Moving towards an English family of languages? [1]

David Crystal

University of Wales, Bangor

I have carefully chosen the words of my title to allow me to bring together the two themes of the present volume: world English and translation. Many Anglicists and philologists will doubtless find the unusual collocation uncomfortable and disturbing – though I do not think Olga Akhmanova would have found it so. Anyone who can provide us with such a breathtaking definition of philology as 'the science which concerns itself with everything that has ever been written or said' (Akhmanova and Idzelis, 1973: 4) would surely not be put off by such a title, but would rather see within it an empirical hypothesis, a challenge, about what 'everything' actually means in relation to present-day English.

Perhaps the collocation is not so unfamiliar? Although this is the first time I have used it myself, there are several phrases which come close to it in the English linguistic literature of the past decade, and in many ways it is simply a logical extension of what is cutting-edge parlance. The steady pluralization of the noun *English* is one manifestation of it, in such phrases as 'new Englishes' or the journal title 'World Englishes' – a usage which has grown since the early 1970s. Associated locutions, such as 'an English' and 'each English' also occur. 'The English languages' is a phrase which has been used by Tom McArthur for a decade, most recently in the title of his book for Cambridge University Press's Canto series (McArthur, 1998). And 'Is English Really a Family of Languages?' was the title of an article in the *International Herald Tribune* a few years ago (Rosen, 1994).

Intelligibility and identity

What could an English 'family' of languages possibly mean? The term 'family', of course, arose with reference to such domains as 'Indo-European', 'Romance' and 'Slavic' – domains where there exists a clearly identifiable set of entities whose mutual unintelligibility would allow them to be uncontroversially classified as different languages. Intelligibility is the traditional criterion, and when that has been applied to the case of English, there has hitherto been little justification for the notion of an English language family. Although there are several well-known instances of English regional accents and dialects causing problems of intelligibility to people from a different dialect background, especially when encountered at rapid conversational speed – in Britain, Cockney (London), Geordie (Newcastle), Scouse (Liverpool) and Glaswegian (Glasgow) are among the most commonly cited cases – the problems largely resolve when the speaker slows down, or they reduce to difficulties over isolated lexical items. This makes regional varieties of English no more problematic for linguistic theory than, say, occupational varieties such as legal or scientific. It is no more illuminating to call Cockney or Scouse 'different English languages' than it would be to call Legal or Scientific by such a name, and anyone who chooses to extend the application of the term 'language' in this way finds a slippery slope which eventually leads to the blurring of the potentially useful distinctions between 'language', 'variety', and 'dialect'.

The intelligibility criterion has traditionally provided little support for an English language family (whether it will continue to do so I shall discuss below). But we have learned from sociolinguistics in recent decades that this criterion is by no means an adequate explanation for the language nomenclature of the world, as it leaves out of consideration linguistic attitudes, and in particular the criterion of identity. If intelligibility were the only criterion, then we would have to say that people from Norway, Sweden and Denmark spoke a single language – 'Scandinavian', perhaps – with several regional varieties. The socio-political history of these nations, of course, disallows any such option. Swedes speak Swedish, Norwegians Norwegian, and Danes Danish. Or, to take a more recent example of how language nomenclature can change (and rapidly): at the beginning of the 1990s, the populations of Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia would all be described as speaking varieties of Serbo-Croatian. Today, the situation has polarised, with Croatians considering the language they speak to be Croatian, and Serbs Serbian, and efforts being made to maximise the regional differences between them. The 'Croatian variety of Serbo-Croatian' has become 'the Croatian language'. A similar story can be found in any part of the world where language is an emergent index of socio-political identity.

That is the point: if a community wishes its way of speaking to be considered a 'language', and if they have the political power to support their decision, who would be able to stop them doing so? The present-day ethos is to allow communities to deal with their own internal policies themselves, as long as these are not perceived as being a threat to others. However, to promote an autonomous language policy, two criteria need

[1] This article by Professor David Crystal was written specially for this issue to suit the title "World Englishes and Translation", which was later replaced by a broader one – "World Englishes". No changes were made to the original version of the article. [Editors]

to be satisfied. The first is to have a community with a single mind about the matter, and the second is to have a community which has enough political-economic 'clout' to make its decision respected by outsiders with whom it is in regular contact. When these criteria are lacking, the movement is doomed.

