

## Regional International Englishes – The Future of English as a Lingua Franca?

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### **Abstract:**

*This article focuses on usage and perceptions of English in the world today. Following an analysis of existing terminology in and related to the field of World Englishes, a new model of 'Local' and 'International' Englishes is proposed as an alternative theoretical framework through which the current global state of English can be considered. The new model implies that, partly due to inertia in language teaching and testing, the form of International English which is equally intelligible for all users may in fact be quite far removed from the perceived international standard for the language at present. Examples drawn from World Englishes literature are used to illustrate the new framework, then an argument is made for the development and promotion of a number of 'Regional' International Englishes that enhance mutual intelligibility within blocks of geographically proximate countries, but are in turn also intelligible with each another. The case is made that this scenario is preferable to the imposition of a single world standard for the language. It is finally argued that current English education and testing practices may act as an obstacle to the goal of promoting Regional International Englishes, and that more research into the existing characteristics and perceptions of English at a regional level is necessary.*

**Key words:** World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca

### **Introduction**

'English' is a subject name that features regularly on study timetables all around the world. It is also a language that, in the author's experience, students are often encouraged to regard as essential for their future. The inclusion of English in the core curriculum of educational systems across the globe suggests a widespread belief in its importance; however there is ongoing debate about exactly what form of this language students should be learning. Should they be studying the English of 'native' speakers from the UK or America, or would a focus on one or more of the many other varieties in existence be more appropriate? In order to make decisions as to which form or forms should be taught in different educational contexts it is important to first consider the full spectrum of 'Englishes' and the different purposes that they are used for. This article will therefore examine, and propose a model for, the usage of Englishes in different local and international contexts with the aim of providing some useful insights for English language curriculum construction.

The first step in the analysis presented here will be the examination of possible and perceived meanings of terms such as 'English' and 'Englishes' - a discussion that leads on to the clarification of the scope and terminology usage of this article. Categorizations of Englishes that are used in local and international contexts will then be considered, with reference to literature written in varieties that are often regarded as 'nonstandard', together with the communication needs of these contexts. A model of how the different categorizations interact will then be proposed and finally an argument will be presented for the development and promotion of 'Regional International Englishes', together with the implications of this for English language research and teaching.

## English? english? Englishes?

Different writers define English in different ways. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) make a distinction between 'English' and 'english', viewing the former as the central colonial language, the 'proposed standard code' of British English, and new varieties of post-colonial English as the latter. The distinction is made to draw attention to the changes that the language underwent in its journey through the British Empire; however the authors do not emphasize the fact that a large portion of the population of southeast England almost certainly did not use the standard code of Received Pronunciation (RP). There were, and still are, a variety of different Englishes spoken in England, and the language that was brought out into the empire by merchants and soldiers may in many cases have been far removed from RP (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Although the distinction made by the above terminology highlights one characteristic of modern English forms, it does not provide focus on the large variety of Englishes in existence today and the differences between them.

The widely recognized framework put forward by Kachru (1985) takes a different viewpoint and divides Englishes into three categories; essentially 'native', 'nativized', and 'English as a Lingua Franca'. Kirkpatrick (2007) argues that the native and nativized categories in this model are fundamentally the same thing, viewing the main distinction as being between this group of 'World Englishes' and English as a Lingua Franca, a category where English is used predominantly for communication between different language groups. This merging of the native and nativized categories challenges the conventional image of the 'native speaker' (generally speaking a white Caucasian from a country such as the UK or America) that appears to be strongly embedded in the psyche of countries such as Japan. Indeed the writings of Seargeant (2005) suggest that many Japanese would be very surprised to see speakers from countries such as Cameroon and Singapore being included in the same language grouping as, for example, Americans. Kirkpatrick's view also opposes the idea of a 'standard' English that is inherently superior to other forms of English. This in turn challenges the supposed superiority of native speakers as language users and teachers, a concept that still enjoys a strong prevalence in the English language teaching market of countries such as the UK (Clark and Paran, 2007). The term 'native speaker' has additionally been criticized by writers such as Rampton (1990) and Mahboob (2005). Rampton suggests that 'language expertise', 'language inheritance' and 'language affiliation' are more appropriate descriptors of a person's relationship with a language. The use of these terms when describing language users serves to further blur any perceived native/non-native difference between speakers of World Englishes. It should also be noted that even the distinction between English as a Lingua Franca and World Englishes is not generally regarded as static; models for how new Englishes develop have been put forward by writers such as Kachru (1992), Moag (1992) and Schneider (2003). What is considered to be English as a Lingua Franca today may be regarded as a World English tomorrow.

