

Topographies of Globalization

Politics, Culture, Language

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English as a Dead Language

For some decades now, the language of international academic and professional conferences has been identified in their calls for papers and programmes as English. In this paper, I shall maintain that this is a misleading formulation. The language of choice in international conferences is International English.

The four speakers in a session at which this paper was originally given spoke three different varieties of English: the panel consisted of a Frenchman and three Icelanders, one of whom – myself – spoke in a native British English. They were all fluent and articulate speakers of English, probably more fluent and more articulate at least in their specialist fields than most English speakers. Linguistically, however, there were two distinct varieties of English involved: both the French and Icelandic varieties shared characteristics which were missing from my first-language English, and vice versa. If American, Scottish or Australian speakers had been present, their speech would in important

ways have been be closer to mine than to the other speakers. Bulgarians, Iraqis and Koreans would, on the other hand, align themselves with the French and Icelandic speakers. In short, there is a clear divide between the 'native' Englishes of the traditionally English-speaking countries and the 'new' Englishes of the rest of the world. And this divide is widening.

And I was – and am – in the minority: not only in this particular conference, but globally. During the closing decades of the last century English crossed an extraordinary threshold, one which only Latin has, as far as we know, ever crossed before. There are henceforth more people on this planet using English on a day-to-day basis as a second language than speaking it as a first language.¹ First-language English is becoming a minority language, like French and Icelandic; and before long it will have to fight the same battles as French and Icelandic against the hegemony of the global giant, International English.

In this paper, I shall maintain that there is a significant and growing difference between these two languages, old and new English. And more importantly, the prognosis for the middle future – say the next two or three hundred years (the global stance of the conference invited us to wide panoramas and courageous perspectives) – is that the differences will inevitably increase until the incremental quantitative change becomes qualitative. The new language is on the eve of independence, and native English speakers have no more right, and certainly no more capacity, to influence the development of International English than their French and Icelandic colleagues. In time, the descendants of native English-speaking peoples today will speak a language as unlike International English as Italian is from Latin – and for the same reasons. In becoming an international language of learning and communication, Latin ceased to develop; its grammar and pronunciation became fossils; while Italian, a living language, could not and cannot avoid continual change. In the same way, we must expect International English to retain its grammar and pronunciation longer and better than the Home Englishes. It is already showing clear signs of becoming a dead language like its august predecessor.

The early origins of this division between the new and the old go

back to the beginnings of British expansion in the sixteenth century and mark the whole period up into the twentieth. There were essentially two modes of operation of the English-speaking peoples in the territories they invaded, involving two different modes of dissemination of the English language: I shall call them (1) *extermination*, leading to linguistic *displacement*, and (2) *exploitation*, leading to linguistic *infiltration*. The first, of course, is the most effective process as far as the spread of language is concerned, the process which occurred in North America, Australia and New Zealand, and elsewhere on smaller scales: the indigenous populations and their languages were largely destroyed, and native English-speakers took their place. In some areas, the original populations survived in small marginalized groups, while in others, such as Tasmania, the extermination was swift and total: few if any historical programmes of racial extermination have ever been as effective. At all events the result of this process was that there was no cultural intercourse between English and the displaced languages, and English was free to develop along its own lines. It developed differently, and with differing time-scales, in the various new territories and home in Britain, but everywhere this development was an essentially intrinsic, relatively interference-free native language process in which certain important common characteristics were retained and developed. This allows us to class the present Englishes of the British Isles, North America and Australasia as one group, which I shall call the Home Englishes.

The second mode of dissemination occurred in those places where there was a policy not of extermination but of domination: this occurred for instance in the Indian subcontinent and those parts of Africa which came under British rule. As with the first mode there was, of course, a fundamental economic motivation behind this policy; these areas were already rich in man-power suitable for exploitation, and the land itself was not the temperate virgin terrain that the British found in North America and Australasia. In these areas, then, English spread as a second language over large and multifarious populations, and although in time it became the first language for large and various groups of people it has retained many of the second-language characteristics which I shall briefly discuss in this paper.

