

The English Language in the 21st century. Different Identities of a “Global Language.”

Paul Maersk Nielsen*
Universidad del Salvador

When it comes to approaching the “Different Identities of a ‘Global Language’” there are at least three aspects that must be defined or narrowed down before attempting any sort of analysis within the framework of this paper. These are:

- a) The concept of the term global language, the factors involved which make a language global, and the reasons for English to have become a global language.
- b) The notion of the identity of a language.
- c) The manner in which any language can acquire different identities.

Again, if we are to define a global language, the correct thing to do is to begin by defining language. There are many definitions of language, but for the sake of this paper only two have been chosen. The first by Dwight Bolinger (1968) in his renowned *Aspects of Language*, in which he defines human language as “a system of vocal auditory communication using conventional signs composed of arbitrary patterned sound units assembled according to set rules interacting with the experience of its users.”

The second by David Crystal (2015) on *Britanica.com*, who in turn defines language as:

... a system of conventional spoken, manual, or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release.

A number of different definitions could have been chosen, these were chosen because they are both connected to the main theme of the “IV International Conference on English Language – Culture of English Speaking Countries”, i.e. the relationship between language and culture.

Both definitions, though forty-seven years apart, include the cultural aspect of language. Bolinger says: “rules interacting with the experience of its users,” stressing the idea of the “experience of its users.” What is this *experience* other than the cultural element in language? As will be pointed out later on, the relationship between a peoples’ experience, their language and their culture is unavoidable.

Crystal (2015) goes even further when he overtly connects language with the “culture” and “the expression of identity” of its users.

Now the issue at stake is: Whose culture? Whose experience? Whose identity? The answer is not as straightforward as it may seem at first sight. And it is definitely not so in a language such as English.

This brings us back to the three aspects that necessarily have to be narrowed down before we attempt to explain the situation of English in the early 21st century.

* Graduated as a Teacher of English at Universidad del Salvador (USAL), Argentina. Specialized in Higher Education Management at IUO – Interamerican University Organization, Canada. He is now writing his Dissertation for a PhD in Modern Languages and attending a PhD course in Education, both at USAL. Professor of English Language and Phonetics at the Modern Languages School, USAL, from 1998 to 2008, and at present: Professor of English Grammar and Linguistics at Modern Languages School – USAL Campus in Pilar. In the field of university management, he served as the Academic Coordinator at USAL Campus in Pilar from 1993 to 2010. He is the Dean of the School of History, Geography and Tourism since December 2010, and a member of Academic Coordinating Unit at USAL Campus in Pilar, since November 2014.

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1. Crystal, David (2003) *English as a Global Language*.

David Crystal (2000, p. 3), when addressing the concept of the term global language, says that “a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country.” This *special role* that Crystal argues a language must develop is not related in any way to the number of native speakers of that language or the number of countries where in which the speakers use that language as a mother tongue, but more to the role it plays in countries where the speakers are non-native speakers of the language in question. This special role could be that of an official language, such as is the case in India or some of the African nations, or the main foreign-language taught, either to children at school or to adults who have never learnt it.

The factors involved in one language becoming first international and then global, have very little to do with whether one language or another is perceived as simpler to use or teach, or whether one language is more “user friendly” than another. The main cause is related to the power of the people who speak it (Crystal, 2000). This power can be either political, economic, military, technological, or a combination of all of these factors.

There have been many examples of this throughout history. Greek and Latin were, at the time, the equivalent of world languages though what was considered as the world has differed considerably over the centuries.

Now, why has English become a global language? There is no doubt that English clearly meets the description above as to what makes a language global. Throughout the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, and during the first decade of the 21st, the language of the British Empire and the USA, as a superpower, has been English.

Graddol (2000, p. 6) argues that during the 17th and 18th centuries “the nation state emerged as a territorial basis for administration and cultural identity... National languages... had to be constructed. Consequently English was self-consciously expanded and reconstructed to serve the purposed of a national language.” As form then, English has worked its way to becoming a global language. It became the language of science, of the industrial revolution, of the economic power of Britain and the USA in the 19th century as they dominated the money markets of the world. It went on to become the language of diplomacy and of technological innovation of the 20th century and early 21st.