In this article analysis will be carried out primarily based on the framework presented by Kirkpatrick (2007), whereby all varieties of English in existence will be broadly categorized as either World Englishes or instances of English as a Lingua Franca. This terminology gives equal footing to all varieties of English that are established to some degree and is free from the concept of a pre-existing central, superior standard. The categorizations could be better represented as clusters of points along a continuum rather than having clearly defined boundaries; however for the purposes of clarity of analysis in this article they will at times be referred to as separate entities. The term 'English' will be used in the remainder of this paper to refer to any specific variety or category of the language, while 'Englishes' will denote a collection of different varieties or categories.

## Local and International Englishes

The categorizations of World Englishes and Lingua Franca Englishes could be more accurately characterized as the property of being closer to one or the other of two theoretical extremes on a continuum. In order to develop this concept further, the point at the Lingua Franca end of this continuum will be defined as 'Global International English' (language used for the purpose of facilitating communication between all groups), while the point at the other extreme will be defined as 'Local English', (language used to express the culture of the speaker as accurately as possible). It should be noted that 'groups' in this context does not necessarily refer to nations; this would be a drastic oversimplification as there are many different cultural groups contained within most countries.

Englishes that are used around the world today can be seen as being somewhere on a scale between the two poles mentioned above, and whether they are regarded as Lingua Franca usage or a World English is determined by their location between these two extremes. As the Local English end of the theoretical continuum is highly divergent (since there are many different cultures to be expressed) and the Global International English extreme is convergent (in order to be efficient for communication it needs to be the same for all groups), a more precise two-dimensional representation of the situation would be a circle where the areas near to the edge represent World Englishes and the area near the centre represents Lingua Franca Englishes (see Figure 1). Some of the regions near the circle perimeter may not have very established World Englishes, however this model assumes that there is some form of English in existence or development that can fulfill the role of expressing each culture with a high degree of accuracy, even if it is not very widely used.

