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Publisher: Routledge

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## Changing English

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccen20>

## Reflections on the Rhetorics on the (Re-)Location of English

Mario Saraceni<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> SLAS, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK

Available online: 20 Sep 2011

To cite this article: Mario Saraceni (2011): Reflections on the Rhetorics on the (Re-)Location of English, *Changing English*, 18:3, 277-285

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2011.602830>

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## Reflections on the Rhetorics on the (Re-)Location of English

Mario Saraceni\*

*SLAS, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK*

For a growing number of people around the world, the ability to speak English has become an important skill and an integral part of their lives, similar to the ability to use a computer. This, in turn, means that English is unquestionably no longer exclusively associated with the identities of nations traditionally referred to as ‘Anglophone’ – this is part of what I call the *relocation of English*. In this paper I first illustrate this notion, suggesting that the English language could be reconceptualised so that the links with its ‘ancestral home’ may be completely severed, and the language may cease to be associated to a foreign Other and become fully part of the linguistic repertoire of the Self. In the second part I discuss some pedagogical implications of this idea.

**Keywords:** relocation; linguistic repertoire; hybridity; language ownership; TESOL

### Part one: defining the relocation of English

The diffusion, varieties and roles of English around the world have constituted an area of growing academic interest and debate over the last four decades. This vast phenomenon has been examined from different but interrelated angles: geohistorical, (socio-)linguistic, pedagogical, and ideological.

### *The rhetorics of the spread of English*

The common underlying notion in this variegated body of academic enquiry is the metaphor of ‘spread’, namely the idea that a central, original core of English has been subjected to centrifugal forces (e.g., the British Empire, national identities in postcolonial settings, etc.) which have produced both an expansion of the geographical footprint of the language as well as a diversification of its form. Classic diagrammatic models of English in the world are all underpinned by this idea, which is represented particularly clearly in Strevens’ map of International English (1980, 86), where the spread of English is represented by means of a family tree model, and in David Crystal’s rendition of Braj Kachru’s three-circle model of the spread of English, probably the best known of such diagrams (Figure 1).

From this perspective, there is, first of all, a fundamental, primordial connection between *English* the language and *England* the country, reflected in the morphology of the two words. This is as basic as the association of the German language with

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\*Email: [mario.saraceni@port.ac.uk](mailto:mario.saraceni@port.ac.uk)

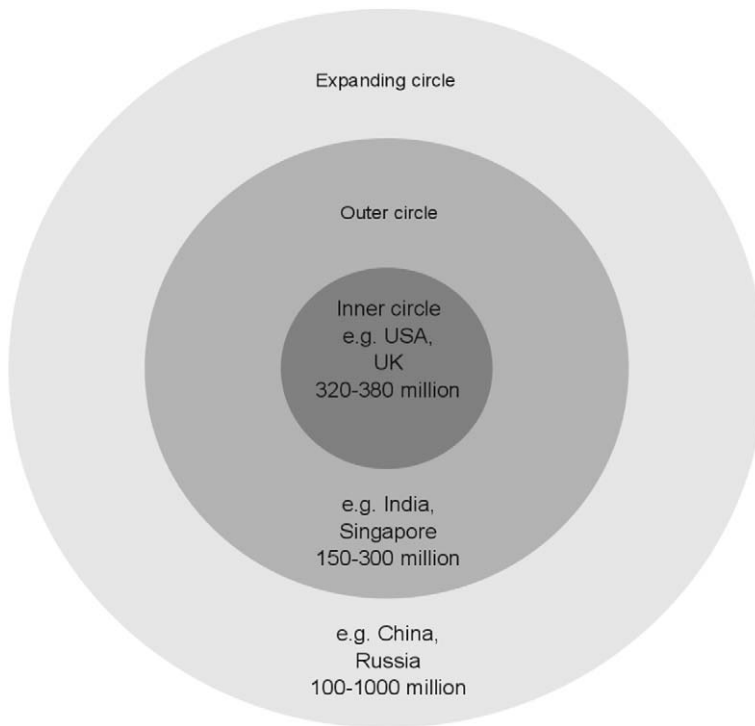


Figure 1. Kachru's three circles of English. Reprinted from David Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, 2003, p. 61, with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

Germany, the Japanese language with Japan, and so on. This obvious morphological coincidence assigns languages to primary locations in ways which seem to be entirely natural and unquestionable. Such locations are also considered, almost by intuitive definition, the places where languages have historically originated from, giving rise to a quasi-biblical spatio-temporal idealisation of their primeval locations.

