Emerging Engishes

In the new millennium, English will be a countable noun, predicts David Crystal.

Over the last hundred years, English has come to be spoken by more people in more places than ever before. Current estimates suggest that 1.5 billion use it as a first, second, or foreign language – one in four of the world’s population. And the obvious question is: what will happen to the language, now that it has achieved such a global presence? For, when a language spreads, it inevitably changes.

The vocabulary explosion

The bulk of the new distinctiveness of English is in vocabulary – by which I mean not just new words, but new meanings of words, and new idiomatic phrases. Words rapidly come into use in one area that are unknown in another. It only takes a year or so. The first permanent English settlement in North America was in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607; and loan words from Indian languages were introduced into contemporary writing virtually immediately. Captain John Smith, writing in 1608, describes a ‘racoon’; ‘totem’ is found in 1609; ‘caribou’ and ‘opossum’ are mentioned in 1610.

The impact of a new culture upon English affects a huge amount of vocabulary. Think of the cultural domains likely to generate new words when English came to be used in such places as West Africa, Singapore, India, or South Africa, and speakers found themselves adapting the language to meet fresh communicative needs.

- There will be words for foodstuffs, drinks, medicines, drugs, and the practices associated with eating, health-care, disease, and death.
- The country’s mythology and religion, and practices in astronomy and astrology, will bring forth new names for personalities, beliefs, and rituals.
- Oral, and perhaps also written, literature will give rise to distinctive names in sagas, poems, oratory, and folk tales.
- There will be a body of local laws and customs, with their own terminology.

Current estimates suggest that 1.5 billion people speak English

Nobody has ever worked out just how much of a culture is community-specific in this way, but it must be a very significant amount. So, when a community adopts a new language, and starts to use it in relation to all areas of life, there is inevitably going to be a great deal of lexical adaptation.

New words and meanings

This will happen in two main ways. First, some words will change their meaning. Words from the variety of English introduced (eg British English) will be applied to new settings and take...
Emerging Englishes

on different senses. A word won’t quite fit, but, rather than invent a new one, people keep the old one and change its meaning to fit the new context. For example, ‘lounge’ in parts of South Africa has come to be applied to certain types of restaurant and places of entertainment – one might see the name of an Indian restaurant such as ‘Bhagat’s Vegetarian Lounge’, or a phrase such as ‘beer lounge’.

Secondly, words will be taken over (“borrowed”) from the local setting – usually, words from the indigenous language or languages spoken in the country. Where many cultures co-exist, such as in South Africa or Malaysia, these words can come from several languages. In the South African Sunday Times we find this sentence: ‘Diplomatic indabas only rarely produce neatly wrapped solutions to problems.’

What is an indaba? The word is from the Nguni group of languages. It was originally a tribal conference, but has now been extended in meaning to mean any conference between political groups.

How many words?

How many of these words are we looking at? Word-lists and dictionaries show some surprising results. There were over 3,000 items recorded in the Branfords’ first edition of the Dictionary of South African English (1978). The Concise Australian National Dictionary, published in 1989, has 10,000 items. There are over 15,000 entries in Cassidy and Le Page’s Dictionary of Jamaican English. Many English-speaking countries now have on-going dictionary projects, as new words are being invented all the time.

English speakers have always adopted a welcoming attitude towardsloan-words. English is a vacuum-cleaner of a language, readily sucking in words from wherever other languages it meets – well over 350 of them. Because of this, although English is historically a Germanic language, the bulk of its vocabulary is not – it is largely Classical/Romance in origin. And in such countries as Nigeria, where some 450 source languages are available, the eventual lexical distinctiveness of Nigerian English is bound to be considerable.

Even in countries where the number of localised words is relatively small, their effect on the character of the language can be great, for two reasons:

- The new words are likely to be frequently used within the local community, precisely because they relate to distinctive notions there.
- These words tend not to occur in isolation: if a conversation is about, say, local politics, then the names of several political parties, slogans, and other allusions are likely to come into the same discourse, making it increasingly impenetrable. ‘Blairite MP in New Labour Sleaze Trap, say Tories’ might be a British newspaper example. Six words with British political meanings or overtones are used in quick succession.

