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Standard Englishes, Contact Varieties and Singapore Englishes

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As a result of its history, English functions in Singapore in a complex linguistic ecology, with varieties of English interacting with each other and with other languages. Singapore Englishes include a localised Standard, and a societally recognised contact variety. Individual Singaporeans have varying degrees of personal experience (English as a native, second, or foreign language, or no knowledge of English). Local native speakers may be seen by some as speaking a faulty variety of English less legitimate than varieties of English from its traditional homelands. Within Singapore, both education policy and the practice of the individual teacher need to be informed by the situation of Singapore English on the world and regional scene and also by the complexities of English within Singapore. It is now widely recognised in Singapore that the teaching of English should be primarily located in the setting and culture of Singapore, although not at the expense of exposing students to a wider cultural range of expression in English. The world-wide setting for English has general implications for English teaching throughout the world.

1. Perspectives from the conference

The subtitle of the conference at which this paper was presented indicated a search for ‘native and non-native speaker perspectives’. One of the concepts I would like to question in this paper is the concept of a *native speaker*. This has long been at issue in the field of world Englishes, where a large part of the research is in settings (like India, Nigeria, or Singapore) where English is widely used, but where it is not the ancestral language of a major part of the population, and where it is a second rather than a native language for the majority of its speakers (see, for example, Mufwene 1994, Gupta 1997a, Boyle 1997). These are sometimes called ‘ESL settings’ and are referred to by Kachru (e.g. 1992) as the ‘outer circle countries’. In his introduction to the conference Claus Gnutzmann invited us to ask whether person and professional biographies did make a difference to our approach to issues of the teaching and learning of English as a global language. To some extent that was the case. During discussion and presentations during the conference it became apparent that those of us with experience in the ‘outer circle’ countries had indeed a very different perspective from those whose experience with English was principally in the non-Anglophone parts of Europe.

For some years we have known that some of the Northern European countries (especially those of Scandinavia, and the Netherlands) have had some features in common with the ‘outer circle’ countries, and that English had a role within them beyond what was normally expected in those countries where English is principally a foreign language (Kachru’s ‘expanding circle’). However, with the strengthening of Europe as a political

identity, English is coming to play a role within the whole of Europe which has nothing to do with the colonial history of Britain, and which certainly has nothing to do with the present position of the two Anglophone countries of the European Union (the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom). During the conference it became clear to me (someone whose working life until two years ago had been spent in Asia) that we are now seeing the extension of English as a global language into areas which do not have a history of English colonialism and yet are beginning to use English in ways which go beyond the use of English as a foreign language (Janßen's paper was especially helpful to me). The use of English to communicate with people from the 'inner circle countries' where English is the main ancestral language and the dominant native language is only a small part of the use of English. Within Europe, English is also a link language between Europeans who are native speakers of other languages. It is also becoming a vehicle for cultural self-expression within the European context.

At least in Germany, the Anglo-American model of English is still seen as the point of reference, rather than a model of English which takes account of the range of Englishes in the world, and which sees English as a vessel of self-expression. As English does function in global terms, the sense that English belongs to its ancestral speakers has already broken down, and in due course those European countries where English has traditionally been a foreign language will have to adapt to a more open perspective which recognises the diversity of English in the world.

2. English and Singapore

I have for many years been concerned with the need to examine the particulars of an English using setting and of the need to remember the place of the individual within the collective. The complexity of the relationship between the individual and the collective was first articulated by Rodney Moag (1982), but it is still most usual to examine settings for English in terms of the country. This is necessary of course -- the wood has to be visible as well as the trees. But the way in which change occurs is by change in individuals adding up to a collective (e.g. Gupta 1993). So we should never forget the behaviour of the individual elements within the collective.

Singapore is an island in South-East Asia, cradled between Malaysia and Indonesia, almost on the equator. Once a British colony, first as a part of India, and then as a crown colony, it has been since 1965 an independent nation. It has a population of just over 3 million people. It is wealthy, technologically extremely advanced, and the population has a high standard of living and of civic care. Singapore is also to an extreme degree multicultural and multiracial, and is an example of what I call a cosmopolis -- an urban trading centre in which multilingualism is deeply embedded (Gupta, 1997b, fthcg 2000).

