ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Parameters of epicentral status

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Abstract

The present paper offers a fundamental discussion of constituent parameters and relevant issues associated with the concepts of pluricentricity and epicentres. It proposes an explicit division into a weak reading, highlighting the co-existence of national varieties of languages, and a strong one, focusing on influence exerted by some varieties on others. Parameters which constitute epicentres include size and speaker numbers, geographical proximity, intensity of mutual relations, directionality of influence, and attitudinal factors. Methodologically, a fully convincing documentation of epicentral influence would call for diachronic data from both varieties in question, an investigation of detailed usage conditions of forms compared, and a plausible account of the potential for contact – though for now this seems very difficult to achieve. It is suggested that the perspective taken should not only encompass standard varieties and that the weak version of pluricentricity has strong roots in language attitudes and perception rather than production.

1 | INTRODUCTION

With colonial expansion and migration, peoples re-located and took their languages with them. The traditional association between a language and the space where it is spoken has thus widened and needs to be redefined. Some 'heritage languages' are nowadays spoken outside of their home bases, and some languages and language varieties have been transported and diffused globally, in geographical reality and also in cyberspace (Mair, 2013, 2020). In recent theorizing, such regional, social, and structural diffusion processes have widely been understood to transgress traditional

categories and boundaries, national and otherwise, and consequently a range of appropriate concepts and frameworks have been introduced and developed: today's linguistic processes and language varieties are widely seen as marked by transnationalism and 'translanguaging' (Canagarajah, 2013), by 'transcultural flows' (Pennycook, 2007), and language forms understood as globally floating resources (Blommaert, 2010; Meierkord, 2012), by increasingly blurring boundaries (Schneider, 2020a, pp. 232–235) and as 'posthumanist world Englishes' (Wee, 2021). On the other hand, some languages have been assumed to have developed new, distinct 'centers,' national forms and boundaries, and thus have become 'pluricentric' or even 'epicentres' of their respective regions. The notions of 'pluricentricity' and 'epicentral language varieties' are under discussion: with their emphasis on national boundaries and power relationships, they impose a decidedly conservative, nationally focused perspective and may actually therefore be regarded as somewhat untimely. This is epitomized in the recent debate on the relative merits of the concepts of 'pluricentricity' versus 'pluriareality' (Durgasingh & Meer, forthcoming; Dollinger, 2019a, 2019b; Muhr, 2020).

The term 'pluricentricity' and the concept of languages being 'pluricentric' was introduced by Kloss (1978) and popularized by Clyne (1992). In English linguistics, the first to suggest that English is a pluricentric language (with some illustrative and suggestive examples but without clear definitions) was Leitner (1992). Clyne defined a pluricentric language as one which has several '(epi-)centres,' which, in turn, he described as 'a national variety with at least some of its own (codified) norms' (Clyne 1992, p. 1). Cases in point include English, with British, American, Canadian, Australian, and more varieties of their own (Leitner, 1992); German, with distinct norms in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland; Portuguese, which branches into a European-Portuguese and a Brazilian form; and, a fairly young manifestation to which Clyne devotes some attention, Serbian and Croatian, which formerly were regarded as Serbo-Croatian but have come to be posited as two distinct languages after the break-up of former Yugoslavia. Subsequently, a relatively small number of later publications enquired into the nature of pluricentricity and possible epicentric influences in English-speaking nations (Gries & Bernaisch, 2016; Heller et al., 2017; Hoffmann et al., 2011; Hundt, 2013; Leitner, 2010; Peters, 2009; Schneider, 2011, 2013, 2014, forthcoming).

The present contribution is designed essentially as a survey and discussion piece. Rather than investigating original data it is intended to highlight core issues of the notion and the debate around it. Thus, the research questions asked are rather generic:

- What is the state of the art regarding research on epicentres and pluricentricity in English?
- What constitutes a linguistic epicentre?
- How can linguistic epicentres be identified and investigated meaningfully?

2 | PLURICENTRICITY AND EPICENTRES: WHAT WE (BELIEVE TO) KNOW

The notion of epicentres has been used somewhat fuzzily, so I argue there are two distinct readings (related to but more pointed than what Hundt, 2013, p. 185 called 'two dimensions'). Clyne's original understanding and definition, quoted above, claims that several national varieties of a language co-exist, with norms of their own (it highlights two defining components, 'national' and 'codified'); I call this a 'weak' understanding, best encoded in the literal understanding of the term 'pluricentric.' In addition, however, there is a strong reading, going beyond mere co-existence by claiming that some language varieties exert influence on others, typically in their vicinity and typically larger ones upon smaller ones. This is best terminologically encapsulated in the 'epicentre' metaphor borrowed from seismology, designating the point of origin of an earthquake or an underground explosion and implying that waves of impact radiate from there, affecting adjacent regions. The application of the metaphor to language seems evident: linguistic innovations and influences spread from the center to the periphery. In many writings on the subject the weak and strong readings of these terms are not kept apart, and the terms 'pluricentric' and 'epicentric' are often treated broadly as synonyms.

