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Colonisation, migration, and functions of English¹

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ABSTRACT

The sociohistory of English in a locality has implications for the current functions of English there. Such factors as colonial attitudes to earlier inhabitants, colonial involvement in education, and the movement of people into the colonised territory, have created a multiplicity of different relationships with English. English-using countries fall into five categories, but the experience of individuals in each category varies too widely to allow generalisation from the country to the individual.

1. Non-native varieties

There have recently been a series of papers which discussed terminology for the study of world Englishes. The most prominent are those by Kachru (1992) Mufwene (1994), and a set of discussion documents by no less than 14 people (which I will refer to as Singh et al 1995). Contested terms *new varieties* and *native speakers*. The discussion documents of Singh et al seem to me to be especially in a terminological morass. All of us are to some extent the victims of our own experience -- we tend to focus on those parts of the world we are most familiar with, and tacitly assume that the rest of the world is the same. I would like to stand back from the terminological confusion and contestation and look at the patterns of spread of English as a whole, and how the arrival and use of English in a given locale affects the pattern of its use today.

A tendency to concentrate on *varieties*, rather than *speakers*, is, I feel, at the root of some of the problems. The terms *native* and *non-native* in particular, when applied to varieties, present problems.

In an earlier paper, Kachru divided users of English into three types:

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Internationally, the users of English are viewed from three perspectives: that of a native user for whom English is a first language in almost all functions; that of a non-native user who considers English as a foreign language and uses it in highly restricted domains; and that of a non-native user who uses an institutionalised second-language variety of English.

(Kachru 1985)

Kachru here is making a link between using a *second-language variety* and being one of two types of *non-native user*. Bamgbose (Singh et al 1995:303) puts it quite explicitly, in the first of his four characterisations on non-native Englishes:

Non-native Englishes differ from native ones in a number of ways, which those interested in language and society will regard as linguistically significant. First, all of them have developed through the imposition of English on populations that predominantly speak other languages. The result is that speakers of non-native varieties are bilingual, having acquired English as an additional language mainly through the educational system.

Note here how it is assumed that “speakers of non-native varieties” are non-native speakers. Bamgbose later (304) indicates that for him even if a non-native variety were to become a native variety by being passed down in a speech community, it would still have a different status from an “original native variety”. I find all this unduly confusing. It is not languages or varieties which are or are not native, but *people* who have native languages. Trudgill (Singh et al 1995:315) makes a similar point.

Languages and varieties have histories which embody the collective experience of their speakers. Much of the discussion about varieties of English is based on national varieties, so that the country is taken as exemplifying the total experience of English of its citizens. Socio-political reality does generally make the concept of a nation a useful one, but in this paper I want to keep in mind the fact that countries are composed of individuals. It may be that there are some countries where the experience of virtually all the individuals is similar enough to say that they have a common history vis-à-vis English, but the norm is that the individuals group themselves into sets of different histories. These histories may be determined by such factors as ethnicity, social class, or geography.

Some years ago, Moag (1982) developed a check list which mediated from speakers to countries, and which illustrates the potential differences between countries traditionally classed as ENL, ESL or EFL. It seems to me we need to reclaim this sense of countries being only aggregations of people, and get back to the speakers.. Kachru (1992:3) updates his circles representing the spread of English, and points out that he is obliged to miss out “countries such

as South Africa ... and Jamaica” because “their sociolinguistic situation is rather complex, particularly with reference to the English-using populations and the functions of English”. I would argue that most countries are complex, and that we would benefit from a diversity-oriented model of varieties.

For some scholars (Quirk 1991), the major distinction is between the “native varieties” and the “non-native varieties”. For most, the crucial distinction is between countries where English is seen as foreign -- to be used only with foreigners, and those where it is “indigenised” -- that is where it is used (outside a pedagogical setting) among citizens. I will follow this thinking, and do not refer in this paper to countries where English is primarily a foreign language (e.g. France, Japan, Korea). Kachru (1991) pointed out a need to incorporate such countries into the world English fold. All I would like to add is that I feel that these countries are also not homogeneous (the situation of English in the Netherlands is very different from the situation of English in neighbouring Germany, for example) and that they also embody diversity.

I will operate with the following definitions:

English	Any variety which its speakers generally call English, including varieties that have been described as creoles (Mufwene 1994) ² .
native language	A person’s native language is a language the individual acquired before any other language had been acquired: a native language may be learnt alongside other native languages. The language of greatest proficiency in adult life is not necessarily a native language: indeed a native language may be totally lost in later life. A native speaker of English has acquired English as a native language.
normal transmission	A language is normally transmitted when it is spoken domestically to children from infancy by an older generation, so that the younger generation acquire it as a native language (Thomason and Kaufman 1988)
contact variety	A variety of a language (in this case, of English) that as a result of having been in a contact situation has “a form palpably different from either stock language” (Weinreich 1953:69). This implies major differences in

² Including the English of Lowland Scotland, which has been called *English* at some times during its history and *Scots* at others.

syntax from other varieties of the language (the terms *major* and *palpably* are of course unfortunately vague).