Having addressed the issue of English as a global language, it would be appropriate to identify who the users of English are. Professor Braj Kachru (1987) proposes a perspective based on the users of English in a three circle model: the Inner Circle (L1 varieties, e.g. the USA, United Kingdom), the Outer Circle (ESL varieties), and the Expanding Circle (EFL varieties). (Figure 1)

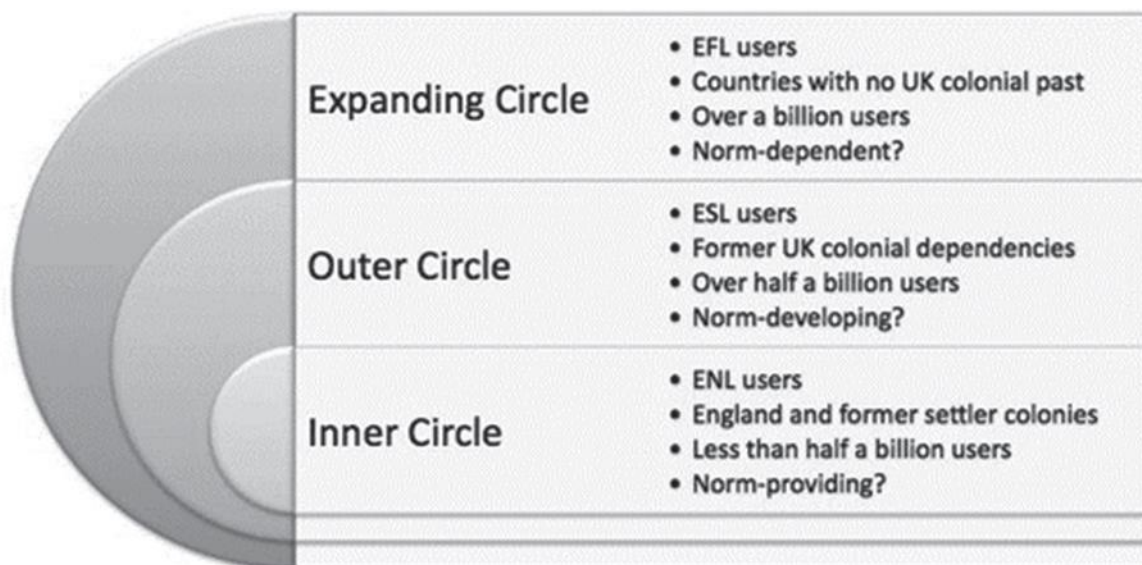


Figure 1

Each of these users of English has an identity of their own which as Kachru (1987, p. 181) says:

bring to the English language... a unique cultural pluralism, and a variety of speech fellowships. These three circles certainly bring to English linguistic diversity, and let us not underestimate- as some scholars tend to do - the resultant cultural diversity. One is tempted to say, as does Tom McArthur (1987), that the three Circles of English have resulted in several English "languages."

The term *culture* is closely associated with the concept of identity. Culture, according to Yule (2006, p. 267) is used "to refer to all the ideas and assumptions about the nature of things, people and ideas that we learn when we become members of social groups." And it is via language that culture is manifested. As Claire Kramersch (2013, p. 63) notes,

In the dyad 'language and culture', language is not a bunch of arbitrary linguistic forms applied to a cultural reality that can be found outside of language, in the real world. Without language and other symbolic systems, the habits, beliefs, institutions, and monuments that we call culture would be just observable realities, not cultural phenomena. To become culture, they have to have meaning. It's the meaning that we give to foods, gardens and ways of life that constitute culture.

Yule (2006, p. 267) agrees with Kramersch that culture necessarily needs language to manifest itself, consequently strengthening the notion that language and culture are mutually dependant,

... we develop awareness of our knowledge, and hence of our culture, only after having developed language. The particular language we learn through the process of cultural transmission provides us, at least initially, with a ready-made system of categorizing the world around us and our experience of it. With the words we acquire, we learn to recognize the types of category distinctions that are relevant in our social world. Very young children may not initially think of "dog" and "horse" as different types of entities and refer to both as bow-wow. As they develop a more elaborated conceptual system along with English as their first language, they learn to categorize distinct types of creatures as a dog or a horse. In native cultures of the Pacific, there were no horses and, not surprisingly, there were no words for them. In order to use words such as dog or horse, rain or snow, father or uncle, week or weekend, we must have a conceptual system that includes these people, things and ideas as distinct and identifiable categories.

