The future of global English grammatical identity

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The cluster of books on English as a global language which appeared in the late 1990s (Crystal, 1997; McArthur 1998, Graddol, 1998) focused on the question of why English has become a world language and what is likely to happen to it sociopolitically speaking. Little attention was paid to the question of what happens to the form of the language when it is adopted in this way. Historical experience is no real guide to the kinds of adaptation that are currently taking place. Several of the 'New Englishes' of the past have been well studied, of course – notably British, American, and Australian English – but the way the language has evolved in settings where it has been introduced as a first language is likely to be very different from the way it will evolve in settings where the majority are non-native speakers. There are already signs of this happening, though it is difficult to make reliable generalizations given the social, ethnic, and linguistic complexity within the countries where these developments are taking place, and the considerable variations between settings. However, it is possible to identify several types of change which are taking place, and to gain a sense of their extent, from the case studies which have been carried out.

Any domain of linguistic structure and use could be the basis of variety differentiation, but with first-language varieties the variation has been almost entirely associated with vocabulary and phonology. There has been little acknowledgement of grammatical variation in those reference grammars which incorporate an international perspective: Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985: 19-20), talking about the distinction between British and American English, comment that 'grammatical differences are few ... lexical examples are far more numerous', and they make only sporadic reference to possibilities in other regions. The point is apparently reinforced in Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan (1999: 20-21), who conclude that 'grammatical differences across registers are more extensive than across dialects' and that 'core grammatical features are relatively uniform across dialects'. Undoubtedly there is an impression of relative 'sameness' (ibid: 23), with very few points of absolute differentiation (e.g. AmE *gotten*), but it may well be that this is due to a set of factors which will not always obtain.

Two points are relevant. First, grammars – especially those motivated by teaching considerations - have traditionally focused on standard English, and thus essentially on printed English, which provides the foundation of that standard (Quirk, 1962:95). Non-standard varieties are mentioned only in passing. However, we know from intranational dialectology that it is here where grammatical divergence is most likely to be found. Second,

because international varieties are chiefly associated with speech, rather than writing, they have also attracted less attention. Even in the major European reference grammars, which have always acknowledged the importance of the spoken language, there has nonetheless been a concentration on writing. Corpora are still massively biased towards the written language: the 100-million-word British National Corpus, for example, has only 10% of its material devoted to speech. The Bank of English had a remarkable 20 million words of transcribed natural speech at the point when its corpus had reached 320 million words, but this is still only 6%. The 40-million-word corpus used for Biber, *et al* is a significant improvement in proportions, with 6.4 million words of conversational speech and 5.7 million of non-conversational speech; but even 30% of a corpus is an inversion of the realities of daily language use around the world.

Traditionally, the national and international use of English has been in the hands of people who are not just literate, but for whom literacy is a significant part of their professional identity. 'Educated usage' (which usually meant 'well-educated'; see Quirk (1960)) has been a long-standing criterion. The influence of the grammar of the written language has thus been pervasive in these people's everyday usage, fuelled by a strongly prescriptive tradition in schools and an adult reliance on usage manuals which privileged writing above speech. Grammars totally devoted to speech are rare, and self-avowedly exploratory, as with Brazil (1995). But as English becomes increasingly global, we must expect the centre of gravity to move away from writing in the direction of speech. Although there is no suggestion anywhere that standard written English will diminish in importance, there is increasing evidence of new spoken varieties growing up which are only partly related to the written tradition and which may even be totally independent of it. It is unlikely that any regional trends identified in a predominately written corpus tradition will be predictive of the grammatical changes which will take place in global spoken English. Accordingly, the current view, that there is little macro-regional grammatical differentiation, may not be applicable for much longer.

But even in the available literature, with its bias towards writing, there are more signs of grammatical differentiation than the general statements suggest. This is most in evidence in Biber *et al*, where the results of statistical register-based comparisons are presented, and special attention is paid to areas of interaction between lexicon and grammar, with particular reference to British (BrE) and American (AmE) English. The view that 'core grammatical features are relatively uniform across dialects' is broadly justified, but how we interpret this depends on exactly what is meant by 'core', and just how much tolerance we allow in under the heading of 'relatively'. Certainly, when we examine colligations (i.e. lexical collocations in specific grammatical contexts) we find a multiplicity of differences. The index to that book identifies some 60 locations where its approach established some sort of contrastivity, and at

many of these there is considerable lexico-grammatical variation. An example of this variation is given in Table 1 (a), where some of the adverbial differences are noted; Table 1 (b) takes the topic of adverbs modifying adjectives, and extracts the relevant differences for