The notion of pluri-/epi-centricity is intuitively appealing and has been fairly widely proposed, but it appears questionable at second glance, and, most importantly, empirically difficult to pin down. Below I look at some pertinent

publications, most importantly the significant work by Hundt (2013), that questioned and tested the concept. I argue, however, that part of the difficulty stems from the fuzziness and ambiguity of the concepts in question, and so in its main part the present paper surveys and discusses several parameters that define the concept, particularly its strong reading, thus offering steps towards a theory of pluricentricity and epicentres.

With a few notable exceptions, earlier work on the subject has tended to be exemplary or motivated by ideological concerns. Leitner (1992), in the first publication to explicitly suggest that English is a 'pluricentric' language (and to apply and introduce this term), essentially points out the existence of a few national varieties of English, thus implicitly adopting what I call the 'weak' understanding of the term, without going into further details. This extrapolates from Clyne's original understanding of the term as 'languages with several interacting centres' (Clyne, 1992, p. 1). As further examples from the English-speaking world, Clyne refers to Singapore, Malaysia, India, West Africa, and other so-called 'world Englishes,' thus indirectly building an immediate connection with this vibrant research field. While this is clearly in line with the 'weak' reading as defined above, implying no more than the co-existence of several national varieties, Clyne's text, while not explicitly expounding the 'strong' reading as well, weakly implies it, for instance by positing the 'relationship between national varieties as a dynamic and interactive one' (Clyne, 1992, p. 2), including dominance and possible convergence processes. Peters, in contrast, phrases this much more explicitly: 'national epicentres exercise some influence over the surrounding environment' (2009, p. 108; similarly Hundt, 2013, p. 182). An explicit empirical application and testing of this line of thinking, investigating the spread and adoption of features from one variety into another, an adjacent one, is offered by Hundt (2013, pp. 183–184). Actually, Clyne's original publication (1992) already looks into a few possible components of pluricentricity (and so does Hundt, 2013, much more explicitly). Clyne also recapitulates a proposal brought forward by Ammon (1989), who postulates different degrees of impact, so-called 'full centres,' 'nearly full,' 'semi-,' and 'rudimentary' centers (without any detailed discussion, application, or exemplification, however).

The notion of pluricentricity inspired a series of first conferences (beginning with Braga, Portugal, in 2010 and Salamanca, Spain, in 2012) and then publications strongly motivated by the desire to achieve the recognition of so-called 'non-dominant varieties' of pluricentric languages as independent and equally important language forms (Muhr et al., 2013; Muhr & Meisnitzer, 2018; Muhr & Thomas, 2020; Soares da Silva et al., 2011; Soares da Silva, 2014). In a similar vein, work by German linguists on syntactic variability in German, showing that there are regional patterns which transcend and do not follow national divisions (Elspass et al. 2017), triggered a rather fierce debate on whether 'pluricentricity' or 'pluriareality' are adequate concepts to grasp this type of variability (see below in my section on perception versus production). Without this being explicitly addressed, almost all of this work hinges upon the weak version of understanding pluricentricity.

In contrast to these rather generally orientated and partly ideologically motivated publications, there has been a fairly small number of empirical and technical studies from the corpus-linguistic tradition that have attempted to test the strong understanding of epicentricity, the claim that 'various regionally relevant norm-developing centres have emerged that exert an influence on the formation and development of the English language in neighbouring areas' (Hoffmann et al., 2011, p. 258; similarly Hundt, 2013, p. 182). Possible examples suggested include Australian, Indian, and Singaporean English influencing their respective neighboring regions (Hundt, 2013, pp. 182, 186). After an extensive and convincing discussion of the topic, Hundt (2013) ultimately remains very skeptical: 'the concept is far from straightforward, both on theoretical and on methodological grounds' (p. 182). She believes that the notion has 'immediate intuitive appeal' but is not really useful because of 'theoretical pitfalls and methodological stumbling blocks' (p. 201).

