An anecdotal introduction

Some time ago, I was attending an international seminar at a European university. Around the table were representatives of some 20 countries. There were two people from the UK, two from the US, 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 around 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 neighbors 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'd 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 didn't 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'd consciously avoided using the word fortnight replacing it by two weeks, as he'd 'had trouble with that one before'. 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, I recall, when the US, UK, and Australian delegates were all reduced to incoherence when 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). I also remember ‘engine-cover’ being proposed as a neutral term for bonnet and hood. Somebody made a joke about the need for a linguistic United Nations. The rest is a blur.

An interpretation

In the cold, sober light of later days, it seemed to me that what I had observed taking place at that seminar was of some significance, as far as the future of the English language was concerned - and probably was taking place regularly at international gatherings all over the world. I was seeing a new kind of English being born - a variety which was intended for international spoken usage, and which was thus avoiding the idiosyncrasies associated with national varieties of expression. Such a variety is not yet with us, as a living entity with standardized usage, but it still needs a name. Let us call it Emerging World Standard Spoken English (EWSSE).

Although EWSSE does not exist as an institutionalized variety, its written equivalent does - traditionally called Standard English, but in the present context perhaps better called World Standard Printed English (WSPE). It is sometimes forgotten that what we call Standard English is essentially a written - and primarily a printed - variety of language, and moreover one which has developed as a standard precisely because it guarantees mutual written intelligibility, first within individual countries, then internationally. It isn't difficult to demonstrate the reality of WSPE.

In preparing The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language (1995), I chose one day - 6 July 1993 - and collected as many English-language newspapers as I could get hold of from around the world. Friends, people from the CUP offices, academic contacts, and others sent them in to me - an enormous pile of newsprint. They came from first language countries, such as the UK, USA, and Australia; second-language countries, where the language has some special status, such as India and Singapore; and countries where English has no such status, being taught solely as a foreign language, such as Greece (The Athens News), Egypt (Al Ahram), the Czech Republic (The Prague Post), Korea (The Korea Herald), and Japan (The Daily Yomiuri). I then went through these papers looking for differences in vocabulary, grammar and anything else which might be considered linguistic. There was next to nothing. Cultural influences were obvious, of course - local names and personalities, more space devoted to local sports and politics - but linguistically there was little variation. The range of grammatical constructions was virtually identical - not surprising, perhaps, when we realise that, in the whole of the largest reference grammar we have for English (Quirk, et al's Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language), reference to the index (under American English, British English, etc.) brings to light only a handful of constructions which display regional variation. There was much more variation in vocabulary, of course, but even here the overall impression was one of uniformity and standardization - and the places where this uniformity was missing were restricted to certain sections of the newspaper, such as cartoon
captions and sports reports. Only in spelling and punctuation were there noticeable national differences, reflecting British vs American points of origin - and it is a moot point nowadays whether these can any longer be called 'national', given the way these two standards have come to be used erratically throughout the world. They even appear in 'mixed' versions in some countries, such as in Canada and Australia (where there may be variation even between provinces/states) and in Britain (where the influence of US spelling is widespread). On the whole, therefore, WSPE is the same wherever it is encountered. This is what one would expect. That is what a standard is for. It would not be able to fulfill its role as an international (written) lingua franca if it were riddled with regional idiosyncrasies.

