

CULTURE AND THE USE OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

The growing prominence of regional and local varieties of English changes the way people approach English in the 21-st century, and the most important aspect they will have to take into consideration is the link between language and culture. This (culture) becomes multi-faced, taking into account the diversity of the people who speak English around the world, and there is no single formula for how to handle issues of culture in using a foreign language. Sometimes speakers of English need to diverge from what they have been taught in order to make themselves understood to other speakers of English from around the world. The present paper analyses the use of English language in different communities around the world, referring to the preservation and revival of English/Englishes and to the way in which people who wish to communicate internationally should use this language.

Key words: varieties of english, discourse, different cultures, native speakers, non-native speakers of english

1. CO-CULTURES AND THE USE OF ENGLISH

If it is to consider the varieties of English that we might meet at the table of negotiations or in any international transactions, we would find out that the linguistic combinations are quite numerous. For instance, at the US-Mexico border, people use a language known as “Spanglish”, in some parts of Canada, people communicate in a language that is a combination of British English, American English and French, since “language is a living organism, fed by the very breath of those who employ it, whoever these might happen to be” (Ozick, 1996: 74).

Language is able to respond, from its core, to the constant appeal of time, perpetually demanding new tricks, new experiments, new amusements.

All cultures and co-cultures share special usages of meanings. If we refer to co-cultures, teenagers, for instance, create their own language/argot. When they use the word *random* with the meaning: *completely off the wall*; *joints* with the meaning: *any brand of popular sneakers*, and *byte-bonding* when computer nerds discuss things no one else can understand, other people, who don’t belong to their group/co-culture will not understand very much of their discourse. It is the same with such groups as business people, that, communicating with one another have the feeling that they belong to the same culture. It is also possible that business people having a strong co-culture background (Afro-Americans, women, drug-users, gays etc) should bring specific vocabulary from that co-culture. Afro-American English, for instance, certainly reflects the influences of African languages on American English. At a simple analysis, the authors of the volume: *Communication between Cultures*¹ found the following instances of use in Afro-American English:

- A) Subject nouns are followed by a pronoun that repeats the reference: *My father, he...*
- B) Questions omit the auxiliary *do*: *What it come out?*
- C) Context clarifiers are used instead of varying verbs to indicate tense: *I know it good when he ask me.*

Afro-American language also distinguishes itself by being very rhythmic, namely holding some syllables longer or changing their accent, when compared to standard American English. The same authors (mentioned above) list a few styles that they consider to be commonly used by Afro-Americans:

¹ Larry Samovar, Richard Porter, Lisa Stefani, *Communication Between Cultures*, 1993, p.86.

1. *Sucking and Jiving* – is used when confronted with a critical situation, when mistreated by representatives of the dominant culture or authority. Usually, by using this type of language, the Afro-Americans create a false impression, as to avoid a difficulty. Thus, *bad* means the opposite, *Charlie* stands for white man, *get down* is to engage in something, with great enthusiasm, etc.
2. *Rapping* – is used to impress the listener by verbal virtuosity; in the black community, rap is the mating call, the introduction of the male to the female, and it is ritualistically expected by black women.
3. *The Dozens* – is a more aggressive style, consisting of a series of insults that two parties throw at each other, while being observed by other people: *Say man, your girlfriend so ugly, she had to sneak up on a glass to get a drink of water.*
4. *Proverbial wisdom* – is a style that obviously aims at teaching truths and values like: “All that glitters is not gold” etc. and it can often be encountered in the Afro-Americans’ discourse.

Linguists also noticed some difference between the discourses performed by women and those performed by men, some go even further and say that “we can at least in a provisional fashion say that women and men constitute two linguistic groups” (Kramarae, 1981: 92). For women, for instance, Wood (1994: 27) lists seven very characteristic features of communication:

- The first is *equality*, because women usually establish equality between them and their interlocutors, to make them feel more comfortable. They use sentences like: “It happened to me too, I understand you very well”.
- The second feature is *support*, meaning that women perform a discourse full of sympathy for their interlocutor, like: “How very difficult it must have been for you!”
- *Questioning* is the third feature and it completes the *support*, by asking further questions on the same subject and showing compassion and understanding: “How was your first meeting with the new boss? I guess it was not easy”.
- *Sustaining conversation*, the fourth feature, is to find interesting topics for interlocutors as to keep interaction going, like in the sentence: “I hope you had a nice journey”.
- *Responsiveness* follows, meaning that women show they are attentive to what is being said: “Really?”, “Is that so?” etc.
- The next feature is *personal and concrete style*, meaning that giving details about personal contexts creates closeness between speakers.
- *Tentativeness* is the last feature identified by Wood and it describes a very polite, warm register of communication. For example: “I wonder if you could tell me about..., only if it is not bothering you”.