An obvious possible case in point is Australia, which, as noted already by Clyne, is 'conducting a more aggressive export campaign of its variety' (Clyne, 1992, p. 5), attempting to establish it on the Pacific Rim, including parts of Asia (similarly Leitner, 2010). Peters (2009) conducts an explicit (though thematically limited) investigation of the issue and finds anecdotal evidence that appears to confirm weak epicentric influence of Australian English in New Zealand, if only on the lexical level, 'dated through historical lexicography' (p. 109). Let me add some very simple corpus evidence, based on the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE et al., 2015) suggesting similar relations. For example, the

typically Australian word *breakie* occurs 10 times in the Australian segment of GloWbE, and the other components of this corpus also show it weakly in Asia (six times in Malaysia, twice in Singapore) and New Zealand (twice). The evidence for *stubbie*, another shibboleth of Australian English, is similar in principle but weaker: it occurs 19 times in the Australian sub-corpus and is also found twice in New Zealand and once in Hong Kong.

Hoffmann et al. (2011) ask whether Indian English constitutes a possible epicentre for varieties across South Asia (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh). On the basis of a comparison of light verb constructions across South Asian varieties, the authors conclude that their findings are 'compatible with the hypothesis that IndE is a model variety… in the region' (p. 261) but no more than that; there is no real, solid evidence: 'our data do not allow any substantial conclusions as far as the epicentre hypothesis is concerned' (p. 276). Similarly, in a study of hypothetical subjunctive patterns Hundt et al. (2012) find very weak and tentative evidence for a role of Indian English as a lead variety in South Asia, if at all. Equally tentative and reluctantly phrased (but potentially supportive) evidence is provided by Bernaisch and Lange (2012) on the basis of data for focus marking with *itself* and by Koch and Bernaisch (2013) based on new ditransitives. Lange (2020) also believes that the notion of Indian English as a possible epicentre has 'intuitive plausibility' (p. 255). She surveys five structures and finds 'a possible "trickle-down effect"' (that is, higher frequencies in India than in neighboring varieties) but views this as 'a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for stipulating epicentre status.' Accordingly, she states the 'issue [remains] unresolved' (p. 255). However, Gries and Bernaisch (2016, pp. 19–20) see some weak evidence supporting the assumption of a possible epicentral role of India, and Heller et al. (2017) offer even more tentative support for a possible epicentral role of Singapore (see below under 'proximity').

A few more possible epicentres (in the strong sense) have been suggested as possibilities, given what is known about their political and sociohistorical circumstances (Schneider, 2011, 2013, 2014),[1] but to my knowledge these have not been tested at all so far. New Zealand, while being comparatively small and geographically isolated, may exert some influence in Asia through academic and commercial contacts and, even more importantly, across Pacific island nations, from where it has attracted substantial population groups and where in some cases it holds authority over the education system. Singapore's English, associated with the most developed, wealthiest, and most strongly Anglophone country in the region, might become a model for Southeast Asia (given the increasing political integration of ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, with English as their sole official language) and even East Asia (Japanese groups of students are regularly brought to Singapore to have an immersion experience in what for them counts as the nearest English-speaking country; M. Nakano and J. D'Angelo, p.c.). South Africa may be evolving into an epicentric model for less affluent and developed states in southern Africa, given that it has close political ties with Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, and Namibia (where such linguistic impact has been incipiently shown; Schröder, 2020). And finally, Jamaica as the largest and culturally most visible English-speaking nation in the region may influence other Caribbean varieties.

The following sections raise some fundamental questions concerning epicentres. I believe it is important to distinguish three different relevant perspectives: (a) defining factors, that is prerequisites of epicentral influence; (b) methodological issues, that is problems of identifying possible influences; and (c) further, especially ontological issues.

3 | DEFINING PARAMETERS: WHAT MAKES A VARIETY AN EPICENTRE?

Given the so far rather loose understanding of the core notion(s), in this section some potentially defining parameters of epicentricity will be explored.

3.1 | Size and demography

Given the laws of gravity, it is not surprising that a primary assumption involves size: larger nations presumably have an impact on smaller ones, and not the other way around. Thus, for example, Australia influences New Zealand

(Peters, 2009) and India may influence Sri Lanka (Hoffmann et al., 2011, p. 259; Heller et al., 2017, p. 113). Obviously, 'size' in this context means demographic factors and population numbers and density rather than geographical extension and land mass – so American English is conventionally taken to leave traces in Canada, not vice versa. In a usage-based or accommodation-driven perspective this can be reduced to sheer numbers: there are roughly nine times as many Americans as there are Canadians, so the American input for accommodation (and associations being built, linguistic forms being copied, and so on – see below) is about nine times higher.