Table 1 about here

conversation. This kind of variation is found at several places within the grammar. For example, older semi-modals (e.g. *have to, be going to*) are noted to be 'considerably more common' in AmE, whereas recent semi-modals (e.g. *had better, have got to*) are 'more common by far' in BrE (ibid: 488-9). Variations are also noted with respect to aspect, modals, negation, concord, pronouns, complementation, and several other areas. Although each point is relatively small in scope, the potential cumulative effect of a large number of local differences, especially of a colligational type, can be considerable. It is this which probably accounts for the impression of Britishness or Americanness which a text frequently conveys, without it being possible to find any obviously distinctive grammatical or lexical feature within it.

But whatever the grammatical differences identifiable in relation to American and British English, these are likely to be small compared with the kinds of difference which are already beginning to be identified in the more recently recognized New Englishes. And areas which one might legitimately consider to be 'core' are being implicated. Several examples have been identified in case studies of particular regional varieties, as will be illustrated below; but it is important to note the limitations of these studies. The state of the art is such that the examples collected can only be illustrative of possible trends in the formation of new regional grammatical identities. There have been few attempts to adopt a more general perspective, to determine whether a feature noticed in one variety is also to be found in others, either nearby or further afield (Crystal, 1995a: 358,ff.). (An exception is Ahulu (1995a), comparing usage in West Africa and India, and his two-part study of lexical and grammatical variation in international English, as found in postcolonial countries (1998a, 1998b).) Nor do the case studies adopt the same kind of intra-regional variationist perspective as illustrated by Biber, *et al*, or examine lexico-grammatical interaction. The studies are typically impressionistic - careful collections of examples by linguistically trained observers, but lacking the generalizing power which only systematic surveys of usage can provide.

The absence of statistical data, in the literature referred to below, means that the varietal status of features identified as non-standard (with reference to British or American English) is always open to question. For example, the use of uncountable nouns as plurals (*furnitures, luggages, equipments*, etc) has been observed in several West African countries, in India, and in Singapore and Malaysia, and is probably common elsewhere. It is of course a

common error in English language learning. The question is therefore whether the use of this feature is so generally acceptable within a country that it would no longer be appropriate to call it an error. To avoid an error diagnosis there has to be usage across a significant section of the population, and for it to be recognized as part of a new standard a significant number of these people need to be educated and to have achieved a level of English that in other respects would be said to be advanced. If these criteria are met, then the model which new learners encounter will routinely contain the feature, and this will help to consolidate it. *Welcome in Egypt* is now so widespread in that country that it has appeared in a Longman grammar.

It is not always clear whether a new feature arises as a result of transference from a contrasting feature in a local contact language or is a general property of English foreign-language learning, though individual studies sometimes suggest one or the other. The process of change is evidently rapid and pervasive, and origins are usually obscure. But a synchronic comparison of a distinctive English construction with the corresponding construction in the contact languages of a region is usually illuminating, and well worth doing, as it is precisely this interaction that is likely to be the most formative influence on the identity of a New English. For example, Alsagoff, Bao and Wee (1998) analyse a type of *why* + *you* construction in Colloquial Singapore English (CSgE), illustrated by *Why you eat so much?* – a construction which signals a demand for justification (i.e. 'unless there is a good reason, you should not eat so much'). There are parallels in BrE and AmE: *Why eat so much?* (which would usually suggest 'I don't think you should') vs. *Why do you eat so much?* (which allows the reading 'I genuinely want to know'). The authors point out that the verb in such constructions is typically in its base form (not *-ing*) and dynamic (not stative), and thus shows similarities with the imperative, from which (they argue) the *why* construction inherits its properties. They draw attention to such constructions as *You hold on, OK*, which are somewhat impolite in BrE and AmE, but not considered offensive in CSgE; indeed, the presence of *you* is considered more polite than its absence. Thus, they conclude, *Why you eat so much?* is more polite than *Why eat so much?* They explain this reversal with reference to substrate influence from Chinese, where the imperative allows the use of second person pronouns to reduce face-threatening illocutionary force.