The paradigm shift of the beginning of the 20th century, which brought about changes in lifestyle, technology and moral values, is clearly portrayed in the award-winning British television series "Downton Abbey." These changes made it very hard for some of the members of the older generation to quite grasp what was going on. A good example is precisely the understanding of the terms *weekend* and *telephone*. In the Britain of the turn of the century, the concept of work days, Monday to Friday - Saturday and Sunday, among the upper classes did not exist. In the following scene, the Dowager Countess of Grantham, who one would imagine has not worked a day in her life, is at a complete loss when Mathew Crawley, the lawyer who is the pretender of the Earldom of Grantham, suggests that he will continue with his law practice in Rippon and come down to Downton at the *weekend*:

Lady Edith: What will you do with your time?

Mathew Crawley: I've got a job in Rippon. I said I'll start tomorrow.

Lord Grantham: A job! You do know I mean to involve you in the running of the estate.

Mathew Crawley: Don't worry. There are plenty of hours in a day, and of course I'll have the weekend.

Dowager Countess: (quite puzzled) What is a weekend?

(retrieved from www: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhfpbw-nuwk>)

The Dowager Countess is awed even further by the telephone, which is clearly not part of her

conceptual system: “Is this an instrument of communication or torture?” and “First electricity, now telephones. Sometimes I feel as if I’m living in an H.G. Wells novel.”

Having established that there is a mutual dependency between language and culture, both of which are closely connected with identity, it would now be appropriate to pose the following question: *whose culture is reflected through English?* Considering that, according to Professor Kachru, there are over a billion speakers of English as a Foreign Language, most of which we can infer have had teachers who speak English as a Foreign Language, as is the case in Argentina, it is very likely that most of the speakers of English in the world are manifesting their own cultures via English, thus giving English a new identity.

David Crystal (2013) in his lecture at the English Speaking Union in London argues that language affects culture, and if a language is transferred to a new setting, it quickly reflects aspects of that culture. This has generated different varieties of English that have lessened the chance of standardization. Nonetheless he still believes that though English is no longer the language of the English, it has the English seal on it. He argues that culture-specific elements of English, as idioms for example, are not fully grasped by non-native speakers of English.

Braj Kachru (1998) claims the controversy has two aspects. The first is that the uses and users of English have gone out of control. More than four hundred million people are using English within the context of their non-western, non-Judeo-Christian sociocultural context. The language has been Asianised, Africanised, culturally, linguistically and socially speaking. In other words, English has been separated from its traditional cultural norms. A number of institutional varieties of English have their local histories, traditions, pragmatic contexts and communicating norms. The result is that the African English, South Asian English, South East Asian English is African, South Asian and South East Asian First and Universal Second.

The second aspect, claims Professor Kachru, is that there has to be a pragmatic shift. English must cease to be looked at within the perspective of a monolingual’s view of the language, and within a mono-cultural speech community. Instead, it must be looked at within a multicultural context. The traditional presuppositions about English, therefore, have to be re-evaluated. English must be viewed as a repertoire of cultures, not a single culture (Kachru, 1998, p. 314).

Linguists, especially working in the field of English as a second language, have yet to study the international implications of the uses of English in the OUTER CIRCLE. There is enough evidence and considerable research to show that the deviations are not merely phonological, lexical nor grammatical, but the whole cultural convention which is used in these varieties, the whole notion of textual conventions are distinctly different. The pragmatic notions of politeness rudeness, force, persuasion, are not the same as in American or British culture. Therefore the underlying notion of what is appropriate is different, and appropriateness is a feature of culture.

The idea of English as a single homogenous variety is now dissipating as the varieties have become distinctive in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. English has become, says Crystal (2013), an amalgam of varieties. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a need for intelligibility among speakers of EFL; in the last ten years or so, the need has been for identity.

The question is: what happens when a language develops a distinctiveness of this kind? The idea is not new (Crystal, 2013). The differences between British and American English go back to the days of the American independence. In the American Continental Congress of 1778 (McCrum, 1993, p.229), it was recommended that “all replies and answers to the visiting French Congressman should be put to him in the language of the United States.” Language nationalism even led John Adams to propose an Academy in order to promote American English as an institution.

Though it would be relevant, there is no need to enumerate the differences between British and American English vocabulary, pronunciation or grammar based on their cultural background. They are so widely spread that most speakers of English are aware they exist, and have been exposed to them at some point or other. But it is clear that they are two quite different cultures, because it would be a hard thought for both Britons and Americans to live with if it were believed that the English language never really left its original cultural home and is therefore, still in some sense, British culture.