What the seminar example seems to be suggesting is the eventual emergence of a spoken equivalent to WSPE, in international settings where educated people come to talk to each other and choose to use English as their (spoken) lingua franca. It is not surprising that such a variety should be growing, given the way in which English has developed as a genuine global language in the second half of the 20th ce(Crystal, 1997). The linguistic characteristics of this variety are currently unclear; but, a priori, if it is to succeed, there are certain features which it must have, and which we would expect to see emerging early on in its development, in the form of uncertainties about usage. Chief amongst these would be intelligibility difficulties over national regional norms (as in the case of the baseball idiom) as people using English from one part of the world come into contact with those using English from another. Because most regional dialect differentiation is a matter of vocabulary, this is the domain where usage problems will be most immediately and noticeably encountered. (I use vocabulary to include idioms, of course - and use as my chief example of transatlantic difficulty the problem I faced when, on my first visit to the USA, and arriving in a hotel restaurant for breakfast one morning, I asked for 'eggs'. I was asked: 'How do you like your eggs?'. Unused to this question, I stammered 'cooked'. The unflappable response, which listed 'once over easy', 'sunny side up', and several other alternatives, brought me into contact with the lexicon of an unfamiliar culinary world. The problem remains: when last in New York, the terminology, as well as the syntax, of sandwich construction, is still beyond me.) Next, in this EWSSE, will be differences in grammar - as I have said, insofar as national variations exist at all. And the domain of pronunciation will provide a third kind of close encounter - already observable in the 'midatlantic' accents which emerge when people speaking different regional Englishes accommodate to each other, or in the unique amalgam of ex-European accents which currently characterizes the corridors of power in the European Union.

This is an exciting time, for linguist observers of the world scene. No language has ever had such global exposure as English has, so there are no precedents for what is currently taking place. We do not know what happens to a language when it becomes a genuinely world language - recognized as a prestige language in all countries, and used in aggregate by more people (especially as a second or foreign language) for more purposes than any other language. Let us pause for a moment, and reflect on the statistics (bearing in mind that statistics on world language use are notoriously approximate). The number of people who use English as a first language must currently be about 400 million - more accurately, between 350 and 450 million. The chief reason for the uncertainty is whether creole and pidgin varieties derived from English should be included in the total: if you consider these to be 'varieties of English' then you will include them, and you will move towards the higher total;
contrariwise, if you consider that they are, in some sense, separate languages now, you may wish to exclude them, and you will then move towards the lower total. It should also be noted, in passing that, of these 400 million people, about 230 million of them live in the USA - well over half. Fifty-six million live in the UK - very much a minority dialect of world English now!

But the issue of British versus American English begins to seem very dated when we consider the next total - the number of people who speak English as a second or foreign language. Here the figures are even more difficult to be sure about, for the obvious reason that fluency is a continuum, and we have to decide how much competence in English somebody needs before being allowed to join the community of world English users. A criterion of native-speaker-like fluency would clearly produce a relatively small figure; including every beginner would produce a relatively large one - such as the British Council estimate that, at the turn of the century, about a billion (thousand million) people will be learning English, somewhere or other. That figure cannot be ignored - the people are, after all, learning English, as opposed to some other language - but plainly it needs to be interpreted cautiously. The commonest estimates I see these days hover around 300-400 million for second-language users, and around 500-700 million for foreign language users. That makes 1200-1500 as a grand total, which is about a quarter of the world's population, and far larger than the cumulative total for (the eight languages which comprise) Chinese.

This is not the place to review the reasons for the remarkable spread of English. I have gone into these in my English as a Global Language (1997), so there is no point in repeating them here - other than to remind you that we are talking about different forms of power. Languages spread, not because of any intrinsic structural characteristics - inherent notions of logic or beauty or simplicity, or the like - but for one reason only: the power of the people who use them. You can see this at the very outset of the global English period. At the end of the 16th century, English people travelling abroad would reflect on which languages would be of most use to them. Latin, Italian, French, and Dutch - were among those listed - but English, never-'Our English tongue', says Richard Mulcaster in 1582, 'is of small reach - it stretcheth no further than this island of ours - nay, not there over all'. There must have been only about 5 million speakers of English then. And there was no reason for anybody abroad to pay much attention to what was written in English. But, ironically, Mulcaster made his remarks in the same year that an aspiring actor married a Stratford girl called Anne Hathaway, and just before Raleigh sent the first of his three expeditions to America (1584). Within a generation, the status of English would have fundamentally changed. Within a century, the British Empire would be a reality. And in addition to this military, colonial application of power we then find three other applications: in the 18th century, a technological, industrial power (the Industrial Revolution, where we must remember that over half of the pioneers were working through the medium of English); in the 19th century, economic power, with the USA eventually taking over the world lead from Britain; and finally, cultural power, with the USA again predominant in the present century, as is evident in such domains as advertising, broadcasting, and the Internet.

