

English: Whose Language?

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Britain. A small country on the periphery of the new Europe, racked by social division and violence, increasingly bereft of any real political influence in the world, currently on a severe economic downturn now that the “economic miracle of the eighties” bubble has burst. On the face of things, this Kingdom that is no longer United, this Britain that can lay very little claim to Greatness, would seem to have very little to offer the world. But one thing the whole world appears to want, and increasingly so, is our language. English.

Yes, you read it right. *Our* language. Now, to use this particular possessive adjective, to claim English as the language of the British, might well be seen as inviting accusations of ignorance as well as arrogance. We are, however, only too aware that British English is but one of a variety of world Englishes. There is American English, the language not only of a vast nation but of the staple media diet of a substantial percentage of the world’s population. Film, television, pop music have all helped its spread. There is Canadian English, a less permeating but equally authentic variety. If we group the Australian and New Zealand varieties together, differences though there are, we have Antipodean English, with its own geographical sphere of influence in South East Asia, and fast growing inroads to the European media (viz. Neighbours and Kylie Minogue), with possible subsequent American English-style spread.

There is Indian English, developed from the need in a country of many tongues for an instrument of communication that would favor no one tongue above another, and grown into a variety with its own distinct grammatical, phonological and lexical patterns. And there is West African English, born of the same necessity for a lingua franca among tribes thrown together in unnatural liaison by the artificial boundaries of colonial territories, and developed over time into a highly distinctive variety of its own, almost as incomprehensible to a speaker of say, Indian English, as one to the aforementioned tribal languages must have been to a colonial map-maker.

Hong-Kong English, Caribbean English..., the list goes on. Far from being “our” language, in a narrow British sense, English is now the language of a multitude of cultures and races, of north and south, of black, white, yellow, and

brown, of the developed and the developing. It is, in fact, a multi-national language.

It is also, and quite separately, an international language, and in that context lies the logic of my basic premise: British English, "our" language, is the variety most of the world wants for international communication purposes. Why? Certainly not because it represents some ur-English, or linguistically pure of basic norm of "English"-ness. The language of Walt Disney would fulfill this role as easily as the language of Shakespeare, and could probably be proved, on linguistic grounds, a more efficient, streamline, and up-to-date model. Linguistics can describe language(s), but can never fully explain the reasons for their growth or decay, the patterns of their use in the real world. More powerful factors underlie these: factors like politics, economics and basic psychology.

While economics have dictated the rise of a universally comprehensible form of English as an international language, politics have ensured that, on a large part of the world stage, American English has been denied that position: the mere suspicion of neo-imperialist transgression in many parts of Latin America and South East Asia, for example, has been enough to swing any balance in these regional attitudes to varieties of English. Similarly, on regional stages, as the Indian sub-continent, where India is seen as a potential violator of borders by surrounding smaller nation-states, the latter wholeheartedly reject the English of the former as a political form of self-defence from any threat of encroachment. In situations like these, British English comes into its own: the days of the British Empire are long past, we are a threat to no-one, we have increasingly less realisable political ambition in the world, hence our language, as a politically "unmarked" variety for most arenas, can be happily espoused by any nation, with no fears for the political consequences. As our political star wanes, our linguistic one must surely wax.

Moreover, British English for many people holds cultural associations which render it a more attractive variety than the alternatives. However inappropriate these associations might be in the world of the nineties, they linger on as popularly held illusion long after the reality has undergone significant change. A Britain of thoughtful dons and country gentlemen, of luxurious green lawns and afternoon teas, of tennis-playing girls and sweet little old ladies, of refinement and a sense of fair play; there is still a sort of pre-war cultural Empire on which the sun has never set in the minds and imaginations of the great majority of the inhabitants of our former colonies and which draws them towards British English, and away from the newer, brasher varieties which have not really been around long enough to establish worthwhile associations with any confidence.

No, English is not "our" language any more. Britain has given it to the rest of the world, who have picked it up and run with it. But right now, and for the foreseeable future, a variety of factors conspire to ensure that "our" English is the one most of the world wants to use to converse with the rest of the world.