Standard English (StdE)

A variety that exists world-wide in slightly different forms that differ only slightly (mainly in a small number of lexical, and orthographic features, and in different distribution of perfective and progressive verbs). None of the Standard Englishes are contact varieties. StdE is the variety taught in schools and seen as usual in most writing and formal speech throughout the English speaking world.

2. How English moved

Until the late sixteenth century English was not spoken anywhere outside the British Isles. The spread of English within the British Isles resulted both from the spread of the English people, especially throughout what is now England and the lowlands of Scotland, and also from the switch to English of populations in all parts of the British Isles which were ruled by English speakers. Some of the processes that took place in the British Isles could be said to have been precursors of what was to happen later on a global scale, but because they are no longer current, the processes of language learning and shift are no longer seen as informing us about the features of English within the British Isles now, except when immigrants and the descendants of recent immigrants are discussed (Mac Aogáin refers to this in Singh et al).

In the early seventeenth century England became a competitor in the European expansion to the Americas. This began a whole range of associated processes of movement of peoples and of languages. The major processes of colonisation at this time were:

- English-speaking people went from the British Isles to settle in the Americas. They made up a large part, or a majority, of the population. The previous inhabitants were (at best) harshly treated.
- Britain (and Spain and Portugal) traded for people in Africa (speakers of various languages) and took them to the Americas. These people learnt English informally in colonies under British control.

Britain developed new markets and new sources of raw materials over the eighteenth century, notably in India and (later) Africa. The declaration of

independence by a group of the American colonies in 1776, the illegality of the slave trade from 1808, and the effects of the industrial revolution were among the factors that gave rise to the second phase of British colonisation in the nineteenth century:

- Trading, fiscal and political control of regions of Asia and Africa was attained. Small numbers of English-speaking people went from the British Isles³. They were not encouraged to settle, although some settlement was allowed in Africa. The previous inhabitants were treated with a degree of respect, especially in Asia.
- English-speaking people from the British Isles were moved to Australia and (later) New Zealand, on much the pattern of the settlement of the American colonies (and with similarly harsh treatment of the previous inhabitants, especially in Australia).
- Provision was increasingly made for the higher social classes among the indigenous peoples (especially of the Asian colonies) to learn English formally.
- From the mid-nineteenth century, non-English speakers were encouraged, often through systems of indentured labour, to move from one area under British influence or control to another. Movements included: from India to Fiji, the Straits Settlements or Mauritius; from China to the Straits Settlements; from Pacific Islands to Northern Queensland. Many of these people learnt English informally.

The three main ways of English arriving in a place were therefore:

- By migration of English-speakers of British Isles ancestry
- Through a situation where residents needed to learn English informally (slavery, indentured labour).
- By establishment of schools where English was formally taught to children who did not have English as a NL.

³ Due to the history of English imperialism within the British Isles there is a problem with the terms *Britain* and *British*. The *British Isles* consist of two large islands, Britain and Ireland, and many small ones. I use *Britain* to mean the political entity which controlled the entire British Isles from the seventeenth century until 1921 (when most of Ireland became an independent republic). A *British person* is anyone from the British Isles, including England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. During the later years of the Empire many people not of British ancestry were British citizens, adding further confusion to the term.

The distribution of settlers of British Isles ancestry is of some importance. Crosby (1986) identifies lands thousands of kilometres from Europe where Europeans form the majority population. These *Neo-Europes* were shaped by biogeographical factors -- they are principally in the temperate zones of the north and south, and European plants and animals can thrive there (Crosby 1986:5f). It was these places, on the whole, where British people were encouraged to settle, and it was in these places that the indigenous inhabitants were especially suppressed, even to the extent of being massacred. The major *Neo-Britains* are in North America and Australasia. In the tropical regions, indigenous inhabitants were coerced rather than smashed:

The rule (not the law) is that although Europeans may conquer in the tropics, they do not Europeanize the tropics, not even countrysides with European temperatures.

(Crosby 1986:134)

Crosby attributes the high mortality among indigenous peoples in the Neo-Europes principally to their lack of resistance to Old World germs, while among the factors in the failure to Europeanize the tropics was the lack of resistance of the Europeans to the Asian and African organisms. Whatever the cause and effect, it remains the case that in those areas outside Europe where English is now spoken by descendants of the British there is generally a dishonourable history of elimination of indigenous inhabitants, coupled with both accidental and intentional bacteriological warfare.

