

VARIETIES OF ENGLISH AND EXAMS: STANDARD ENGLISH?

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Abstract

The increasing number of non-native speakers of English leads, among other things, to a loss of the dominant position of the native speaker of English as the norm-provider, on the one hand (see e.g. Graddol, 2006). On the other, however, the monopoly position of the native speaker as a language expert is still deeply rooted in English language teaching as a foreign or second language, at least in the European context. Though this is not a novel phenomenon, it opens up a number of topical issues which are worthy of attention (see e.g. Dewey, 2014). In effect, theoretical as well as pedagogical issues are brought to the fore. The article offers, firstly, classic models of English (e.g. Kachru's model of concentric circles) and asserts that models like these can serve as a good starting point at the general level, but they do not reflect the current socio-political situation in the world. The author is subsequently concerned with such problematic and closely related terms as Standard English and codification which seem to be fundamental particularly in teaching English as a foreign and second language. In this connection, the author questions the notion of Standard English as one single variety and questions the distinction sometimes made between English as a second language and English as a foreign language. Furthermore, the author mentions descriptive works (e.g. Seidlhofer, 2009; Jenkins, 2006) that examine English as a lingua franca – that is, politically correct variety of English used by non-native speakers of English. Though the research into English as a lingua franca has in recent years focused primarily on the spoken language, it might work as a stepping stone in designing English teaching/learning and testing materials in the future. The question remains whether English as a lingua franca at this stage can be regarded as a variety of English and it is not clear at all which English should be taught and assessed.

Key words: varieties of English, Cambridge Exams, Standard English, codification, error, norm

Abstrakt

Žádný z jazyků doposud nepůsobil ve své funkci celosvětově. V této souvislosti dochází na jedné straně ke dlouhodobému nárůstu používání angličtiny jako druhého či cizího jazyka, což vede mimo jiné ke ztrátě dominantní pozice rodilých mluvčích (např. Graddol, 2006). Na straně druhé je však monopolní postavení rodilého mluvčího jako znalce jazyka udávající jazykovou správnost stále hluboce zakořeněno ve výuce angličtiny jako druhého či cizího jazyka, přinejmenším v evropském kontextu. Ačkoliv nejde o fenomén v žádném případě nový, otevírá řadu aktuálních témat, na které je nutné reagovat (viz např. Dewey, 2014). Do popředí se tak dostávají otázky nejen teoretického ale i pedagogického rázu. Článek nabízí dnes již klasické modely pojetí současné angličtiny (např. Kachruův model tří soustředných kruhů). Přestože mohou být modely tohoto typu zajímavým výchozím bodem v obecné rovině, nereflektují mimo jiné sociopolitický vývoj světa. Článek se dále zaměřuje na problematické koncepty úzce související s touto tematikou např. vymezení takových variabilních a elastických pojmů jako jsou standardní angličtina či kodifikace, které se zdají být pro výuku angličtiny jako druhého či cizího jazyka stále zásadní. V této souvislosti autor polemizuje s myšlenkou jednotné standardní angličtiny a zmiňuje i zavádějící rozlišení angličtiny jako druhého a cizího jazyka. Autor dále uvádí i deskriptivní práce (např. Seidlhoferové, 2009; Jenkinsové, 2006) zkoumající angličtinu jako lingua franca, tj. politicky korektní varietu angličtiny, ve které angličtina není mateřským jazykem nikoho, resp. ne většiny účastníku. I když je výzkum tohoto zaměření zatím na úrovni vědeckých publikací a zabývá se převážně mluveným jazykem, pokouší se reflektovat

komplexní jazykovou situaci. Do budoucna by tedy mohl sloužit jako odrazový můstek při vytváření materiálů pro výuku angličtiny a testování obecně. Otázkou však zůstává, zda lze v současné době angličtinu jako lingua franca považovat za varietu angličtiny, a vůbec není jasné, jakou angličtinu učit a hodnotit.