English is a vacuum-cleaner of a language, readily sucking in words from whichever other language it meets

Exactly the same kind of piling up of foreign expressions can be heard, and often read, in areas where new Englishes are emerging. In this example from the South African Sunday Times, all the local words are Afrikaans in origin:

It is interesting to recall that some verkrampte Nationalists, who pose now as super Afrikaners, were once bittereinder bloedsappe.

Switching codes in writing

When people rely simultaneously on two or more languages to communicate with each other, the phenomenon is called code-switching. You will hear it happening now all over the world, between all sorts of languages, but it is especially noticeable in English because it is so widespread. And it is happening in writing as well as in speech. Tom McArthur, in The English Languages (1998), gives an example of a leaflet issued by the HongkongBank in 1994 for Filipino workers in Hong Kong who send money home to their families. It is a bilingual leaflet, in English and Tagalog, but if you read the Tagalog section you will find a great deal of English mixed in. Here is a short example:

Mag-deposito ng pera mula sa ibang HongkongBank, atay HongkongBank ATM, using your Cash Card. Mag-transfer ng regular amount bawa ni buwan (by Standing Instruction) galang sa inyong Current o Savings Account, whether the account is with HongkongBank or not.

This kind of language is often described using a compound name,
New horizons
It is perfectly possible 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 - rapping is a case in point. 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) or verb use (he be running) - can become part of the standard educated speech of a locality, and may eventually appear in writing.

Unexpected things are happening. All over the world, children are being born to parents with different first-language backgrounds who speak English as a lingua franca. Their English often contains code-mixed or non-standard forms. If these parents choose to speak to their children in this English, as often happens, we now have the prospect of code-mixed and non-standard English being learned as a mother-tongue - and by millions of the world's future citizens. As the man said: 'You ain't seen nothin' yet!'

Increasing diversity
Mixed-English languages are certainly on the increase, and it is important to realise that this is happening. It is quite wrong to think of future world English as simply a more widely-used version of British English, or of American English. These varieties will stay, of course, but they will be supplemented by other varieties which will display increasing differences from them. The signs of this period of diversification have been around a long time, but the extent of its presence has only recently come to be appreciated. It is not something we usually see in print, but we readily encounter it when we travel - usually in the form of a breakdown of comprehension. We speak to somebody in English, and they reply - but we cannot understand what they are saying, because their English is so different.

With these experiences in mind, can we avoid the conclusion that, left to itself, English is going to fragment into mutually unintelligible varieties, just as Vulgar Latin did a millennium ago? The forces of the past 50 years, which have led to so many newly-independent nation-states, certainly suggest this outcome. English has come to be used, in several of these countries, as the expression of a socio-political identity, and it has received a new character as a consequence, conventionally labelled Nigerian English, Singaporean English, and so on. And if significant change can be noticed within a relatively short period of time - a few decades - must not these varieties become even more differentiated over the next century, so that we end up with an English 'family of languages'? It is certainly possible. But there are pressures working in the opposite direction too.

The role of Standard English
Alongside the need to reflect each local situation and identity, which fosters diversity, there is the need for mutual intelligibility, which fosters standardisation. People want to be able to understand each other, both within a country and internationally. There has always been a need for 'universal languages'. And as supra-national organisations grow - political, economic, social - the need becomes more pressing. The 185 members of the UN are there, not simply to express their identities, but also because they want to talk to each other. And whatever official languages are chosen by such organisations, it is essential - if the concept is to work - for everyone to learn the same thing, a standard form. The term Standard English has come to be widely used in this connection. When people read or write for an international audience, what they use is Standard English.

A similar international standard is also likely to develop in speech, as contacts increase and people influence each other more. When we reflect on the opportunities there are for contact these days, whether as a result of the media, travel, or electronic communication, the chances are that the standard element in the international use of English will be...
Emerging Englishes

stretched rather than weakened. Satellite television, beaming down large quantities of educated spoken English into homes all round the world, is a particularly significant factor.

