# 3.3 DAVID CRYSTAL
## An English Family of Languages?*

**Introduction to Reading 3.3**

English has a unique role in the world – that is indisputable. What is less clear is how to label that role as it currently stands. There is also considerable debate about what might happen in the future. In this excerpt, Crystal ponders some of the issues.

How many of these labels have you come across in your reading: English as a Foreign Language, English as a Second Language, English as an International Language, International English, International Englishes, English as a Global Language, English as a World Language, English as a Lingua Franca, Global English, World English, World Englishes – and how many more similar labels have you also come across? That there are so many labels suggests that the role of English in the world is far from clear. What is still being debated is the exact nature of the role of English in the world now and in the future, and how it might/ should be labelled – an important issue as each label carries its own ideological baggage: to talk of *International/Global English* implies that there is one single form of English, whereas to talk of *International/Global Englishes* implies that there is more than one – and that before you consider the use of the premodifiers such as *global* or *world* (for further discussion, see Jenkins 2007).

In this excerpt, which comes towards the end of the book from which it is taken, Crystal is considering the future of English after a broad account of the then current (2003) position. He mentions the three-circle model, a reference to a much-used and widely presented (Bloomer, Griffiths and Merrison 2005: 415; Crystal 2003: 107; Jenkins 2009: 19) representation of English in the world using three concentric circles and originally presented by Braj Kachru. You might like to try to draw your own version of the model from the following information if a copy is not easily to hand – start by drawing three concentric circles. Countries are located in the model in relation to how English is used in each of them:

- in the *inner circle* appear countries where English is used as a mother tongue for all administrative and most social purposes (countries such as the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand for example)
- in the *outer circle* (in fact, the middle circle of the three you have drawn) there are those countries where English is regarded as being used as a second language and where much of the administration of the country is

achieved through the medium of English, often for historical reasons of conquest and imperialism (Singapore is located in this circle; see Reading 2.7 in this reader)

- in the *expanding circle* (the outermost of the three) there are those countries where English is used largely as a foreign language and is not used for national administrative purposes (e.g. Japan, France, Vietnam (see Reading 3.4)).

One of the disadvantages of the model is the confusing labels: the so-called outer circle is in fact the middle of the three concentric circles and the 'expanding circle' is the outermost circle of the three. Perhaps it is best to think of the labels as relating to the predominant use of English in the country and in relation to the labels of English as a mother tongue (inner circle countries), English as a second language (outer circle – not using English for such central purposes as the inner circle countries) and English as a foreign language for the expanding circle where English is used as a foreign language only in that country as at the time of categorisation. Of course, as countries develop and the use of English changes in the world, a country may be relocated into a different circle to reflect its use of English in the modern world.

The future of world English is likely to be one of increasing multidialectism; but could this become multilingualism? Is English going to fragment into mutually unintelligible varieties, just as Vulgar Latin did a millennium ago? The forces of the past fifty years, which have led to so many New Englishes, suggest this outcome. If such significant change can be noticed within a relatively short period of time, must not these varieties become even more differentiated over the next century, so that we end up, as McArthur argues, with an English 'family of languages' (McArthur 1998)?

Prophets have been predicting such an outcome for some time. In 1877, the British philologist Henry Sweet (the probable model for Shaw's Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion/My Fair Lady*) thought that a century later 'England, America, and Australia will be speaking mutually unintelligible languages, owing to their independent changes of pronunciation' (Sweet 1877: 196). The same point had been made nearly a century before by Noah Webster, in his *Dissertations* (1789). Webster thought that such a development would be 'necessary and unavoidable', and would result in 'a language in North America, as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German, or from one another' (Webster 1789: 23). From Webster's pro-American point of view, of course, that would not have been such a bad thing.

Neither of these scholars proved to be accurate prophets. And indeed, it is plain that the question of fragmentation does not have a single simple answer. The history of language suggests that such a course of events has been a frequent phenomenon (as in the well-known case of Latin); but the history of language is no longer a guide. Today, we live in the proverbial global village, where we have immediate access to other languages and varieties of English in ways that have come to be available but recently; and this is having a strong centripetal effect. With a whole range of fresh auditory models becoming routinely available, chiefly through satellite television, it is easy to see how any New English could move

in different directions at the same time. The pull imposed by the need for identity, which has been making New Englishes increasingly dissimilar from British English, could be balanced by a pull imposed by the need for intelligibility, on a world scale, which will make them increasingly similar, through the continued use of Standard English. At the former level, there may well be increasing mutual unintelligibility; but at the latter level, there would not.

