The future Englishes of the world: one lingua franca or many?

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What seem to be the possible or likely futures for Englishes in the world? An English speaking world? A world in which most people speak a first language, and English as a second language? A world of increasingly divergent forms of English? A world of competing major languages and diminishing minor languages? A world of increasing diversity?

In order to consider these questions it is important to define exactly what we mean by terms such as world Englishes, an English speaking world, and major or global languages, as our understanding of such terms will shape what predictions we make about their future. Prediction is of course the operative word in this equation since an educated guess is really all that is possible given the multitude of unpredictable factors that can or will impact on these issues. This paper will seek to argue that in fact with the exception of increasing diversity, which appears most unlikely, all these scenarios are likely to come to pass in some way in various parts of the world. Furthermore, I will argue that looking for global trends or patterns in these matters is not appropriate. Not only are the tools being used to attempt such predictions inadequate, but also these factors will be determined increasingly by localized or regional influences and not global ones. It is overly simplistic to group together regions such as Europe and Asia when considering the futures of Englishes and other languages since the factors impacting on their future are so different. There seems no doubt that global demographic trends clearly demonstrate the fact that native speakers of English have either already or soon will be outnumbered by those who speak English as a foreign or second language. While this will clearly impact on varieties of English around the world, the main factors that determine how the language develops in terms of its variety and influence, will be localized factors, which will mean the experience will differ greatly around the world.

Looking first at a definition of some of the terms discussed above, the concept of 'World Englishes' is commonly understood as the different varieties or appropriations of English that have developed around the world over time. These have all been comprehensively documented in the literature, such as Singaporean English or 'Singlish', Malaysian English or 'Manglish', and so on. Such varieties are examples of how people in different parts of the world have expressed their own identity by developing their own version of predominately spoken English. However looking to
the future we may need a broader definition of world Englishes or varieties of English. As Warschauer (2000) discusses, as the commercialization of intellectual property in the EFL sector continues, native speaker countries such as England, Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand will gradually lose market share in the delivery of English language training and publishing of ELT curricula to other regions such as Asia. This will have a likely impact on ELT pedagogy and quite possibly result in what Warschauer refers to as 'a bifurcated system' where the development of ELT courses is separated from their delivery (Warschauer 2000, p.10). One possible consequence of this is the development of larger regional varieties of English such as an 'Asian standard' where 'non-standard' rules governing grammar and vocabulary for example are established thus extending the concept of varieties of English.

The concept of an English speaking world also needs definition in order to speculate about its likely future. If we mean a world dominated purely by native speakers or those who speak English as a first language then clearly this seems most unlikely as Graddol (1997 & 2000) explains. Graddol's demographic modelling demonstrates quite emphatically that in terms of population, the number of native English speakers has either already been usurped or soon will be usurped by those who speak English as a second language. As birth rates fall in the industrialized English speaking world and the reverse occurs in the non-industrialised, non-English speaking world, it seems that the optimistically triumphant dreams of those mainly British speculators from the colonial era of a world dominated by native English speakers by the twenty-first century have been all but dashed. So, if we define an English speaking world as one of native speakers, then clearly this seems impossible at this stage. However if we define an English speaking world as one in which the majority of its residents speak the language as their preferred second language as a lingua franca, then this would seem an entirely likely scenario. The corollary of this would then seem to be a world in which greater variations in English develop in different regions over time, although arguments will later be developed to counter this as being a foregone conclusion.

The other definition to consider is what is meant by a global or major language. In order to be considered a global or major world language, it must be one which provides its speakers with a degree of power, whether this be political, commercial, social or all of these concepts. Clearly English by definition is such a language as are several other languages, carrying similar influence to a lesser extent, such as Spanish, Mandarin, French and so on. What seems likely as Graddol (1997), Crystal (1997) and others have discussed is that a greater number of languages will increase in importance as global languages among such terms, while an increasing number of 'minor' languages will do the reverse over time.

In order to speculate about the future of world Englishes and the position of English
in the world, it is important to understand the situation as it is at present. Clearly, this is one in which English finds itself at the top of this apex of languages in terms of its worldly power, as is illustrated by facts such as those expressed by Crystal (1997) whereby at that time of publishing 85% of international organisations used English as their official language; 85% of the world’s film market was in English; some 90% of all academic texts published in certain fields such as linguistics were in English. Figures of the total number of native speakers in the world today vary but Crystal (1997) puts this figure at around 337 million rising at a much slower pace to about 433 million by 2050 and Graddol (1997) puts the current figure (which he admits is an underestimate) at about 235 million now rising gradually to about 462 million by 2050.

