

Englishes in the Expanding circle: variety or deficiency?

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Abstract

As English has constantly been spreading around the world as a global language, it is no longer a language restricted to countries where English is spoken as their first language, but languages of a diverse range of speech communities. It serves as a national language in intra-national communications as well as it functions as a lingua franca in international communications.

Based on the framework proposed by Kachru (1985), there have been more and more discussions on the three circles of English according to its functions and social status, namely, Inner-, Outer-, and Expanding-circles. He argues the significance and importance of recognition and acceptance of non-native varieties especially in the Outer-circle countries, where diverse varieties of English in terms of grammar, lexicon, and semantics are developed in culturally specific contexts. Since the primary function of language is to express one's thought and cultural identity, Crystal (2003) argues that one does not necessarily have to acquire so-called 'native-like' competence, i.e., Inner-circle varieties, or cultural norms of such varieties in order to use English freely, as long as it is intelligible among the people who are involved in the communication.

While non-native varieties of English have been recognised as distinctive varieties of English in the Outer-circle countries, English in the Expanding-circle has been gradually becoming the focus of recent research from World Englishes perspective. There still has been a strong assumption that those varieties, such as China English, are merely Interlanguage (IL), and not recognisable and distinctive varieties of English in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) field. Considering the fact that people in the Expanding-circle countries have much more limited exposure to English and opportunities to use English, often resulting in limited English proficiency, it seems reasonable to accept those arguments from SLA perspectives. However, as many researchers have pointed out, nativisation of English in their own cultural contexts has certainly been occurring. That is, people in the Expanding-circle countries have started to use English as a way of expressing themselves rather than as a tool of international communication. Examples of those can be seen in the studies of loanword usage, code-switching and mixing, and more recently, in the literature and music.

When looking at Inner-circle varieties, one realises how ambiguous the term 'Standard English' is. It is true that in the written contexts, there may be such a thing, but in the spoken contexts, especially informal ones, it is not difficult to see utterances such as 'they was going', 'I were a student' in native varieties, which are usually considered as errors in non-native spoken contexts. If those features can be seen as a distinctiveness of a native variety, and if some features in the Outer-circle can be seen as distinctiveness of a non-native variety (although this 'non-native' term can be problematic as well), there should be consideration of what could be distinctiveness of non-native varieties in the Expanding circle. In other words, one needs to consider the criteria for a 'variety'; what are acceptable and what are not.

This paper attempts to establish the criteria for a variety, considering various cultural norms and features that are common in non-native varieties, as well as attitudes towards such varieties among local users and other native/non-native speakers of English.

References

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