It is obvious that the context within which women manifest these features matters very much. The discourse a woman delivers in a business meeting will not be the same with the one she uses as a lawyer in a courtroom, but it is sure that the profile of their discourse is given by the general purpose of communication, which is to establish and maintain relationships with others, while for most men it is to manipulate, control and improve their image and status. Wood also identified some features for the typically masculine speech (Wood, 1994). They are:

- *Problem – solving* orientation
- *Superiority and control* over conversation
- *Directness and abstractness* of discourse.

It is not difficult to imagine that all these differences between women and men orientations in discourse may create difficulties at the table of negotiations, especially when they come from different cultures.

2. NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

Paradoxically enough, native speakers of English may need to learn new dialects, as to understand what people from other corners of the world say in this language, because native colloquialisms may be inappropriate.

In the 21-st century, English is considered more a language of communication, than a foreign language, controlled by native speakers. An increasing number of people use English on a daily basis to find information or communicate with the world online. For them, the key to communication will not be found in the syntactic or basic functional syllabi used in English classes, but in complex project-based approaches that will help students learn and practice the analytic problem-solving and argumentation skills needed in their competition for a better job/position in society. This is how a branch of English for Specific Purposes, namely, English for Occupational purposes (EOP) was developed. EOP deals with the special needs of particular vocational groups. Therefore, it focuses on basic communication skill for secretaries, factory workers or clerks and it is taught in secondary schools or in trainings offered by employers at different worksites.

The growing prominence of regional and local varieties of English changes the way people approach English in the 21-st century, and the most important aspect they will have to take into consideration is the link between language and culture. This (culture) becomes multi-faced, taking into account the diversity of the people who speak English around the world, and there is no single formula for how to handle issues of culture in using a foreign language. Sometimes speakers of English need to diverge from what they have been taught in order to make themselves understood to other speakers of English from around the world. On the one hand there is pride in the particular characteristics of the local varieties of English, and on the other hand, with the worldwide influence of the Internet and of the American broadcasters, such as the CNN, it is likely that English will become more homogenous, and more influenced by American English. The fact is that speakers of English (whether first language or second language – we do not refer to using English as a foreign language here) come 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 suppress words from their regional variety that might not be understood, meaning that they make a shift from a dialect to another, from a code to another. It is obviously not the same when shifting from one language code to another language code.

In international politics, business and education, as well as in the media, or the Internet, English will surely remain mutually intelligible because of the constant interaction (electronic and otherwise) between the “Englishes” of the various parts of the world and the value of English as *lingua franca*. But besides that, another phenomenon has appeared: mutually unintelligible forms of English 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, in Africa, English is used as a communication language between people of different language groups, who have no contact with English speakers, and this certainly leads to the *pidgin*² varieties, meaning those varieties of English that contain a lot of borrowings from one or more of the local languages.

The number of English speakers around the world was divided by Kachru (1986) into three groups, which together would form three circles. He describes the first circle as the one containing the countries where English is a native language: UK, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. The second circle represents ESL³-countries, that is former British colonies, such as: India, Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa, and the third circle represents EFL⁴-countries like China, Japan, Israel, Greece, Romania etc. The phenomenon that is obvious for us all is that the third circle is continually growing, and David Crystal, in his book: *English as a Global Language* gives the following figures, in this sense:

² *pidgin language* = a simplified language derived from two or more languages; it is a contact language developed and used by people who do not share a common language in a given geographical area.

³ ESL = English as a Second Language.

⁴ EFL = English as a Foreign Language.

From fluent to all levels of English

- 320-380 million English speakers in the inner circle
- 150-300 million English speakers in the 2-nd circle
- 100-1,000 million English speakers in the third circle, which is also expanding.

The British Council documents⁵ also presented some significant figures regarding the extent to which English was used:

- Over 70 countries have English as their official or semi official language and in 20 more countries it has an important status.
- One out of five individuals of the world population speaks English to some level of competence and demand from the other four fifths is increasing.
- English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control points, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, sport, international competitions, pop music and advertising.
- Over two thirds of the world's scientists read in English.
- Three quarters of the world's mail is written in English.
- 80% of the electronically stored information is in English
- Out of the estimated 40 million users of the Internet, more than 75% communicate in English.
- In Central and Eastern Europe there are some 50 million people learning English (9% of the population) and the demand is growing.

