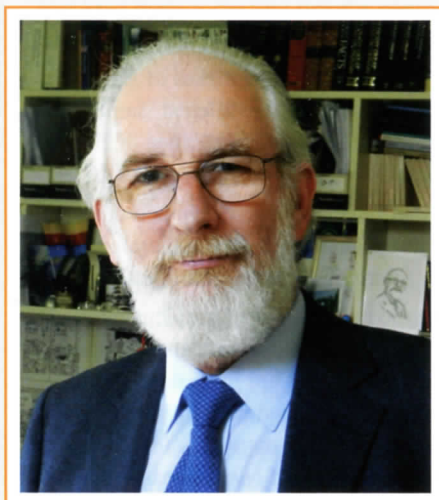




## The more things change ...

*David Crystal, English language expert and patron of IATEFL, introduces this special section on language.*



The notion of world English seems to have been around for ever, but is actually very recent. In the 1970s people were still coming to terms with the idea that English was becoming global. It wasn't conceivable a generation before, according to Reg Close, thinking back to 1937: 'who could have imagined that English would survive as a *lingua franca*?' Randolph Quirk draws attention to the way the trend became apparent only after World War 2. And nobody had published books recognising English as a global language when they were writing.

Our present-day concerns are anticipated. Alfred ('Gim') Gimson was worried by deteriorating intelligibility in second-language communities, while a later contributor emphasised the need to retain local accents for identity. The tension between maintaining intelligibility and maintaining identity is still with us, as occasional difficulties of comprehension at any international conference illustrate. For Ron White, the solution was to recommend more than one model. And the possible complementarity of local and global perspectives later became a major theme, as seen in Shih-Chieh Chien.

In the 1970s, when the rise of new global Englishes was still in its infancy, there was uncertainty about their future. Many felt they would have a short life, or remain only as 'low' colloquial speech. Quirk predicted more would

emerge, and he was right, his point being echoed twenty years later by David Graddol. What nobody predicted was how quickly these 'new Englishes' would appear in an institutionalised form, with written and spoken norms, local dictionaries and grammars, and an unselfconscious use in local literature. We have seen this happen in several countries. Today there is a much greater recognition of variety differences, and a level of mutual respect, than existed two generations ago.

For several contributors, this diversity is a real plus. For Quirk, the strength of English lies in its geographical spread: if its use diminishes in one place, it is secure in another. By 1977 the global spread had, he felt, 'enough momentum ... to carry it through this century

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and the next without serious rival'. He was right about that too. He also predicted a lessening of use in some countries, as indigenous languages achieved greater presence, and with some resisting English; and this was later supported by Graddol, predicting an eventual fall in the proportion of English learners.

The contributors are positive about increasing diversity. Graddol makes the important point that diversity is nothing new: 'we have already learned to live with a pluricentered language', and anticipates greater tolerance of variety. Everyone now accepts the need for some kind of international standard, but we now realise that this won't be a monolithic thing. It will include variation, just as English has always done.

By the 1990s the question of how to handle variation in teaching was beginning to be debated, and the contributors to the 1993 panel display the range of views we still discuss today. That decade brought increased recognition of the new complexity: life was no longer a simple question of British vs American English; other varieties were becoming influential, and the Internet began to expose learners to them in unprecedented ways. A common question was which variety would eventually dominate—presumably American English. What we now know is that, yes, American influence on other varieties has been great, but not so much that these other varieties have lost their identity. British English is still British, although showing more American features than a generation ago.

It is this scenario that fuelled the alternative view that none of the traditional varieties would become dominant, but that some sort of new international English would evolve. For Close, this would be a 'common core', not a native-speaking variety. Graddol anticipated the development of an English 'not modelled on any one national variety'. There was a growing realization that research was needed. One contributor asks for a corpus of international data—something we now see, for example, in the International Corpus of English and the Vienna Voice corpus. But the question of best practice remains. Another contributor asserts that until international English has been properly studied, we should stay with native-speaking norms. Chien emphasises the need to make these norms communicatively relevant.

Close asked: 'who could be bold enough to prophesy how much English and what kind of English will be used in the year 2017?' We are now almost there, and many of his concerns are still with us. His comment on the role of the teacher is as relevant today as it was then: 'the solid work of preserving English as a medium of international communication will fall upon classroom teachers, whose success will result largely from their steering a steady and consistent course'. The French have a phrase for it: 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'.