An Introduction to International Varieties of English

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Contents

1 Background notions

This book is about the characteristics of the English language as it is used in various countries around the world. It is restricted, however, to those varieties of English spoken predominantly by native speakers of English. This means we will consider the kinds of English spoken in Britain, the USA, Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and the Falkland Islands, but will have little to say about the varieties spoken in Nigeria, Jamaica, Singapore, Hong Kong or the Philippines. This distinction will be spelt out in greater detail and justified further in section 2.2 and immediately below. Here I merely draw attention to this self-imposed limitation, and make the point that this book does not attempt to provide in-depth coverage of English in all the countries in which it has a significant place.

To some extent, this limitation is a consequence of the introductory nature of this text. The cases dealt with here are all the easy ones: they arise by putting speakers of different varieties of English together and letting a new variety emerge, influenced by surrounding languages in ways which will be explored in this book. These relatively simple processes also apply in more complex situations, but other factors also play important roles there. To deal with the situation in Nigeria or Singapore, we would need some understanding of the contact situation in which the varieties of English there developed, including the political and educational conditions. In particular we would need to know about the principles affecting languages in contact, especially where the language we are interested in remains a minority one for a long period. We would also have to know a lot more about the languages spoken in these areas at the time English was introduced – in both these cases, this means several languages. If we wanted to look at pidgin and creole languages such as Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea or Krio in Sierra Leone we would need to know about the general principles which govern the process of simplification (producing pidgins) and the principles of reconstructing grammatical complexity (producing creoles). These are interesting issues, but not elementary ones.

The book is arranged as follows. In the rest of this chapter, some fundamental notions for the subject will be discussed. In Chapter 2 we will look at the spread of English, and ways of describing it. In subsequent chapters we will consider general problems concerned with the vocabulary, grammar, spelling and pronunciation of varieties of English around the world. We will see that the general sources of vocabulary, the types of variation in grammar, and so on, are remarkably similar, wherever the variety in question is spoken. In the last three chapters we look at the way colonial Englishes are affecting British English, trace the movement towards linguistic independence in the various countries being considered, and discuss the notion of standard in more detail.

This is not a book which will tell you all about Australian or Canadian English. There are many such works, starting with Trudgill and Hannah (1994; first published in 1982), and including papers in journals such as *World Englishes* and *English World-Wide*. There is even a series of books published as a companion series to the journal *English World-Wide*. These can give far more detailed information on the situation in each of the relevant countries and on the use of the linguistic structures which are found there. Instead, this book attempts to look for generalisations: the things which happen in the same way in country after country, and which would happen again in the same way if English speakers settled in numbers on some previously unknown island or on some new planet. This is done in the belief and the hope that descriptions of the individual varieties will be more meaningful if you understand how they got to be the way they are.

At the end of each chapter you will find some suggestions for further reading and some exercises. Answers to the exercises are provided in a section at the end of the book called 'Discussion of the exercises'. The exercises are intended to check and to extend your understanding of the material in the text, and to provide challenges for you to consider. They are not graded for difficulty, and vary considerably in the amount of time and effort they will require to complete, so take the advice of your teacher if you are in doubt as to which ones to attempt.

1.1 Accent, dialect, language and variety

You can usually tell after just a few words whether someone has a Scottish, Australian or American accent; you don't have to wait for them to say some particularly revealing local word or to use some special construction. The important thing about an accent is that it is something you hear: the accent you speak with concerns purely the sound you make when you talk, your pronunciation. Since everybody has a pronunciation

of their language, everybody has an accent. Those people who say that somebody 'doesn't have an accent' either mean that the person concerned sounds just like they do themselves, or means that the accent used is the expected one for standard speakers to use. In either case, there is an accent. The accent in which Southern Standard British English is typically spoken, sometimes called 'BBC English', is usually termed 'Received Pronunciation' or 'RP' by linguists. That label will be used here in preference to McMahon's (2002) 'SSBE'.