An illustration of a movement's failure is the Ebonics controversy in California in 1996. This incident received widespread publicity during December 1996, most reports sharing the content and tone of this *New York Times* editorial (24 December), under the heading of 'Linguistic Confusion':

'The school board in Oakland, Calif., blundered badly last week when it declared that black slang is a distinct language that warrants a place of respect in the classroom. The new policy is intended to help teach standard English and other subjects by building on the street language actually used by many inner-city children and their parents. It is also designed to boost self-esteem for underachievers. But by labelling them linguistic foreigners in their own country, the new policy will actually stigmatise African-American children – while validating habits of speech that bar them from the cultural mainstream and decent jobs.'

The name *Ebonics* – a blend of Ebony + phonics – was being given to the variety of English spoken by African Americans, and which had previously been called by such names *as Black Vernacular English* or *African-American Vernacular English*. Although the intentions behind the move were noble, it was denounced by people from across the political and ethnic spectrum, including such prominent individuals as Education Secretary Richard W. Riley, the black civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson, and writer Maya Angelou. Quite evidently the two criteria above did not obtain: the US black community did not have a single mind about the matter – indeed they seemed largely to oppose the suggestion, for such reasons as were mentioned in the *Times* editorial – and the people who had the political-economic clout to make the decision respected were also against it. The school board withdrew its proposal a month later.

By giving a distinct name, Ebonics, to what had previously been uncontroversially recognised as a variety of English, a hidden boundary in the collective unconscious seems to have been crossed. It is in fact very unusual to assign a novel name to a variety of English in this way, other than in the humorous literature, where such names as *Strine* (a spelling of an imagined casual Australian pronunciation of the word 'Australian') can be found. There are indeed many locations which have generated their regional humour book, in which the local accent or dialect is illustrated by comic 'translations' into Standard English (see Crystal, 1998). A typical collection is called *Yacky dar moy bewty* (Llewellyn, 1985) – a title which itself needs commentary. *Yacky dar* is a humorous spelling of Welsh *Iechyd da* ('Cheers', literally 'Good health'), the conventional utterance before drinking. It is one of the few Welsh phrases known to English people. *Moy bewty* is similarly a humorous spelling of *My beauty* – reflecting the pronunciation of a vocative used in the West Country to address animals (= 'My beautiful one') and, by extension, people and things in general. Here is an extract from the West Country section of the book, with Standard English on the right: I add in brackets my own word-for-word 'translation' of the mock dialect:

Marnin, zur.	Good day, sir.	[Morning, sir.]
I nades vishun taykle.	I would like some fishing tackle.	[I needs fishing tackle.]
This yur anny gude?	Is this what you require?	[This here any good?]
Baste inna wuld, vor sartin.	It is an excellent make.	[Best in the world, for certain.]
Rop er up.	Yes, that is suitable.	[Wrap her up.]
Ow maich, me dear?	How much is it?	[How much, my dear?]
Whooart??	That much?	[What?]

Exchanges of this kind, however, are part of the genre of language play, and recognised as such by author and reader. They are not serious attempts to upgrade the status of the dialect into a separate language. The notion of translation which they employ is purely figurative. Indeed, the humour depends on a tacit recognition of the fact that we are dealing with a variety which is 'non-standard', and that people can recognise what it is saying. There is no true intelligibility problem and no problem of identity status.

With just one exception, within Britain and America, there has never been a situation where a specific regional variety of English has acquired a new name as part of its claim to be recognised as a standard in its locality. That exception is Scots. Here is McArthur's summary of the situation (1998: 138):

'The people of Scotland occupy a unique historical and cultural position in the English-speaking world. They use the standard language (with distinctive phonological, grammatical, lexical, and idiomatic features) in administration, law, education, the media, all national institutions, and by and large in their dealings with Anglophones elsewhere, but in their everyday lives a majority of them mix 'the King's English' with what in an earlier age was called 'the King's Scots'.'