Singapore has 4 official languages, English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, and of these English is the most official. Since 1987 English has been the sole medium of instruction in schools, and it is the language of government and officialdom. Singapore has traditionally been seen as an example of a country where English has important official status at national level and is spoken as a second language at the personal level, Crystal (1988:8f) classes English in Singapore in the category "Official (second language) or semi-official use", although in his more recent book (1998:51) he refers to "evidence of quite widespread use in family settings". McArthur (1998:53) has Singapore as an "ESL territory". Graddol (1997:10f), in a return to the less categorical classifications of Moag recognises the existence of shift towards English in the traditionally ESL areas, and presents Singapore in the tables for both L1 and L2 speakers.

The three largest ethnic groups in Singapore are the Chinese, the Malays, and the Indians, all of which embody ethnic and linguistic diversity within themselves. There are also a number of smaller groups, including groups defined by a particular kind of mixed identity, which are of a historical importance greater than their small numbers would suggest (Gupta 1994).

Singapore, like many other places in the world, is multilingually oriented. The European nation-state tradition, which dominated most of the history of 19C Europe and is still alive as a political force today, is not the only pattern of a political entity. The mindset, the assumptions, of a resident of a cosmopolis are strikingly different from those of a nation state which construes itself as monolingual.

3. Ecology of English in Singapore

I will first summarise the general pattern of English use in present-day Singapore. To understand the patterns of language use in Singapore we need to make divisions based on age and social class. In the past gender and ethnicity have also been important. Nowadays, although of all ethnic groups, the Chinese are the least likely to be major users of English, the differences between the ethnic groups are not great, Ethnicity is linked to the other languages in the repertoire, however.

The official variety of English in Singapore is of course Standard English, and, as we shall see, it is now (after some battles in the 70s and 80s) well accepted that Singapore Standard English will have some lexical items that are not shared with other Standard Englishes. However, the situation in Singapore is complicated by the presence of a contact variety of English, normally known as Singlish, and which I have referred to as Singapore Colloquial English (e.g. Gupta 1994). McArthur (1998:216) refers to Singlish as a mixed variety, an Anglo-hybrid, along with Hindlish (Hindi+English), Spanglish (Spanish+ English) and Frenghish (French+English). This is misleading, as the others are semi-institutionalised codemix varieties. The Sing- of Singlish is Singapore, not a language. Like Fijian English (Siegel 1987) or Nigerian Pidgin English, it is a contact variety. The main difference from StdE is syntactic, and the lexis is dominated by English. It is Singapore Colloquial English which is the most usual ENL of those who learn English at home.

Some of the common features of Singapore Colloquial English can be seen in these examples, one of which is a conversation between myself and a child of nearly 6 who is a native speaker of English (her major language), and the other, which is a literary representation of a monologue that switches between Standard English and Singapore Colloquial English. The SCE shows optional BE deletion, optional tense marking, little noun morphology, PRO-drop, and the use of a set of pragmatic particles, including the tentative particles *ah* and *hor* and the assertive particle *lah* (Gupta 1992).

Spoken data (orthographic transcription with normal punctuation)

R -- girl, aged 5;8
 AG -- A F Gupta
 [AG and R are looking at a photograph of a crowd of people, in a performance]
 R Then this is the Jesus son.
 AG Jesus's son!
 R No, this is Jesus son.
 [1 sec]
 Hah?

- AG Jesus son?
 R Yah.
 AG Jesus didn't have any children.
 R That one- ah - because ah, like us hor, /is/ Jesus daughter and son ah.
 Acting only lah.

Literary Representation (playscript)

I can handle heavy traffic. That's no problem ... What I'm afraid of is stopping. Parking. You know, leaving your car behind. Here cannot, there cannot. It's all written down they say. But still I get mixed up. And end up parking in the wrong place. And you know what happen lah. Fine. Fine. Fine. Fine, fine lah.

(Kuo Pao Kun. 1990.

The Coffin is too big for the hole... and other plays. Singapore: Times Books)

Singlish is not very relevant in today's discussion, because it is well accepted in Singapore that Standard English is the appropriate language of education and formal use. For this reason I have described Singapore English as diglossic. However, the fact that most Singaporean native speakers of English are native speakers of a *contact variety* is relevant, as speakers of non-standard varieties are usually silently marginalised in the discussion of native speakerdom.