While it is of course possible that other contact languages could have imperative constructions of a similar kind to those occurring in Chinese, and could thus influence a local variety of English in the same way, the probability is that such interactions are going to be specific to the contact situation in an individual country. Especially in a multilingual country, where English is being influenced by a 'melting-pot' of other languages (such as Malay, Tamil, and Chinese in Singapore), the likelihood of a particular constellation of influences being replicated elsewhere is remote. Distinctive grammatical features are also likely to be increasingly implicated in the 'mixed languages' which arise from code-switching.

Moreover, as the CSgE example suggests, even features of grammar which superficially resemble those in standard BrE or AmE might turn out to be distinctive, once their pragmatic properties are taken into account. Modal verbs, for example, are likely to be particularly susceptible to variation, though the effects are not easy to identify. In short, there is every likelihood of 'core' features of English grammar becoming a major feature of the description of New Englishes, as time goes by. Table 2 illustrates a range of features which have already been noted, some of which are very close to what anyone might reasonably want to call 'core'. (The list is by no means exhaustive, nor are the features identified necessarily exclusive to the area noted.)

Table 2 about here

Let us look at just one of these areas in detail, using a case study from one country. All the standard processes of lexical creation are encountered when analysing the linguistic distinctiveness of new Englishes (Bauer, 1983: Ch. 7), and several studies of Pakistani English have shown the distinctive role played by the various kinds of word-formation (Baumgardner, 1993, 1998). Compounding from English elements is found in such items as *wheelcup* ('hub-cap') and *side-hero* ('supporting actor'), with some elements proving to be especially productive: *-lifter* (cf. *shoplifter*) has generated many new words (e.g. *car lifter, luggage lifter, book lifter*), as has *wallah/walla* 'one who does something' (e.g. *exam-centre-walla, coachwalla*). Hybrid compounds, using Urdu and English elements, in either order, are also notable: *khas deposit* 'special deposit', *double roti* 'bread'. Distinctive prefixation is found, as in *anti-mullah* and *deconfirm*, and there is a wide range of distinctive suffixation, using both English and Urdu bases: compare *endeavourance, ruinification, cronydom, abscondee, wheatish, scapegoatism, oftenly, upliftment,* alongside *begumocracy, sahibism, sifarashee* (sifarash 'favour'), *babuize* (babu 'clerk'). Word-class conversion is illustrated by such verbs as *to aircraft, to slogan, to tantamount* and by such noun forms as *the injureds, the deads*. Various process of abbreviation, clipping, and blending, are in evidence: *d/o* ('daughter of'), *r/o* ('resident of'), *admit card, by-polls*. Baumgardner (1998) also illustrates distinctive collocations, both English only (e.g. *discuss threadbare, have a soft corner*) and English/Urdu combinations (e.g. *commit zina* ('adultery'), *recite kalam* ('verse')).

Language is an immensely democratising institution. To have learned a language is immediately to have rights in it. You may add to it, modify it, play with it, create in it, ignore bits of it, as you will. And it is just as likely that the course of the English language is going to be influenced by those who speak it as a second or foreign language as by those who speak it as a mother-tongue. Fashions count, in language, as anywhere else. And fashions are a function of numbers. The total number of mother-tongue speakers in the world is steadily

falling, as a proportion of world English users (Graddol, 1999). It is perfectly possible (as the example of rapping suggests) for a linguistic fashion to be started by a group of second- or foreign-language learners, or by those who speak a creole or pidgin variety, which then catches on among other speakers. And as numbers grow, and second/foreign-language speakers gain in national and international prestige, usages which were previously criticised as 'foreign' – such as a new concord rule (*three person*), variations in countability (*furnitures*, *kitchenwares*), or verb use (*he be running*) - can become part of the standard educated speech of a locality, and may eventually appear in writing.

What power and prestige is associated with these new varieties of English? It is all happening so quickly that it is difficult to be sure; there have been so few studies. But impressionistically, we can see several of these new linguistic features achieving an increasingly public profile, in their respective countries. Words become used less self-consciously in the national press - no longer being put in inverted commas, for example, or given a gloss. They come to be adopted, often at first with some effort, then more naturally, by first-language speakers of English in the locality. Indeed, the canons of local political correctness, in the best sense of that phrase, may foster a local usage, giving it more prestige than it could ever have dreamed of - a good example is the contemporary popularity in New Zealand English of Maori words (and the occasional Maori grammatical feature, such as the dropping of the definite article before the people name *Maori* itself). And, above all, the local words begin to be used at the senior or most fashionable levels of society - by politicians, religious leaders, socialites, pop musicians, and others. Using local words is then no longer to be seen as slovenly or ignorant, within a country; it is respectable; it may even be 'cool'.