What would Scots look like, if it were written down? A little later in the chapter (p. 149), McArthur tells the story of a time when he was filling in an annual form which asked him to state his modern language

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skills. The first few times he wrote 'English' and 'French'; then, as he says, having 'grown a touch mutinous', he added 'Scots' (he is from Glasgow). He adds:

'Nobody commented on the change; perhaps nobody noticed it. But fur masel, Ah'd cryssit a wee bit Rubicon aa yn ma lain – an, efter aa the years that separatit ma faither an me, Ah stertit tae feel a gey wheen shairer aboot ma ain owrelookit mither tongue.'

[But for myself, I'd crossed a little bit [of] Rubicon all on my own – and, after all the years that separated my father and me, I started to feel a considerable amount surer about my own overlooked mother tongue.]

How does Scots stand in relation to the two criteria referred to above? The situation is complex, because the Scots community does not have a single mind about the matter, nor has it had enough political-economic clout to make any decision respected by outsiders. In relation to the former point, the case in favour has been strongly argued by the leading scholar on Scots, Jack Aitken. After reviewing the arguments, he concludes (1985: 44):

'All the phenomena just recounted – the distinctiveness of Scots, its still substantial presence in daily speech, the fact that it was once the national language, its identifiably distinct history, its adoption (some Gaels would call it usurpation) of the nation's name, and the massive and remarkable and still vital literature in it, mutually support one another and one further and remarkable phenomenon – the ancient and still persistent notion that Scots is indeed "the Scottish language".'

But the missionary tone of this quotation, along with the indication that at least one section of the Scottish community thinks differently, suggests a complex sociolinguistic situation; and at the end of his article even Aitken pulls back from the brink:

'I believe what I have written suggests that if Scots is not now a full "language" it is something more than a mere "dialect". A distinguished German scholar once called it a *Halbsprache* – a semi-language.'

In relation to the second criterion, it remains to be seen whether the changing political situation in Scotland (the 1997 referendum on devolution agreeing the formation of a new Scots Assembly) will produce a stronger voice in favour of Scots. McArthur is doubtful (ibid.):

'Any political change in the condition of Scotland is unlikely to have a direct influence on the shaky condition of Scots or Gaelic, because the movement for Scottish autonomy (within the EU) does not have a linguistic dimension to it.'

If he is right, then that eliminates the strongest traditional contender for a separate identity within an English 'family of languages'.

The changing situation

But new contenders are entering the ring – an inevitable consequence of the emergence of English as a genuine global language. 'Genuine' is used here in order to reflect the reality that English is now spoken by more people (as a first, second, or foreign language) than any other language and is recognised by more countries as a desirable lingua franca than any other language. This is not the place to recapitulate the relevant statistics, insofar as they can be established: this information is available elsewhere (for my own estimates, see Crystal, 1995, 1997; see also Graddol, 1998). But it is important to recognise that the unprecedented scale of the growth in usage (approaching a quarter of the world's population) has resulted in an unprecedented growth in regional varieties. Variation, of course, has always been part of the language, given that Angles, Saxons, and Jutes must have spoken different Germanic dialects. The emergence of Scots can be traced back to the beginning of the Middle English period. In the 18th century, Noah Webster was one of many who argued the need to recognise a distinct American (as opposed to British) tongue. And the issue of identity has been central to debate about the nature of creole and pidgin Englishes around the world. But it is only in recent decades (chiefly, since the independence era of the 1960s) that the diversity has become so dramatic, generating a huge literature on 'world Englishes' and raising the question of linguistic identity in fresh and intriguing ways.

The chief aim of McArthur's book is to draw attention to the remarkable 'messiness' which characterises the current world English situation, especially in second language contexts. Typically, a 'new English' is not a homogeneous entity, with clear-cut boundaries, and an easily definable phonology, grammar, and lexicon. On the contrary, communities which are putting English to use are doing so in several different ways. As McArthur puts it (p. 2), 'stability and flux go side by side, centripetal and centrifugal forces operating at one and the same time'. And when actual examples of language in use are analysed, in such multilingual settings as Malaysia and Singapore, all kinds of unusual hybrids come to light. Different degrees of language mixing are apparent: at one extreme, a sentence might be used which is indistinguishable from standard English. At the other extreme a sentence might use so many words and constructions from a contact language that it becomes unintelligible to those outside a particular community. In between, there are varying degrees of hybridisation, ranging from the use of a single lexical borrowing within a sentence to several borrowings, and from the addition of a single borrowed syntactic construction (such as a tag question) to a reworking of an entire sentence structure. In addition, of course, the pronunciation shows similar degrees of variation, from a standard British or American accent to an accent which diverges widely from such

standards both in segmental and nonsegmental (intonational, rhythmical) ways (Crystal, 1996).