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To these two modes of linguistic expansion we must now add a third, which began in the second half of the twentieth century and shows signs of snowballing in the early decades of the twenty-first. This we can call (3) *international trade and communication*, and it may be that in the grander scheme of things this development should be seen as a continuation of the earlier colonial policies (2) above. Linguistically, at least, the results are similar: the old British colonial areas now in general speak types of English which are closer to the new international varieties than the old Home Englishes. In the following diagram, this is shown by allowing the groups to overlap, so that 'colonial' English belongs to both camps:

There is, to be sure, enormous diversity within the two groups, and if I am to present an overview it will entail a rather drastic simplification. I shall discuss the *external* differences between the two groups, their

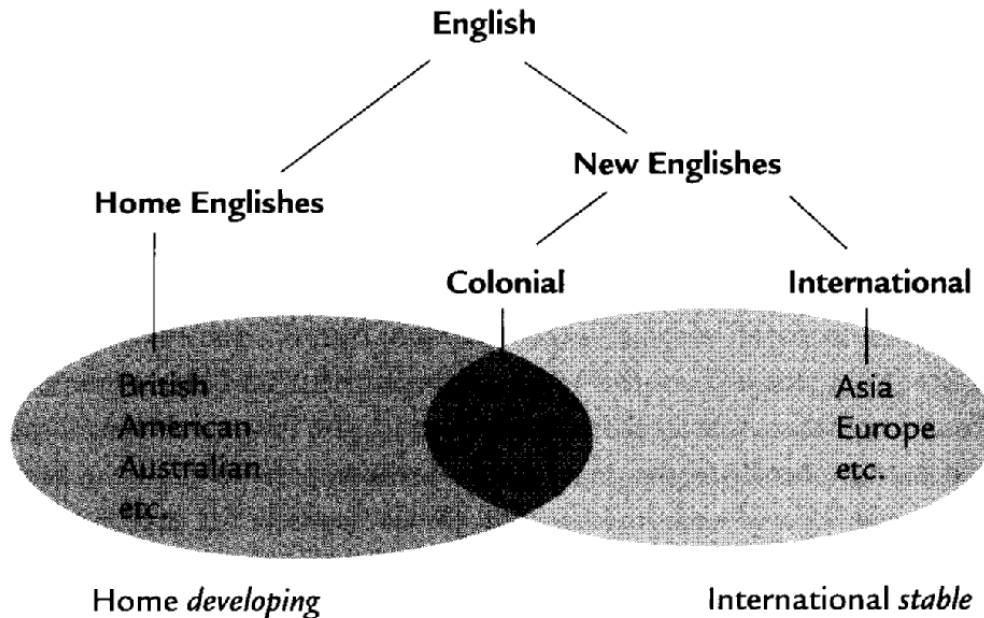


Figure 1: Home, Colonial and International English

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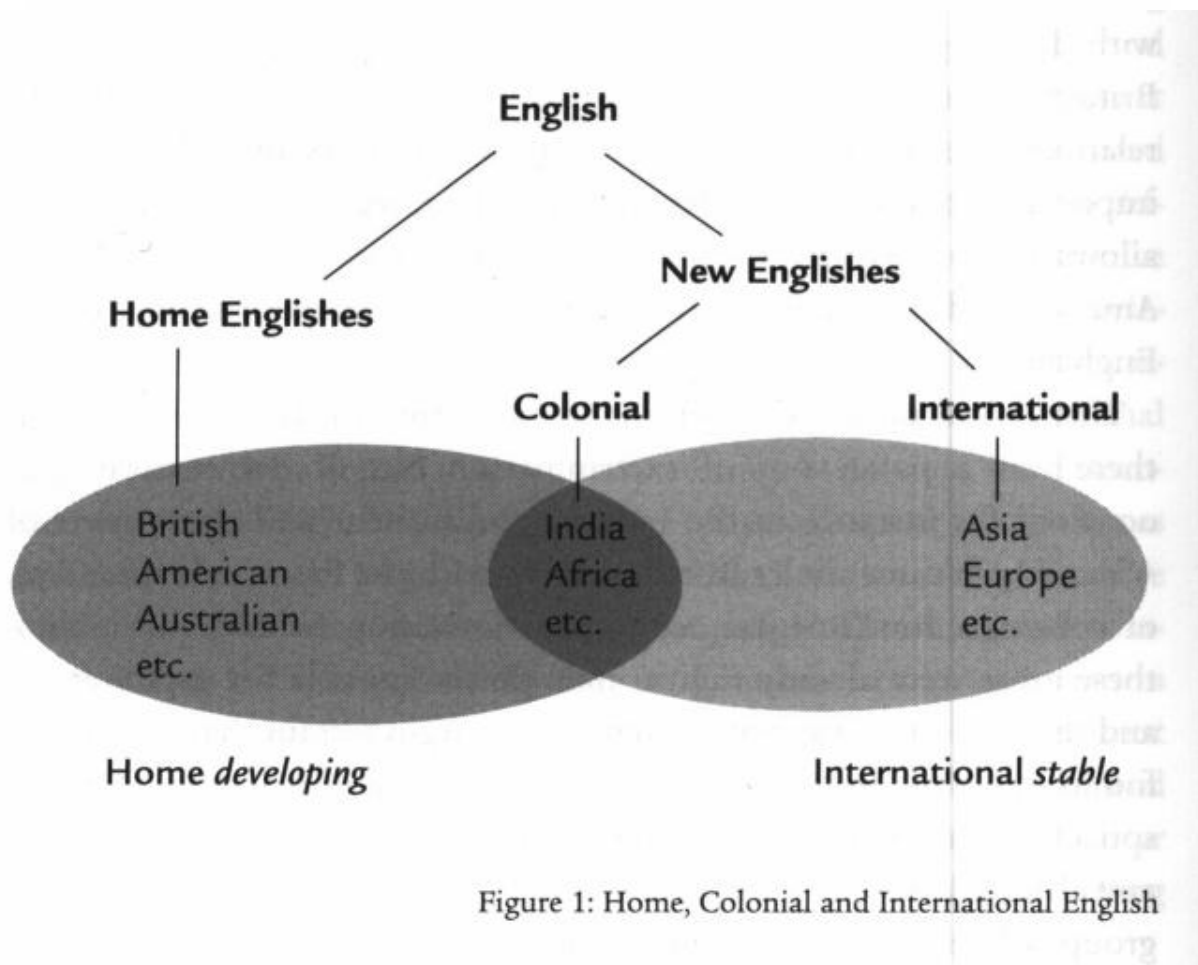


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aspectual differences towards each other and to the wider community of languages. In the course of this overview, I shall introduce some of what we might call the *internal* differences, the linguistic details of the division. Since my own area of expertise lies in the sounds of language my examples will be confined to details of pronunciation: I shall discuss a very few points only, but I have chosen them so as to give a general idea of the range of problems involved.

I shall set up four dichotomies:

Home	International
first language	second language
developing	stable
increasing illiteracy	spelling pronunciation
phonetic elaboration	phonetic simplification

For the first of these, one which is also implicit in the other three, I am suggesting a clear division between two types of language competence depending on the way in which languages are acquired. One's first language – and we should note that it is not unusual to have two or more first languages – is acquired *preliterately* by young children. The fundamental grammatical and phonological structures of the language are acquired before the child can read or write: literacy is a later skill applied to a language whose foundations are already in place.