The next step is the move from national to international levels. These people who are important in their own communities - whether politicians or pop stars - start travelling abroad. The rest of the world looks up to them, either because it wants what they have, or because it wants to sell them something. And the result is the typical present-day scenario - an international gathering (political, educational, economic, artistic...) during which senior visitors use, deliberately or unselfconsciously, a word or phrase from their own country which would not be found in the traditional standards of British or American English. Once upon a time, the reaction would have been to condemn the usage as ignorance. Today, it is becoming increasingly difficult to say this, or even to think it, if the visitors have more degrees than the visited, or own a bigger company, or are social equals in every way. In such circumstances, one has to learn to live with the new usage, as a feature of increasing diversity in English. It can take a generation or two, but it does happen. It happened within 50 years between Britain and America: by 1842, Charles Dickens (in his *American Notes*, revised in 1868) made some observations about American linguistic usage - such as (in Chapter 9) his amazement at the many ways that Americans use the verb *fix* - all expressed in tones of delight, not dismay.

But, whatever your attitude towards new usages - and there will always be people who sneer at diversity - there is no getting away from the fact that, these days, regional national varieties of English are increasingly being used with prestige on the international scene, and that grammatical distinctiveness is becoming increasingly centre stage.

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Table 1 (a). Differences in British and American adverbial usage, after Biber, *et al* (1999).

	BrE	*AmE*	*Page*
Adverbials			
yesterday in news	X		795
days of week in news		X	795
as (manner/time) in news		Y	841
as (reason)	Y		846
maybe, kind of, like		X	867
sort of	X		867
so		Y	886
then	Y		886
adjective as adverb (eg *slow*)		Y	542
good (as adverb)		X	543
real + adjectives		X	543

X = much higher

Y = higher

Table 1 (b). Specific adverb+adjective pairs showing differences in conversational usage (after Biber, *et al*, 1999: 545).

Occurrence	*BrE*	*AmE*
100+ per million	very good	pretty good
	very nice	really good
50+ per million	quite good	too bad
	really good	very good
20+ per million	pretty good	real good
	quite nice	real quick
	too bad	really bad
	fair enough	too big
		very nice

Table 2. Some potentially distinctive grammatical features of New Englishes.

Construction	*Example*	*Location noted*
Sentence functions		
Rhetorical questions	Where young! (= I'm certainly not young)	S Af Ind
	Where he'll do it! (=He certainly won't do it!)	S Af Ind
	What I must go! (= I don't want to go)	S Af Ind
Tag questions	He left, isn't? (= He left, didn't he?)	S Af Ind
	He can play golf, or not?	Mal
	He can play golf, yes or not?	Mal
	You stay here first, can or not?	Mal
	You didn't see him, is it?	Zam., S Af, Sg, Mal
	You are coming to the meeting, isn't it?	S As, W Af
	He will come tomorrow, not so?	W Af, S As,
Clause elements		
SV Inversion	Why a step-motherly treatment is being ...	Pak
	at no stage it was demanded ...	Pak
	What they are talking about?	Mal
	When she is travelling to the States?	Mal
	She is crying why?	Mal
Complementation	busy to create (= busy creating)	Pak
	banning Americans to enter	Pak
	decision for changing	Pak
Adverbial position	You must finish today all your practicals.	Mal
	Sushila is extremely a lazy girl.	Mal
	Seldom she was at home.	Mal
	Hardly they were seen in the library.	Mal
End-placed conjunctions	She can talk English but.	S Af Ind
	I cooked rice too, I cooked roti too. (= I cooked both rice and roti)	S Af Ind
Topicalization (not necessarily emphatic)	Myself I do not know him.	Zam
	That man he is tall.	Zam
	My friend she was telling me.	S Af
	His uncle he is the cause of all the worry.	Mal