Klíčové slová: variety angličtiny, cambridgeské zkoušky, standardní angličtina, kodifikace, chyba, norma

1 Setting the scene

With the advent of wide-spread access to travel, international work, educational opportunities and with the rapidly growing dominance of English as the first global “lingua franca” of the modern world, it is a matter of urgency to address theoretical as well as pedagogical concerns closely associated with the process of global spread of English. In line with e.g. Dewey (2014) the process, albeit not recent at all, poses a large number of critical challenges, such as re-consideration of current teaching materials and language assessment. The present article, firstly, summarizes major theoretical points of departure of the most influential paradigms and then moves on to discussing more practical challenges. More specifically, it attempts to make a contribution to the discussion from a professional perspective and touches upon some of the benefits and challenges of such pedagogical changes with regard to language assessment of second and foreign language learner in particular, however blurring the long-standing distinction between the two terms (second language vs foreign language learners) may be today.

1.1 Attempts to describe the state of English and an EFL variety?

In assessing the second language learner, it is held necessary to take into account such highly problematic, controversial and traditional notions as the norm, deviation, error, mistake, Standard English as they are still at the heart of the English as Foreign Language domain (see e.g. Quinn-Novotná, 2012). Cambridge examinations, and other similar examination bodies e.g. International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Pearson Test of English (PTE), seem to be well-established in Europe, are growing in scope and catering for all levels of proficiency. They nonetheless raise fundamental questions for the teacher and tester tied together with the recent increase in the number of English learners and Englishes in relation to the notions of standard and standardisation. Against this backdrop, it is perhaps worth looking back for a while in order to see how the spread of English has been viewed by some distinguished linguists.

Traditionally, attempts to describe the state of English can be subsumed under two main and influential models and paradigms – namely, Kachru’s New Englishes and Quirk’s Nuclear English, as they both almost simultaneously sparked worldwide debates over the global state of English usage and showed an alternative to the traditional classification of English (English as a native language, English as second language, English as a foreign language). More specifically, the heated debate over the state of English identified the conflict between accepting new forms and the fear of fragmentation of the English language. As a matter of fact, it is frequently

suggested that the term English brings along powerful cultural associations (cf. Crystal, 2003). For this reason, some scholars suggested a change of name in order to de-emphasize the connection to England and its imperial past. As a result, the terminological plurality in the field of World English(es) is enormous, and beyond the scope of the paper but it illustrates the complexity and diversity of the phenomenon. In fact, Quinn-Novotná (2012, p. 21) lists 49 competing terms.

In examining the spread of English, Kachru (originally proposed in 1985) identified three broad sociolinguistic contexts. Kachru's famous and now classic model, which Ferencík (2015, p. 30) calls the "guiding beacon of all discussions around the global spread of English", consists of three concentric circles classifying the English-using world according to the historical context of English, the status of English and the functions in various regions. As it is well-known, the model implies the origins of Englishes (native or non-native Englishes), the type of spread of English in non-native settings, the manner of acquisition and functionality (English as a native language, English as a second language, English as a foreign language), and the sources of norming. The Inner Circle includes the Native English-speaking countries where English is used as the primary language, e.g. UK, Ireland, Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand. The Outer Circle consists of the former colonies where English plays an important role as a second language, e.g. Singapore, Malawi, India and Africa, and Expanding Circle brings to English another dimension and includes countries such as China, Germany, Slovakia, Czech Republic, where English (English as a foreign language) is becoming an important language in business, science, technology and education. The last two circles correspond to non-native speakers of English and show clearly that non-native speakers significantly outnumber native speakers. As a result, it is non-native speakers of English who will, as it is expected, shape beliefs and ideologies connected with it. Still, the model suggests, among other things, that the inner circle is the "norm-providing", the outer circle "norm developing" and the expanding circle "norm-dependent".