This fairly simplistic view based on nationally-defined primordial locations isn't challenged by the fact that many languages are also used outside the borders of the countries bearing their names. Indeed, the very concept of language spread is grounded in the idea of languages trespassing their natural borders. Therefore, it isn't challenged even when the spread is of unprecedented proportions like that of English.

### ***An alternative view of the relocation of English***

Intuitively logical as it may seem to be, however, the use of the 'spread' metaphor to describe what I call the *relocation* of English isn't universally accepted. The very notion of a point of origin is linguistically problematic. In the specific case of English, it would be manifestly impossible to identify any point in history or geography when/where the language can be said to have 'started'. One can only talk of phases of development. These involve events, of various durations and complexity, which may have contributed to the evolution of the language. As Milroy (2002) has

cogently pointed out, the selection and the codification of a few of them and the significance attributed to them are arbitrary decisions inherent to narratives of the ‘history of English’ which, in turn, is an integral part of larger nation-state narratives:

English as the language, first of one powerful nation-state and subsequently of others (pre-eminently the USA), and also the language of a great empire, must be given a glorious history, which [...] should be a very long history, preferably unbroken and continuous and – as far as possible – pure. (Milroy 2002, 16)

This was particularly important for the discursive construction of the close link language–people–territory, and, consequently, of the nation state in the context of nineteenth-century Europe (Wright 2000; Makoni and Pennycook 2007). Thus, when the geohistorical origin and, more in general, the history, of English, are viewed as ideological constructs instrumental to nation-state narratives, not only is the notion of ‘origin’ challenged, but the very concept of *a* language also begins to be questioned. The boundaries between languages, that is, can be considered to be politically motivated, rather than linguistically definable: ‘the question of what is or isn’t a language is always finally a *political* question. The linguist cannot answer it objectively by measuring degrees of structural differences or mutual comprehensibility’ (Joseph 2006, 27; see also Bolton 2006, 308). Moreover, even without considering the political or ideological dimension, Hudson contends that ‘the search for language boundaries is a waste of time’ (1996, 36), while, similarly, Sydney Lamb notes that ‘There is no generally applicable way to make the distinction between one language and another. Languages are neither discrete objects nor are they uniform across speakers’ (2004, 413). Lamb’s conclusion, therefore, is that ‘There is no such thing as a language. There is such a thing as Language, but it is a mass noun’ (2004, 218). Multilingualism is the norm in communities throughout the world, hence ‘the notion of “a language” makes little sense in most traditional societies’ (Mühlhäusler 2000, 358).

Intended in this way, Language as a mass noun is characterised not by internal linguistic boundaries but by a pervasive hybridity: ‘languages are always mixed, hybrid and drawing on multiple resources’ (Pennycook 2010, 129). This reflects the recent shift of focus in sociolinguistics from language as ‘system’ to ‘language as *practice* (constantly in flux)’ (Mufwene 2008, 32). If, finally, both linear histories of languages and neat separations between them are political and ideological constructs, the ‘spread’ metaphor loses validity: ‘the origins of English use are not to be found in the idea of a language that spread from the centre to the periphery, but in the multiple, simultaneous origins of locality’ (Pennycook 2010, 86), and, as a consequence, English ‘has always been local’ (87). This challenges not only the ‘spread’ metaphor, but also, crucially, the binary opposition between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’.

### *A note on World Englishes*

It will be useful, at this point, to consider, for a moment, the position of the World Englishes (WE) paradigm, arguably the best known and most frequently cited description of the roles and forms of English in the world. First of all, within the WE framework, the ‘spread’ metaphor is of central importance, the main tenet

being that the pluralisation of English into Englishes has been caused by the spread of the language out of England, which has in turn initiated a process of diversification whose actual characteristics have been determined by the acculturation of English in the sociocultural realities of the various parts of the world it was brought to; in this sense, Indian English, Malaysian English, Nigerian English, etc. are seen as reincarnations of the language in India, Malaysia, Nigeria, etc. This is encapsulated in Chinua Achebe's explanation of the reasons why he chose English as the language that would enable him to express his African-ness:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (Achebe 1965, 29)

The notion of 'an ancestral home' of English seems to correspond very closely to the idea of 'the original location' of the language discussed earlier. As a corollary, the centre-periphery dichotomy is also very strongly affirmed, as is evident in the three-circle model, particularly through the adjectives 'inner', 'outer' and 'expanding' (for a fuller critique of the model, see Bruthiaux 2003; Pennycook 2003, 2009; Yano 2001, 2009, Saraceni 2010).