For example, within a few lines from a single Malaysian conversation, we can extract the following utterances (for the original conversation, see Baskaran, 1994). At the top of the list is a sentence which could be called Standard Colloquial English; below it are other sentences which show increasing degrees of departure from this norm, grammatically and lexically. At the bottom is a sentence (in this English dialogue) which is entirely Colloquial Malay.

Might as well go window-shopping a bit, at least.
Grammatical hybrids
My case going to be adjourned anyway. [auxiliary verb omitted]
Okay, okay, at about twelve, can or not? [distinctive tag question in English]
You were saying you wanted to go shopping, nak pergi tak? [addition and tag question in Malay 'Want to go, not?']
Can lah, no problem one! ['I can'; *lah* is an emphatic particle]
Lexical hybrids
No chance to ronda otherwise. [Malay 'loaf']
You were saying, that day, you wanted to beli some barang-barang. [Malay 'buy ... things']
But if anything to do with their stuff – golf or snooker or whatever, then dia pun boleh sabar one. [Malay 'he too can be patient']
Betul juga. [Malay 'True also']

Continua of this kind have long been recognised in creole language studies. What is novel, as McArthur points out, is the way phenomena of this kind have become so widespread, happening simultaneously in communities all over the world. After reviewing several speech situations, he concludes (p. 22):

'Worldwide communication centres on Standard English, which however radiates out into many kinds of English and many other languages, producing clarity here, confusion there, and novelties and nonsenses everywhere. The result can be – often is – chaotic, but despite the blurred edges, this latter-day Babel manages to work.'

I imagine there would have been a similar sense of chaos during the periods of rapid change in English language history, notably the early Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The arrival of thousands of words and expressions from French, for example, would not have passed without comment. Indeed, we do occasionally find such a comment. There is the famous 'egg' story of Caxton (Prologue to Virgil's *Book of Eneydos*, c.1490), for instance (I have modernised the morphology, spelling and punctuation, apart from the two critical words: for the original, see the text in Crystal, 1995: 57):

'And certainly our language now used varies far from that which was used and spoken when I was born. For we English men are born

under the domination of the moon, which is never steadfast but ever wavering, waxing one season and waning and decreasing another season. And that common English that is spoken in one shire varies from another. In so much that in my days [it] happened that certain merchants were in a ship in Thames for to have sailed over the sea into Zealand, and for lack of wind they tarried at the Foreland and went to land for to refresh them. And one of them named Sheffield, a mercer, came into a house and asked for meat, and specially he asked after *eggys*. And the good wife answered that she could speak no French. And the merchant was angry, for he also could speak no French, but would have had *egges*, and she understood him not. And then at last another said that he would have *eyren*. Then the good wife said that she understood him well. Lo! What should a man in these days now write, *egges* or *eyren*? Certainly it is hard to please every man by cause of diversity and change of language.

Egges was a northern form, a development from Old Norse. *Eyren* was a southern form, a development from Old English. French has nothing to do with it – but the fact that the story is reported in terms of French clearly suggests the extent to which there was pressure on the contemporary consciousness.

As a second example, there is the comment of 16th-century scholar Thomas Wilson, *in The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), objecting to the 'inkhorn terms' (i.e. learned terms) that were being widely introduced into English at the time (again, spelling and punctuation have been modernised).

'Some seek so far for outlandish English that they forget altogether their mother's language. And I dare swear this, if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell what they say; and yet these fine English clerks will say they speak in their mother tongue, if a man should charge them with counterfeiting the King's English.'