There are two closely related frameworks in sociolinguistics to explain such types of diffusion of linguistic innovations. One is Trudgill's (1974) 'gravity model,' which views population density and distance as suitable predictors of interaction and thus linguistic influence. The other is Labov's 'cascade' model (2001, p. 285), which describes innovations which move from large population centers to medium-sized urban areas at some distance and from there to smaller and ultimately more rural places, bypassing geographically intermediate locations.

3.2 | Proximity

Concomitant with the earthquake metaphor, an obvious assumption is that influence is strongest in direct adjacency and nearby locations, and gets weaker with increasing geographical distance. Epicentral influence is thus most likely to affect neighboring nations. All the three examples mentioned in the previous section constitute cases in point for this relationship as well. In theories of language change this goes back to Schmidt's (1872) 'wave theory,' which projects that innovations spread out from a center of innovation in concentric circles like the waves on a quiet lake, getting weaker with distance increasing. A related notion in language typology are 'linguistic area (*sprachbund*)' phenomena, shared (and obviously diffused) in a region even across otherwise unrelated languages (Velupillai, 2012, pp. 51, 411–415).

An aspect that to my knowledge in this context has not been considered so far but might play a role is a nation's developmental and economic status: it is certainly conceivable that more highly developed and wealthier nations exert influence on less developed ones, since they may be considered attractive model cases and have achieved a status and degree of prosperity which others may still be aiming at. A similar line of thinking, reasonably well-documented, is the global impact of American English on other world Englishes: whether due to economic attractiveness, political power or media impact, it is undisputed that irrespective of geographical proximity many varieties have been adopting features originally taken to be typical of American English. As is well-known, Mair (2013) proposed American English to be the only model 'hub' of a 'system of world Englishes.' Consequently, it may be conceivable that the English of Singapore, arguably the wealthiest and most developed nation in Southeast Asia, could grow into a model role in the region as an epicentre. Heller et al. (2017) provide some supportive evidence for such a claim, showing that Singapore's profile of factors determining genitive selection works as a predictor for Hong Kong's corresponding profile. But then, based on the same kind of evidence, Singapore itself comes out as being more strongly influenced by Philippine English than vice versa (2017, pp. 137–138) – an observation which is difficult to interpret in a conventional epicentric line of thinking.

3.3 | Developmental status

It has been assumed and suggested that in order to exert influence on others a variety must first be endonormatively stabilized (in the sense of Schneider's Dynamic Model; Schneider, 2007) in itself – endonormative stabilization, some degree of distinctness from British English, 'certainly is a prerequisite for epicentre status' (Hoffmann et al., 2011, pp. 201, 277; similarly Hundt, 2013, p. 185). Clearly, whatever constitutes a model for others must be distinct, recognizable, and stable to a considerable extent – but I am not sure whether it is fruitful and necessary to fully require development up until phase four in a rigid sense. As I pointed out repeatedly in Schneider (2007) and

elsewhere (Schneider, 2019), the concept of endonormative stabilization in itself is complex and consists of several constituent components (political independence as a prerequisite, emphasis on homogeneity, an accepting attitude, codification, literary creativity) which may occur independently of each other. In particular, observing homogeneity is often more of a political construct and discourse convention, while in reality ethnic and social differences never vanish completely. What clearly plays a role for a possible epicentral regional impact is a positive attitude towards the potential donor variety: unless speakers use and display it with some pride others won't be willing to pick it up. Based on a questionnaire distributed to language experts and observers, Schneider (2014) discusses several sociocognitive factors that appear to support such a status for the varieties listed above (from Australia to Jamaica) and finds some, though varying, support for positive attitudes. For example, broad Australian accents are nowadays (also) associated with mateship and well-known movie personalities like the late Steve Irwin (the 'crocodile fighter') or Paul Hogan ('Crocodile Dundee'), and speakers may play with the typically Australian hypocoristics (for example, Kate Burridge volunteered a certainly playful but nevertheless indicative sentence such as *After breakie we got a good possie in front of the tellie and opened our Chrissy pressies from the rellies*).

3.4 | Intensity of exchange

In language contact, intensity of contact clearly is a most decisive factor to determine possible outcomes. It is reasonable to assume that the same applies here: the more institutionalized and intense interactions between nations are, the higher the probability of influence. Accommodation is likely between people who interact on a regular, almost daily basis, and less important otherwise. Clearly this interacts with the other factors listed, such as geographical proximity: along the (often invisible) US–Canadian land border, say, between Seattle and Vancouver, interaction and influence is much more readily accomplished than, say, between Australia and New Zealand or between India and Sri Lanka, where it is necessary to board a vessel and cross some distance to get from one place to another.