What you speak with your accent is your individual version of a dialect – a kind of language which identifies you as belonging to a particular group of people. Again, everybody speaks one or more dialects. Standard Southern British English dialect is just one dialect among many. To recognise that this is true, you only have to think of that dialect from an international perspective: it marks the speaker as coming from a particular place (the south of England or perhaps just England) which is just one of the very many places where English is spoken. A dialect is made up of vocabulary items (what Carstairs-McCarthy 2002: 13 calls 'lexical items', that is words, approximately) and grammatical patterns, and is usually spoken with a particular accent, though in principle the accent may be divorced from the dialect (as when an American, in an attempt to mimic the English, calls someone 'old chap', but still sounds American).

Next we need to ask what the relationship is between the dialects of English and the language English. Unfortunately, linguists find it extremely difficult to answer this question. As far as the linguist is concerned, a language exists if people use it. If nobody ever used it, it would not exist. So if we say that *survey* is a word of English, we mean that people avail themselves of that word when they claim to be speaking English; and if we say that *scrurb* is, as far as we know, not a word of English we mean that, to the best of our knowledge, people claiming to speak English do not use this word at all. These judgements are based on what speakers of English do, not determined by some impersonal static authority. If we say 'The English language does not contain the word *scrurb*', this is just shorthand for 'people who claim to speak English do not use the word *scrurb*'. If we say '*scrurb* is not in the dictionary' we mean that lexicographers have not been aware of any speakers using this word as part of English. This shows that we cannot define a language independent of its speakers, but as we have seen, any one individual speaker speaks one particular dialect of a language. Thus this does not enable us to establish the relationship between a dialect (of English) and the language (English).

Now, it is clear that while all people who say they are speaking English

have some features which they share, there are also ways in which they differ. Then we face the difficult question of whether they speak the same language or not (see further in section 8.5). It is probably true in one sense that nobody speaks exactly the same language as anybody else, but it is not very helpful to define a language in this way. (Some linguists use the term 'idiolect' for the language spoken by an individual.) But there is no simple way to decide how different two speakers can be and still be said to speak the same language. Mutual comprehensibility is often suggested as a criterion: if two speakers can understand each other they speak the same language. But this does not correspond to the way in which we normally use the word 'language'. Danish, Swedish and Norwegian speakers may be able to understand each other when they speak their own languages, but we usually regard Danish, Swedish and Norwegian as different languages. On the other hand, people from different parts of Britain or the USA may have great difficulty in understanding each other, yet we still say they are speaking the same language. There is a political element in the definition of a language.

To make matters worse, terms like *language* and *dialect* are terms which often carry a number of meanings in everyday usage which they do not have for the linguist. The warning *Watch your language!* or, for some people, just *Language!*, can be used tell someone to speak (more) politely, and the word *dialect* contains a number of potential traps for the unwary. *Dialect* may be understood as referring only to rural speech; it may be understood as referring only to non-standard language; it may be interpreted as implying 'quaint' or 'colourful' or 'unusual'; none of these are things which a linguist would necessarily wish to imply by using the word. Because the terms *dialect* and *language* are so difficult to define and so open to misinterpretation, it is often better to avoid them where possible.

To do this, we use the term 'variety'. We can use 'variety' to mean a language, a dialect, an idiolect or an accent; it is a term which encompasses all of these. The term 'variety' is an academic term used for any kind of language production, whether we are viewing it as being determined by region, by gender, by social class, by age or by our own inimitable individual characteristics. It will be frequently used in this book as a neutral term.

1.2 Home and colony

In Australia and New Zealand, the word 'home' (frequently with a capital <H> in writing) was, until very recently, used to refer to Britain, even by people who had been born in the colony and grown up without

ever setting foot in Britain. In South Africa this use of 'home' died out rather earlier, as it did in the USA, though *The Oxford English Dictionary* shows the same usage in North America in the eighteenth century. No doubt a similar usage was found among the planters in Ireland. Such a usage is now mocked by young Australians and New Zealanders, but reflected a very important psychological state for many of the people involved.