While the clear-cut model serves as a good starting point for general orientation and is obviously of relevance, it is nonetheless too simplistic. In fact, the situation is more complex nowadays and the model fails to reflect among other things the sociolinguistic and sociopolitical reality. To illustrate, the model suggests that there is only one variety of ENL. Moreover, the model seems to ignore the areas of transition between the circles, implies the primacy of the inner circle varieties, and makes no mention of the speakers' level of proficiency. In addition, looking at the model from the globalised world, the distinction between a "second language" and "foreign language" is almost certainly not valid any more as there is much more use of English in some, particularly European countries, of the expanding circle (e.g. The Netherlands, Scandinavia) than in some of the outer circle as noted by Crystal (2003, p. 67). Yet the model refers to Englishes in plural suggesting there are many Englishes, and also it shows that no variety, linguistically speaking, is inferior or superior (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 28).

Contrary to this liberal and pluricentric (or polycentric) view, Quirk (1982, p. 32) argued that the second language performance should be based on a Standard English, because it would

be easier to teach and it ought to be the accepted educational norm. Quirk further argued in favour of standards/standardisation with a view to ensuring mutual intelligibility amongst speakers of different backgrounds and origins. If Kachru (1985, p. 14) stresses identity and asserts that English is now made up of “unique cultural pluralism, and a linguistic plurality and diversity”, then the new varieties may become mutually unintelligible. On the other hand, there are several looming issues and concerns regarding codification and norms. It is not clear, for example, who will control the norms taking into account the fact that English has acquired a new dominant function world-wide.

While in English language teaching (ELT) the norms are traditionally maintained through the endorsement of native-speaker norms, teaching and testing materials, descriptive studies deal predominantly with the spoken language, focus particularly on the nature and scope of English as lingua franca (ELF) communication (see e.g. Seidelhofer, 2009; Jenkins, 2006) and have a tendency to emphasise the inherent variability of human language in general and the English language in particular. Central to the sociolinguistic premise is that most non-native speakers will probably interact with other non-native speakers rather than native speakers of English who are today in a minority. But similar to Kachru’s model, the influential ELF paradigm does not provide much information on language teaching, the written language, and testing. Still, ELF researchers feel the need to address these issues. “And given the fact that testing exerts such a massive influence on language teaching and, hence, on spoken and written language use, a major challenge for ELF over the next few years is to make the strongest possible case to the large ELT examinations boards that they should start to take account of the findings of ELF.” (Jenkins et al., 2011, p. 309). One of the major questions is whether ELF should be regarded as a variety of English and whether there is Standard English at all.

1.2 Standard English, ELT and Cambridge exams

All this goes hand in hand with the question what actually Standard English today is and whether it exists at all. The answer to this question is not simple. As noted by Fernández (2004, p. 116) “the notion of Standard belongs to a European elite which tends to establish homogenous models” and goes back to the 19th century slogans one nation, one language, one state. But as it is a well-known fact, there is nothing like “English Schreibrache”. Rather present-day English seems to represent an amalgam of varieties which are primarily defined geographically. Traditionally, standard is contrasted with the Kachru’s concentric circle countries briefly outlined above. The traditional notion of standard concentrated on native norms and native like performance as it was deemed necessary to uphold one diversification of varieties of English, which could lead to intercomprehensibility. Quirk (1982, p. 6) advocates a standard stressing that “the relatively narrow range of purposes for which the non-native speaker needs to use English is arguably well catered for by a single monochrome form that looks as good on paper as it sounds in speech.” Although Quirk does not speak of a specific “monochrome standard”, it can be inferred that he means Standard British English and thus inevitably gives considerable

privilege to native-speakers (Kachru's inner circle). Besides, he is opposed to the idea of introducing non-standard forms from New Englishes into Standard English and language instructions.