That, in a very tiny nutshell, is the history of English as a world language. It suggests that the prospects for English, and its relationships with other languages, as David Graddol has pointed out in his British Council survey, The Future of English (1998), are totally bound up with world economic and demographic trends. And one of these trends is already very significant. Analysis of the population growth of the countries involved indicates that (on
average) countries where English is used as a second language are growing at approximately three times the rate of those countries where it is a mother-tongue. For example, even though only 3 or 4% of the people of India are fluent in English, with a population fast approaching a billion and a growth rate of 1.9% per annum, there will soon be more people speaking English in India than there are in England. And certainly, the world total for second-language speakers will soon pass - it may have done so already - the world total for first-language speakers. What this means, in short, is that English has gone well beyond the stage where it can be said to be 'owned' by anyone - a fact which many people (especially those in the UK), recalling their national past, find unpalatable. Even 230 million Americans comprise only about a sixth of the world language total.

No language has ever been spoken by so many people in so many countries before. No language of such sociohistorical prestige has ever had its mother-tongue speakers so significantly outnumbered. There are therefore no precedents to guide us about the likely outcomes. And there are precious few facts. We have to be on our toes - and that means all of us, academics, consultants, journalists, teachers... We are at a crucial observational stage in English linguistic history, and all we can do to cope with the riot of linguistic speculation is fall back on well-established theory to guide our practice. Speculation? You will have seen the headlines. Will the English language fragment into mutually unintelligible languages, as it spreads around the world? Will English kill off other languages? Will our teaching models survive?

To begin answering these questions it is essential to adopt an appropriately general perspective. And chief among these is the need to broaden our views about the functions of language. If this conference is about unity and diversity, then at some point it cannot avoid considering this basic question of language function. What is language for? The conventional answer talks about people 'communicating' with each other in the sense that one person sends a meaning, a message, a thought, an idea, and another person receives it. The whole point of language, it is assumed, is to foster the transmission of knowledge, however this is defined - as concepts, facts, opinions, emotions, or any other kind of 'information'. Why use language? - for 'the expression of thought', says the Oxford English Dictionary - for 'expressing thought or feeling', says Chambers: for 'communicating ideas or feelings', says the Longman Dictionary of the English Language. Let us call this the referential function of language.

But such a view of language is unacceptably narrow. The referential view cannot handle so much of what goes on in real life. It ignores, for example, the vast world of language play - a domain where we bend and break the rules of the language for fun (see further Crystal, 1998). Here is a fragment of a conversation transcribed a little while ago. Janet and John are husband and wife, as are Peter and Jane. The two couples are friends, and they live near each other. They have got together for an evening, and are talking about the way their respective cats met in the middle of the road separating their two houses.

Janet: ...And so there was a sort of confrontation between Crumble and Splash -

Jane: Catfrontation, you mean. (Laughs.)
Janet: Well, alright, catfrontation, if you insist - and they stood by the -

Peter: Near cat-astrophe, if you ask me. (Groans all round.)

Janet: I wasn't asking you, Peter!

Peter: Sorry, I didn't mean to be categorical. (More groans all round.)

Jane: This sounds like it's becoming a catalogue of disasters. (Peals of laughter.)

Peter: I don't think John approves of all this jocularity, when Janet's trying to tell us a perfectly serious story.

Jane: You know what John's being, though, don't you.

Janet: What?

Jane: A catalyst! (More laughter all round.)

Peter: I thought that was what happened to moggies when they'd drunk too much. (Further groans.)

Janet: Oh, that's Christmas-cracker standard.

Peter: Of course, you know what Splash would get if he stayed outside for too long?

Jane: What?

Susan: Catarrh. (More laughter all round)

Jane: Anyway, to get back to the point ...

John: Yes, get on with your catechism, Janet. (Mock cheers.)