3.5 | Monodirectionality

The strong version of epicentricity clearly implies monodirectionality: it is assumed that influences proceed only in one direction, from the larger and stronger variety to the smaller one nearby. This seems largely in line with what we know about social dynamics and cultural exchange, though clearly it is not without exceptions. Contact settings always involve (at least) two parties, and while no doubt a power differential between them may play an important role, there is no reason to exclude mutual impact, or some impact from the weaker to the stronger party, in principle. In creole formation, for example, there is usually an interaction between superstrate elements (often lexical) and substrate impact (often grammatical).

3.6 | Awareness and attitudes

It is not clear whether speakers are aware of (or need to be aware of) one variety exerting influence upon another. Language change in general tends to operate below the level of conscious awareness, certainly in pronunciation and grammar. Based on known parameters of language contact it seems likely that conscious awareness is not required, but some sort of a positive attitude towards the donor variety and culture is supportive and perhaps necessary for components to be mirrored and taken over. Awareness of change is certainly not needed and probably unlikely to be existent; attitudes, in contrast, are impossible to sidestep, and awareness of attitudes may or may not be present and influential.

4 | METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS: HOW CAN AN EPICENTRE BE IDENTIFIED?

A central question in identifying epicentral influence obviously is the one for methodological standards of supporting this hypothesis: what is necessary to provide convincing evidence of the claim of such impact, or at least to make it reasonably plausible? The first scholar to ask for such methodological rigor was Hundt (2013), whose ultimate assessment is rather pessimistic. She argues that for a serious documentation of epicentric influences we lack methodological standards, evidence of the functional equivalence of variants in different varieties, a proof of external influence rather than parallel developments, and an assessment of attitudes involved. Let us have a look at issues playing a role.

4.1 | Synchronicity

Very many of the thorough investigations and comparisons of structural properties of world Englishes today are corpus-based, that is, they build upon large-scale electronic text collections taken to be representative of the respective varieties. As is well-known, the two collections most commonly used in such contexts (explicitly compiled for such comparative purposes) are the corpora produced in the context of the International Corpus of English (ICE) project (Greenbaum, 1996)[2] and the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE et al., 2015).[3] Both, however, are synchronic corpora, taken to represent the state of the language and of these language varieties at the present point in time (or very recently, at the end of the 20th or the beginning of the 21st century; the fact that the compilation of ICE corpora has extended over more than two decades is mostly disregarded).

A core question is whether 'degrees of similarity' (that is, purely synchronic data) are sufficient to establish diachronic impact (Peters, 2009; Hoffmann et al., 2011, p. 261), that is whether the characteristic type of evidence discussed above is suitable to attest epicentral influence, which is a process of change over time. After all, when we propose influence of language A upon language B that takes time – so the donor variety, to be precise, is variety A at time i (t_i), and since the process takes time, ideally we should have evidence of variety B at t_i, the starting point, and then also at some later point in time (t_j), which shows the impact of the change (say, greater similarity to A than at t_i). All we typically get, however, is data from A and B at the same point in time. Similarities between them could thus be due to a wide range of reasons – similarity of input, of shared developments, or mere coincidence, impossible to single out. Hence, in the absence of corpora of world Englishes at different points in time we simply do not have the kind of evidence that we would need to really document impact of A upon B.[4] Such comparisons are carried out – but they are based upon the explicit assumption of stability in variety A between times t_i (the starting point of the putative historical process) and t_j (the point in time from which we have evidence of both). This is a defensible working hypothesis – but it remains a hypothesis, not evidence. But we have to work with the practical limitations that obtain; most of the time the stability hypothesis will be justified. At some point in a not-too-distant future, perhaps after a 'round 2' of collecting 'new ICE' data (similar to the Brown/LOB and Frown/FLOB data of American and British English from the 1960s and 1990s, respectively) such analyses will be possible. Until then, we will have to live with and make the best out of what we have. Investigating change and impact under these conditions is less than ideal, but definitely not impossible. In fact, Gries and Bernaisch (2016, pp. 22–23) argue that it is possible to verify epicentral status on the basis of synchronic data alone by looking into similarities of the precise conditioning of some linguistic choices (see the next section). They conclude: 'In a nutshell, synchronic data are sufficient to identify linguistic epicentres, but diachronic data are needed to study their seismic waves' (p. 23).