If the three colonisation processes had always been discrete, they would have given rise to the three traditional variety types of English-speaking countries:

- native/old varieties, spoken by descendants of the British (varieties resulting from many generations of normal transmission)
- creoles spoken by descendants of slaves and indentured labourers of non-British origin (discontinuous transmission with informal learning in adult life in first generation)
- the indigenised/new/second language varieties (discontinuous transmission with scholastic learning)

However, few places that were colonised by Britain have experienced only *one* of the three colonial linguistic processes. In virtually all regions children of mixed race were produced, creating individuals of partly British Isles ancestry. The American colonies experienced the immigration of large numbers of English speakers, and also the import of African slaves. The Malay peninsula experienced both the political control type of colonisation, and the

use of indentured labour from other parts of Asia. Australia experienced the mass immigration of English-speakers and (in the tropical North) the use of indentured labour from other parts of the Pacific region. In some regions where English was introduced through elite schools there were also populations of indentured labourers picking up English on plantations (e.g. Fiji), or English became so prevalent that numbers of people began also to learn it informally (e.g. Singapore). By the nineteenth century, English speakers who were not of British Isles ancestry were moving around, for example the Malay peninsula received several groups of English-speakers from India and Ceylon. People from the former colonies have also moved to Britain. In all countries, formal study of English became available to more and more people, exposing them to StdE. The continued movement of people and the continued social change have given rise to the considerable diversity in relationships with English that we now see in the former colonies.

3. How English is used

The three main types of language acquisition are still in operation, and in few of the countries that Britain once ruled does everyone experience the same type. In some countries one type predominates, e.g.

UK, USA, Jamaica	predominantly normal transmission
India, Pakistan	predominantly scholastic transmission

In other countries (e.g. Fiji, Malaysia, Nigeria, Singapore), the experience of different individuals is extremely variable, with both modes of transmission common, often in association with extensive societal and individual bilingualism. Informal learning in adult life remains a possibility everywhere, but is especially associated with geographically mobile individuals (within a country or between countries).

Furthermore, the variety that is transmitted normally may be a variety which bears the traces of non-normal transmission (informal or scholastic acquisition post-infancy) in previous generations (a creole or some other kind of contact variety). This is likely to happen in all the countries where English is now being (to some extent or other) normally transmitted, but which have gone through a period of non-normal transmission (e.g. Fiji, Jamaica, Malaysia, Nigeria, Singapore). In all these countries, some children acquire a contact variety as a native language, and the contact variety is likely to function as something like the L-variety in a diglossic situation (e.g. Gupta 1994, Siegel 1987).

The five most common general patterns for countries seem to be:

(a) ***Monolingual ancestral English countries: e.g. UK, US, Australia, New Zealand***

In these countries English is the result of normal transmission from generation to generation since the sixteenth century, and the residents have a large proportion of people of British Isles ancestry. There is a general picture of a standard variety contrasting with low prestige non-standard varieties (often called *dialects*).

Most people speak only English as a native language. However, there are substantial sections of the population who have acquired other languages as native languages (instead of, or in addition to English), some, but not all of whom, are immigrants. Some of these people live in congregations of people of similar backgrounds. There are also pockets of contact varieties, e.g. Black English Vernacular and Gullah in the US, and Aboriginal English in Australia. Note that monolingual ancestral English countries usually contain many individuals of other than British Isles ancestry who have been linguistically absorbed without their ancestral languages leaving a noticeable trace on themselves or the community that has absorbed them.

Since universal education in the late 19C (in these places) the percentage of the population who speak varieties other than StdE has dropped, and non-phonological differences between varieties in these places are small. Regional variation (including within StdE) is largely carried by phonological differences, often tiny. However the data from Hudson and Holmes (1995) shows that large proportions of adolescents in the UK are prepared to use NonStdE even in the formal setting of a tape recorded conversation with a teacher. Non-standard varieties are associated with low-prestige individuals, but are also 'cool', and streetwise. The amount of syntactic shift the individual makes between StdE and Non-StdE is tiny compared to what the amount of personal shift in what I call contact variety countries.

(b) ***Monolingual contact variety countries: e.g. Jamaica***

The largest population are descendants of those who learnt English informally when forcibly migrated (they often have British Isles ancestry too). English has been now transmitted normally for several generations to the majority of the population. There are also minorities who use other languages domestically, often alongside English. There is a range of varieties of English with huge syntactic differences between them, and individuals move

from one variety to another depending on who they are speaking to and how they want to present themselves (Le Page & Tabouret Keller 1985). Some of the contact varieties may be referred to as *creoles*, at least by linguists. Command of StdE varies and control of StdE is associated with high prestige groups, but those who can speak StdE often do not restrict themselves to it -- the use of the non-standard contact variety may be socially and politically motivated. The contact variety is not restricted to low prestige groups.