It's easy to see what is happening. Jane's inspired piece of ingenious word-formation, catfrontation, has sparked off a word-play mood. Peter and Jane try to outdo each other by finding words beginning with cat- which can be plausibly related in meaning to the conversational topic. Eventually John joins in, abandoning his mock-reluctance - and actually adds catapult to the list a few minutes further on.

Judged by any professional standards of comedy, the efforts of these four conversationalists range from the pathetic to the brilliant. But that is not the point. The real point is that all are having an excellent time. They do not mind that the conversation has been temporarily disrupted, and are happy to keep the main story in suspension. They applaud each other's cleverness, using groans and laughter, and nothing else seems to matter. The humour bounces back and forth between them, in an almost competitive spirit - which is why this kind of behaviour has sometimes been called 'ping-pong punning'.
It is difficult to see how ping-pong punning can possibly fit in with the view that the purpose of language is to communicate ideas. For what new knowledge is being transmitted between the participants, as they bounce jokes off each other? None. What have they learned, at the end of the sequence, that they did not know before? Nothing. There seems to be a tacit agreement that none of their language is to be taken at its face value, while the exchange is in progress - that no sentence is to be interpreted as containing any real information. The feline situation is not truly a catastrophic one. John is not really being a catalyst. Nor would Splash really develop catarrh. The rules governing literal discourse have been suspended, while everyone delights in verbally showing off.

The ludic function of language is illustrated here just from a conversation, though it can also be found in many other contexts - word games, such as Scrabble and crosswords, advertising slogans, punning newspaper headlines (a standard source of EFL materials, of course), and (last but hardly least) the linguistically creative world of literature, where rules are being bent and broken all the time. Language play is a good example of a function which has been much neglected in mainstream linguistics - or, for that matter, in such applied areas as the teaching of reading in schools. I'm glad to see a trend to incorporate ludic elements into foreign language teaching materials, in recent years - though even there, I sense a certain reluctance to enter fully into the spirit of it.

The traditional focus on the referential function of language has led to a neglect of other functions, too - and here I return to the world English theme. The referential function is certainly important, at a global level, because it underpins the notion of standard. A standard guarantees mutual intelligibility. That is what it is for. But there is another function which, although it is always with us, has brought into the centre of our attention by the issue of world English, and that is identity. Indeed, on any scale of relative importance, where importance is judged in terms of what people are prepared to do, identity emerges as light-years ahead of intelligibility. People do not usually go on hunger-strike, take part in protest marches, invade parliamentary buildings, and kill themselves for intelligibility - though there is the occasional famous exception, such as the public shredding of government forms in Parliament Square by the Plain English Campaign in 1979. But people do all of these things for identity - to preserve their language, whether collectively or individually in the face of a perceived threat. The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, formulated at Barcelona in 1996, and currently the focus of a great deal of international attention, is devoted to this matter. And a concern for identity has fuelled many of the trends we notice in the use of English, as it increases its global presence.

Chief among these trends is the growth of new national standards - the so-called 'new Englishes' in such countries as India, Singapore, and Ghana - whose role is to preserve national identity. These have now been well discussed (MacArthur, 1998), though still only superficially described, and I will not go into them here, other than to draw attention to the recency with which this phenomenon has emerged. Recall that in 1956 there were only 80 members of the United Nations; now there are over 180. Most of the new members are the result of the independence movements which date from the 1960s. With new found independence comes an urge to manifest your identity in the eyes of the world. And the most convenient way of manifesting this identity is through the medium of the language you use.
Many of the new countries, such as Ghana and Nigeria, found that they had no alternative but to continue using English - the alternative was to make an impossible choice between the many competing locethnic languages - over 400, in the case of Nigeria. However, we can also appreciate their view that to continue with English would be, in the eyes of many, an unacceptable link with the colonial past. How could this dilemma be resolved? The answer was to continue with English, but to shape it to meet their own ends - adding local vocabulary, focussing on local cultural variations, developing fresh standards of pronunciation. It is not difficult to quickly accumulate several thousand local lexical items, in countries which have a wide range of local fauna and flora, diverse ethnic customs, and regular daily contacts with different languages. And I mean 'accumulate' - several regional dictionary projects were launched soon after independence, as part of this expression of new identity. And the emerging literatures of the Commonwealth countries - the novels from various parts of West Africa, the poetry from the countries of the Caribbean - illustrate how quickly new identities can emerge. The term 'New Englishes' reflects these identities.