Hybridisation has been a feature of English since Anglo-Saxon times. Any history of English shows that the language has always been something of a 'vacuum-cleaner', sucking in words and expressions from the other languages with which it has come into contact. (This point has often been neglected by countries who complain these days about the extent to which they have been affected by 'Anglicisation'. English has been 'Frenchified' in the past far more than French has recently been 'Anglicised'.) But today, with more contact being made with other languages than ever before, the scale of the borrowing is much greater than it has been in the past. A wider range of languages is involved. And the borrowing is now found in all varieties of English, and not just in the more academic or professional domains.

Moreover, we have by no means exhausted the novel kinds of hybrid which linguistic change has in store for us. Consider, for example, the situation which is appearing with increasing frequency around the

world in regions where there are high immigration or 'guestworker' populations. A man and a woman from different first-language backgrounds meet, fall in love, and get married, using the English they learned as a foreign or second language as their only lingua franca. They then have a baby, who learns from them – what, exactly? The child will hear English as a foreign language from its parents, but will learn this as its mother tongue. What form will this take? Will there be a linguistic growth analogous to that which takes place when a pidgin becomes a creole? What kind of English will be the outcome?

Or, to take another example: the corridors of power in such multinational settings as Brussels. Although several languages are co-official in the European Union, pragmatic linguistic realities result in English being the most widely used language in these corridors. But what kind of common English emerges, when Germans, French, Greeks, and others come into contact, each using English with its own pattern of interference from the mother tongue. There will be the usual sociolinguistic accommodation, and the result will be a novel variety of 'Euro-English' – a term which has been used for over a decade with reference to the distinctive vocabulary of the Union (with its *Eurofighters*, *Eurodollars*, *Euro-sceptics*, and so on: for a few recent examples using the *Euro-* prefix, see Knowles (1997); for earlier examples, Mort (1986)), but which must now be extended to include the various hybrid accents, grammatical constructions, and discourse patterns encountered there. On several occasions, English-as-a-first-language politicians, diplomats, and civil servants working in Brussels have told me how they have felt their own English being pulled in the direction of these foreign-language patterns. A common feature, evidently, is to accommodate to an increasingly syllable-timed rhythm. Others include the use of simplified sentence constructions, and the avoidance of idioms and colloquial vocabulary, a slower rate of speech, and the use of clearer patterns of articulation (avoiding some of the assimilations and elisions which would be natural in a first-language setting). It is important to stress that this is not the 'foreigner talk' reported in an earlier ELT era. My British informants (I have no information on what their US counterparts do) were not 'talking down' to their colleagues, or consciously adopting simpler expressions: this was unconscious accommodation, which they were able to reflect upon only after considerable probing on my part.

Towards a new pedagogy

Anecdotal evidence of the kind presented in the previous two paragraphs is of little value, other than as a motivation for hypotheses. There is a real need for empirical research into these hybrid language situations; and doubtless the sociolinguistic situation in Russia could provide its own examples. But it is plain that the emergence of hybrid trends and

varieties raise all kinds of theoretical and pedagogical questions. They blur the long-standing distinctions between 'first', 'second', and 'foreign' language. They make us reconsider the notion of 'standard', especially when we find such hybrids being used confidently and fluently by groups of people who have education and influence in their own regional setting. They present the traditionally clear-cut notion of 'translation' with all kinds of fresh problems, for (to go back to the Malaysian example) at what point in a conversation should we say that a notion of translation is relevant, as we move from 'understanding' to 'understanding most of the utterance precisely' to 'understanding little of the utterance precisely ("getting the drift" or "gist")' to 'understanding none of the utterance, despite its containing several features of English'? And, to move into the sociolinguistic dimension, hybrids give us new challenges in relation to language attitudes: for example, at what point would our insistence on the need for translation cause an adverse reaction from the participants, who might maintain they are 'speaking English', even though we cannot understand them? This is the Caxton situation again.

'O brave new world, That has such people in't'. Miranda's exclamation (from *The Tempest*, V. i. 88) is apposite. It is a brave new world, indeed; and those who have to be bravest of all are the teachers of English. I am never sure whether to call language teaching or translating the most difficult of all the language tasks; both are undeniably highly demanding and professional activities (and it is one of the world's greatest scandals that such professions can be so badly paid). But in a world where traditional models and values are changing so rapidly, the task facing the teacher, in particular, is immense. Keeping abreast of all that is taking place is a nightmare in itself. Deciding what to teach, given the proliferation of new and competing models, requires metaphors which go beyond nightmares. Is there any consensus emerging about what a teacher should do, in such circumstances?