If Britain was 'home', what was the other side of the coin? I shall here use the term 'colony' and its derivatives to contrast with 'home', even if the political entities thus denominated were at various times styled dominions, commonwealths or independent countries (such as the USA). The label is meant to be inclusive and general, and to capture what the various settlements have in common.

1.3 Colonial lag

One of the popular myths about the English language is that somewhere people are still speaking the kind of English that Chaucer or Shakespeare or Milton spoke. People were said to speak Chaucerian English in sixteenth-century Ireland (Görlach 1987: 91), and to this day are said to speak Shakespearian English in parts of the United States such as North Carolina and the Appalachians (Montgomery 1998). This myth does, of course, have some foundation in fact, though the mythical versions repeated above are gross exaggerations. The relevant fact is that some regional dialects of English retain old forms which have disappeared from the standard form of the language. *Holp* for the modern *helped* is one of the examples of 'Shakespearian' English that is regularly cited in the USA. The Australasian use of *footpath* for British *pavement* or American *sidewalk* was current in Britain when Australia and New Zealand were settled, and *pavement* is a more recent innovation (in that sense) in Britain. (The first citation showing the relevant meaning of *pavement* in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is from 1874.)

This conservatism in colonial varieties is, rather unfortunately, termed 'colonial lag' – unfortunately because the term gives the impression that the colonial variety will (or should) one day catch up with the home variety, though this is unlikely ever to happen. Colonial lag is a potential factor in distinguishing colonial varieties from their home counterparts in all levels of language: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and lexis. For instance, American English has never changed the length of the open front vowel before /f/, /θ/ and /s/ in words like *laugh*, *bath* and *castle*, which are accordingly pronounced /læf/, /bæθ/ and /kæsl/ in the USA with a phonologically short vowel, but with a phonologically long

vowel in RP, South African English and New Zealand English (RP /lɑːf/, /bɑːθ/ and /kɑːsl/). American English has retained *gotten* while it has changed to *got* in standard varieties of British English (though there are some signs of a revival of *gotten* under the influence of the USA). In syntax, we may consider the so-called mandative subjunctive, illustrated in (1) below. This involves the use of an unmarked or stem-form verb with a third person singular after certain expressions of, for example, desire or obligation.

(1) If the King Street commissars were not so invincibly stupid, they would have *insisted* that the movement *be* left severely alone (1964; cited from the *OED* and Denison 1998: 262).

This usage has remained in the US, while in British English there has been a tendency (one which may now be weakening, particularly in documents written in 'officialese') to prefer the construction with *should* in (1′).

(1′) If the King Street commissars were not so invincibly stupid, they would have *insisted* that the movement *should be* left severely alone.

The example of *pavement* cited above shows semantic change in Britain that was not matched in Australia and New Zealand. Lexical lag can be illustrated with the word *bioscope*, until recently the word for 'cinema' in South Africa, long after the word had vanished in Britain. All these examples make the point that colonial lag can indeed be observed.

On the other hand, it is a lot easier to find examples of colonial innovation and British conservatism. The merger of unstressed /ə/ and /ɪ/ in Australian and New Zealand English leading to the homophony of pairs like *villagers* and *villages*, the preference for *dreamed* over *dreamt* in the USA, the re-invention of a second person plural *y'all*, *you guys*, *yous*, etc. in various parts of the world, the use of words for British flora and fauna for new species in the colonies and the invention of new terms all indicate the power of colonial innovation and home lag. So the question becomes, not whether there is any colonial lag, but how important a factor in the development of colonial Englishes colonial lag is, and whether it is more powerful in some areas than in others. This type of question should be borne in mind while reading the rest of the book.

1.4 Dialect mixing

It is well known that dialects differ in terms of a number of individual phonological, grammatical and lexical features. Such distinctions are typically drawn on maps as isoglosses, imaginary lines between two areas

each of which has a uniform pronunciation, or grammatical or lexical usage, but which are distinct with relation to the particular feature under discussion.