The new varieties attracted enormous debate in the 1970s and 1980s. The question of which kind of English to write in or even, whether to write in English at all - was a real problem facing many creative authors. But these days, with the first generation of post-colonial development behind us, the issues are settling down, and repeatedly one encounters the view nowadays that it is not a necessary either/or choice. It is not a matter of having to choose between intelligibility and identity but of allowing the coexistence of both intelligibility and identity. To be a happy language-using individual (or community), both dimensions are essential: we need to be able to talk to others outside our community, and to understand them, if we wish to trade with them, and have access to their goods and services; at the same time, we need to be able to demonstrate, through our speech, that we are not the same as them. There is no inevitable conflict, because the two functions of language respond to different needs. There is unity and diversity at the same time. But the demands do appear to be contradictory, and when people do see them as contradictory, or are not sensitive to the needs of all the linguistic communities with whom they live, there is always trouble, in the form of acrimonious debates about standards in the school curriculum or in society at large, widespread anxiety about the survival of a local language or dialect, and - in the extreme cases - language marches, rioting, and deaths. Wise language planning can avoid the contradiction, and reduce the tension - even (though this is unfortunately rare) eliminate it: it is possible to have your linguistic cake and eat it, as can be seen in such countries as Switzerland and Finland, where policies of sensitive multilingualism recognize the strengths of individual languages, and the different purposes for which they are used, and real support is given to developing bilingual ways of life. More appropriate, in the present discussion, would be to talk about bidialectism - and this too can be sensitively promoted. However, positive approaches are often not easy to implement: they are bedevilled by complications arising out of individual national histories, whereby the political aspirations of minority groups come into conflict with national government policies. A bilingual or bidialectal policy can also be extremely expensive. But it is the only way in which the otherwise competing demands of intelligibility and identity can be reconciled.

These are important issues for anyone interested in language, at any age, to address; and certainly any curriculum should give its students the opportunity to do so. The issues are important because everyone is affected by them. No-one can avoid being part of the current
of linguistic change or - to extend the metaphor - can avoid bathing in the sea of linguistic variety. Nor can anyone escape the variations of attitude which people express in reaction to what is happening, as some try to swim against the current, while others blithely let it carry them along. Everyone, at some time or other will have their usage challenged by someone else, whether it be a parent, teacher, peer-group member, neighbour, editor, colleague, or boss. The contexts might be local, national, or global. To cope with such challenges, or to respond to them coherently, people need confidence - and confidence comes from knowledge, an awareness of what is happening to language and what the issues are. A linguistically informed curriculum, whether in mother-tongue teaching or in foreign-language teaching, can provide the foundation on which such confidence can be built, because it gives people insight into principles which can make sense of the multifaceted and potentially confusing linguistic world which surrounds them.

And so, to take one of the questions regularly asked: will the English-language fragment? The history of language suggests that fragmentation is a regular 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 to varieties of English, in ways that have come to be available but recently; and this is having a radical effect. A British Council colleague told me recently that he had just come back from India where he had seen a group of people in an out-of-the-way village clustering around a television set, where they were hearing CNN News beamed down via satellite. None of these people, he felt, would have heard any kind of English before - at least, not in any regular way - other than the Indian variety of English used by their school-teacher. With a whole range of fresh auditory models becoming routinely available, it is easy to see how the type of English spoken in India could move in fresh directions. And satellite communication being, by definition, global, it is easy to see how a system of natural checks and balances - also well-attested in the history of language - could emerge in the case of world English. The pull imposed by the need for identity, which has been making Indian English increasingly dissimilar from British English, will be balanced by a pull imposed by the need for intelligibility on a world scale, which will make Indian English increasingly similar - to CNN, at least! And this could happen anywhere.

