

3 STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

Why is the issue of standards of primary concern in the study of EIL? As this chapter demonstrates, in many Outer Circle countries, bilingual speakers of English are using the language on a daily basis alongside one or more others and frequently their use of English is influenced by these other languages. Hence, they are developing new lexical items, new grammatical standards, and their pronunciation is also being influenced by their other languages. These changes lead some people to worry that English will vary to such an extent that it will no longer serve the main purpose of an international language, namely to provide a link across cultures and languages. Thus, it is critical that we examine what is meant by standards, what mutual *intelligibility* involves, and what changes have occurred in different varieties of English.

The chapter begins by discussing the notion of standards and explaining what factors are needed to determine whether or not an innovation has been accepted as a standard. It emphasizes how language spread necessarily involves language change and examines various attitudes that exist among bilingual users of English to their variety of English, as well as to *Standard English*. The chapter then describes and exemplifies present-day variation in English on a lexical, grammatical, and phonological level, stressing that the extent of variation on these levels can vary greatly within a country. It ends with an examination of how the native speaker model has been applied to L2 pedagogy and research in regard to pragmatic and textual competence, and argues for the need to recognize a variety of pragmatic and textual norms in the use of EIL.

Language standards and English as an international language

The issue of standards exists in all languages. The French Academy, for example, is charged with the responsibility of upholding particular

standards in the use of French. Whereas no comparable body exists to regulate the use of English, the desire to uphold standards is clearly present. With the spread of English and the resulting variation in the language, some people believe that the need to uphold common standards has increased in importance. It is puzzling that whereas differences in the use of English between Inner Circle countries are generally accepted, with no one suggesting that this will lead to incomprehensibility, language variation outside Inner Circle countries is often seen as a threat. Brutt-Griffler (1998) argues that such tolerance must be extended:

Most, if not all, Inner Circle English speakers appear willing to meet on a common linguistic plane, accept the diversity of their Englishes, and do not require of one another to prove competence in English, despite the considerable differences in the varieties of English they speak and the cross-communication problems entailed thereby . . . this situation must be extended to all English-using communities.
(Brutt-Griffler 1998: 389)

At present, however, such tolerance is not extended to innovations that occur outside Inner Circle countries; rather many linguists argue that one variety of English must be promoted and a concerted effort made to teach standards.

The debate over standards in English as an international language

The debate over standards was a major topic at a 1984 conference to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the British Council. (See Quirk and Widdowson (1985) for papers delivered at this conference.) At this conference, Randolph Quirk and Braj Kachru, two key figures in the debate over standards in EIL, expressed very different views on the issue. Quirk argued for the need to uphold standards in the use of English in both Inner Circle countries and those outside the Inner Circle. He maintained that tolerance for variation in language use was educationally damaging in Inner Circle countries and that ‘the relatively narrow range of purposes for which the non-native needs to use English . . . is arguably well catered for by a single monochrome standard form that looks as good on paper as it sounds in speech’ (Quirk 1985: 6). In other words, for Quirk, a common standard of use is warranted in all contexts of English language use.

Kachru (1985), on the other hand, argued that the spread of English had brought with it a need to re-examine traditional notions of standardization and models as they relate to Outer Circle users. As he put it,

In my view, the global diffusion of English has taken an interesting turn: the native speakers of this language seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardization; in fact, if current statistics are any indication, they have become a minority. This sociolinguistic fact must be accepted and its implication recognized. What we need now are new paradigms and perspectives for linguistic and pedagogical research and for understanding the linguistic creativity in multilingual situations across cultures.
(Kachru 1985: 30)

Kachru argued for a recognition of norms based on the manner in which English is used within particular speech communities, both native-speaking communities and those in the Outer Circle. He maintained that allowing for a variety of norms would not lead to a lack of intelligibility among varieties of English; rather what would emerge from this situation would be an educated variety that would be intelligible across the others.

Defining Standard English

Central to this debate, of course, is what is meant by standards or norms. In his discussion of *Standard English*, Strevens (1983) defines Standard English as

A particular dialect of English, being the only non-localized dialect, of global currency without significant variation, universally accepted as the appropriate educational target in teaching English; which may be spoken with an unrestricted choice of accent.
(Strevens 1983: 88)

What is significant in this definition is that for Strevens there is no standardized accent associated with Standard English. This will be important when we consider the issue of phonological variation in EIL. Others associate Standard English particularly with the written form of language. Quirk (1990), for example, maintains that Standard English is what might be termed the unmarked variety; it is not unusual or different in any way and is typically associated with written English.

The *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* (Richards, Platt, and Weber 1985) also associates Standard English with written language and it notes its status in relation to other varieties. It defines Standard English as

the variety of a language which has the highest status in a community or nation and which is usually based on the speech and writing of educated speakers of the language.