4. Native speakers

World summaries of the status of English in a country cannot give more than a general position of the pattern of English there. McArthur's characterisation of countries which include Singapore, Nigeria, Fiji, India, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Israel is that:

Many people in ... [the ESL] territories use English for specific purposes , and in some places it has an official, educational, or other role... Competence may vary greatly, from a native-like fluency to 'broken English'.

(McArthur 1998:53)

Crystal (1997:57) allocates 300,000 L1 speakers and 1,046,000 L2 speakers of English to Singapore. Although Crystal (1997:55f) expresses reservations about the reliability of the data, figures such as those given by Crystal (and quoted, for example, by Graddol 1997:10f) get a life of their own, although they are unreliable. As there is no survey data from Singapore on either knowledge of English or native speaker status, the figure can only be an extrapolation or a guess. It is fairly closely related to the 1990 census figures for *literacy* in residents over the age of 10 (Lau 1993:31), in which the figures for English literacy are as follows:

Monoliterate in English		372,260
Literate in English & Chinese	659,193	
Literate in English & Malay	238,701	
Literate in English & Tamil	47,729	
Biliterate in English		945,623
TOTAL NAMED LITERATE IN ENGLISH		1,317,883
(+ Literate in 3 or more languages	19,776 =	1,337,659)

Table 1: Literacy in English in Singapore residents over the age of 10 years (adapted from Lau 1993:31)

In practice most of those literate in 3 or more languages would be literate in English. Obviously, more people can speak English than claim to be able to read a newspaper in it. Those under 10 also speak English (almost all 198,742 of those aged 5-10). Equally obviously, native speakers and non-native speakers alike may either be monoliterate or biliterate.

Summaries based on unsafe data tell us little about the real picture of English in the world. For example, many countries which in reality have a significant number of native speakers are given none in Crystal's table, including Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone.

There certainly are many second language speakers of English in places like Singapore and:

Competence in English among second-language speakers, like that in EFL speakers, varies from native-like fluency to extremely poor.

(Graddol 1997:11)

I would like to attack the widely used concept of *native-like fluency*, which is an illusion. In these traditionally ESL territories it is impossible to distinguish highly proficient L2 speakers of English from L1 speakers of English from the same community. Furthermore, in a situation of language shift, low proficiency in a native language is common. Given the power of English in these places, someone who is a native speaker of English is likely to have their proficiency in it maintained, but many people are more proficient in one of their non-native languages (such as English) than in a native language.

In Singapore too, the native English speaker is usually a native speaker of more than one language, and is a native speaker of an English contact variety. Singapore Colloquial English is usually learnt before StdE (though some families of very high prestige use StdE domestically). Those who know StdE usually use it alongside SCE, depending on context. ESL teachers' concept of 'native fluency' tends to assume a monolingual growing up in a place where most others are monolingual in the same language.

The native speaker has had a central role in the history of linguistics. The experience of learning language is a defining human one, which establishes structures of which we are conscious and structures of which we are unconscious. For me a native speaker of English is someone for whom a language which they call English has been a vessel of initial language learning. Due to historical accident there are two tacit models of native speakerhood in linguistic theory, based on the way in which the concept has been applied in linguistics, namely:

1. The 'native informant' in the SIL tradition, with whom a linguist works to 'discover' the structure of a language.
2. The linguist who introspects into the linguist's own native language. This linguist is either in truth a monolingual living in a monolingually orientated society, or self-construes as such.

In language teaching circles there is a third:

3. Someone who speaks like a high prestige Standard English using person from one of the traditionally ENL countries.

There are degrees of use of English in Singapore:

ENL (English as a native language) (mostly first generation native speakers), For historical and hegemonic reasons such a person would have English as the dominant language too)

EDL (English is the dominant language, best known and most often used)
 EPL (English is a proficient language, and often used, short of dominance)
 EOL (English is known and used to some extent)
 NES (not an English speaker)

There are no statistics on any of these groups, though approximations can be reached by indirect means, including claimed literacy.

