

PERSPECTIVES ON THE GLOBAL USE OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore a few perspectives on the use of English internationally and attempts a classification of viewpoints in order to create a clearer image of the diversity of technical terms that abound in this area. The framework of discussion is that of the World Englishes which, as a trend of thought and substantial research into the possibilities of the English language to serve many purposes in communicating globally, has acquired a valuable authority on the subject. Among the various topics approached by this type of research is the exploration of the features of English as an International Language (EIL), of ESL or EFL, the concept of intelligibility, that of the bilingual's creativity, contact languages and contact literatures, the spread of English in several cultures where it acquired a special status, and the list can go on.

Key words: universal language, bilingual's creativity, contact language, contact literature

Introduction

It is not my concern here to go into an analysis of the characteristics of EIL or other types of versions of English used from a methodological or teaching/training perspective (although this view will be discussed briefly in the last section of the article), but rather to offer an insight into the cultural issues related to World Englishes. The area of discussion in the first part of the paper will bring forward the cultural status of English in India, a country in the Outer Circle, whose relationship with the English language has been long-standing and consistent.

1. Cultural perspectives: English as an element of cultural identity

The view that English is part of the cultural identity has had quite a substantial history in countries where writers chose English as a means of literary expression and where English merged with the local traditions, even with the cultural *psyche*, giving way to new forms of

language expression. Indian writers like Raja Rao, writing in the 40s, for instance, expressed very powerful thoughts about English being part of the Indian heritage. He believes that „the spiritual tradition of India has incorporated the English language to itself” (Rao 6). What lies behind this type of statement?

Following his line of thought I believe the discussion tends to be one about discovering a suitable vehicle for universal truth. In a long line of writers and intellectual men in India, sage men included, there is the constant belief that the Indian contribution to the world culture was the Indian psyche itself, the value of the truth that the country’s culture stands for. As such, universal truth, the spiritual values put forward by the Indian thought along millennia are not bound to one means of expression alone, that is, the Sanskrit language. The following quotation is self-evident: „Truth can use any language, and the more universal, the better it is. If metaphysics is India’s contribution to the world civilization, as we believe it is, then must she use the most universal language for her to be universal”. „And as long as the English language is universal, it will always remain Indian” (Rao 6). In this kind of argument the English language, with all its attributes of universality is seen as a perfect vehicle for delivering universal truth. There is nothing here to suggest dominance of any type or the implication that English was imposed socially and politically. This type of fact is simply not relevant here. Since it belongs to historical fact and cannot be denied, English is to stay in India and become part of its culture ...”not as a guest or friend but as one of our own, of our caste, our creed, our sect and of our tradition”(Rao 6).

What follows from here is a natural spread of English through all the social and cultural levels of the Indian society. English is not therefore the landmark of a certain caste or type of education but is reflected in all layers of society and loses its halo of a superior, elitist and dominating linguistic tool. It has certainly become more than that but also, we are led to believe, less than it was initially intended. It does not mould other patterns, but it is moulded and transfigured according to a cultural pattern which is not its original, historical one.

2. Linguistic perspectives

The mainly cultural impact of English in certain areas of the world has been taken over by the linguistic perspective that has, for a number of years now, tried to contextualize the development of species of English in the speech communities where English was used as a second language. Therefore, the second part of this article attempts to offer a linguistic background to the realities of certain local and historical contexts. The discussion is devoted

to relevant terminology in the field of World Englishes, especially *the bilingual's creativity* and *contact literature*, mainly as they are put forward by Braj Kachru, a leading writer in this area and the initiator of many of the discussions on the topic.

Over the last century, this type of research was issued from a concern to study and define varieties of English which appeared to be distinct from the native varieties. Naturally, the starting point was the inescapable fact that English has acquired a different linguistic reality as it kept spreading to different areas of the world. The so-called „diaspora varieties” brought to the surface the existence of speech communities who developed an „institutionalized non-native model of English” distinct from the native one (Kachru 8). The increasing number of non-native speakers of English determined researchers to speak of *the nativization of English*, the appropriation of the language according to the linguistic and literary norms of the cultures in question (here we are talking especially of Asian and African countries where English has been both a linguistic tool and the carrier of many cultural realities).

Thus we can speak now of two co-existing models of English, native and non-native, each having its linguistic and literary norms as well as the potential to produce them. It is in relation to the latter that linguists have tried to identify linguistic characteristics, speech behaviour and innovations. Researchers have pointed out that emphasis has to be placed on those speech communities whose members use two, three or more languages, depending on context. The study of these communities questioned the validity of considering monolingualism as the only norm for „the description and analysis of the linguistic interaction of traditional multilingual societies” (Kachru 9). So far, monolingualism as the standard norm has included the ideal patterns of interaction involving only native speakers, with distinct, established discourse strategies and speech acts. However, the reality of the new varieties of English has to accept that a non-native speech community uses language creatively; in the process of expressing themselves to other identities (even cultures in the same country) through English, non-native speakers contaminate it with their own sociolinguistic strategies and a new variety of English emerges.

2.1 Contact language and literature

At this point the definition of *contact language* is relevant since it is used in its turn to explain what *contact literature* is. In Kachru's view (10) „... a language in contact is two-faced: it has its own face, and the face that it acquires from the language with which it has

contact. The degree of contact varies from lexical borrowing to intensive mixing of units” (Kachru 1982b 341). I believe this brief and very clear account is also explanatory of the characteristics of contact literatures as a whole, examples of which can be Francophone literatures or non-native English literatures from Ghana, India, Nigeria. As literatures in English written by users of English as a second language they are the product of multicultural and multilingual speech communities and they address different audiences.