None of this disallows the possible emergence of a family of English languages in a sociolinguistic sense; but mutual unintelligibility will not be the basis of such a notion in the case of New Englishes, any more than it has been in relation to intranational [within a nation] accents and dialects. Although there are several well-known instances of dialect unintelligibility among people from different regional backgrounds, 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 a 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'. 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. It is this which allows us to say that people from Norway, Sweden and Denmark speak different languages, notwithstanding the considerable amount of intelligibility which exists between them. It seems that if a community wishes its way of speaking to be considered a 'language', and if they have the political power to support their decision, there is nothing which can 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 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 be respected by outsiders with whom it is in regular contact. When these criteria are lacking, any such movement is doomed.

There are very few examples of English generating varieties which are given totally different names, and even fewer where these names are rated as 'languages' (as opposed to 'dialects'). There are some cases among the English-derived pidgins and creoles around the world (e.g. Tok Pisin, Gullah), but any proposal for language status is invariably surrounded with controversy. An instance from the mid-1990s is the case of *Ebonics* – a blend of Ebony + phonics – proposed for 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* (Perry and Delpit 1998). Although the intentions behind the proposal were noble, and attracted some support, it was denounced by people from across the political and ethnic spectrum, including such prominent

individuals as [US] Education Secretary Richard W. Riley, the black civil rights leader Revd 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, and the people who had the political-economic clout to make the decision be respected also had mixed views about it.

By giving a distinct name, Ebonics, to what had previously been recognized 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 world English 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 on regional dialect play). Exchanges of this kind, however, are part of the genre of language play, and recognized 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 recognize what it is saying. There is no true intelligibility problem and no problem of identity status.

There is one clear case where a specific regional variety of English has acquired a new name as part of its claim to be recognized as a standard in its locality: Scots. Here is McArthur's (1998: 138) summary of the situation:

> The people of Scotland occupy a unique historical and cultural position in the English-speaking world. They use the standard language (with distinctive phono-logical, 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'.

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 power to make any decision be 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 (Aitken 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 identifi-ably 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 (*ibid.*) is doubtful: '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.

In all these cases of emerging linguistic status, however, the number of speakers involved has been a minority, within a much larger sociopolitical entity. We have yet to see whether the same situation will obtain in countries where the New English speakers are in a majority and hold political power, or in locations where new, supranational political relationships are being formed. For example, 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 (Giles and Smith 1979), 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*, *Eurosceptics* and so on), but which must now be extended to include the various hybrid accents, grammatical constructions and discourse patterns encountered there. On several occasions, I have encountered English-as-a-first-language politicians, diplomats and civil servants working in Brussels commenting on 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, 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. These people are not 'talking down' to their colleagues, or consciously adopting simpler expressions, for the English of their interlocutors may be as fluent as their own. It is a natural process of accommodation, which in due course could lead to new standardized forms.

It is plain that the emergence of hybrid trends and varieties raises all kinds of theoretical and pedagogical questions, several of which began to be addressed during the 1990s (see the range of issues addressed in Schneider (1997) and Foley (1999)). 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 [. . .] 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 whole topic is so recent that it is difficult to make predictions with much confidence. Many of the new varieties have grown extremely rapidly, so that it is difficult to establish their role in their society, or how people are reacting to them. In several cases, it is known that the rise of a local English generates controversy within the community. Some writers seize on the new variety with enthusiasm, and try to make it even more distinctive. Others prefer to retain strong links with the British or American standard. Some teachers, likewise, allow the new forms into their teaching; others rule them out.

The Indian author Raja Rao, writing in 1963, was one who looked forward to the development of a new Indian English (Rao 1963: vii):

> English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit and Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up . . . We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.

And a similar view comes from Salman Rushdie [1991: 64 . . .]:

> I don't think it is always necessary to take up the anti-colonial – or is it post-colonial? – cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it. Assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its front.
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> To take the case of India, only because it's the one in which I'm most familiar. The debate about the appropriateness of English in post-British India has been raging ever since 1947; but today, I find, it is a debate which has meaning only for the older generation. The children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have to hand.

The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe has made one of the clearest statements representing the middle-of-the-road position (Achebe 1964: 62):

> The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience . . . I feel that English will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.