Now, the question is: what kind of English do these people acquire?

The two varieties of English that are taken as models by all the other nations of the world are British English and American English. The same author of *English as a Global Language*, David Crystal, explains that the world status of English is the result of the expansion of British colonial power and the emergence of the US as a leading economic power in the 20-th century. Actually, much earlier than that, in 1780, John Adams said that “American English is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last, or French is in the present age. The reason is obvious, because the increasing population in America and their universal connections and correspondence with all nations force their language into general use”.⁶

The dominant influence of American English nowadays is perhaps due to the leading (political and military) position of US in the world, the electronic revolution, the dimension of mass media on a worldwide scale and the success known by the American popular culture. Research made by the British Council has found a lot of Americanisms in the very vocabulary of young Brits (*schedule* pronounced as /s k e d z u l/; *princess* pronounced with the stress on the first syllable and *garage* pronounced with the stress on the last syllable, as to mention only a few examples of the very many that keep coming in the discourse of English speakers from Britain and from elsewhere). We will come back to the “Americanisms” later on in our study.

The American influence is felt especially in Canada, Mexico, Latin America and Philippines, but also in Nigeria, Egypt, Thailand, Japan, South Korea. The Europeans are also exposed to a massive amount of American English and pupils are very attracted to it. Many linguists seem to agree with the definition given to varieties of English by Peter Trudgill: “any kind of language – a dialect, accent, sociolect, style or register that a linguist happens to want to discuss as a separate entity for some particular purpose; such a variety can be very general, such as American English”(Trudgill, 1980, p.5). The dialect, on the other hand, is defined as “a variety of a language spoken in one part of the country (regional dialect), or by people belonging to a particular social class (social dialect or sociolect), which is different in grammar and/or pronunciation from other forms of the same language” (Richards, 1997: 32). But since dialect carries a negative connotation (often associated with non-standard language), most authors prefer to use the term “variety”.

⁵ www.britishcouncil.org/eltecs.htm; www.arel.org.uk

⁶ Quoted in B. Bryson, *Mother Tongue: The English Language*, 1990, p. 56.

McArthur speaking about “hybrid languages” states that: “No variety of English is linguistically superior to any other. American English is not better or worse than British English. Narrowly understood, British English is the form of Standard English used in Britain at large, or more specifically in England, and more specifically still in south-eastern England. It is essentially the medium of the middle and upper classes. It has been associated with the accent known as Received Pronunciation (RP) and with the phrases: Queen’s English, Oxford English and BBC English” (McArthur, 1993: 18)”. American English, on the other hand, namely Standard American English is “a combination of those linguistic forms which are most general in the speech of educated native Americans and a variety of English devoid of both general and local socially stigmatized features, as well as regionally obtrusive phonological and grammatical features” (Janicki:1985, 56).

As for International Standard English, the best definition seems to be that given by Trask (1997: 4) “that particular variety of English which is considered to be appropriate in formal contexts and which is considered by many educated speakers to be appropriate in all contexts”.

Most researchers agree that there is not yet a common standard world wide variety of English. Crystal also uses the term “Englishes”, defining these new varieties of L1 English⁷ as “intranational dialects” on an international scale, involving entire countries and regions. In this model “international varieties express national identities and are a way of reducing the conflict between intelligibility and identity” (Crystal, 1997, p. 134). Crystal claims that we are already multi-dialectal and that some form of standard, international spoken English is inevitable as a supplement to the dialects we make use of, now: an informal local dialect, a formal international dialect and an educated international written dialect. Predicting that speakers of new Englishes would soon be in the majority, Crystal states that these dialects will most likely have some effect on a single standard, worldwide spoken type of English, for example, changing from stress-timed to syllable-timed rhythm, and there is no reason for them not to, since non-L1 English is to some extent independent of social control. While legitimizing new Englishes, Crystal (1997) nevertheless refers to them in a condescending manner, reminiscent of Kachru’s view on expanding circle performance varieties. In that, he echoes McArthur (1993): “Worldwide communication centres on Standard English, which however radiates out into many kinds of English and many other languages, producing clarity here, confusion there, and novelties and nonsense everywhere. The result can be – often is – chaotic, but despite the blurred edges, this latter-day Babel manages to work” (p.14). Drawing on Kachru’s (1986) concentric circle model of English spread and use, Modiano (1999), on the other hand, offers a model which he refers to as “centripetal circles of international English”. The innermost circle includes proficient speakers of English as an International Language (EIL), a general term including all varieties of English which function well in cross cultural communication and which does not necessarily include L1 English. The emphasis is on functional side of language, and in the process of communication there is no inherent need for consistency; varieties usually mix with one another in an attempt to transmit and understand messages in English.