However, commentators such as Graddol encourage those who view the possibility of a future world dominated by English first language speakers to do so with great caution. Graddol provides some interesting modelling of how the number of native English speakers will change using the ‘Engco’ module, a tool developed by his company, The English Company. While it could be argued this tool is still inadequate, it is reasonably comprehensive given the factors it takes into account beyond simple population modelling to make predictions of a future where this pattern of English domination will change quite significantly. Using Kachru’s (1986) concept of the 3 circles of English with native speakers in the middle, second language English speakers outside this and those learning the language as a foreign language on the outer, Graddol predicts that there will be an ever-increasing pressure from the outside in. That is, as the number of native speakers declines, the group of those speaking the language as a second language will continue to increase dramatically as those from the outer circle move to the second over time.

This points to a world dominated by bi-lingual or multi-lingual people. As Graddol points out, there are real questions about how English will develop in the hands of people who are speaking it predominately as a second or third language rather than being on the whole dominated by mono-lingual people, as has been the case up until now. On the face of it, it would seem very likely that this will lead to greater varieties of the language developing over time as it becomes separated from the ‘umbilical cord’ of native speakers.

Another way Graddol (2000) explains this is to compare two very different looking pyramids. On the one hand, we have a present one that resembles a triangle with English and French at its narrow apex, followed down the hierarchy by the other languages of the UN (Arabic, Chinese, German, Russian, Spanish) and then by around 80 national languages and then below this the other official languages within nation states and finally the base comprising all the remaining 6000 plus vernacular
languages. On the other hand is a very different looking pyramid that Graddol sees developing by the middle of this century. That is one which has a widening apex where English is joined by the big global languages of the UN and a narrowing base of local languages with the remaining national languages in the middle.

Graddol also points out that this situation cannot simply be attributed to the rise of English. That is, the loss of minor or endangered languages and dialects is due to several factors including a move towards industrialization and more urbanized populations away from rural and regional areas, improved communications within countries and so on.

While many prophecies about the future made by people such as Graddol are based on solid arguments, it must be said that definitive tools simply do not exist to predict the situation in 50-100 years vis a vis the position of English with any degree of certainty. Firstly, there are so many unpredictable factors at play. Secondly, it is still unclear how commercial trading habits and economic shifts will develop in regions of the world such as north and south-east Asia. Trying to look for global patterns in English is, in my view, unrealistic. It would seem more realistic to attempt to view these trends on a more regional basis. For example, Graddol 2000 sees the possibility of Europe developing as a single linguistic zone, where those who speak one of the 'big' languages such as English have better access to material success, as has been the case in India, for example. However, in my view it does not seem reasonable to assume the same situation will occur in north and south-east Asia and if it does it seems far from certain which language(s) would be dominant.

One possible means of looking for a global trend could be, as Graddol, suggests, by examining the increasing changes in global youth culture. There is no doubt American popular youth culture has been the dominant influence over the last 30-40 years and with this has been the resulting prevalence of English as part of that culture. However, it seems that ageing populations in the west and rising populations in regions such as South America and Asia could have ramifications for the future of English: It would seem reasonable to assume that as global youth culture becomes increasingly influenced by young people from these parts of the non-English speaking world, the importance of other languages in this mix will increase.

Technology is often one argument put forward to explain the growth of English throughout the world until now and into the future. Graddol (2000) points out that at the time of publishing some 90% of Internet service providers were English based. However as Graddol himself points out this trend is not likely continue along these lines. As HTML, the hyper text format in which web pages are compiled, continues to support multiple languages, Graddol (2000) suggests that the proportion of English
language based sites could fall to around 40% by the middle of this century. Indeed, according to recently published figures by Internet World Stats (Usage and Population Statistics), it is clear how much the situation may have already changed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Ten Languages in the Web</th>
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<tr>
<td>(Number of Users of the Internet by Language)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Top Ten Languages in the Internet</th>
<th>Internet Users, by Language</th>
<th>Users as % of Total Users</th>
<th>Users as % of World Pop.</th>
<th>Average Penetration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>293,072,401</td>
<td>37.3 %</td>
<td>4.5 %</td>
<td>26.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>97,984,112</td>
<td>12.5 %</td>
<td>1.5 %</td>
<td>7.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>64,537,437</td>
<td>8.2 %</td>
<td>1.0 %</td>
<td>50.4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>53,782,589</td>
<td>6.8 %</td>
<td>0.8 %</td>
<td>13.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>52,315,999</td>
<td>6.7 %</td>
<td>0.8 %</td>
<td>54.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>32,840,543</td>
<td>4.2 %</td>
<td>0.5 %</td>
<td>8.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>29,220,000</td>
<td>3.7 %</td>
<td>0.5 %</td>
<td>40.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>28,610,000</td>
<td>3.6 %</td>
<td>0.4 %</td>
<td>50.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>21,906,897</td>
<td>2.8 %</td>
<td>0.3 %</td>
<td>9.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>13,657,170</td>
<td>1.7 %</td>
<td>0.2 %</td>
<td>56.4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Ten languages</td>
<td>687,927,149</td>
<td>87.6 %</td>
<td>10.7 %</td>
<td>18.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of the Languages</td>
<td>97,782,873</td>
<td>12.4 %</td>
<td>1.5 %</td>
<td>3.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Total</td>
<td>785,710,022</td>
<td>100.0 %</td>
<td>12.2 %</td>
<td>12.2 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) NOTES: (1) Internet Top Ten Languages Stats were updated on May 30, 2004. (2) Average Penetration is the ratio between the sum of Internet users speaking a language and the total population estimate that speaks that referred language. (3) The most recent Internet usage information comes from data published by Nielsen/NetRatings, International Telecommunications Union, local NIC's, local ISP's and other reliable sources. (4) Data from this site is copyright. It may be cited, giving the due credit and establishing a link back to InternetWorldStats.com.