The younger the age group, the greater the knowledge (e.g. literacy) and use of English (e.g. to family members) is likely to be. This can be demonstrated by any of the (less than satisfactory) figures available, as I have shown elsewhere (Gupta 1994: 30f). Similarly, the higher the social class, the greater the knowledge and use of English is likely to be. This can be demonstrated also in a number of ways, by examining data broken down by such social indicators as income, education level, and type of housing.

For example, as Singapore has such a large public housing sector (85% of all dwellings in 1990), the type of accommodation is hierarchically organised, with the size of government flat being linked to social class, and with landed property being rare and exceptionally expensive. Omitting some types of housing that are less clearly hierarchical, we can see that more English is claimed as the main language used to children of married couples as housing becomes more prestigious:

Type of dwelling	Percentage claiming English as main language to children
<i>Government (HDB) flat</i>	
1 & 2 room	4
3 room	8
4 room	16
5 room & executive	35
<i>Landed property</i>	
Terrace house	43
Semi-detached house	46
Detached house	54

Table 2: English as main language to children, by type of dwelling (adapted from Lau 1993:148)

The real numbers speaking English as a language to their children are greater than this, as this table does not include those who see themselves as speaking English as the second (or third) most important language to their children. Where English is being spoken to pre-school children we do of course have English as a native language. It has not been fully recognised that native speakers exist in substantial numbers outside Kachru's inner circle countries. Nor that, for most practical and pedagogical purposes, that *proficiency* in English is more important than native speaker status.

This concept of proficiency is still often linked to native speaker status. For example, when a German university advertised for a Lektor they may require applicants to be "native speakers of English, to have lived for the previous two years in an English-speaking country, and to be able to teach British, American or Canadian culture". It is time to challenge this equation of personal history with proficiency and with national and ethnic background. If you are doing linguistic research that assumes the validity of native speaker intuition you certainly need the concept. But if you are involved in language teaching in the real world, proficiency means something quite else.

What? In practice *proficiency*, as societally and educationally recognised, means the ability to speak and, especially, to *write* Standard English within the consensual norms of the English-using world. Many native speakers in the inner circle countries do not have this skill, because they have not mastered the norms of the written standard. Many non-native speakers in the outer and even expanding circle countries do master the norms. This ability to do standard English needs to be separated more explicitly from native speaker status. Native speakers of non-standard varieties of English (including contact varieties), like non-native speakers, need to be taught the standard variety. But even native speakers of the standard variety need to be taught the norms of the written standard. If I give you a sentence written in Standard English, you cannot tell me anything about the background of the writer. If I give you a sentence which fails to meet the requirements of Standard English, you may or may not be able to guess whether the writer is ENL. In these four sentences, two produced by native speakers from inner circle countries, and two produced by non-native proficient speakers from Singapore, I would argue that you cannot pick out the non-native users:

- (a) The constraints that we are facing from the urban development today is the rise of a number of small landslides and flooding of the major valleyflats.
- (b) The exact implications of such allusions for dating a poem is a matter of dispute.
- (c) The novels' says as much about the author's aesthetic principles than childhood itself.
- (d) The sequential changes whereby this is finally attained is described in the third chapter.¹

I would prefer to place the concept of the written standard on centre stage and the concept of native speaker very much in the background. Three points emerge from this.

1. There are native speakers of English all over the world, including large numbers in ESL countries
2. The concept of *native proficiency* is of no worth in language teaching.
3. The most useful concept in English language pedagogy is that of the written Standard.

5. Varietal choice

When we learn a foreign language we expect some cultural baggage to come with the language. If we learn French we expect to learn how to buy *baguettes* and what to expect of a *tabac*. In Italian textbooks we order *bruschetta* and find the *gelateria*. Traditionally, the cultural baggage that has come with English has been either the culture of the USA or of the UK, and there are also language teaching organisations in Australia that are marketing Australian culture. Again, traditionally linked with this are pronunciation, spelling, and lexical models of English that focus on a major variety of English.