If the presence of English in the world is seen as based on a centre-periphery relationship, the periphery will be characterised by Englishes which have been modified and adapted to suit local environments, while the centre, by contrast, will be strongly connected with an unaltered form of English, reinforcing the belief in a sort of linguistic garden of Eden where English is pure and perfect or, at least, authentic. This perpetuates the much-exploited possibility that Englishes can be placed along an equally arbitrary scale of 'quality', 'authenticity', 'purity', 'correctness' and so on. Altered forms of English, meanwhile, will perhaps arouse interest and curiosity, but are unlikely to gain the sort of recognition that is aspired to primarily among World Englishes scholars. Indeed, as Kachru himself has noted, the hoped-for full recognition and acceptance of Outer/Expanding-Circle varieties of English has not taken place: while English has 'ceased to be exclusively Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian and Western [...] it is not that other Asian and African canons are necessarily accepted or recognized – far from that' (2009, 176). The multi-faceted nature of English, Kachru laments, has not yet been accepted 'by the linguistic vigilantes or the power elite' (2009, 177).

Thus, as I have argued more in depth elsewhere (Saraceni 2010), the World Englishes school of thought may have paradoxically contributed to a certain marginalisation of varieties of English outside the Inner Circle, despite it being so prominently driven by a strong egalitarian ethos.

### *A user-based perspective*

Another problem is, in my view, the fact that debates about the rules and roles of English in the world have more often than not been circumscribed within the confines of academia and have tended to downplay the importance of the *users* of English and how they feel about the language. In this sense, the academic discourse of 'ownership' of English is particularly significant. In one of the most regularly quoted citations about the concept of 'ownership', Widdowson claimed that 'How

English develops in the world is no business whatever of native speakers in England, or the United States, or anywhere else. They have no say in the matter, no right to intervene or pass judgement. They are irrelevant', adding shortly after that 'Other people actually own it' (Widdowson 1994, 385). In spite of the obviously liberal position expressed by this statement, I find it puzzling that Widdowson, securely among the ranks of the 'native speakers', should decree that 'native speakers' should remain silent about anything to do with the development of the English language and that the 'ownership' of it rests with 'other people'. This apparent contradiction highlights, in my opinion, a major flaw in much rhetoric that characterises this academic field, that is a rather arrogantly self-assigned prerogative to decide how people should feel and/or act in relation to language.

This, incidentally, also applies to the concept of *linguistic imperialism* (Phillipson 1992, 2009), which tends to not take account of users' agency as an active force in establishing the relationship between the English language and its supposed victims (Bisong 1995; Brutt-Griffler 2002).

Even assuming that it is a valid concept, I argue that surely it is up to the individual speaker to feel, or not, a sense of 'ownership' towards the language(s) they speak. It is users of English, not academics, who decide if a language is their own, or, conversely, choose to keep it at a distance. Their agency doesn't require authorisation or approval from linguists or the 'vigilantes' that Kachru alludes to. Cogently, Joseph (2004, 160) makes a useful distinction between academic discourse and public discourse and warns against dismissing the latter simply 'because it is contradicted by our "scientific" data'.

To take a concrete example, the perceptions of Malaysian English among English-speaking Malaysians seem to be rather negative, and this sentiment appears to be directly linked to the perceived degree of 'Malaysianisation' of the language (Tan 2005; Saraceni 2010). Also many Malaysians may feel that English is, ultimately, a 'borrowed language' (Saraceni, forthcoming), regardless of the actual functional and/or identity roles it may play both for the individual and in society at large. This is diametrically opposite to the egalitarian ethos of most scholarship in the field.

Language is intimately connected to one's intellect and one's perception of Self and the idea of using a borrowed language, especially when this language is one's main language, has significant implications for the way one sees him/herself in relation to those considered to be the legitimate owners of that language. It is therefore my contention that the (re-)location of English may be more interestingly considered in relation to the psychological notions of Self and Other than it is with reference to history, geography and linguistic form.

Fundamentally, what is important is that the psychological umbilical chord linking English in the world to its arbitrarily identified spatio-temporal and cultural centre be decidedly and conclusively severed. It is only then that English can truly become an Asian language, an African language and, ultimately, anybody's language, without having to bear special labels in order to be identified as such. If language is constantly in flux, any alteration resulting from the acculturation of English worldwide need not be of any particular significance.

The de-Anglicisation of English needs to take place, in my opinion, primarily in the classroom. Thus, the latter part of this paper turns its attention to pedagogical considerations.

### **Part two: the relocation of English and its pedagogical implications**

If English has no ‘ancestral home’, is de-Anglicised, and is seen as a part of pervasively hybrid locally situated linguistic repertoires, there must be a paradigm shift in its pedagogy, whereby certain principles are seriously reconsidered. The first issue that I wish to address is the role of the ‘native speaker’ in language education.