For example, pouring boiling water on to tea-leaves to make tea goes by various names in different parts of England. The standard word is *brew*, and this is replacing an older *mash*, which in the 1950s could still be heard in Westmoreland, Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and most of Lincolnshire, as well as in some of the adjacent counties (Orton *et al.* 1978: Map L42). However, if we look at the forms found in Norfolk and Suffolk, which fall on the border between *brew* and *mash*, we find localities where both *brew* and *mash* are used, localities where both *draw* and *mash* are used, localities where both *make* and *mash* are used, and occasional localities where just *make* or just *scald* are used. There are a number of points to make about such data. First, it is mainly the case that we find standard *brew* in the *mash* areas rather than the other way round: *brew* is expanding at the expense of the older, non-standard form. Second, it is clear that at the border we find people choosing (possibly fairly randomly) between two forms, both of which are available to them. Third, sometimes people react to this excess of words by using neither, but bringing in another (*make, scald*) and thus cutting the Gordian knot. In any case, a single line on the map represents a great oversimplification of what is happening linguistically. On the ground we find speakers adapting their speech to the speech of their interlocutors, making choices to align themselves socially with one group or another, and using varieties which are not necessarily consistent. This situation is called 'dialect mixing'.

The same is true if we look at pronunciation rather than lexis. In the north of England, the word *chaff* is usually pronounced with a short vowel: [ʧaf]; in the south-east it is usually pronounced with a long back vowel: [ʧɑ:f]. Between the two there is quite a large area where it is pronounced with a vowel which has the quality of the northern one, but the length of the southern one: [ʧa:f]. And where the [ʧaf] area meets the [ʧa:f] area we find pronunciations like [ʧæf], [ʧæ:f] and [ʧɑ:f] (Orton *et al.* 1978: Map Ph3). These represent both compromises and attempts to adopt the standard pronunciation to avoid the issue.

While such borders may move, they may also remain static for very long periods, with speakers at the boundaries speaking a mixed dialect which displays features of the dialects on either side.

You can feel the pull of the same forces every time you speak to someone whose variety of English is not the same as yours. If you are English and talk to an American, a Scot or an Australian, if you are American and

find yourself talking to a Southerner or a New Yorker, if you are an Australian and you find yourself talking to someone from England or South Africa, you will probably notice that your English changes to accommodate to the English of the person you are talking to. This can even happen when you don't particularly like the person you are talking to, or where you have bad associations with the kind of English they speak. You may or may not be aware that you are doing this, and you will probably be unaware that your interlocutor is doing it as well, but the modifications will occur.

Such changes are difficult enough to describe when just two dialects come in contact with each other or when just two speakers come face to face. Typically, in the colonial situation, a lot of speakers of many different dialects come face to face, and in the short term the result is a period of diversity where everyone is accommodating to everyone else. During this period, speakers may not be aware of any trends or emerging patterns. Gradually, however, order emerges from the chaos, the trends become clearer and a new mixed dialect is formed. This mixed dialect will have some of the features of the various dialects which have gone into making it up.

But which features will it have? Is it predictable from the input dialects which forms will persist, and is it deducible from the new mixed dialect where the forms have come from? These questions have been considered in some detail for a number of years now, and no absolute consensus has yet emerged. But perhaps the simplest hypothesis is that in most cases the form used by the majority will be the form that survives in the new mixed dialect (Trudgill *et al.* 2000). There are other factors which appear to be relevant: pronunciations which are stigmatised as being particularly regional (such as making *lush* rhyme with *bush*, or making *sap* and *zap* sound the same) do not appear to survive in the colonies. Such a factor may be no more than a generalisation of the simplest hypothesis, though: if something is strictly regional in Britain, fewer people who use this feature are likely to be part of the mix in the colony, and thus the feature is unlikely to survive. Another suggestion, given the label of 'swamping' by Lass (1990), is that where variability is present (for example between /lʌʃ/ and /lʊʃ/ for *lush*), the variant which is in use in the south-east of England – taken to be the variety with the highest prestige – will always win out. However, there is growing evidence that it is not always the variant from the south-east of England which emerges victorious in the colonies (see Bauer 1999 on New Zealand English), and it may be that where the non-south-eastern variants win out it is because they are used by a majority of speakers.

