots landing and global friendships people speak English across continents everyday.

Another major factor is broadcast media and the Internet. A mere 10 years ago when I was working in South East Asia I used to relish my monthly

trip to the British Council to peruse the British newspapers and watch the BBC news which had been recorded on video. In essence I had to make a concerted effort to come into contact with a form of Standard English even in a country where English was an official language. Now in 2004 I'm living in Japan but still in a rural setting yet with 24 hour access to the BBC and all the broadsheets I have time to read online.

The relevance of this is that being British and living in a foreign country I was prepared to venture 3 hours by bus to the British Council. It is unlikely that a non-native speaker of English living in their own country would bother to embark upon such an arduous trip to come into contact with the BBC! Now in 2004 people worldwide are watching news and information channels directly from Britain and America in the comfort of their own homes. Educated people are aware of the *The Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *New York Times* and *CNN* just from being able to access them online. The access and exposure to Standard English has become so much easier. This is another factor that I feel will maintain a certain uniformity in the English language.

A final point to remember is that as Crystal (2000) mentions, nobody has the title deeds to the English language to necessarily dictate how it will or won't develop. The fact that it is spreading round the world means that a native speaking community can no longer claim to own it or dictate how it is used. In fact whoever learns it from the market trader in Ho Chi Minh to the budding pilot in Tokyo will have some right to alter the language and a part to play in it's development.

Added to this is the fact that many members of the outer and expanding

circles are realizing that on a daily basis the people they need to speak with are other members within those two circles and not speakers from the Inner circle countries. Japanese, Korean and Chinese business transactions are often conducted in English. It would seem somewhat dictatorial and ultimately futile to insist that they speak to each other in British or American English. Language is after all a vehicle for communication and if people wish to speak in a certain way then generally they will.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion I would have to agree with Widdowson (1994, 385)

'As soon as you accept that English serves the communicative and communal needs of different communities, it follows logically that it must be diverse. An international language has to be an independent language. It does not follow logically that it will disperse into mutually unintelligible forms. For it will naturally stabilize into standard form to the extent required to meet the needs of the communities concerned'.

It seems that maybe standardized and LFE's may both flourish simultaneously. The use of English as the major language of communication worldwide is a great asset in international politics, business, education, and the media. Speakers of English (whether first-language or not) quite feasibly will learn to use two 'dialects'-one with their own community, and one in the international context. When communicating with people from other parts of the world, they will be able to substitute words from their

regional variety that might not be understood. In international politics, business, and education, in the media, and on the Internet, it is likely that English will remain mutually intelligible because of the constant interaction between English speakers of various parts of the world and the value of English as a global communicative device.

At the same time, it also seems likely that mutually unintelligible forms of English with norms of their own will increasingly develop as the language is taught and learned in areas of the world, which are isolated from contact with first-language speakers. For example, English is used in Africa as the language of communication between people of different language groups who have absolutely no contact with English speakers, and this can lead to the development of pidgin varieties with numerous borrowings from one or more of the local languages. In the expanding circle many countries see English as purely functional in communicating with other expanding circle members and see no importance to adhere to an inner circle variety.

We can only take educated guesses on likely trends, but it seems certain that the English language will continue to change in the future, and to respond in dynamic and innovative ways as its use increases across the world.

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