The second circle belongs to speakers with native or foreign language proficiency, meaning that the variety of English they speak is different from standard EIL to need code-switching when in cross-cultural settings. The third circle is comprised of learners of English and the outermost circle includes people who do not know English. In Modiano’s model it is not necessarily L1 English speakers who define the language: “Proficient non-native speakers of EIL, rather than the native speakers who are not proficient in EIL, are better equipped to define and develop English as a tool in cross-cultural communication” (Modiano, 1999: 25). This new status of non-native speakers is in opposition to

⁷ In the terminology of English language teaching, we have:

- English as a native language (ENL), also called first language (L1);
- English as a second language (ESL), in an environment where English has a special significance, also called second language (L2);
- English as a foreign language (EFL), in places where it has no special significance, also called third language (L3).

English as an additional language (EAL) is usually based on the standards of either British/Commonwealth English or American English

Kachru's theory where native speakers are not only proficient, but also norm producers and also restricted by geographical location. Modiano, on the other hand, considers that English, since it has become a globally functioning language can no longer be seen as restricted to a certain place. He also attracts attention on the fact that there has been a shift in the motivation for learning English, from integrational to instrumental or utilitarian use of language, and also on the importance of functionality and the democratization of English use.

But sometimes, these terms used to describe varieties of English might create confusion. In addition to the pluralization of English to Englishes and the term World Englishes, we often encounter English as an international language, English as a lingua franca, English as a global language, English as a world language, English as a medium for intercultural communication, as well as pidgin and creole varieties.

There are two large scale ELF corpora that offer a lot of data in this field: the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) (see Seidlhofer 2004) and the Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (see Mauranen 2003). Analysis of such data made by Firth, for example, indicates that "EFL speakers can learn and use known (and also non standard) resources as they become known-in-common during the talk itself" (Firth 1996, p. 247). Another remark is that EFL speakers are not embarrassed to admit their lack of shared, stable linguistic competence. Their perceived or actual lack of competence is often made relevant in talk implicitly, for example, by laughing at one's own non standard usage, or explicitly, for instance, by asking "How do you say that in English...?"

Barbara Seidlhofer's research at VOICE, on an excerpt in which a L1 French speaker and a L1 German speaker are discussing business, indicates that the interaction was successful as consensus was reached and both speakers acted as senders and receivers of messages, despite the very often incorrect use of standard L1 English. The presence of humour in their conversation, along with quite serious but common grammatical errors made by both parts (such as 3-rd person -s, tags, phrasal verbs and idioms) didn't hinder the success of the interaction. To be more precise, the typical errors, according to the author, include:

- dropping the third person present tense -s
- confusing the relative pronouns *who* and *which*
- omitting definite and indefinite articles where they are obligatory in ENL, and inserting them where they do not occur in ENL
- failing to use correct forms in tag questions (e.g. *isn't it?* *Or no?* instead of *shouldn't they?*)
- inserting redundant prepositions, as in *We have to study about...*
- overusing certain verbs of high semantic generality, such as *do*, *have*, *make*, *put*, *take*, etc.
- replacing infinitive constructions with that-clauses as in *I want that...*
- overdoing explicitness (e.g. *black color* rather than just *black*).

While these common errors do not seem to impede communication, there is evidence that what often leads to problems is lack of familiarity with vocabulary, especially in conjunction with poor paraphrasing skills and unilateral idiomaticity, that is, when expressions such as metaphors, idioms and phrasal verbs used by one speaker are not known to his or her interlocutor.

3. CONCLUSIONS

We may conclude that as a growing number of people have now access to the English language, because of the expansion of the internet and of the great number of multinationals in the world, and implicitly because of the growing number of international transactions, in the process of international communication, people are tempted to emphasize their own local variety of English, rather than submitting to colonial standardized norms in order to project their identity and values. This means that culture will affect the way in which one uses language to communicate in business. Therefore, English language will certainly continue to change in future and to respond to people's needs in dynamic and unpredictable ways, as its use increases across the world.

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