The situation is very different in places where English is widely used. There we find a focus on *local* culture. The primary English textbooks of both the 1980s and the 1990s have been located in Singapore. It is an idealised Singapore. In the earlier series, in particular, it was one in which people dressed and behaved in the stereotypical ways of their ethnic group. However, pictures show a familiar Singapore architecture, and texts use Singaporean names and titles. In one story (1982:36) a woman and her baby are trapped in a burning flat:

Her neighbours heard her cries. They ran along the corridor to her flat, but they could not open the door and get in. Flames were coming out of the window, so it was very hot in the corridor.

“Cik Salmah, throw your keys to us. Then we can unlock the door,” they shouted.

Here we see the spelling of *neighbours* and the use of *flat*, which are used in only some parts of the English-using world. *Cik* is a term of address used to mature Malay women in Singapore. The physical context (windows opening onto a corridor) is also local.

In the later series, produced in the 1990s (and for some of which I was a consultant) Singapore is still idealised, but the lexis and the visuals are even more recognisably locally focused. In the earliest level (1991:48) a streetscape of the *neighbourhood* includes such Singapore institutions as a *police post* (small community police station) and a *food centre* (non-enclosed building where cooked food is sold from stalls and where buyers may eat at tables). Later (1992:20f) there is a lesson using children’s games, with the following inventory of games:

zero point [a game played with a rope], tag, football [soccer is pictured], Snakes and Ladders, *capteh* [a game played with a feathered ball which is kicked], computer games, kite flying, top spinning, hopscotch, marbles, *congkak* [where marbles or seeds are moved around a board], chess, basketball, baseball, Police and Thieves, *masak-masak* [playing at cooking], Doctor and Nurse.

Names with a Malay origin are italicised, but they are there in an English textbook with the expectation that they will be used in English text. In terms of the two major English reference varieties, there is a mixture, which reflects Singapore behaviour. The spelling is predominantly in the British tradition, although some US spellings (e.g. *program*) do appear -- the US spellings are not completely absent even in the UK however, and in many countries there is relative freedom in access to both spelling traditions. In line with this, the 1990s textbooks use the *-ize* spelling where possible rather than *-ise*. Lexical items reflect the mix that is actually found in Singapore and include some more associated with British English and others more associated with American. There is no hesitation to use the terms appropriate for Singapore cultural items such as *MRT* (the local rapid transit system).

As children get older, there is a conscious effort to extend cultural range, but there is no effort to move the cultural locus to one of the inner circle countries. What is introduced is cultural and historical items from the wider world, alongside examples and opportunities for self-expression which are visually and verbally places in Singapore.

It is inevitable that local standards develop wherever English is used for local culture. But we should not exaggerate fragmentation of English and emergence of polycentrism (Graddol 1997:56). The standard Englishes of the world are remarkable not for their differences but for their similarity, other than in pronunciation. As I said many years ago (Gupta 1986), we are talking about a few lexical items, some of which are, in Görlach’s terms (1990) *heteronyms* -- words for a common referent -- (*flip-flops / slippers / thongs / chappals* or *motorway / expressway / highway*) and others are terms for local institutions. There is some minor syntactic variation (*It wants washed / washing, accommodation(s), got(ten)*) since my paper on Singapore Standard English any of the features then very evident in Singapore English have become much more widespread everywhere.

Some of these alternatives, drawn from a range of Englishes, can be seen in the sentences below. This kind of variation does not affect the grammatical core of Standard English, which is shared by all the Standard Englishes.

- (a) This is the first time I _____ lobster. (*have eaten / am eating*)
 (b) The project _____ be completed in December. (*will/would*)
 (c) He _____ in England but his family moved to Australia when he was 5 years old.
 (*had been born / was born*)
 (d) If Singapore Post had not changed the postal system, I _____ boast of a instantly
 recognisable prestigious address. (*can / could*)
 (e) She had _____ herself a bicycle. (*got / gotten*)
 (f) I _____ my mother last week. (*wrote / wrote to*)
 (g) My name has six _____. (*letters/alphabets*)

English users who move around -- even within a country -- know that they will have to cope with local terminologies and minor syntactic differences of this sort. The well established US and UK standards are not even very separate, with the US orthographies (*medieval, fetus, tire*) making headway even in the UK, and with words being very mobile. The majority of texts in StdE give away little or nothing about their author's origins, although they may reveal the cultural setting. Each of the sentences below is clearly placed in a particular cultural setting, but could have been produced by someone of any national or linguistic origin who was referring to that culture:

- (a) The laya and bhava of the raga had the audience mesmerised.
 (b) It cost three lakh rupees.
 (c) They ate chicken tikka sandwiches.
 (d) Use NETS and win.
 (e) We want to join the kampong costume contest. ²

As soon as English is used in self-expression these culturally based words have to appear, and this is something that users of English in various parts of Europe will have to face. At several points in the Braunschweig conference speakers used the terms *grammar school* and *A-levels* to refer the German cultural items *Gymnasium* and *Abitur*. This translation of German cultural terms into a near-equivalent from the culture of a reference variety (in this case that of England) is an example of the use of an external culture as a reference point. The terms *grammar school* and *A-levels* are particular to a specific educational system and can cause confusion either if the German system is assumed to be identical to the English one, or if an interlocutor (an American, an Indian, a Dane or an Australian for instance) is unfamiliar with the cultural terms from England. If English is thought about in world terms then the German terms would be used, with an explanation (if necessary) adjusted to the cultural knowledge and background of the interlocutors.

Much ink and sound has been wasted on pronunciation models. In fact reality determines the model for pronunciation, which is casually determined by the kinds of English to which a learner is exposed. The exposure is often varied, and includes the teacher, other learners, and the media. In places where English is widely used, speakers do not generally want to sound like foreigners (Tan & Gupta 1992). In Singapore the use of a markedly American or British accent is seen as an affectation and referred to as *slanging*. (Gupta 1995, Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985). This attitude may be more widespread in even EFL language learning settings than has been accepted, and is likely to become more widespread as English is used by those from countries like Germany to express their own culture. The learner needs to be conscious of what identity is being projected -- if you adopt a particular English accent very successfully, for example, English hearers may attribute to you the stereotypical features of the social or geographical group who use that accent.

6. Conclusion

Schumann's model of language learning (e.g. 1978, 1979) assumes that there is an out-group with whom the learner of a language may or may not identify. This is not the case in many language learning settings, where the target group for, for example, children learning English, are members of one's own community.

Other language learning settings need to learn from this. The needs of the learners in using English are not to be seen as a need to interact with people from an inner circle country. In many settings the primary need is to operate within one's own country. The global status of English has also reduced the importance of the inner circle countries both as models for the learner and as targets for conversation. A Norwegian travelling in Southern Europe is likely to do much negotiating in English as is an Indian doing business in China, something which has been interestingly discussed by Graddol. It is clear in the traditional ESL settings that the actual target for learners is a local one, but we also need to take on board that all speakers and learners of English come to participate in global acts of identity and complex expressions of culture.

There is not one kind of Standard English which is *English as a global language*. Nor is it realistic to expect that learners of English all over the world can be exposed to all the varieties of Standard English that there are. What understanding English as a global language means is taking a perspective on English as a world possession rather than as a possession of those countries where it is an ancestral language. This implies a recognition that when English is used to express identities it will become locally adapted. Learners do need to be taught a tolerance towards variety in pronunciation -- there is no single Standard English pronunciation. They also need to be alerted to lexical variety within Standard English and shown (using examples from their own culture) how English can express a cultural identity which is not that of an ancestral English setting.

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¹ (a) was written by a Singaporean undergraduate, not a native speaker of English. (b) is from a book published in the USA and written by an academic from the USA, a native speaker of English. (c) was written by a British undergraduate, a native speaker of English. (d) is from a book published in Singapore and written by a Singaporean, not a native speaker of English. All involve issues of concord and number in academic writing.

² (a) and (b) reflect a South Asian cultural setting. Although *lakh* would seldom be used outside South Asia, the terms *laya*, *bhava* and *raga* would be used wherever Indian music was the topic -- in fact this example came from Australia. (d) uses the terms *NETS* which places it in Singapore, while *kampong* is used in a Singaporean, Malaysian and Bruneian context to refer to a traditional settlement of a particular kind. *Chicken tikka sandwiches* originated in the UK, where they are a best selling line at Marks and Spencers, the marriage of a South Asian dish (*chicken tikka*) to local tastes.