Kachru takes issue with Quirk and points out to the fact that many non-native speakers consider the norms arrogant, imperialistic and insulting. In other words, Kachru's argument is in clash with the traditional approach of applied linguistics and the theory of interlanguage, in which the second language competence is seen via an interlanguage continuum (first language and second language). Briefly, any difference from Standard English (American or British, for instance) is considered an error. Thus, the supremacy of the Inner-Circle stressing the native speaker ideology has been challenged by Kachru and others especially with regard to standardization and the ownership of English. Furthermore, Kachru made a claim that non-native speakers were not trying to identify with native speakers. In other words, non-native speakers were not interested in the norms of the Inner Circle. That is, Kachru was against the use of such pejorative labels as errors, deviants, and such like. Some go even further and claim that native speaker models restrain non-native creativity and liberty. In spite of the fact that Kachru's division is not flawless, for example, it is sometimes criticized as it assumes that the inner circle countries are superior to other varieties, it has encouraged linguistic independence of varieties of outer circle English. The Quirk-Kachru debate briefly described in a rather simplistic way triggered and encouraged further research on the topic and led to the development of other models and more politically correct names for the English language.

Obviously, the concept of standard is particularly topical and central in education. Essentially, however, the notion of standard suggests we all share similar understanding what it really means. Yet there is no agreed-upon definition of standard and nor is there agreement on what students of EFL want to learn (Farrel – Martin, 2009, p. 2). First of all, the concept of standard can be somewhat misleading as it carries certain and sometimes false presuppositions for various people. For instance, Strevens (1985, p. 6 cited in Abbott, 1991, p. 49) asserts that:

1. *Standard English is the English of the numerical majority of English-user;*
2. *it has some special quality of excellence because, it is believed it is either used by the majority, or it has some official function, rather as Standard French has the imprimatur of Académie Française.*

Strevens (1985, p. 6) goes on to define standard as “English with no local base”. Strevens adds that Standard English “is accepted throughout English-speaking world” and “... it is spoken with any accent.” He also argues against the idea of central official authority since standard usage is established by common consent and acceptance or rejection among the educated users of the language (Abbott, 1991, p. 49). McArthur (2003, p. 442) identifies three major characteristics of Standard English:

3. *It is easiest to recognize in print because written conventions are similar worldwide.*

4. *It is usually used by news presenters.*

5. *Its usage relates to the speaker's social class and education.*

Further in line with e.g. Strevens – McArthur (2003, p. 442) notes that Standard English hinges upon general acceptance of correct usage. Kavka (2009, pp. 135 – 140), stressing the dynamicity of the present day English, points out to the fact that the term standard is considered idiomatically neutral by educated speakers of British English although he is aware of the fact that different varieties of the English-speaking worlds tend to overlap more than we are inclined to admit (2009, p. 136). Trudgill (1999) in his famous paper Standard English: what it isn't notes that "there seems to be considerable confusion in the English-speaking world, even amongst linguists, about what Standard English is (Trudgill, 1999, p. 117). Trudgill goes on to note what Standard English is not; according to him, it is not a language (but rather a prestigious variety of English); not an accent (despite the fact that especially lay people associate it with Received Pronunciation or the Queen's English, BBC English, English of educated people, for example); not a style (since Standard English can be used formally and informally); not a register; not a set of prescriptive terms.

In sum, there is generally no agreement on what Standard English is (Ferenčík, 2012, p. 31). Or rather, it is easier to say what Standard English is not. Farrell and Martin (2009, p. 3) conclude that if Standard English is supposed to be an instance of "only one form of English, the term World Englishes would be the norm that includes all varieties of the language." Inevitably, as mentioned above, the prolific global growth in the number of English learners and English speakers as a second and foreign language will require modifications and updating with respect to language assessment and testing. In a similar vein, new approaches to language modelling and norming are to be required (see e.g. Jenkins – Leung, p. 2013).

In referring to the domains of applied linguistics and language teaching, Erling (2000) concludes that international English textbooks made in the UK today look very similar to the former British English textbooks, adding that rather than changing the name of the language teachers should be given advice on how to teach "less imperialistically, how to be more sensitive to other cultures, and how to make sure that the local languages are not replaced by English but cultivated and cherished" (2000, p. 13).