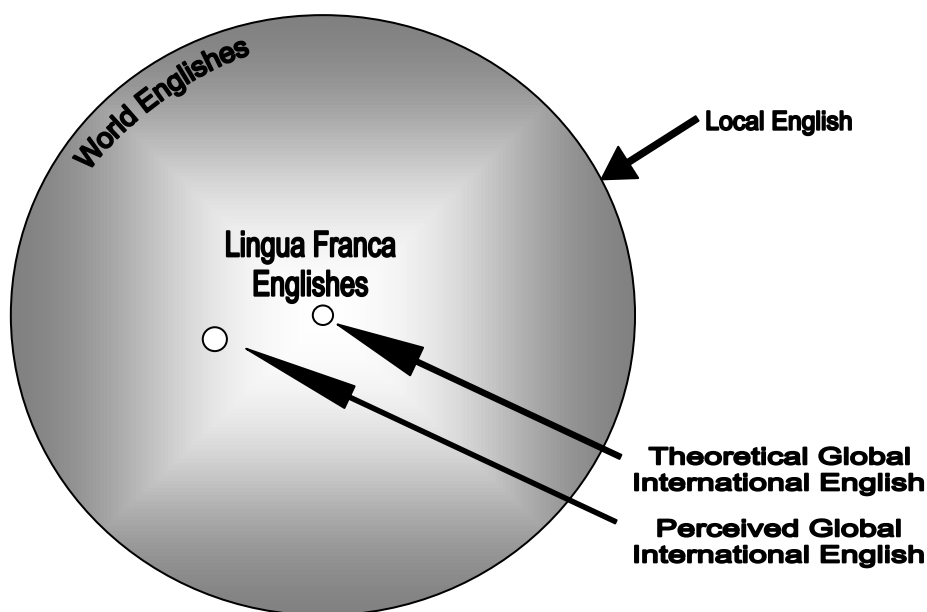


Figure 1: A New Model of Local and International Englishes

It should also be noted that the actual location of the Global International English extreme, represented in Figure 1 as being in the centre of the circle, is ultimately determined by where speakers of World Englishes perceive it to be. It is situated where speakers believe the most widely recognized international standard to be (and this may differ for each speaker); when communicating with an outsider of unfamiliar linguistic background speakers will move their language towards this point in an effort to communicate more effectively. Accordingly the perceived Global International English extreme may not be in the same central position as the theoretical Global International English Extreme (theoretical Global International English being equidistant from all Local English extremes).

The present state of the world is the determiner for the current position of perceived Global International English. The domination of the English language testing industry by strongly US or UK slanted tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC and IELTS (Hamp-Lyons & Davies, 2008; Jenkins, 2006) together with the wide availability of teaching materials for British and American English make one of these two a convenient choice for many educators seeking a standard to teach. Matsuda (2003), for example, comments on a strong bias toward British and American English in ELT teaching practices in Japan. A survey of German high school teachers by Decke-Cornill (2003) also suggested that teachers in German academic high schools were generally in favor of maintaining British or American English as the main standard to teach as it gave them clearer guidelines of and goals for what they should actually be teaching. The study failed to note, however, that many of these teachers may have studied abroad in England or America themselves; thus a different variety of English being taught in schools would devalue their own training and this might have accounted for their preference for British or American English. Nonetheless influences such as this are likely to result in large numbers of speakers of World

Englishes perceiving Global International English as being closer to the English of the 'inner circle' countries (as described by Kachru (1885)) than it is to other World Englishes. Thus the current situation represents a stage where perceived Global International English, though somewhat removed from British and American English, is still a great deal closer to these standards than it is to non-'inner circle' varieties of Local English. Of course British and American English here refer to idealized examples of language rather than the large range of actual usage within each country.

A shift along a continuum from a World English toward perceived Global International English can be observed in the novel *Sozaboy* (Saro-Wiwa, 1994). The author notes in his foreword that if he had written the whole novel entirely in the variety of Nigerian pidgin that he bases the language in the book on it would be almost entirely incomprehensible to people from outside the region where the story is set. Instead he opts for a mix with a more widely understandable variety of English in order to make the novel easier to read for outsiders. In terms of the model outlined above, he shifts the language slightly toward what he perceives to be the form of English with the highest level of mutual intelligibility; perceived Global International English. In this case the shift is only slight and the strong flavor of the World English remains evident in the work. The effect he achieves is what appears to be a fairly accurate representation of the native culture that is still comprehensible to a relatively wide range of readers.

The language that Saro-Wiwa uses evokes images of the environment of the region. For example the main character's outward manifestation of his sexual yearnings is described by his prospective partner as his 'man wey still dey stand like snake' (Saro-Wiwa, 1994, p.37) - imagery and phrasing that is unlikely to be heard in a more neutral International English where straightforward communication is prioritized above representation of local environment. It should be noted here that the author is actually from the region where the story is set, rather than an outside observer; thus it is reasonable to assume that he had sufficient understanding of the local culture and World English to render it accurately.

Whereas *Sozaboy* pushes a World English slightly in the direction of a perceived international standard, a study based in the Shetland Islands outlines how school students are consciously encouraged to write in 'standard' English and their local 'dialect' separately, and to be aware not to mix the two when writing or speaking (Melchers, 1999). Melchers notes that the aim of this education appears to be partly in order to heighten students' awareness of both which forms constitute their local language (generally considered either to be a variant of either English or of Scots, depending on how the status of Scots is perceived (McArthur, 2003)) and which are more widely understandable. The author mentions that the school children do not use 'Shetlandic' when talking to outsiders and generally display the ability to code-switch between their local variety and the 'standard' variety used for external communication. This is a very clear example of language being obviously moved towards the perceived Global International English Standard in order to facilitate communication with outsiders.