My impression, as I travel around and listen to people reporting on their experiences, is that there is increasing recognition of the importance of distinguishing between production and reception skills in language teaching. From a production point of view, there is a strong case for pedagogical conservatism. If one is used to teaching standard English with an RP accent, this argument goes, then one should continue to do so, for a whole range of familiar reasons – the linguistic knowledge base is there in the various analyses and descriptions, there are copious course-books and materials, and there is a well understood correspondence between the norms of spoken and written expression (important for examination purposes as well as for reading literature). In short, there is a general familiarity with this variety which must breed a modicum of contentment.

But from the viewpoint of listening comprehension, there is an equally strong case for pedagogical innovation. It is a fact that RP is

changing (to be precise, continuing to change), and that many forms of 'regionally modified RP' are now to be heard among educated people in Britain and abroad. It is a fact that several regional accents (e.g. Edinburgh Scots, Yorkshire) are now more prestigious than they used to be, and are being used in settings which would have been inconceivable 20 years ago – such as by presenters on radio and television, or by switchboard operators in the rapidly growing domain of telemarketing. It is a fact that new regional first-language standards are emerging in such countries as Australia and South Africa. It is a fact that new regional second-language standards are emerging in such areas as West Africa and the subcontinent of India (though less obvious how far these are country-restricted: see Crystal (1995: 358,ff.)). And it seems to be a fact (though the evidence is still largely anecdotal) that there are new hybrids emerging in foreign-language contexts all over the English-speaking world.

If this is the case, teachers need to prepare their students for a world of staggering diversity. They need to expose them to as many varieties of English as possible, especially those which students are most likely to encounter in their own locale. Careful thought needs to be given to the best way of grading these new materials. And above all, teachers need to develop a truly flexible attitude towards principles of usage. The absolutist concept of 'proper English' or 'correct English', already subjected to insightful scrutiny by Akhmanova and her colleagues (see, for example, the Introduction to Akhmanova and Idzelis, 1973), needs to be replaced by relativistic models in which literary and educated norms are seen to maintain their place alongside other norms, some of which depart radically from what was once recognised as 'correct'. There may even, in due course, be the need to take on board the concept of an 'English family of languages' – though, from the examples discussed earlier, it would appear we are not quite at this stage.

Any move to a new mind-set is never easy, and some will not wish to make it, for old habits die hard. We should perhaps bring to mind the wise words of Igor Stravinsky, in his "Poetics of Music" (Ch. 5): 'A renewal is fruitful only when it goes hand in hand with tradition'. But there is no doubt in my mind that the need to adopt a dynamic linguistic relativism, recognising as central the notions of variation and change, and to interpret this model pedagogically, is the only way forward, and the chief challenge facing our ELT specialists as we move into the new millennium.

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Discussion:

English or a Member of the Family: a Quest for 'Target'.

Irina Maguidova

There can be little doubt that Professor Crystal's article 'Moving towards an English Family of Languages' raises a number of issues the importance of which can hardly be overestimated. English as a World Language, English as the present-day 'lingua franca', English co-existing with numerous nationally-based 'Englishes', the 'ownership' of English etc. etc. – these are the 'fateful' questions that concern us deeply and invariably produce food for thought.

We have to, as philologists and teachers of English, face the fact that variation in English is growing literally 'before our eyes'. More than that: in so far as this process is markedly condensed in time, we are actually witnessing something that at a different period of history could have taken not decades but centuries at least. As it is, however, we may say that the end of the present century has seen the rise of the numerous, new varieties of English which seem to be striving for an intensely competitive relationship with their authentic 'source'.

True (and there is an enormous literature on the subject) English has hardly ever been a monolithic whole. There have always been various territorial and social distinctions within British English as well as the diatopic distinctions between different varieties of English spoken outside England, in countries like Canada, Australia, the United States etc.

Today, however, the 'geography' of English has gone through a dramatic change. The familiar 'net' of the territorial and social dialects of the British Isles plus the diatopic variants of English (not to mention