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Sharing Englishes & Social Media

Yearlong Grant at Pace University, Final report

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Foreign languages have always fascinated me. My mother wanted to make sure that I was in the “good group,” i.e., the one where English was taught (that is, not all kids could learn English). It was important for her to know that her daughters would learn this language. We were in communism; my mother knew English could mean something more than *just* a language. However, the teacher who taught us, like all teachers of foreign languages, was Romanian; Romanians created the textbooks; from the start, we learned English with an accent. I did not know this then. I would find out about it later when I came to the States and people asked me the question that would soon become repetitive and annoying, “So, where are you from?” Just to clarify, to this day, I am not ashamed of my past and country, but the question does situate one outside of (what is misleadingly considered) proper English because the rather invasive question isolates/excludes/borders.

I knew my English was different. In the beginning, actually, I translated almost every single statement. I heard vowels and consonants in Romanian being transformed and eventually getting out of my mouth in English; sometimes, the words could be understood; other times, a word was repeated or followed by an explanation. That was the Romanglish phase of my Englishes.¹ As a graduate student, if I did not talk with Keith for hours, my new linguistic persona wouldn't have emerged the way it is today. If I did not work independently with my mentors, Tom, Elizabeth, and Floyd, I would not have been able to publish and become an author. Yet, my Englishes will always stay (a) foreign(er).

I share this story because it is obvious that I have always been intrigued by variations of Englishes and when I came across an article² where the noun was used in plural, everything that I had felt and experienced at an intimate level finally made sense at a professional/official level. Of course, there are Englishes and each one has its own uniqueness. But things don't come pre-packaged with simple solutions. Things are complex and complicated. To this day, people almost never refer to the noun in plural. To me, that is a mistake. By using English in singular, we fall prey to the inconsistencies of memory by repeating the same limiting scenario where foreigners of English are going to be put in a different category.

This is why Chloe³ and I have tried to talk about various ways through which English *oppresses*. To start, its usage in singular, which should be revisited and used in plural so that the language itself is viewed as *families* comprised of different members: all different, all beautiful, none excluded.

¹ For more info, please refer to my book chapter, “Nomad/Romanglish.” *Between History and Personal Narrative: East-European Women's Stories of Migration in the New Millennium*. Eds. Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru, Madalina Nicolaescu, Helen Smith. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013

² “Provincializing English” by Simon

Gikandi: <https://www.mlajournals.org/doi/abs/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.1.7>

³ Chloe's blogs: <https://ugresearch.blogs.pace.edu/category/summer-2017/chloe-richards/>

In “Discourse on the Logic of Language” by Marlene Nourbese Philip,⁴ one primary source used in our study, the writer who was born in (Trinidad &) Tobago talks about how English becomes the “father” in the sense of imposing one colonizer point of view, enslaving its speakers. On the contrary, a language should be a means through which to communicate freely. Continuing the oppression via language, the Haitian writer Lenelle Moïse in her “the children of immigrants”⁵ makes a bold statement. From the title, Moïse reminds the world that she is a free spirit who has the option to disregard the convention according to which the first letter in a title (unless it’s a preposition, article, or conjunction) should be capitalized. By standing up against this convention, she is defiant in a way that invites us to question all the rules that we learn by rote memorization and how we then apply them habitually and sometimes quite rigidly.

While rules may be good, language, like us, has contexts and moods, and we should adapt quickly, if we care for our Englishes to survive. In addition to this, the writer talks about how much work she had to do to translate her parents’ mocked, accented English. Like many children of immigrants, Moïse is forced to skip over her childhood with its playful ways of using language and instead enter adulthood, via strict usage of English.

Chloe analyzed these two texts closely and she spoke about “the gold standard of English.” In one of her blogs, she wrote about her own parents’ exposure to English, especially her mother’s. Chloe talks about how her grandmother taught her kids English hoping that one day they would leave Guyana and come to the States. Back there, they were exposed to “the King’s English,” which indicates that they knew a very good version of English. In fact, her mother, Chloe tells us, was disliked back home for talking *too properly*. Imagine her mother’s shock to come to a new country, to think she *knew* its language, yet to be ridiculed by the natives. In one of her blogs, Chloe cuts deeper into the problem and talks about how class relates to language, more exactly, how we label people based on their performance in English. The question, “So, where are you from?” takes on a different, more *real* and blunt turn: you are not from here!

In another blog, Chloe analyzed a very disturbing clip⁶ from an otherwise beloved movie, *My Fair Lady* (1964). The clip is atrocious to watch because the male professor makes his student repeat over and over again until she reaches the proper/perfect way to pronounce words in English. The professor wants the woman to learn how to *master* English, not grammatically, not even lexically, but just by focusing on pronunciation. This is symptomatic of a larger, more severe problem. There is absolutely nothing wrong with how people pronounce words in English. Sure, if they make grammatical errors, or if their syntax is faulty, or if they have a limited vocabulary, then that would be a problem. But in the above-mentioned clip, the professor is fixated on pronunciation and informs his student that a perfect usage of the words may give her better job opportunities, so, in return, she may climb the mythical social ladder of success.

Here, Chloe, brilliantly, pointed out that both of them were white, and that the problem of “othering” was even more complex and strongly connected to status quo. As Chloe says, the character in the movie “must assimilate and shape herself in his [the professor’s] likeness.”

⁴ Listen to the author reading her piece: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=424yF9eqBsE>

⁵ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/91753>

⁶ Watch the clip here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJr9SSJKkII>

Moving on, from a movie quite successful until today, we need to take into account the surge of technology, the transformation of English into a “lingua franca,” and the speed with which something can be disseminated *in the world* with just one click. To that, we also need to factor in how public figures misuse the language and how that complicates even further effective and respectful communication.⁷

How are *we* then responsible for the way in which we treat our language? In one of her blogs, Chloe reminds us of A.A.V.E., African-American Vernacular English, and how to this day it is unjustly considered slang rather than dialect. One scholar, Geoffrey K. Pullum, argued that A.A.V.E. is a dialect suggesting that “no subculture’s slang could constitute a language.” By introducing A.A.V.E. into discussion, Chloe invites to reconsider what should be classified as slang and what as dialect.

To conclude, let us all reflect on these questions: are we conscious that if we reject the others based on trivial aspects, we are in fact hurting & impoverishing the language in which we operate? Also, are we aware of the fact that if we continue to impose the “gold standard of English” we exclude people from performing best to their abilities? Are we also aware of the power that we have to birth a language? As I argue in own my collection, *Transnational Narratives in Englishes of Exile* (2017),⁸ we are born in a language, but we also give birth to one. By so doing, we let languages and dialects coexist.

This study may have reached its end, but we hope others at Pace/elsewhere will continue it. I personally distrust monolithic English and consider it damaging to speakers of Englishes. If the noun Englishes was introduced by specialists in the late ‘70’s, *when we will have the courage to use it in plural?*

⁷ “Trump Savagely Mauls the Language”: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/opinion/donald-trump-english-language-.html> or “Trump and his White House have made some embarrassing spelling mistakes — here are the worst ones”: <http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-typos-spelling-tweets-unpresided-2017-4>

⁸ For further details on the plurality and inclusiveness of Englishes, you may listen to my interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3ausfm35NI>