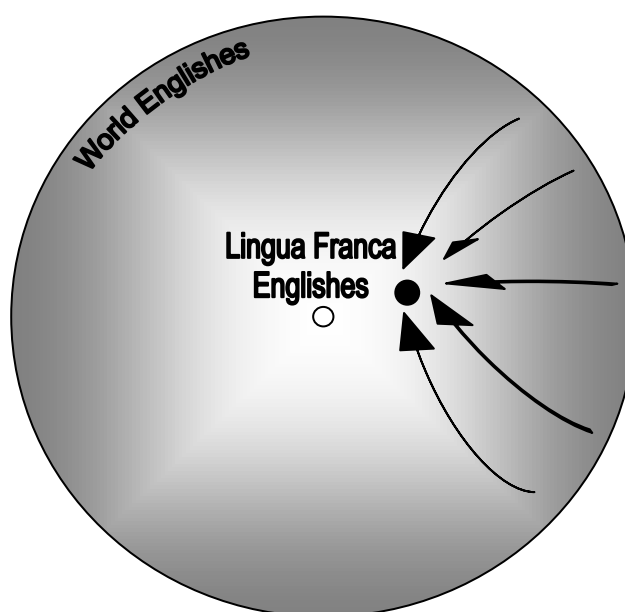
Another novel that features a mix of World Englishes is *The Shipping News* (Proulx, 1993). The story is told mainly from the perspective of a New Yorker, however speech from many of the Newfoundland characters in the book is decidedly different to the English of the narrator. One example of this is the lack of third person '-s' forms: "AGNIS have a manly heart, Agnis do," said Mavis Bangs to Dawn when the aunt went off with her measuring tapes and notebook. "A boldish air, she grasp on things like a man do' (Proulx, 1993, p.112).

Although Proulx was lauded for her work by the mainstream press, the accuracy of her representations is in fact disputed by some writers from Newfoundland (Inglis, 2000). For any readers who are not intimately familiar with Newfoundland the most important thing about the way that some of the characters speak is likely to be the fact that it is different to their own variety of English and different to their perception of Global International English. It is this difference, this unfamiliarity that lends the characters an air of exoticness, regardless of whether or not real Newfoundlanders speak as represented in the book. In this situation the movement of the characters' speech away from perceived Global International English serves to highlight their different cultural background.

## Regional International Englishes

Returning to the model, just as the centre of the shortest possible line between two points on the perimeter will change as the position of the two points varies, so will the most efficient point for communication on the scale of Local and International English change depending on the cultural affiliation of the conversants. Clearly the point that is equidistant and shortest for all speakers will be close to the centre of the circle, and this can be considered to be the theoretical ideal for Global International English. However if all of the people involved in a communication activity are concentrated on one particular

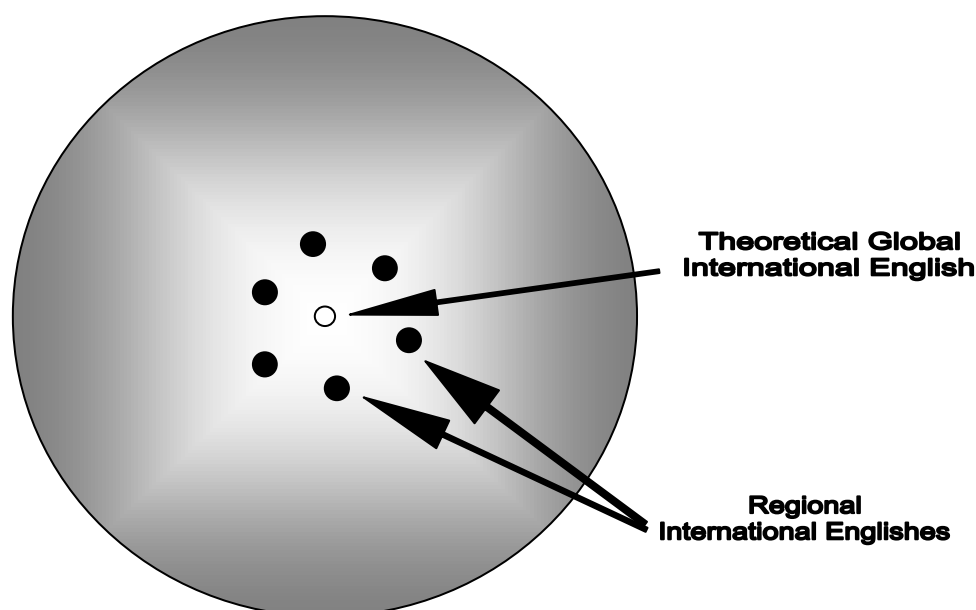
side of the circle, then the point that results in the shortest aggregate distance from the location of the World Englishes will be significantly removed from the centre. If relative proximity on the circle perimeter is considered representative of either cultural or geographical proximity then this implies that the most efficient lingua franca for communication between speakers of World Englishes in a particular region of the diagram will be slightly different to the most efficient lingua franca for world communication. It should also be noted that in reality speakers are likely to move the language they use closer to perceived Global International English if they are unfamiliar with the linguistic and cultural identities of their conversants, thus the centre point of a curved line between World Englishes that takes into account the 'pull' of perceived Global International English would probably be a more accurate representation of the actual situation (see Figure 2). The behaviour of adapting speech for enhanced mutual comprehensibility is noted by Yamaguchi (2002) when she refers to the 'foreigner talk' of native English speakers conversing with low proficiency users.