4.2 | Nature of evidence

What kind of evidence is required to convincingly posit monodirectional linguistic influence? Claims of epicentric status have so far been based mostly upon 'the seemingly exclusive focus on surface structures and their degree of

similarity between an assumed epicentre and the varieties in its close physical proximity' (Gries & Bernaisch, 2016, p. 4). If the claim is the diffusion of a certain linguistic feature from variety A to variety B, then obviously a minimum requirement to observe is the presence of that feature in both varieties plus some other, backing evidence (since shared existence does not imply any transfer relationship and may be coincidentally shared with many other varieties as well; mere presence seems insufficient to posit influence). Uniqueness of shared distribution might be an argument: if the feature in question is found in two varieties only and not anywhere else then the assumption of some sort of closely shared relationship seems plausible (although no directionality is implied). What in practice is often taken as a supportive observation is a characteristic frequency relationship: if feature X is very frequent in variety A and also rather common in B but rare elsewhere this may be indicative of a flow from A to B (and often is).

A stronger argument for relatedness or influence than merely shared patterns and a frequency cline will be shared complex usage constraints, especially if these constraints are unusual enough to connect them with the observation under scrutiny: if feature X occurs in varieties A and B only in specific environments, under tightly circumscribed conditions, then some sort of relationship seems likely (though, again, this in itself does not imply directionality of the influence). Gries and Bernaisch (2016) pursue such an approach, looking in some detail into determinant conditions of dative alternation across South Asian Englishes, shared 'probabilistic constellations of linguistic and contextual characteristics' (p. 5; similarly, Heller et al., 2017, on genitive and dative alternations).[5] Clearly, such subtle underlying principles may emerge in the process of a variety gaining its distinctive character, as Heller et al., have stated: 'the process of structural nativization does not only seem to take place on the level of surface structures, but also on the more concealed level of underlying norms triggering the surface structure choices' (2017, p. 136).

4.3 | Practical issues and connections

In addition to other arguments, the assumption of influence of variety A on B must simply be plausible, that is, supported also by extralinguistic, social, political, or cultural observations. The factors of size and contiguity, mentioned earlier, contribute to plausibility. Prestige and social desirability may play a role. Usually it should be possible to substantiate epicentral influences by pointing out some sort of explicit contacts. For example, the American character of English in the Philippines was made possible not only by the political dominance of the United States in the country after 1898 but, more importantly, by the importation and thus linguistic impact of a large number of American teachers coming to the Philippines in the years to follow, known as the Thomasites. As to the possibility of Indian linguistic influence on Sri Lanka, the observations that Sri Lankan schools imported and adopted Indian textbooks and language teaching material (Hoffmann et al., 2011, p. 259) and that India set up a language teaching institution in Sri Lanka (Heller et al., 2017, p. 113) certainly constitute simple and practical connections: if anything distinctively Indian is mentioned and taught in these texts or in that institute then this is likely to be picked up and integrated in Sri Lankan language learning as well. As the authors point out, orientating towards the nearest neighbor as a linguistic model has the additional advantage of avoiding some sociocultural baggage and the 'imperialist connotations of BrE and AmE' (p. 259).

5 | INTERRELATIONS: THE ONTOLOGY OF EPICENTRES

While I do not intend to raise essentialist considerations or embark on genuinely philosophical lines of thinking, it makes sense to ask for the grounding of the linguistic observations made when arguing for epicentric influence: where do we find such impact and, possibly, why?

5.1 | Standard-ness

Since pluricentricity and the notion of epicentres are defined via codification and linguistic norms in a nation, the question is where real-life variability, the presence of nonstandardized varieties, learner forms of a language, or grassroots manifestations (Schneider, 2016; Meierkord & Schneider, 2021) kick in? Can only standardized varieties function as epicentres? Would that imply any relationship with developmental stages of varieties, for example such that epicentres should have reached the stage of endonormative stabilization?

I believe that taking these questions seriously and attempting valid answers discloses an important weakness of the concepts of pluricentricity and epicentres, namely their reliance on national boundaries and varieties, and also norms. As was stated at the beginning of this paper, this seems a rather rigid, untimely approach which neglects the multifaceted nature of today's linguistic interactions. It no longer represents current linguistic thinking, which tends to highlight transnational flows and language forms as floating resources in a wide range of application contexts. Clearly, nonstandardized language forms, at least some of them, are equally effective as potential sources of linguistic influences, as is illustrated by the example of features of African American English used in Japanese and Korean Hip Hop (Pennycook, 2007) or features of Nigerian Pidgin ('Naija') spreading in cyberspace to various (although non-contiguous) locations (Mair, 2013).