² The pre-literate language is self-acquired and *non-standardized*; its form is a statement of the child's immediate social identity, since the child enters into its immediate peer-group by making use of the language of that group. The process of acquisition is largely controlled by the child: attempts by parents and educators to correct and standardize children's language are largely futile, at least in the pre-literate stage. This is one of the interfaces at which language change takes place: the language of the peer-group asserts its identity by differentiation from other groups, including those of older generations. This leads us to the crucial point: *languages which are learnt as first languages undergo change.*

On the other hand, second languages – or more exactly *secondary* languages, since humans can learn numbers of languages – are usually

learnt today *through the medium of reading and writing* by children or young adults who have already assimilated the idea of the authority of the written word. The second language is thus learnt as a normative, canonized body of knowledge, where the forms and structures used are 'right' or 'wrong'. In the case of International English, poised as it is to achieve full independence from the home Englishes, this normative learning process becomes the only mode of transmission: cloning takes the place of regeneration. *Second-language English tends towards stability and resists change.*

I shall illustrate these processes with two short examples. Consider the two words

important — evident

Both these words have the same endings in the spoken Home languages, with a weak centralized vowel known as *schwa* and usually symbolized with a turned e:

import ənt – evid ənt

The two different spellings have no grounding in speech, and are notoriously difficult for first-language English speakers to learn. Second-language English speakers, however, learn two different forms through the medium of writing and the pronunciation of their (mostly) second-language English teachers: for them, spelling and pronunciation coincide.