Perhaps the most difficult feature of pronunciation to deal with in this

context is the fate of non-prevocalic /r/ in words like *shore* and *cart*. All varieties of English retain an /r/ sound of some type in words like *red* and *roof*, but in *shore* and *cart* where there was once an /r/ before something which is not a vowel (either a pause or a consonant), there is no /r/ in the standard English of England, though the older pronunciation with /r/ is not only reflected in the spelling, but heard in many regional dialects from Reading to Blackburn. Varieties which retain the historical /r/ are sometimes referred to as 'rhotic' varieties or (particularly in American texts) 'r-ful' varieties; those which do not retain it are called 'non-rhotic' or 'r-less' varieties. The non-rhotic pattern did not become part of standard English pronunciation in England until the eighteenth century, but traces of it can be found in the sixteenth (Dobson 1968: 914).

Precisely how rhoticity and non-rhoticity spread into North America is a very complex matter. According to Crystal (1988: 224; 1995: 93) the first settlers in Massachusetts were from eastern counties of England, and rhoticity was already disappearing from there at the time of settlement in 1620. New England, including Massachusetts, remains non-rhotic to this day, with Boston speech being caricatured with the expression *Hahvahd Yahd* for *Harvard Yard*. Settlers in Virginia, on the other hand, were mainly from the west of England, and took their non-prevocalic /r/s with them to a new continent, and their version of English (in this regard) spread westward across America. While this version of events has a pleasing simplicity, it cannot be the entire story, if only because Jamestown, Virginia, the site of the first settlement in what is now the USA, is in the heart of a traditionally non-rhotic area. It is the people who settled slightly later who must have provided the basically rhotic population. We need to consider at least two other factors. The first is that the major ports along the eastern seaboard remained in constant contact with England, and could thus be affected by changes in English norms. The second is the large number of Scots–Irish immigrants who arrived in the early eighteenth century – perhaps a quarter of a million of them in a fifty-year period. These people spoke a rhotic variety of English.

Most of this gives the expected pattern. Speakers in Massachusetts were originally non-rhotic because the majority of the immigrants were non-rhotic. North America as a whole became mainly rhotic because most of the English-speaking settlers were rhotic. The case of Jamestown itself is not necessarily as complex as it seems: of the 105 settlers (all men) on the original ship which landed in 1607, only thirty-eight were still alive eight months later (Bridenbaugh 1980: 119), so that the settlers who must have influenced the pronunciation of the colony must have been later arrivals, perhaps even eighteenth-century arrivals. It is

certain that factors other than the origins of the first settlers played a role. Whatever the contribution of maritime contacts with England in the late seventeenth century, we can see a much more recent example of external norms having an effect: although New York City was traditionally non-rhotic, it became the prestige norm to pronounce non-prevocalic /r/ there in the course of the twentieth century due to the influence of the mainstream US rhoticity.

Similarly, it is no great surprise to find that Australian English is non-rhotic. While large numbers of Irish and Scots did settle in Australia, in 1861 the English-born people in Australia outnumbered the Irish by more than two to one, and the number of English-born living there was greater than the number of Irish, Scottish, US and Canadian-born people combined.