A standard variety is generally:

- (a) used in the news media and in literature

- (b) described in dictionaries and grammars
 - (c) taught in schools and taught to non-native speakers when they learn the language as a foreign language.
- (ibid.: 271)

When changes occur in an Outer Circle country and when such innovations get conventionally established by regular use, some argue that they should be considered as standard for that particular context. The problem, however, is determining exactly when an innovation can be considered a standard or norm. Bamgboṣe (1998) delineates five factors that can be used to determine whether or not an innovation is a norm. They are

- demographic (How many people use the innovation?)
- geographical (How widely is the innovation used within the country?)
- authoritative (Who uses the innovation?)
- codification (Where is the usage sanctioned?)
- acceptability (What is the attitude of users and non-users toward the innovation?).

Bamgboṣe contends that the most important factors in determining if an innovation can be considered a norm is whether or not the innovation is *codified* in such things as dictionaries, coursebooks, or other manuals, and whether or not it is widely accepted.

The question of intelligibility

If different norms develop in different varieties of EIL, will this ultimately lead to a lack of mutual intelligibility among them? To answer this question we need to consider what is meant by *intelligibility*. This is a complex matter, involving what some linguists refer to as ‘intelligibility’ (recognizing an expression), *comprehensibility* (knowing the meaning of the expression), and *interpretability* (knowing what the expression signifies in a particular sociocultural context). For example if a listener recognizes that the word *salt* is an English word rather than a Spanish word, English is then intelligible to him or her. If the listener in addition knows the meaning of the word, it is comprehensible, and if he or she understands that the phrase, ‘Do you have any salt?’, is intended to be a request for salt, then he or she is said to be able to interpret the language.

Whereas these are important distinctions to make in discussing the issue of intelligibility, often the term is used to cover all three types of meaning given above, and for the most part we will use the word in this more general sense in the discussion that follows. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that in many ways it is what is referred to as interpretability that causes the greatest problems in the use of EIL for cross-cultural communication

since interpretability entails questions of culture and context. This is because the listener must be able to understand a speaker's intentions even when they are expressed indirectly as in the example above, 'Do you have any salt?' However, it is important to note that when English is used cross culturally, it is very possible that the speakers will work together to achieve interpretability. Bamgboşe (1998) emphasizes this fact when he notes, 'Preoccupation with intelligibility has often taken an abstract form characterized by decontextualized comparison of varieties. The point is often missed that it is people, not language codes, that understand one another' (p. 11). Clearly a willingness to be involved in matters of interpretation needs to exist if communication is to take place between speakers of different varieties of EIL, an issue we will return to later in the chapter.

Given the spread of English there is no question that many varieties will develop, each with its own norms. Yet the fact that many bilingual users of English acquire the language in an educational context in which particular standards of use are emphasized will likely ensure some unifying norms. Indeed, unifying norms are needed if English is to serve purposes of wider communication. As Widdowson (1994) notes,

As soon as you accept that English serves the communicative and communal needs of different communities, it follows logically that it must be diverse. An international language has to be an independent language. It does not follow logically, however, that the language will disperse into mutually unintelligible varieties. For it will naturally stabilize into standard form to the extent required to meet the needs of the communities concerned. Thus it is clearly vital to the interests of the international community . . . that they should preserve a common standard of English in order to keep up standards of communicative effectiveness.

(Widdowson 1994: 385)

Language change and varieties of English

As was noted in Chapter 1, the early spread of English was fueled primarily by speaker migration from the United Kingdom, resulting in the development of Inner Circle varieties of English. The language change that occurred in these countries has been largely codified and widely accepted. The current spread of EIL has occurred primarily through the macro-acquisition of English by existing speech communities, resulting in a tremendous growth in the number of bilingual users of English. It is within the so-called Outer Circle countries, in which English has some type of

official status within the country, that the greatest controversy regarding language change and questions of intelligibility has arisen.

Kachru (1986) refers to the varieties of English used in many Outer Circle countries as institutionalized or nativized. He contends that, because in these countries English serves a wide range of functions in the local educational, administrative, and legal systems, the use of the language has become institutionalized, resulting in the development of new norms which have become codified and accepted. As pointed out earlier, at the 1984 conference Kachru argued for a recognition of norms based on the manner in which English is used within particular speech communities. He argued that whereas Inner Circle countries are usually considered to be *norm-providing speech communities*, Outer Circle countries are *norm-developing* communities since innovations in these countries get conventionally established by regular use and are subsequently codified. He also suggested that in the Expanding Circle, where English does not have an official role, its use should be *norm-dependent* since there is no regular internal use of the language. In this respect, Kachru and Quirk are in agreement.

Whereas many Outer Circle countries have developed new standards of use, each country in the Outer Circle exemplifies a distinct historical, acquisitional, and cultural context in reference to the spread of English. Hence, the use of English in each of these countries is unique in the extent of change that has occurred and the manner in which the local community has accepted these changes. In order to demonstrate the unique development of English within specific contexts, we now turn to a comparison of the use of English and the attitudes toward change that exist within two Outer Circle countries, India and Singapore. These countries were selected because in general applied linguists and educators based in them exemplify contrasting attitudes toward their own *nativized variety* of English (or *World English*).