*Figure 2: Representation of a Communication Situation between Conversants with Different Local Englishes under the New Model*

Leading on from this it can be argued that current perceived Global International English is in general highly efficient for communication between speakers of certain World Englishes, but not very efficient for those speakers located on the side of the circle that is most distant from it. It therefore follows that current perceived Global International English could be better described as a Regional International English – one that is highly efficient for lingua franca usage between a particular segment of World English speakers. Instead of trying to shift this Regional International English toward theoretical Global International English, it is proposed that a more efficient solution for all World English speakers would be to establish several other Regional International English standards to operate together with the one(s) that already exist.

The exact details of how many Regional International Englishes there should be, how they would be established and what regions they should represent are issues that require further investigation; however in principle each Regional International English should be a more efficient lingua franca than Global International English for communication between the World Englishes speakers of the region it represents. The set of Regional International Englishes should also have a high degree of mutual intelligibility with each other in order to facilitate global communication. This situation is illustrated in Figure 3 (for the sake of the diagram six Regional International Englishes representing the six continents and their surrounding areas are assumed).



*Figure 3: The Positioning of Regional International Englishes under the New Model*

A large amount of English communication is now considered to occur in a lingua franca context (Gradol, 2000). Geographical convenience and cultural ties dictate that a great deal of this is likely to occur between groups in the same region. If this is the case then the relatively high volume of intra-regional, as opposed to inter-regional, communication would justify Regional International Englishes as a more efficient solution than attempting to establish a single global standard. Movement towards this outcome may in fact already be underway - Jenkins, Modiano and Seidlhofer (2001) identify 'Euro English' as a potentially emerging variety of language that closely matches the above description of a Regional International English.

## **Implications for English Language Teaching and Research**

Within the scope of this article it has only been possible to briefly introduce the model of Englishes presented above, and there are many aspects of it that require further examination. In particular, more research needs to be done on ascertaining what common regional use of English is (for example, examination of the Englishes used between countries such as China, Korea and Japan in Asia). As was noted earlier, a Global or Regional International English is ultimately located wherever the speakers on the periphery perceive it to be, thus studies analyzing people's perception of what they believe their regional international language consists of (or should consist of) would be another way of determining the features of such a language. People's perceptions are likely to be affected by their education, so attention needs to be given to creating educational materials that are based on studies of interactions in English between members of different groups in a region, and that focus strongly on the different cultures of that region. An emphasis on regional culture and vocabulary may in turn spur the more concrete development of recognized regional forms of international English to complement existing standards.

In order to develop regional languages as outlined above clear targets need to be put in place; the study of German high school teachers (Decke-Cornill, 2003) detailed earlier, for example, cites the need for clear standards as being one of the reasons why some teachers were in favour of teaching British or American English over other varieties. Jenkins (2006) also argues the case that a change in the English testing system must precede any overhaul of what is taught in the classroom, as teachers and students are unlikely to be motivated to focus on material that is not reflected in the targets of mainstream tests. With this in mind another important area that requires investigation is how the existing English language testing framework can be adapted to allow for a wider variety of standards.

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