The situation in New Zealand is far less clear-cut. In 1881, there were nearly as many settlers born in Scotland and Ireland as there were settlers born in England, but the difference was not great, and many of the English settlers would have spoken a rhotic variety. To get some idea, we can look at the number of immigrants in 1874 (see Table 1.1, data from McKinnon *et al.* 1997). Note that if even a quarter of the immigrants from some of the vaguely defined areas (such as 'Rest of England') were rhotic, the number of rhotic immigrants would have been greater than the number of non-rhotic ones. These figures do not take into account the destinations of the individual speakers in New Zealand: if all the rhotic speakers ended up in one place and all the non-rhotic speakers in another, we would expect this to lead to two distinct dialect areas. Things are not as clear as that. We do have some evidence that the South Island of New Zealand was largely rhotic in the 1880s, although the same was not true of the North Island at that time. Today rhoticity is confined to part of the southern end of the South Island. If we are to stay with a 'majority rules' view of the fate of /r/ in New Zealand we must either assume that the majority is influenced by continuing immigration – so that something which was once a majority form can, because of continued immigration, become a minority form – or we must assume that the majority is determined over quite a large community, not just the immediately local community. Either hypothesis causes problems in the New Zealand context because of the retention of rhoticity in one small area of the country.

In New Zealand, therefore, a simple rule of majority among the early settlers may not be sufficient to explain everything about the pronunciation of the mixed dialect used there. We may also have to consider factors such as subsequent immigration patterns, the geographic isolation of particular groups of speakers, and where particular groups of

Table 1.1 Sources of immigration to New Zealand in 1874, showing probable rhoticity of immigrants

Rhotic		*Non-rhotic*	
Origin	*Number*	*Origin*	*Number*
Lanarkshire	774	Essex, Middlesex (including London)	1,566
Ulster	1,189	Channel Islands	291
Cork and Kerry	912	Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex, Kent (note: not all non-rhotic)	1,973
Elsewhere in Ireland	1,670	Rest of England, Scotland and Wales (note: not all non-rhotic)	4,425
Warwick, Gloucester, Oxford	1,188		
Devon and Cornwall	1,055		
Shetland	262		
Total	**7,050**	**Total**	**8,255**

speakers see the prestige variety as coming from (in the New Zealand context, speakers in rhotic areas may have seen Scotland as a centre of prestige; in the New York context, the prestige comes from the broadcast standard in the USA). Overall we can predict a great deal about the form of a colonial mixed dialect from the form used by the majority of the settlers, but it is not yet clear how large the remaining gaps are. It would be unwise yet to assume that the majority explains everything, though it certainly explains a lot.

Exercises

1. Choose any three features from any colonial varieties of English, and decide whether they illustrate colonial lag or not. For instance, you might choose the Canadian 'raised' pronunciation of words like *out* and *house*, which have a noticeably different vowel from that in *loud* or *browse*, the American use of *Did you eat yet?* rather than *Have you eaten (yet)?*, and the American use of *biscuit* for something which is not sweet, but in principle any three features will do. Reflect on how you decide in each case.

2. Record yourself having independent conversations with two people, each of whom speaks a different variety of English. Can you hear differences in your pronunciation in the two cases? If so, what have you

changed? If not, what might be preventing change? If you cannot set this up, try recording a single interviewer in the broadcast media interviewing two different people who speak different kinds of English, and ask the same questions about the interviewer.

3. The following brief passage is taken from R. D. Blackmore's *Lorna Doone* (1869, chapter 3). The author is trying to represent the local Devon speech of his character. Which non-standard features in the text show accent, and which show dialect?

> Never God made vog as could stop their eysen ... Zober, lad, goo zober now, if thee wish to see thy moother.

4. Note that in New York it is now overtly prestigious to have a rhotic pronunciation, while non-rhotic pronunciations are also found, but have less prestige. Both rhotic and non-rhotic pronunciations are also found side-by-side in parts of England like Reading, Bath and Blackburn. Which pronunciation is seen as more prestigious in these places: the rhotic or the non-rhotic? Why? What does this say about standards in general?

Recommendations for reading

Görlach (1987) is a good source on colonial lag. While Görlach himself is sceptical, he cites sources which have given the idea a warmer welcome. The origin of the term 'colonial lag' is obscure to me.

The main source on dialect mixing is Trudgill (1986), as updated by Trudgill *et al.* (2000).

For a helpful discussion of the establishment of rhoticity in the USA, and the Jamestown settlement in particular, see Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998: 94–9).

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Note: entries in **bold** give the place where the term is defined.