And how does balance manifest itself in community terms? This is where the notion of multilingualism comes into play. It is an axiom of contemporary sociolinguistically informed language planning that the only way to reduce the tension between language communities is to recognize the importance of linguistic diversity, and place multilingualism at the centre of language policy and planning. In the case of English, as I have said, we should be talking about multidialectism rather than multilingualism, but the issue is the same: joint respect for the two principles, intelligibility and identity. And this is what my baseball anecdote at the beginning of my paper was intended to illustrate. The EWSSE scenario suggests that, during the 21st century people with an international presence who speak English as a first language will find themselves adding a third variety to their repertoire. Many people already have two. They speak a national formal variety, or dialect ('I speak British/US/Australian... English') as well as an intra-national informal variety, which is often regionally biased ('I speak the colloquial English of Liverpool, Glasgow Boston, New Orleans...'). Those who are bidialectal in this way slip into each of these varieties without thinking about it. In future, the baseball example suggests, they will become tridialectal, with the international variety offering them a
further option of an English in which national usages have been replaced by regionally neutral forms - to be used, of course, only when circumstances are right.

I feel it happening to me. At home, I speak my personal brand of Welsh/Liverpudlian-influenced English. At a national conference I drop the local Welsh/Liverpudlian expressions, and adopt an accent more in the direction of RP. And at an international conference, such as this one, I go a stage further, and drop as many of my national Britishisms as I can - especially the colloquialisms - which I sense might pose problems of intelligibility. Even the accent changes. This is not 'foreigner-speak' - a conscious simplifying or talking-down. It is a new variety, as complex as any other variety I know, but geared towards a different audience. And, as I said at the outset, it doesn't exist in stable form as yet. I am conscious of it growing within me. But it takes a long time for a new set of norms to become internalised. It requires feedback from others, of the conversational kind, and very little of this has yet happened to me - I have probably used several Britishisms in this talk today without intending to. But I do know that the variety in which I have given this talk is different from the corresponding variety I would be using were I giving it in Birmingham or Manchester. I sense the constraints.

What becomes especially interesting, of course, is to speculate about the way this EWSSE will develop. It will undoubtedly adopt fresh forms of lexical expression, as national regionalisms come to be avoided. Some of these will come from the nature of the interactive context itself: I am told that there is a growing distinctive technical and slang vocabulary in English in the corridors of the European Community these days - words and phrases which only the diplomats and bureaucrats use when going about their business. Huge numbers of terms beginning with the prefix Euro-, for example. In that microcosm, we see the members of an international, multilingual community changing a lingua franca to suit themselves. And because it is a microcosm, with relatively small numbers of people involved, the changes are taking place quite quickly. It could take a hundred years for it to happen on a world scale, though once the Internet comes to be voice-interactive (within the next 25 years, I suspect) that could change. Even pronunciation is affected. I have heard a conversation where the linguistic accommodation between the multinational participants was so great that everyone adopted a range of phonological modifications - such as articulating final consonants carefully, and speaking in a more syllable-timed way. Even - and this is the point - the British participants picked up these speaking patterns. I have heard myself do it many times - slipping into the syllable-timed speech being used by everyone else. Indeed, given that varieties of syllable-timed speech is the norm for most languages in the world, and has emerged through language contact in so many varieties of second-language English (such as the Caribbean, South Africa, India), it may well be that WSSE, at the end of the next century, will be a syllable-timed variety of English. That would certainly save us all a great deal of time worrying about patterns of word stress!

That is enough speculation, for one talk. I hope the principles which fuelled the speculation are clear. There is always a tension between unity and diversity, and the only way it can be resolved is by understanding the processes which foster both. A developed concept of language function is critical, and within this, an appreciation of the complementary notions of intelligibility and identity. If our job, as English language teachers, is to do the best for our
pupils, to put them in the most powerful position possible to cope with the demands of an increasingly complex world, then - the more we can familiarise them with varieties of the language, the better. And the more we can prepare them for the realities of tridialectal English-language use in the 21st century, the better. It isn't going to make our job any easier, of course. But then, if you'd all wanted an easy job, you wouldn't be here.

References