Verb phrase		
Auxiliary/Copula deletion	When you leaving?	Mal
	They two very good friends.	Mal
Aspect/Tense	I am understanding it now.	S Af, S As
	They are owning three houses.	Mal, S As
	He is having two Mercs .	Mal
	I finish eat. (= I have eaten)	S Af Ind
	I already eat.	Sg
	You never see him? (= Haven't you seen him?)	S Af Ind
	waited-waited (= waited for a long time)	S Af Ind
	I have been signing yesterday.	Mal
	I would be singing next week.	Mal
	(expressing distant future, vs. *will*)	
Phrasal verbs	cope up with (sth.)	Pak, Zam, Gha
	stress on (sth.)	Pak
	dispose off (sth.)	Pak
	fill this form	Gha
	pick the visitor (= pick up)	Gha
	participate a seminar	Pak
Noun phrase		
Preposed elements	milk bottle (= a bottle of milk)	Pak
	toast piece (= a piece of toast)	Pak
	knife bread (= bread knife)	Zam
	under construction bridge	Pak
	(= bridge which is under construction)	
	detrimental to health medicines	Pak
Apposition	Johnny uncle (= uncle Johnny)	S Af Ind
	Naicker teacher (= teacher, Mr Naicker)	S Af Ind
Number	aircrafts, equipments, luggages, machineries	Nig, Gha
	stationeries, damages (= damage)	
	jewelleries, cutleries, furnitures	Mal
	on the right tracks	Gha, Ind
	in their strides	Gha, Ind2
	trouser	Nig
Article use	a good advice	Gha, Ind
	a luggage	Gha, Ind

	There'll be traffic jam.	Mal
	She was given last chance.	Mal
	arrived from United States of America	Gha, Ind
	on his way to bank	Gha, Ind
	majority of the people	Gha, Ind
	students at the Oxford University	Gha, Ind
	working at the Lever Brothers	Gha, Ind
	had a shock of her life	Gha, Ind
Pronoun deletion	Did you find? (something previously mentioned)	S Af
	If you take, you must pay.	Mal
Other constructions		
Prepositions	request for	Gha
	investigate into	Gha
	gone to abroad	Gha
	ask from him	Nig
	discuss about politics	Nig, Zam
	return back	Zam
Comparatives	more better	Zam
	younger to	Zam
	junior than	Zam
Postpositions	Durban-side (= near Durban)	S Af Ind
	morning-part (= in the morning)	S Af Ind
	twelve-o-clock-time (= at twelve o'clock)	S Af Ind
Particles	I told you, what. (= Don't you remember, I told you)	Mal
	He is really serious, man. (= I'm telling you)	Mal
	He's a real miser, one. (= a typical miser)	Mal, Sg
	He's not the eldest, lah. (= I'm telling you)	Mal, Sg
	We are going, oo. (= right now)	Gha3
	He is tall, paa. (He is very tall)	Gha3
Reduplication	now-now (= soon, at once)	Zam, S Af
	who-who (= who plural, whoever)	S Af Ind
	where-where (= where plural, wherever)	S Af Ind
	one-one (= one each)	S Af Ind
	lot-lot (= lots of)	S Af Ind
	quick-quick (= very fast)	S Af Ind
	tear-tear (= tear to shreds)	Gha

	good good (= very good)	Ind
	big big fish (= many fish)	Ind
	good good morning (intimate tone)	Ind
Lexical morphology	coloured television	Nig
	repairer (= repairman)	Nig
	second handed	Nig
	proudy	Zam
	easeness	Zam
	poorness	S Af Ind
	imprudency	Zam
	delayance	Gha
	costive (= costly)	Gha
	matured = mature	Gha

Key:

Gha	Ghanaian English (Gyasi, 1991; Ahulu, 1994, 1995b)
Ind	Indian English (Kachru, 1986; Mehrotra, 1997)
Mal	Malaysian English (Baskaran, 1994; Platt and Weber, 1980))
Nig	Nigerian English (Awonusi, 1990; Bamiro, 1994)
Pak	Pakistani English (Baumgardner, 1990)
S Af	South African English (Mesthrie, 1993a)
S Af Ind	South African Indian English (Mesthrie, 1993b)
S As	South Asian English (Kachru, 1994; Ahulu, 1995a, 1998a, 1998b)
Sg	Singaporean English (Alsagoff, Bao and Wee, 1998; Platt and Weber, 1980)
W Af	West African English (Ahulu, 1995a, 1998a, 1998b)
Zam	Zambian English (Tripathi, 1990)