5.2 | Perception or production?

As mentioned earlier, the notion of pluricentricity has recently been juxtaposed to 'pluriareality' especially in German linguistics (Dollinger, 2019a, 2019b). Some linguists, for example Elspass et al. (2017), showed that in the German-speaking area, syntactic choices are regionally distributed in a 'pluriareal' fashion, that is the same phenomena occur in several, mostly adjacent areas but these areas are totally independent of the state boundaries between Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. As against this view, 'pluricentricity' was advocated as upholding the distinct identity of national varieties, notably of Austrian German as against German German, most vehemently by Dollinger (2019a), who sees Canadian English in a similar relationship to American English. Linguistic evidence, also from the English-speaking world (Schneider, forthcoming), shows that while the vast majority of linguistic forms and phenomena display regional distributions disregarding political boundaries, there is a small set of forms, typically lexical choices (some Austrianisms or Canadianisms), which mark national usage habits. Dollinger's argument (2019a) is that only these few symbolic forms count as relevant evidence and constitute pluricentricity: 'For identity purposes, discourse frequency is far more important than the size of the lexical inventory that is different from other locations, nations and speakers.… only a handful of terms, *when used frequently*, may act as powerful linguistic identifiers' (Dollinger, 2019a, p. 192; italics in original). In contrast, all other distributional patterns are rejected as irrelevant to the issue, representing 'atheoretical empiricism' (p. 64). I disagree here. In fact, Dollinger's understanding of 'pluricentricity' also contrasts with the notion of the strong version of epicentres as defined in the present paper, since his prediction and focus is not on one variety influencing the other but rather on varieties developing different (select) forms on both sides of a political border (his examples are Braunau in Austria and Simbach in Germany, or Vancouver in Canada and Bellingham in the United States; 2019, p. 44).

More importantly, I argue (in Schneider, forthcoming) that the difference between the two positions is much more a question of not only ideology but also perspective, the difference between language perception and production. The pluriareal stand focuses on and documents regional differences in language production. In contrast, pluricentricity is rooted more strongly in the perception of variety differences. Its representatives choose to focus on and thus perceive and accept only those forms as relevant which are associated with nationally distinct variation. In the context of looking into pluricentricity, this represents a particularly narrow understanding of the weak version of this notion, but it throws light on the fact that general applications and defenses of the concept of pluricentricity lend themselves

to nationalistic views and exploitations precisely because they are interested predominantly in linguistic perception rather than production.

5.3 | Complex systems and usage-based setting

How can epicentres emerge, materialize themselves, and start to exert influence upon neighboring varieties? In principle, obviously this is a question which strongly touches upon essentialist, philosophical issues, one's belief in what language is and how it works. I believe the view of language as a complex dynamic/adaptive system and the functional/cognitive/usage-based paradigm, associated with 'Construction Grammar' (Hoffmann & Trousdale, 2013), offers a fundamental explanation of how mutual influences between speakers and language varieties, and epicentres, for that matter, originate and sustain themselves. This is too broad a topic and an issue to be covered here – suffice it to introduce a few basic assumptions and to direct the reader to a very small selection of core sources (for the complex systems perspective, see Kretzschmar, 2015 and Schneider, 2020b, 2020c; for a fundamental usage-based account, see Bybee, 2010 and especially Schmid, 2020).[6]

The theory of complex dynamic systems has been found to account for the properties of many systems in the natural and social sciences. They are complex by integrating very many agents, associations, and hierarchy levels, which build new entities which are more powerful than the sum of their parts. They are perpetually evolving and oscillating between sub-systems characterized by relative stability and order (possibly approximating so-called 'attractor' states) and sub-systems which are simply chaotic. They are perpetually in motion, self-organizing, and auto-emergent, in constant interaction with many environmental factors, and typically non-linear and involving cybernetic internal feedback loops, thus potentially magnifying developmental processes to the point of allowing qualitative leaps at times. It is claimed that languages originate, are organized, and operate like that as well, and obviously that equally applies to language varieties. Epicentres (in the weak sense) are thus emerging, self-organizing sub-systems of the overarching set of linguistic options, evolving in time, strengthening some developmental trends to re-organize (or disrupt, for that matter) specific linguistic sub-systems, in interaction with other sub-systems (through dialect contact and language contact, triggered by human agency and accommodation).