In the years since these remarks were made, this is precisely what has been happening – and not only in Africa, but throughout the countries of the outer circle. There is even a

suggestion that some of the territories of the expanding circle – those in which English is learned as a foreign language – may be bending English to suit their purposes, as in the case of Euro-English [. . .]. Local usages are emerging, and achieving standard status within a region. For example, 'Welcome in Egypt' is now so established among Egyptian speakers of English, of all educational backgrounds and social classes, that it must now be seen as a variant as standard in character as is the prepositional variation between 'quarter to' and 'quarter of' in US and UK time-telling. (It has begun to be cited as accepted usage in some local editions of ELT textbooks.)

If Englishes did become increasingly different, as years went by, the consequences for world English would not necessarily be fatal. A likely scenario is that our current ability to use more than one dialect would simply extend to meet the fresh demands of the international situation. A new form of English – let us think of it as 'World Standard Spoken English' (WSSE) – would almost certainly arise. Indeed, the foundation for such a development is already being laid around us.

Most people are already 'multidialectal' to a greater or lesser extent. They use one spoken dialect at home, when they are with their family or talking to other members of their local community: this tends to be an informal variety, full of casual pronunciation, colloquial grammar, and local turns of phrase. They use another spoken dialect when they are away from home, travelling to different parts of their country or interacting with others at their place of work: this tends to be a formal variety, full of careful pronunciation, conventional grammar, and standard vocabulary. Those who are literate have learned a third variety, that of written standard English which (apart from a few minor differences, such as British vs. American spelling) currently unites the English-speaking world.

In a future where there were many national Englishes, little would change. People would still have their dialects for use within their own country, but when the need came to communicate with people from other countries they would slip into WSSE. So, a multi-national company might decide to hold a conference at which representatives from each of its country operations would be present. The reps from Kolkata, sharing a cab on their way to the conference, would be conversing in informal Indian English. The reps from Lagos, in their cab, would be talking in informal Nigerian English. The reps from Los Angeles would be using informal American English. Any one of these groups, overhearing any other, might well find the conversation difficult to follow. But when all meet at the conference table, there would be no problem: everyone would be using WSSE.

People who attend international conferences, or who write scripts for an international audience, or who are 'talking' on the Internet have probably already felt the pull of this new variety. It takes the form, for example, of consciously avoiding a word or phrase which you know is not going to be understood outside your own country, and of finding an alternative form of expression. It can also affect your pronunciation and grammar. But it is too early to be definite about the way this variety will develop. WSSE is still in its infancy. Indeed, it has hardly yet been born.

If one happens to be in the right place at the right time, one can glimpse the birth pangs. I saw such a pang while attending an international seminar at a European university in the late 1990s. Around the table were representatives of some twenty countries. There were two people from the UK, two from the USA, and one from Australia, with the others all from countries where English was either a second (official) language or a foreign language. The lingua franca of the meeting was English, and everyone seemed to be using the language

competently – even the native speakers. We were well into the discussion period following a paper which had generated a lively buzz of comment and counter-comment. Someone then made a telling remark. There was a silence round the table, which was broken by one of the US delegates observing: 'That came from out in left field.' There was another silence, and I could see some of the delegates turning to their neighbours in a surreptitious way, as one does when one does not understand what on earth is going on, and wants to check that one is not alone. But they were not pondering the telling remark. They were asking each other what 'from out in left field' meant. My neighbour asked me: as a native speaker, he felt confident I would know. I did not know. Baseball at that time was a closed book to me – and still is, very largely.

One of the braver of the delegates spoke up: 'Out where?', he asked. It took the US delegate by surprise, as plainly he had never had that idiom questioned before; but he managed to explain that it was a figure of speech from baseball, a ball coming from an unusual direction, and what he had meant was that the remark was surprising, unexpected. There were nods of relief from around the table. Then one of the UK delegates chipped in: 'You played that with a straight bat', he said. 'Huh?', said the American. 'Oh, I say, that's not cricket', I added, parodically. 'Isn't it?', asked a delegate from Asia, now totally confused. The next few minutes of the meeting were somewhat chaotic. The original theme was quite forgotten, as people energetically debated the meaning of cricket and baseball idioms with their neighbours. Those who could added their own local version of how they said things like that in their part of the world – the sports metaphors they lived by. Eventually, the chairman called everyone back to order, and the discussion of the paper continued. But my attention was blown, and I spent the remainder of the session listening not to what delegates were saying, but to how they were saying it.