(c) ***Multilingual scholastic English countries: e.g. India, Pakistan***

In these countries people are seldom native speakers of English. There are minorities (including some of partly British ancestry) who are native speakers of English, and a handful of elite families who transmit English as a native language to their children alongside other languages. In other elite families English may be introduced to children as a second language within the family, as children approach school age. Use of English is seen as being on a proficiency continuum. Whether a person speaks English at all/well/badly depends largely on the type and amount of education they have received. Some people have the highest imaginable level of control of StdE, and for some people who are not native speakers of English, English is the most proficient language.

While many children learning English are not dependent on classroom experience, but receive extensive community support for English, in some regions or social settings, children may be entirely dependent on classroom experience. Proficiency in English is generally associated with high social class. English exists alongside other languages (sometimes several in the same place). Nearly everyone who speaks English speaks at least one other language fluently. Languages other than English are strong in all regions, and English is not required or usual in most areas of life. As in the traditional native speaking situations, people do not generally shift their variety much -- perhaps even less -- if you have a certain level of proficiency that is where you are at. There is not an established contact variety independent of the proficiency continuum.

(d) ***Multilingual contact variety countries: e.g. Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Malaysia, Nigeria, Ghana***

These countries are really a mixture of (b) and (c). English is widely spoken, in some cases (e.g. Singapore) by almost the whole population, but is not necessarily universally known, and the majority of English speakers are not native speakers of English. But quite a proportion of the population do have English as a native language. In these countries, as in the multilingual scholastic countries, many languages are spoken, and cities especially are multilingual. They differ from the multilingual scholastic English countries in having many locales where there is no single strong regional language, so that English becomes necessary for large numbers of people as a *lingua franca*.

While most children in these countries are not dependent only on classroom experience for learning English, there are still some individuals who are dependent on their classroom for learning English, as they live in areas where English is little used outside the classroom. In these places, also as in the scholastic English countries, nearly everyone who speaks English speaks at least one other language fluently.

As in the monolingual contact variety countries, there is an established contact variety (whether you call it creole, creoloid, or pidgin, or broken English, according to place and your terminological preferences). As in the monolingual contact variety countries, speakers move dramatically from standard English to creole, depending on context, politicisation, etc.. Control of StdE is associated with high prestige groups, but, again as in the monolingual contact variety countries, use of the creole is not limited to low prestige groups. However, as in the scholastic English countries English is associated with a proficiency continuum too, which confuses the issue. It is common for the most proficient language in adulthood to be English, whether it is one of the person's native languages or not. Knowledge of the contact variety might be prestigious in these places (as an alternative to no knowledge of English), which it is not in monolingual contact variety countries.

(e) ***Multilingual ancestral English countries: e.g. South Africa, Canada***

In these countries the descendants of those of British Isles origin are not a sufficiently large majority to absorb the majority of other groups in the country. In South Africa, the descendants are a minority, with the majority of the population living in a scholastic English setting. In Canada the descendants of the British are a majority, but a large minority of Francophones has never been

swallowed up by them, helped by a geographical concentration in one region.

The current debate in the USA about an official language for the USA is based on the fear some have that the USA is moving from the category monolingual ancestral English country into this category, with Spanish the other language.

Two places with a similar history of the introduction of English (e.g. Singapore and India) may produce very different outcomes due to demographic distribution and political decisions. The progress of a contact variety (to be forever only on the proficiency continuum, to flourish and emerge as a language, to exist in a diglossic English, or to die) is unpredictable.

Furthermore, the variability in the experience of the individual in all these countries precludes any ability to generalise from country to speaker. We cannot assume that everyone born and bred in the UK is a native speaker of English, nor that everyone born and bred in India is a non-native speaker of English. There is also no way of distinguishing the speech of a native speaker from that of a highly proficient non-native speaker, in phonology, in syntax, or in control of Standard English. What may be audible of the individual's personal history is what variety of English they have learnt, but how they learnt it may not be detectable even to a member of their own community. Especially in multilingual contact variety settings, it appears not to be possible to distinguish between adults proficient in English who learnt it as a native language, and those adults proficient in English who learnt it at school.

Control of standard English, is a mark of prestige in all countries. Being a native speaker of standard English obviously confers some advantage, and there are more of these in the ancestral English countries than in the others. However, many native speakers of English in the ancestral English countries, as elsewhere, are native speakers of non-standard varieties. Furthermore, control of the spoken standard does not guarantee control of the written standard, which is usually the yardstick of prestige. Control of written standard English is not the prerogative of native speakers of standard English, and certainly not of people from the ancestral English countries. It is associated with elite groups from all types of countries in the English-speaking world.

4. Conclusion

The way in which English arrived in a country, and the demographic distribution of speakers of other languages are the major factors in determining the situation of English in the countries that once were British colonies. Countries can be divided into five categories. However, in all categories the experience of the individual is extremely diverse. The diversity of English

situations within each category of country is such that the equating of a variety with a country, and the extension of the nature of that variety to the individual, is not possible.

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