The cognitive, usage-based paradigm can explain how this happens 'on the ground,' as it were. Humans employ domain-general cognitive strategies to develop their communicative potential, beginning with simple symbolic expressions based in bodily experience and perception, and then increasingly expanded and complexified via processes such as metaphor, analogy, or grammaticalization to build increasingly complex and abstract schematic constructions. Usage, the entire set of everyday utterances made anywhere, stands at the center of this, in constant interaction between intake (forms and utterances heard from others and integrated into one's own mental knowledge system) and performance (one's own utterances which contribute to the shaping of others' intake and thus shared language knowledge). Repeated and regular relationships between communicative needs (intended meanings) and contextual factors on the one hand and conventionalized ways of encoding and expressing them in context (through suitable language forms, speech acts, and other forms of expression) build incrementally through interaction and usage. A complex set of associations between intentions and meanings and formal expressions and communicative habits emerges in a complex, perpetually changing, 'self-organizing' fashion. They manifest themselves through the evolution of shared conventions in the community and also through entrenchment and increasingly strengthened neural connections of synapses, in an individual's knowledge of 'a grammar.' Language is thus understood as shared conventions as to how to express situation-grounded meanings and individual, cognitively entrenched patterns, and its material basis are these associations – recognized similarities and relationships between situations, utterance types, and structural options, activated and connected in human brains in similar ways across individuals in a speech community.

For epicentres, clearly regionally distinctive usage patterns are strongly rooted communally (and, correspondingly, in many individual minds) in a specific area. If for external reasons (power relationships, dependency, expansion, prestige, and so on) speakers from one (dominant) region interact regularly with speakers from another adjacent

region then they provide usage models; the latter will adopt and also build associations taken over from the former. Cultural and linguistic contact thus implies having one's range of (linguistic) habits and discourse options expanded, through usage-based interaction and possibly entrenchment of associations in the donor region's speakers' minds. Other parameters of the epicentre model fall out from this perspective: adjacency facilitates mutual interaction and thus usage-based interference (humans who live far apart from each other are simply much less likely to interact); population size (that is, a larger speaker number) increases the probability of encountering a representative of that community; prestige and power trigger emotional reactions, which make one's own adoption of habits and associations, that is, learning and information storage, more desirable and thus likely, and so on.

6 | CONCLUSION

Pluricentricity, and consequently the notion of epicentres, seems a relatively simple and straightforward concept at first sight – but it actually isn't, as I hope to have shown. There are a number of different perspectives that can be adopted, and parameters that associate with it to varying extents and may be jointly taken to define it. It is important to clearly distinguish between the weak and the strong reading of the notions in question – terminologically, I see the former most clearly expressed in the notion of pluricentricity and the latter in the concept of an epicentre (though usually and in most instances, both are treated as largely synonymous, two sides of the same coin). Pluricentricity, with its focus on national standardized varieties, seems an increasingly problematic and slightly quaint concept, since it disregards important aspects of today's transnational realities and invites nationalist interpretations reminiscent of the 19th century. The idea of epicentres, the strong reading, seems linguistically more interesting and appropriate but difficult to pin down empirically. Ultimately, the above considerations strongly suggest that epicentral influence is to be seen not as an all-or-nothing effect but as a 'prototypical' concept, a relationship which may hold to a lesser or stronger extent and which in turn is composed of and can be detected by a range of composite factors.

NOTES

[1] Leitner (1992, p. 225) also suggested that 'India, Singapore and other areas' have been 'recognized' as epicentres, without going into this any further.

[2] https://www.ice-corpora.uzh.ch/en.html

[3] https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/

[4] In fact, there is a small exception to this: for written Indian English data from the Kolhapur corpus of 1978 and from the written component of ICE of the late 1990s are stylistically similar enough to make them comparable, with a 20-year real-time interval in between. Schneider (2020b) provides some small-scale evidence of change in between.

[5] This line of argumentation is not new, of course. In sociolinguistics, similar constellations have been searched for to argue for direct historical ancestry of one variety from another. A strong example is the 'Northern subject rule' of verbal inflection (varying by whether the subject function is filled by a lexical noun phrase or a pronoun, a most unusual and complex constraint) offering evidence for roots of African American English in (northern) British English dialects (Montgomery et al., 1993). See also Meyerhoff and Niedzielski's (2003) suggested 'norms for good practice' in comparing varieties.

[6] The following two paragraphs constitute my attempt at concisely summarizing these highly complex and rich theoretical frameworks, by necessity selectively. The interested reader is referred to the sources listed here (a minute and personal selection) and the many other publications and sources mentioned there.

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