What was immediately noticeable was that the native speakers seemed to become much less colloquial. In particular, I did not sense any further use of national idioms. Indeed, the speakers seemed to be going out of their way to avoid them. I made a small contribution towards the end, and I remember thinking while I was doing it – 'don't use any cricket terms'. Afterwards, in the bar, others admitted to doing the same. My British colleague said he had consciously avoided using the word *fortnight*, replacing it by *two weeks*. And, as the evening wore on, people began apologizing facetiously when they noticed themselves using a national idiom, or when somebody else used one. It became something of a game – the kind that linguists love to play. There was one nice moment when the US, UK and Australian delegates were all reduced to incoherence because they found that they had disbarred themselves from using any of their natural expressions for 'the safe walking route at the side of a road' – *pavement* (UK), *sidewalk* (US) and *footpath* (Australian). In the absence of a regionally neutral term, all they were left with was circumlocution (such as the one just given).

It is only an anecdote, but it is an intriguing one, as it illustrates one of the directions in which people can go as they move towards a WSSE. It did not have to be that direction. It would have been perfectly possible for the seminar group to have gone down another road: to have adopted 'out in left field' as an idiom, everyone adding it to their own idiolect – de-Americanizing it, as it were. That did not happen, on that occasion, though it seems to be happening a lot elsewhere. US English does seem likely to be the most influential in the development of WSSE. The direction of influence has for some time been largely one-way. Many grammatical issues in contemporary British usage show the influence of US forms,

US spellings are increasingly widespread (especially in computer contexts), and there is a greater passive awareness of distinctively US lexicon in the UK (because of media influence) than vice versa. On the other hand, the situation will be complicated by the emergence on the world scene of new linguistic features derived from the L2 [English as a second language] varieties, which as we have seen will in due course become numerically dominant. No feature of L2 English has yet become a part of standard US or UK English; but, as the balance of speakers changes, there is no reason for L2 features not to become part of WSSE. This would be especially likely if there were features which were shared by several (or all) L2 varieties – such as the use of syllable-timed rhythm, or the widespread difficulty observed in the use of *th* sounds.

The development of WSSE can be predicted because it enables people, yet again, to 'have their cake and eat it'. The concept of WSSE does not replace a national dialect: it supplements it. People who can use both are in a much more powerful position than people who can use only one. They have a dialect in which they can continue to express their national identity; and they have a dialect which can guarantee international intelligibility, when they need it. The same dual tendencies can be seen on the Internet, incidentally, which simultaneously presents us with a range of informal identifying personal varieties and a corpus of universally intelligible standard English. It is an interesting context for those wishing to study the forces affecting language change, with users searching for a balance between the attraction of a 'cool', idiosyncratic, but often unintelligible linguistic persona and the need to use an 'uncool' standardized form of expression in order to make oneself understood!

'Having your cake and eating it', of course, also applies to the use of completely different languages as markers of identity. It may well be that the people travelling by cab to the international conference would be speaking Hindi, Hausa, and Spanish, respectively. When they all meet at the conference table, they would switch into WSSE. They do not have to give up their national linguistic identities just because they are going to an international meeting. But of course this scenario assumes that Hindi, Hausa, and Spanish are still respected, alive and well, and living in their respective home communities.

There is nothing unusual, in linguistic terms, about a community using more than one variety (or language) as alternative standards for different purposes. The situation is the familiar one of *diglossia*,[a] as illustrated by the 'high' and 'low' varieties found in such languages as Greek, German and Arabic (Ferguson 1959). It would seem that English at the global level is steadily moving towards becoming a diglossic language. Already, in such locations as Singapore, we see two spoken varieties co-existing (albeit uncomfortably [. . .]), one being used for intelligibility (Standard British English) and the other for identity (Singlish). A similar scenario is found in the Philippines, where Standard American English co-exists alongside Taglish. If WSSE emerges as a neutral global variety in due course, it will make redundant the British/American distinction. British and American English will still exist, of course, but as varieties expressing national identity in the UK and USA. For global purposes, WSSE will suffice.

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[a] The situation where two or more language varieties are used in different social domains and for different social functions, where one language is perceived as the High (H) variety and the other as the Low (L) variety. Use of L in an H context could be seen as comical at the least and offensive at the worst (Bloomer, Griffiths and Merrison 2005: 465).

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