In the light of the discussion above, it is not surprising that the notion of prescriptivism, conventionally the realm of written language, is not uncontroversial for most linguists who concern themselves with descriptivism and is sometimes like a red flag especially when language is viewed as unchangeable and static, as one firm langue. However, the distinction between prescriptivism and descriptivism is not that crystal clear as Baron (2002, p. 3) explains "... the line between descriptive and prescriptive grammar is not always easily drawn. For example, when language change is in progress (as is still the case with can and may), there is a tendency to dismiss as 'prescriptivist' any call to distinguish between two words that historically had different meanings, which, presumably, were part of speaker's lexical competences." The importance of prescriptivism can also be acknowledged from a pedagogical point of view, yet still is probably

in need of reconsideration. The overwhelming number of non-native speakers of English has, among other things, the effect of considering the importance of standardisation and norms in relation to examinations for non-native speakers of English. This arises several crucial questions. Is one language variety (e.g. British or American) inherently more important than any other? To what extent should the norm be prescriptive in exams? What language variation is (un) acceptable? As it is well-documented, the number of non-native speakers of English, i.e. people who speak English as their second or ~~as~~ a foreign language, is much higher than that of native speakers who are in a minority. More specifically, according to some sources (e.g. Braine 2006) 80% of the English speakers in the entire world are non-native speakers. Obviously, this sociolinguistic fact ought to be recognised. In effect, it is highly unlikely that British or American varieties will set trends in the immediate future.

By contrast, it must be noted that there will always be a large number of people who will aim to achieve almost native-like proficiency, e.g. translators, interpreters, and/or English language teachers (Nesselhauf 2005, pp. 37 – 38). Baron (2000) claims that “current notions of World Englishes or International English reintroduce issues of standardisation and prescriptivism” (2000, p. 13). Although there is probably a strong case for regulating the status of English, it is particularly challenging for native speakers of English to understand the impulse to maintain the ‘purity’ of a language by regulation (Graddol, 2006, p. 116). Besides, unlike other European languages, e.g. Czech and French, English is not institutionally codified. That is, there is no scientific institution regulating or codifying standard in a sense of document that carries some authority with native speakers on points of disputed usage, but rather, the standard form is shaped by influential sectors of society, e.g. major publishing houses and media. This means that the information found in traditional grammar books and dictionaries for the learner of English, for example, is primarily descriptive rather than, strictly speaking, prescriptive. Hudson (2000, p. 2) in his paper entitled *The Language Teacher and Descriptive versus Prescriptive Norms: The educational context reminds us that most European languages have some kind of official codification, while English doesn't. In spite of the fact that his paper is primarily aimed at native speaker teachers of English teaching English to native speakers in UK schools (except for Scotland) his comment is of relevance as it recognizes the issues of power. “The demand for EFL books, including descriptive grammars, is what drives grammar-writers and publishers, so English is very heavily codified for non-native speakers. For these people non-standard English is of no interest, so the grammars don't mention it.”* (Hudson, 2000, p. 2)

At the end of his paper, Hudson concludes that English is not at all codified for UK learners as opposed to non-native speakers. Baron (2000, p. 20) notes that traditional grammar books and dictionaries of English have defined their task to be encoding the principles underlying formally the “correct” written grammar. Consequently, it is sometimes believed that “correct” denotes written language. Baron (2000, p. 20f) goes on to say that the situation is nonetheless changing as more and more linguists are coming to suggest that the grammar of spoken language is sufficiently distinct from that of the prescriptive norm; that spoken language merits its own (written) grammar. In this connection, it is hoped that the use of language corpora will shed light

on the fuzzy concept of norm since the accessible corpus norm represents the norm of a language as a whole. Having said that, the notion of norm is highly problematic as it is most recently viewed as dynamic and variable.

This is not to say that there has never been a call and need for the standardisation of the language and establishment of an Academy, and perhaps Dr Samuel Johnson is believed to represent the academy (see e.g. Kavka, 2009, p. 20). Yet as noted by Johnson himself in the preface of his dictionary, the existence of the Academy might in fact hinder or destroy the spirit of English liberty. By contrast, Widdowson (1992, p. 324) argues in favour of teaching Standard English as a mother tongue or any other language. His claim rests on the fact that, especially written language, it is the language of institutional communication, and if you are not competent in this language, you are disqualified from entry into an array of areas of social and professional life.