The linguistic cake

Centrifugal and centripetal forces co-exist in our world. We want both to have our linguistic cake and to eat it. We want our language both to express our identity and to allow us to communicate intelligibly. We want to be different and we want to be the same. The splendid thing about humans using language, of course, is that this is the kind of thing the human brain does very well. Because the brain is so multi-functional when it comes to language, we can have our cake and eat it.

One of the main insights of linguistics during the 20th century was to demonstrate the extraordinary capacity of the brain for language. Bilingualism, multi-lingualism, is the normal human condition. Well over half of the people in the world, perhaps two-thirds, are bilingual. Children learn their languages – often several languages – at extraordinary speed. Evidently, there is something in our make-up which promotes the acquisition of talk.

A tri-English world

I have no difficulty in foreseeing the gradual emergence of a tri-English world – a world, that is, in which three levels of English co-exist:

- The base level, the place where we all start, is the home, our family dialect. In my case, this was Wales, and my home dialect was a Welsh English so strong in accent that when my family moved to Liverpool, when I was 10, I was immediately dubbed Taffy, and remained so even after my accent had moved towards Liverpudlian. I am fluent both in Welsh English (‘Wenglish’) and Scouse. I have two home dialects. Everybody has at least one.

- The second level is the national variety of Standard English which most people learn when they go to school. (With a minority of people in the UK, especially in SE England, the home dialect is already Standard English.)

In my case, the second level was British Standard English. I learned to write it, and gradually to speak it, avoiding such features as amn’t and double negatives, and learning a different range of grammatical constructions and vocabulary than was found in my home dialects.

- The third level is an International Standard English – an English, in other words, which in its grammar and vocabulary is not recognisably British, American, or anything else. When working abroad, many people become skilled in using a variety which lacks some of its original Britishness, because they know they are talking to people from outside the UK. International Standard Spoken English is not a global reality yet, but it is getting nearer.

Similar distinctions are to be found in other language settings too. Many foreign learners of English will have an ethnic or ancestral language for level one, and a national language for level two – such as (in Northern Spain) Basque for the first and Spanish for the second. The first two levels may also be very different forms of the same language, such as (in Southern Italy) Neapolitan and Standard Italian, respectively.

The new revolution

I think most educated people, one day, will be tri-dialectal in English – whether in the UK, USA, Ghana, or Singapore. Foreign-language learners will find themselves needing to cope with these variations, too – developing a sense of international norms alongside the national norms which are currently the focus of teaching. Teachers already often draw attention to local lexical and grammatical differences, such as UK ‘pavement’, US ‘sidewalk’, and Australian ‘footpath’, but the perspective is invariably from one of these varieties towards the others. Someone teaching British English draws occasional attention to American alternatives, or vice versa. One day, I believe an international standard will be the starting-point, with British, American, and other varieties all seen as optional localisations.

I do not know how long it will take for such a scenario to become fully established. But I do know that it will not be an easy transition, as it will involve significant changes in our methods of teaching and examining. The situation is unprecedented – with more people using English in more places than at any time in the language’s history – and unpredictable, with the forces promoting linguistic identity and intelligibility competing with each other in unexpected ways.

For those who have to work professionally with English, it is a very interesting time. After all, there has never been such a period of rapid and fundamental change since the explosions of development that hit the language in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For the first time in 400 years, we are experiencing what happens when English goes through a period of particularly dramatic change.

It is indeed a revolution in the way the language is used – an exciting time to be a linguist, of course, to be observing the beginning of it, but a problematic time to be a teacher, having to guide others through it. Doubtless traditional practices in teaching language production will continue with little change for the time being, but there must surely be an early broadening of practice with respect to listening comprehension. After all, we are already living in a world where most of the varieties we encounter are something other than traditional British or American English. We do our students a disservice if they leave our care unprepared for the brave new linguistic world which awaits them.