They do not belong to the tradition of the English literature in the Inner Circle (the countries where the native model emerged) and it is only natural that they display both a different national identity and a linguistic distinctiveness. Many researchers claim that there is a clear gain in relation to the bilingual’s creativity (the meaning of the term as put forward by Kachru (21) is „linguistic creativity exhibited by non-monolinguals” especially in literary contexts); this gain has several linguistic and cultural aspects. In what follows, I will provide only a few examples of such aspects meant to clarify the concept of contact literatures (adapted from Kachru 10) :

- they provide a blend of two or more linguistic textures and literary traditions;
- they offer the English language extended contexts of situation on the basis of which such contexts may be interpreted and understood;
- both their discourse devices and cultural assumptions are distinct from the ones associated with the native varieties of English (and therefore richer and more comprehensive);
- they extend the scope of the historical dimension and cultural tradition from the standard native speech communities to different heritages worldwide (Asia, Africa);
- the cultural expansion that they propose creates a new literary sensibility and extends the cultural awareness of a reader who does not belong to the speech community using a non-native variety of English;
- they reinforce the fact that a text has a unique context and as it is, these literatures display context-free varieties of English (whereas initially, national English literatures are specific and context-bound);
- they have become a pleasant and useful vehicle for culture learning, providing the training system and methodology are adequate. It is a fact nowadays that intercultural,

multicultural training are part of the required knowledge and expertise in many fields of activity.

The international varieties of English are beginning to act on the English language with an unprecedented intensity. The changes they bring refer mostly to the diversification of literary genres and styles, verbal repertoires and literary conventions. Furthermore, they make possible the introduction of new cultural dimensions that so far have not been part of the literary history of English.

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse in depth the devices through which a bilingual writer's creativity becomes manifest, but I will choose the example of *style*, as authenticity of style has been the focus of much linguistic and cultural research (e.g. Lindfors 75). Among the most interesting and relevant aspects in terms of studying varieties of non-native English literatures we find the extensive use of native similes and metaphors (which, linguistically speaking, are a source of collocational deviation), the translation („transcreation”) of proverbs or idioms, the use of certain syntactic devices, and the use of culturally dependent speech styles. To take just one or two examples, such similes from the work of Achebe, an African writer (quoted by Lindfors) as *like a lizard fallen from an iroko tree*, or, *like pouring grains of corn into a bag full of holes*, bring to the reader's mind the very cultural milieu which is the setting of the story.

In the case of translating idioms or proverbs, their main goal is to universalize a specific incident, characterise a situation or context, but even more importantly, such devices provide „a grammar of values”. These values are meant to introduce us to the meanings of an underlying culture which is manifest in such varieties of English.

From this perspective, however, the processes of discovering the underlying thought that fuels a type of culture and trying to understand it are not confined to the literary varieties of English but also to the ordinary speech uttered by multilingual speakers using English in everyday contexts. Creativity therefore is not limited to literature alone and Kachru (20) makes a significant point about „transfer in contact” during linguistic interaction in multicultural contexts. Different thought processes and contents manifest themselves in different varieties of English, be they regular, standard speech acts or literary styles.

Conclusions

- a) So far I have analysed the issue of the universality of the English language from a distinct cultural perspective and from a specifically linguistic one. In the course of the analysis it has come out that English as a vehicle for carrying cultural content suffers significant influence in the process of creating discourse in a multilingual and multicultural context. People writing literature in English appropriate the language to communicate their individual sensitivity or experience. Far from being an instrument of domination alone in the regions where English has become a second language, it proved it had the potential to change and adapt. In Widdowson's words (EIL, ESL, EFL: Global issues and local interests 165) „as soon as the language is used it cannot be kept under control”. This holds true both for the literary varieties of a language and for its everyday use in common situations. Language therefore has an intrinsically changeable character, along with ideas, values and beliefs. Many recent examples, also from the field of literature, bring forward the work of Salman Rushdie, especially *Midnight's children* (1980) and *Shame* (1983). A 1990 review of his novels (Bhikhu Parekh 1990) speaks of „... Rushdie standing up to the English Language as an equal”. „... He does to English what the English have done to India. He deconstructs it, colonises it, reclaims it for the Indian...”.

Creativity, however, does not belong exclusively to the literary phenomenon, „the process is endemic in the very nature of language” (Widdowson 168) and this is what language spread is about.

- b) The second point I would like to raise is that even in countries where English is studied as a foreign language (and I am thinking specifically of Romania), the spread of English is beginning to take a different shape from the initially teaching/learning approach. What I have in view is that an increasing number of scholars (historians, philosophers, physicists) are writing their books first in English and then they are translated by somebody else in Romanian.

As a result of many people studying abroad in English lots of master dissertations and PhD theses are written in English. The process is interesting and I believe worth pursuing from a linguistic and cultural point of view. It is true, we are not speaking of literature writing but of scientific works mostly, but the numbers are growing and the trend is substantial. At the same time, people in different professions use English in interactions

with both native and non-native speakers. As a teacher I am aware that the cultural content of Romanian speakers cannot be neglected, but for the moment, the prevailing view is that speech acts which do not conform to the standard rules are deviations from the monolingual's norm. I believe this would be an interesting topic of study, especially in the case of interactions between Romanian speakers and non-native users of English but this goes beyond the scope of this article.

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