Attitudes toward varieties of English

In analyzing the varieties of English spoken in Singapore, Lick and Alsagoff (1998) point out that varieties of any language are associated with particular social groups and can be characterized by a specific set of linguistic variations. In addition, they note that from a linguist's point of view, all varieties of English are equal because they are fully systematic and regulated by a set of rules. They give an example of a sentence from what is termed 'Singlish', a particular variety of English spoken in informal contexts in Singapore. The sentence, 'She kena sabo by them', is equivalent to the Standard English sentence, 'She was sabotaged by them'. Lick and Alsagoff point out that this Singlish sentence is grammatical in that the

sentence conforms to the grammatical rules of Singlish. Put another way, if these words were arranged in any other order, they would not be considered grammatical by speakers of Singlish. Thus, Singlish is a valid grammatical variety of English, linguistically equal to any other variety of English. When, however, Singlish was used on a local Singaporean television entertainment program, it led to tremendous controversy, with some Singaporeans urging the authorities to step in and regulate the use of Singlish on television so that children would not speak what they termed 'bad English'. Others, however, defended the use of Singlish, claiming that this variety of English was part of the Singaporean identity and that ordinary people could relate to it.

A controversy such as this highlights the fact that whereas all varieties of English are linguistically equal, they are not considered to be socially equal. The variety with the most prestige is typically referred to as Standard English, with all other varieties generally labeled with pejorative terms such as sub-standard or non-standard. As Lick and Alsagoff note,

Generally, the variety spoken by the socially dominant group, which normally includes the rich and powerful, as well as the educated elite, has the most prestige. This variety is then institutionalized as the standard: it is used for governmental administration and on all formal occasions. It is taught in schools and used in the mass media (on television, radio, and in the press) and it serves as the model for those who wish to master the language. In contrast, the varieties used by people of lower social status, such as the poor and the uneducated, are tagged as *nonstandard*, sometimes derogatorily as *substandard* synonymous with words such as *bad*, *corrupt*, and *offensive*. Such a standard–nonstandard division is basically a reflection of social inequality.

(Lick and Alsagoff 1998: 282)

Whereas Lick and Alsagoff's description of standard and non-standard English is significant in its recognition of the prevalent association of Standard English with social class and status, it does not elaborate on the various ways in which specific varieties of English can be used within a country. In the case of Singlish, in some instances, the non-standard variety is in fact used by speakers of the socially dominant group as well as speakers of lower social status, but the former generally only use it in informal contexts to signal social identity and rapport. However, Singlish is the only variety many less powerful, less educated Singaporeans have available to them and is therefore often considered to be non-standard or sub-standard. In many countries where an institutionalized variety of English exists there is a dual attitude toward the use of some local indigenized varieties like Singlish. Although for some the local variety

represents a means for speakers to take ownership of the language and thus express their own identity, for others the indigenized variety represents a corruption or sub-standard use.

Kachru (1986) notes that the varieties of English that exist within Outer Circle countries often represent a cline, with some varieties like Singlish serving more local or national purposes, whereas what is termed Standard English reaches a more extensive audience. He uses the term *cline of bilingualism* to describe the range of varieties of English used by individuals within one country. Hence, one can speak of an individual's cline of bilingualism ranging from the variety he or she typically uses in the local market to the variety he or she generally uses in educational or business contexts. In some cases, however, as we have seen, an individual may not have access to all the varieties of English spoken in the country. This cline can be represented by an English language hierarchy for Singapore shown in Figure 3.1 that is similar to the personal language hierarchy shown in Chapter 2 in Figure 2.3. The inverted pyramid illustrates that Standard English has a greater territorial reach. However, the other varieties of English are important elements of an individual's linguistic repertoire, allowing levels of formality and role relationships to be signaled.

In many ways, in their rhetoric and policies, Singaporeans and Indians have very different attitudes regarding the value of their local indigenized variety of English. This difference is evident in the findings of an early study of language attitudes and indigenized varieties of English in the two countries (Shaw 1983). Shaw asked college students from both countries what variety of English they believed should be learned—British English, American English, Australian English or the nativized variety. Whereas a large number of Indians were in favor of promoting their own variety of English, Singaporeans were equally divided between accepting a British

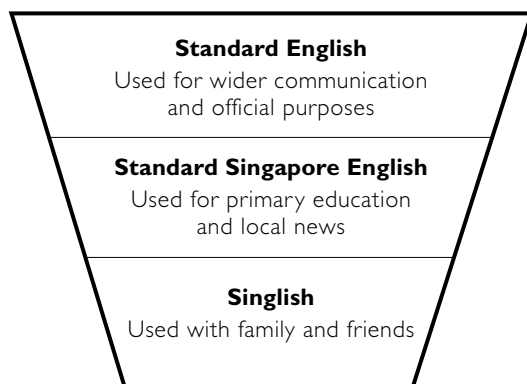


Figure 3.1: English language hierarchy for Singapore