There is a great deal of spelling confusion in the endings *-ant*, *-ent*, *-ance* and *-ence* in modern English. These endings come into English as French or Latin loans, going back to the Latin present participle *-ant-* or *-ent-*, depending on the class of the verb: *important* comes from Latin *portant-*, from *portare* 'carry', while *evident* comes from *vident-*, from *videre* 'see'. However, many Latin forms ending in *-ent* entered English through French, which had (sensibly!) levelled both endings to *-ant*; thus English has *pleasant*, *servant*, *tenant* although the ultimate Latin roots had *-ent* (*placent-*, *servent-*, *tenent-*). Some of these words were later re-spelled under the learned influence of Latin (*apparent*, *dependent*),

and later learned loans retained their 'correct' Latin forms (*arrogant, confident*); hence there is a good deal of confusion in the spelling today, giving us inconsistencies such as the noun *dependant* but the adjective *dependent*; or the parallel forms *attendant* but *superintendent*. None of these endings are, of course, distinguished in Home English speech,³ and it is a pity that International English, which distinguishes them both in speech and spelling, has to be burdened with the pretentious inconsistencies of an earlier age.

In the Home Englishes, the weak vowel ə has the highest frequency of any sound, making up some 11% of the speech-sounds in English – more than one in every 10 speech-sounds;⁴ and yet this sound is not shown in the spelling. Thus while second-language speakers will probably distinguish naturally between the endings of the following words:

teacher doctor beggar harbour martyr massacre

speakers of Home English all pronounce the same ending, and have to learn the spellings by rote. But *schwa* ə is a rarity in International English, which usually substitutes a strong form of the vowel based on spelling, whatever first-language accent is used. These and many other irregularities in Home English which are not sanctioned by spelling are thus ignored in International English, and many of these 'spelling pronunciations' are also established forms in Africa and the Indian sub-continent. In the Home Englishes, however, levels of literacy are falling; and as the old languages continue to evolve and diverge more and more from the spelling, tensions between the spelling and the spoken form will continue to increase. Change cannot be averted in living languages; and so some time in the middle future a breakdown is inevitable. This then is the third of my dichotomies: *International English tends towards a spelling-pronunciation, while in the Home Englishes illiteracy will inevitably increase.*

My fourth dichotomy is a result of a characteristic of secondary or communication languages. Their phonetic or sound structure is impoverished: generally speaking there are fewer distinctive sounds than the native languages. The reason is obvious: when two differing phonologies (sound systems) mix, for instance when an Icelander

applies her first-language phonology to English, there will be fewer points of correspondence: features of both Icelandic and English will be lost, and the smaller set of features which are retained will be those which correlate roughly with both phonologies.⁵

I shall demonstrate by describing a small area of the vowel systems of Home and International English, the so-called high or close vowels which occur in the words *deed*, *did*, *food* and *good*. They are shown in Figure 2.