The cultural identity that is manifested via English is based on local everyday life and includes animals, plants, food, drink, customs, practices, sports, games, politics, religion, myths, legends, etc. (figure 2)

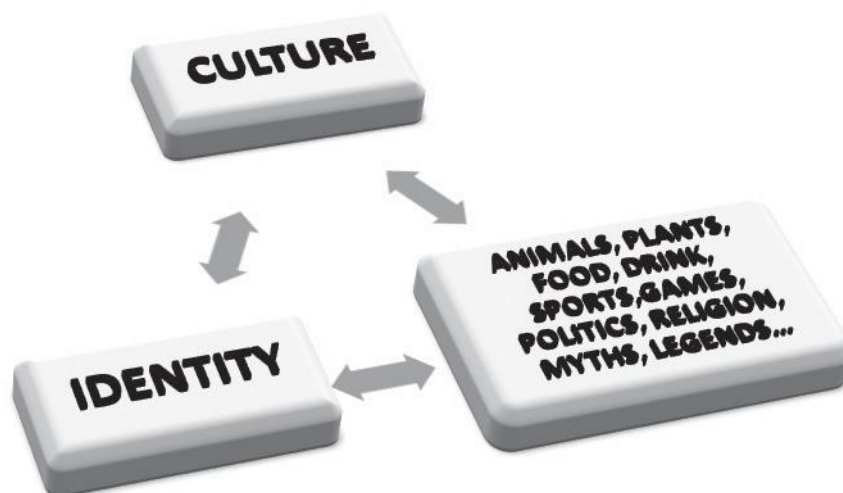


Figure 2

A good example of cultural identity modification of English is Japanese English. English has become acculturated to Japanese Culture, becoming “less and less of a foreign language” (Iwasaki, 1994, p. 266) “...and more and more an additional language for international communication, with the result that the Japanese have acquired an additional vehicle of Japanese Culture.” Many terms, such as *sushi*², *bonsai*³, *Shinto*⁴, *Zen*⁵, *haiku*⁶, and *origami*⁷ are defined in Romanized Japanese and are now well established English words that are listed in the Oxford Dictionary of the English Language.

Other less well-known examples of Romanized Japanese words include, *Taian* (a lucky day), *butsumentsu* (Buddha’s death; an unlucky day), *shichi-go-san* (the lucky numbers: three, five and seven), all of which are used in Japanese speakers of English because their cultural content cannot be translated.

Bhatt (1995) claims that Indian English addresses the relationship between the forms in which English is manifested, its speakers’ perception of reality and the nature of their cultural institutions. “Language is constrained by the grammar of culture.”

The use of undifferentiated question tags serves positive politeness functions. They are linguistic devices governed by the politeness principle of non-imposition, e.g. “You said you’ll do the job, isn’t it?” Indian English speakers find this type of example non-impositional and mitigating.

Another example of Indian grammar is the use of the pragmatic particle *only*. As contrastive stress is rare, they use such a construction as “He works on Thursdays and Fridays only,” though it can solely be used for members of a set that belongs to a particular, semantically identifiable, lexical field. Thursday and Friday belong to the same lexical field.

In most varieties of Indian English, direct questions appear without the English subject-verb

2. Sushi: a Japanese dish of small cakes of cold cooked rice, flavoured with vinegar and served with raw fish, etc. on top.

3. Bonsai: (1) a small tree that is grown in a pot and prevented from reaching its normal size. (2) the Japanese art of growing bonsai.

4. Shinto: a Japanese religion whose practices include the worship of ancestors and a belief in nature spirits.

5. Zen: a Japanese form of Buddhism.

6. Haiku: a poem with three lines and usually 17 syllables, written in a style that is traditional in Japan.

7. Origami: the Japanese art of folding paper into attractive shapes.

inversion rule, as in *What this is made from?* Or *How many kids he has?* This indicates that in Indian English the *focus* takes preverbal position.

Conclusion

This paper intended to establish the relationship between the English language and the culture/identity of its users. As mentioned above, English “is not a bunch of arbitrary linguistic forms applied to a cultural reality that can be found outside of language,” it is the vehicle by means of which culture is manifested. The English language has changed and will continue changing. There are varieties developing. There are differences arising. These differences are the result of the pressure exerted by the culture of the people who use these developing varieties.

English is no longer the language of the English. The English language has taken over the history of the people who speak it, as if encapsulated in its words and structures (Crystal, 2000). To quote Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o: “Language as culture, is the collective memory bank of a peoples' experience in history.”

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