(Source: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm)

While variations exist in these kinds of statistics, an argument could be made that the continuing nature of such a trend could result in continued linguistic plurality rather than a trend in the opposite direction.
The same could be said for the impact of the global media over the next century. Graddol (1997 & 2000) argues that the trend in global satellite delivery of programs such as MTV and the Murdoch-owned sports network Star TV is for globally produced content which is then locally distributed and customized. The result, which is already apparent in many parts of the world, can be seen as at least a continuation of the status quo in terms of current linguistic diversity where local languages are supported in terms of both the programming content as well as advertising and so on. Not only does this cater for populations in a variety of non-English speaking countries but, as Graddol (2000) suggests, this will also cater for the Diaspora of people, whose first language is not English, currently living in the English speaking world. Once again such trends are evidence to suggest a sharp decrease in linguistic diversity over this century is not necessarily a certainty.

One trend that does need to be emphasized is that discussed by Warschauer (2000); and that is future employment patterns. As Warschauer points out there is an increasing move towards service or knowledge based work, which places a higher emphasis on inter-personal communication, which of course relies on language. Warschauer discusses Castells (1996) concept of 'Informationalism' where there is a move towards increasing global networks through tourism, business, the scientific world and the media. The result of this push, Warschauer claims, is the increasing value of a lingua franca. However, this does not automatically mean this lingua franca will be English, or at least not English alone in every part of the world.

In so far as English is increasingly seen as one such lingua franca encouraged by this process of informationalism, Warschauer claims this will promote the development of world Engishes. He suggest that the TEFL/TESOL industry can respond to this by adopting the concept of 'multiliteracies' put forward by the New London Group (996) and Cope & Kalantzis (2000), which suggests that most curricula in the field limits itself to standard forms of the language. However, it would seem that the degree to which the English language teaching profession can exert any real influence over the future of world Engishes is extremely small, given the enormity of factors at play.

The arguments of Linguicism (Skutnab-Kangas, 1988) and Linguistic Imperialism (Phillipson, R. 1992) put forward in the past, which paint English as some kind of sinister force putting to the sword linguistic diversity and with it cultural identity, in my view seem simplistic and unlikely as an explanation of the future. The future that seems most probable is one in which English is likely to be spoken by an ever increasing number of people as a second language. It is likely to be used a one of a few important lingua franca in ways that do not necessarily result in the loss of cultural heritage. As Warschauer argues, this increasing number of people will view English not so much as foreign language but as a means by which they can communicate in
an additional language to speakers of other languages and in ways that express their own identities. As can be seen in the example of Singapore, the growth of English is not equated with the loss of cultural heritage. Rather, this has been accompanied by flourishing multilingualism and the development of a variety of English by the Singaporean people that reflects their own identity.

Perhaps this view is best summarized by Warschauer when he claims that

*If the central contradiction of the 21st century is between global networks and local identities, English is a tool of both. It connects people around the world and provides a means to struggle to give meanings to those connections. If English is imposing the world on our students, we can enable them, through English, to impose their voices on the world.*

(Warschauer 2000, p.12)

In summary, any predictions about the possible or likely futures for Englishes in the world are fraught with risk, given both the inadequacy of the tools to measure such trends, as well as the multitude of unpredictable events that could impact on the situation in different ways in different parts of the world. While increasing diversity seems least likely, there is enough evidence in the way the global media and the Internet are developing to suggest that language diversity will be supported at the local level by global networks. While the prospect of a world dominated by native English speakers seems demographically doomed, it does seem likely that as more people speak English as their second or third lingua franca, varieties in English will continue to develop around the world, with these varieties reflecting the different cultural identities of the speakers.
References


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