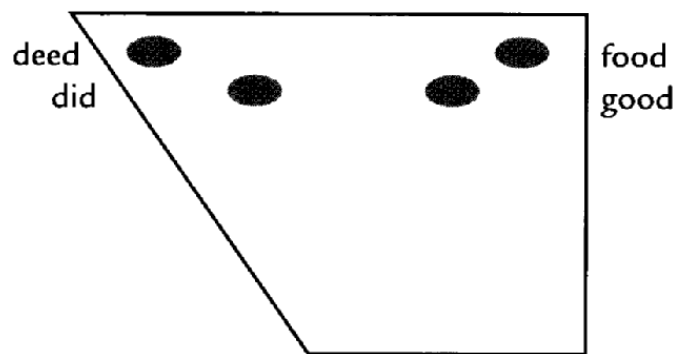


Figure 2: Close vowels in Home English: traditional classification

I follow the general practice of showing vowel qualities by means of a chart of the *vowel space*, an abstract representation of the speaker's face looking towards the left, with vowels defined according to the average position of the highest part of the tongue. The four different vowels in Figure 2 are pronounced with the tongue high in the mouth; *deed* in a high forward (leftmost) position, *did* lower and a little retracted, *food* in a high back position, and *good* lower and a little advanced. The chart does not indicate the concomitant lip-rounding of the two back vowels; it is enough to bear in mind that European languages have a strong (but not unbroken) tendency to apply lip-rounding to back vowels, particularly the close (high) ones, and a general (but variable) tendency not to round front vowels.

This system of close vowels is fairly elaborate in English, since most languages make do with only two high vowels, for example French *dix-douce*, Spanish *dicho-mucho*. Icelandic like English has the *deed-did* distinction (*líta-lita*), but not the *food-good*, so that Icelanders tend to pronounce

food and *good* with the same vowel (Scottish and Ulster English, alone among the Home Englishes, also merge these two vowels). However, the general trend in International English is to ignore this distinction and to simplify the close vowel system to 2 vowels as in Figure 3:

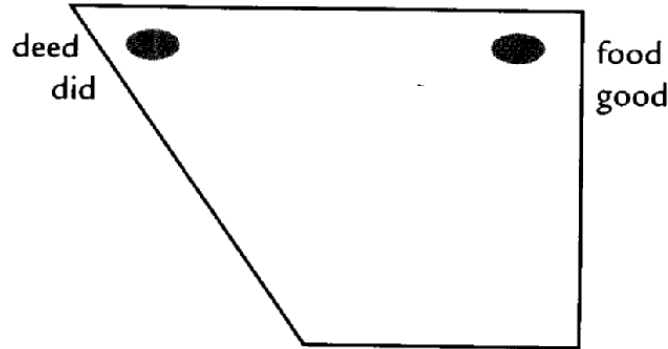


Figure 3: Close vowels in International English

Thus International English has a tendency to create a wealth of homophones such as *eat-it*, *seen-sin*, *feel-fill*, and to use the same vowel in *rude*, *wood*, *boot* and *Bush*. Looking into the future, we can expect that simplification of this nature will become the rule in various areas of the sound system of the language. Working to some extent against this, however, we can expect the influence of the spelling to steer pronunciation into channels quite different from the first-language environments of change in the Home Englishes.

Meanwhile in the Home Englishes we are witnessing rapid change of a very different nature in progress in these vowels. The situation represented in Figure 2 is representative of a rather old-fashioned pronunciation. A fairly standard Southern British pronunciation of the back vowel in *food* is decidedly more forward (centralized) than the position shown on the chart, much more forward than French *doux*, Spanish *mucho*, or Icelandic *mús*. This movement forward seems to be gathering momentum, and is becoming a marked characteristic of the pronunciation of the younger generation. There are Southern British and Australian students in my classes with shifts in these vowels amounting to radical system changes: the old back vowels *food* and *good* are becoming front vowels, and the old front vowels *deed* and *did* are moving out of their way, *did* becoming a centralized vowel and *deed* diphthongalizing. These movements are shown in Figure 4:

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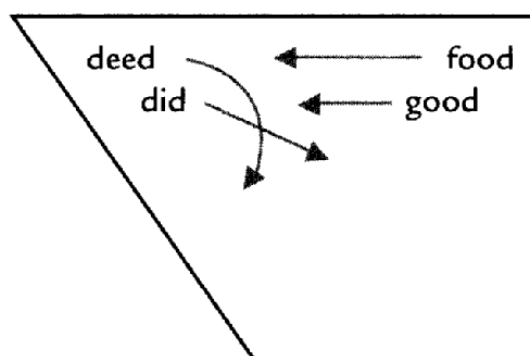


Figure 4: Current changes in Southern British and Australian close vowels.