Regarding language variation, it manifests itself in several distinctive features such as morphological and lexical, syntactic and orthographic aspects at the micro- level. At the macro-level, language variation becomes even more apparent in discourse as well as pragmatic features (Taylor, 2002, p. 18). Cambridge ESOL underscores the varieties of English suited to the individual goals and objectives of the candidates but stresses a certain degree of consistency at the same time. “Candidates’ responses to tasks in the Cambridge ESOL examinations are acceptable in varieties of English which would enable candidates to function in the widest range of international contexts. Candidates are expected to use a particular variety with some degree of consistency in areas such as spelling, and not, for example, switch from using a British spelling of a word to an American spelling of the same word in the same written response to a given task”. First Handbook for Teachers (2007, p. 4)

As Cambridge exams are designed at Cambridge, it is sometimes mistakenly taken for granted that the only option for the learner is to use Standard British English as probably the most codified and promoted variety of English.

As noted above, this change is having a profound effect on Standard English, and, for example, takes the form of modes of discourse, with their own ways of reasoning and arguing, and of presenting information (Halliday, 2006, p. 374). Therefore, the concept of standard is of continual interest not only amongst linguistics but also the general public. With a bit of exaggeration Widdowson (1992) describes the attitude towards Standard English of those who are in a powerful minority, e.g. those in government, as follows: “Proper English is Standard English and unless there is conformity to its norms, chaos will come again, the language will disperse, and we shall indeed be left with nothing. If the centre cannot hold, things will fall apart, and standards of communication, indeed standards of social behaviour in general, will decline. The centre is the standard language, and so if that holds, standards will be maintained. Correctness is ultimately a matter of moral values.” (Widdowson, 1992, p. 323)

Conclusion

For all of the above, it is possible to conclude that the description of the current state of English remains a challenging enterprise. Similarly, the notion of standard is highly problematic as well as complex, especially in relation to the English language. Trudgill's definition of Standard English being a variety of English is in harmony with Crystal (2003, p. 10) who also refers to Standard English as a variety of English. Some refer to standard as a dialect albeit, traditionally, dialect often stands in opposition to standard and implies a sub-class of a variety. Standard is usually referred to grammar rather than pronunciation and bears no direct relation to style. That is, Standard English includes both formal and informal styles. Standard is often contrasted with non-standard – a dialect. According to Hudson (2000, p. 2), the linguistic features of the two (standard and non-standard) are correlated with one other, i.e. standard feature is a strong predictor of the other features and the other way round. Apart from the linguistic characteristics, Standard English features social characteristics, e.g. education. Widdowson (1993, p. 328) argues in favour of Standard English and recognizes its importance not only in education. But the existence of one Standard English is disputable.

Despite the disparities between scholars and practitioners outlined above, British and American standards are nonetheless preferred in the teaching as a foreign language as well as in placement test and proficiency tests including Cambridge examinations. In particular, the CEFR pillars are invariably based on and compared with native speaker models. The same applies to teaching and testing materials that draw upon native speaker data. Yet the native speaker model of one and the only standard could be misleading in a number of ways as it appears as if there was one variety spoken by all native speakers of English, who are clearly in minority today. The importance to understand English as a lingua franca (ELF) is, therefore, unquestionable but far from saving. Indeed, descriptive ELF research into non-native speaker communication is attractive and thought-provoking. ELF puts great emphasis on variability and flexibility, and calls quite rightly for reconsideration of such notions as norms, Standard English, and codification in the immediate future. At the same time teaching and learning ELF is probably the most radical and controversial (Graddol, 2006, p. 87). Though this type of research might serve as a springboard for further discussion regarding testing and assessment, fundamental questions and practical issues remain unresolved, e.g. what to teach - in terms of pedagogy, materials, testing, and will require not only a profound change in attitudes. In other words, going beyond the confines of the conventional norms of language pedagogy is not unproblematic as teachers tend to be notoriously conservative in their attitude towards teaching language, norms and standards.

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