This is a very different picture to the simplification we saw in Figure 3, and if we now compare the close vowel systems of International and Southern British English at the beginning of the twenty-first century, two radically different pictures emerge:

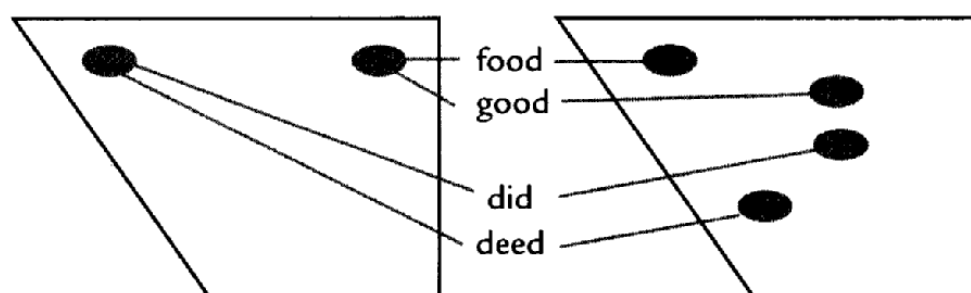


Figure 5: Close vowels in International and Home (Advanced Southern British) English

These differences in the close vowel systems are only the beginning of the story: other groups of vowels show similar and sometimes greater discrepancies. Without going into further details I might mention that the vowels in *cot* and *cat* are merging in many varieties of International English, but diverging in American English; *cot*, *caught* and *calm* are merging into one vowel in American English but diverging sharply in Southern British English. These changes reflect on-going divergences in pronunciation between the main varieties of English today, and a crucial point is that none of the changes in the various Home

Englishes reflect the spelling, while spelling is a significant factor in the development of the pronunciation of International English.

I have discussed only pronunciation in this short paper, leaving other linguistic factors for another time. There are of course a great many unknown variables at work in all these processes, and I certainly do not wish to make any detailed forecasts for the next centuries. Languages are amongst other things markers of social identity, and there seems little to indicate that this mainspring of language divergence and change is losing its impetus, despite the supposed standardizing effects of global media and communication. My guess is that standardization and normalization will increasingly take place in International English, which will remain sensitive to written norms, but the evidence so far points as much to divergence as convergence in the development of the various Home Englishes. There is no doubt, for instance, that the Home Englishes will continue to develop and that the tension between the written and the spoken languages, already considerable, must at some time reach breaking-point. For increasing numbers of speakers Home English is already an illiterate, unwritten language, and new spelling systems will inevitably appear if literacy is to be maintained in the long term. International English, on the other hand, will not need to change, and as the Home Englishes drift away and lose contact, International English will become a truly non-national language in the same way that Latin was in the Middle Ages.

Notes

- ¹ Barbara Seidhofer, quoting *The Observer* 29 October 2001, gives British Council statistics to this effect. See Seidhofer, 'Brave New English?' *The European English Messenger* X/1 (2002), 42.
- ² I ignore here as immaterial to the present discussion the debate between behaviourists and innatists on the mechanism of first-language acquisition, stating however for the record that I read the evidence as supporting a broadly innatist position: for a good overview and further references, see Ray Jackendoff, *Foundations of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 82–103. For a profound and sensitive assessment of the issues involved, I recommend Jean-Claude Milner, *Introduction à une science du langage* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995; [abridged edition of 1989, same publisher]), pp. 239–262.
- ³ Adult Home English speakers are often unaware of the homophony, and even believe themselves to make 'slight' differences in speech. The speech-conscious may in fact distinguish between these endings in formal recitation, and singing. This is, however, a result of conscious literacy, and does not occur in spontaneous speech, as the endemic spelling problems of Home English speakers amply demonstrate.
- ⁴ Gimson gives Fry's (1947) figure of 10.74 for the percentage of *schwa* of all Standard British English phonemes. Alan Cruttenden, *Gimson's Pronunciation of English* (London: Arnold, 2001), p. 148.
- ⁵ Screening processes such as these are usually seen as restraint systems in contemporary linguistics. I prefer to speak in terms of reinforcement effects in fields of integral interference (Knútsson, *Intimations of the Third Text*, PhD. dissertation, forthcoming).