The notion of ‘native speaker’ (NS) and its distinction from ‘non-native speaker’ (NNS) have been debated at length in the relevant literature. Despite the lack of any agreed alternatives, there is a fairly general consensus that the terms are flawed and misleading (Paikeday 1985; Rampton 1990; Davies 1991, 2003, 2004; Rajagopalan 1999; Jenkins 2000; Brutt-Griffler and Samimy 2001; Braine 2010). Three decades ago, Ferguson recommended that ‘the whole mystique of the native speaker and the mother tongue should be quietly dropped from the linguist’s set of professional myths about language’ (1982, vii). Again, there is a relatively broad agreement on this point, even though linguists haven’t really dropped the mystique of the ‘native speaker’, quietly or not.

As Braine (2010, 9) notes, ‘in simplistic terms, a NS of a language is one who speaks the language as his/her first language; accordingly, a NNS is one who speaks that language as a second or foreign language’. This is indeed very simplistic, but the perceived distinction between NS and NNS is often almost entirely non-linguistic, as it is based on ‘country of origin, names, ethnicity, skin colour, and accent’ (Braine 2010, 9–10). These non- or, at best, para-linguistic criteria derive directly from the conceptualisation of English based on the ‘spread’ metaphor, which almost logically induces the myth of the prototypical, idealised ‘native speaker’ of English as a white person, with a suitably Anglo-sounding name, coming from one of the Inner-Circle countries (preferably Britain or the US), where English exists in its most unadulterated and authentic form. This is diametrically opposed to a conception of de-Anglicised English, in constant flux, seamlessly integrated within any linguistic amalgam it happens to be part of. It is also irreconcilable with the fact that most people in the world are brought up in multilingual societies, so that defining what someone is a native speaker of is virtually impossible and ultimately meaningless.

In addition, and more tangibly important, the problem with this ethnic-geographical characterisation of the NS is not just that it is obviously entirely inaccurate, but also that it is the basis for a system of employment within the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) field which is fundamentally prejudiced and unjust, precisely because of its inaccuracy. In many parts of the world English teachers who are of the right ethnic group and have the right passport are not only much more easily employed – even without qualifications (Kirkpatrick 2006) – but also better remunerated.

Essentialist views of language in general and of English in particular also tend to make a clear-cut distinction between ‘native’ (or ‘first’) language, ‘second’ language and ‘foreign’ language. These categories are often seen as coinciding respectively to Kachru’s Inner, Outer and Expanding Circles of English. It is apparent, however, that the relocation of English potentially invalidates these distinctions or, at the very least, makes them much more blurred than they are normally thought to be. First of all, the very essence of the relocation of English is that the language is repositioned away from the Other and closer to the Self. This entails that the modifier ‘foreign’ becomes counterintuitive and unnecessary. Additionally, English

as a hybrid language, part of hybrid language matter, doesn't lend itself well to being considered 'first' or 'second' or in any other ranking order.

The location of English within broader linguistic repertoires makes it necessary for language educators to reconsider the soundness of methodologies which tend to favour, rather forcefully, the isolation of English from other languages. In a world-wide context, English is, in the vast majority of cases, used in *conjunction* with other languages, and the resulting blend represents an enriching of an individual's meaning-making potential. From the point of view of language pedagogy, this provides opportunities for greater meta-lingual awareness (Canagarajah 2007) which can be enhanced through translation (Pennycook 2008) and, generally, a 'translingual approach' (Horner et al. 2011). It is important that learners know that using language involves not so much selecting 'correct' lexical items of grammatical forms as being engaged with other people in a mutual exchange and negotiation of meanings (intended in the broad, functional sense), where language is 'intersubjectively constructed in each specific context of interaction' and its form 'negotiated by each set of speakers for their purposes' (Canagarajah 2007, 925). From this point of view, the learners' 'mother tongue', or any other language, need not be seen as an obstacle to effective communication but as *enhancing* the possibilities for more sophisticated and complex meaning making.

Interestingly, such proposals are often met with criticism that tends to be expressed by people who feel uncomfortable with what they see as an excessively laissez-faire attitude to language use. Such disapproval is frequently substantiated with warnings about the risks inherent in the lack of a common standard and the consequent loss of mutual intelligibility. These admonitions are then corroborated by concrete examples of situations where standards are of vital importance, such as air traffic control communication or legal language. However, what such criticism ignores is the fact that the language of air traffic control communication, legal language, and other forms of discourse where norms are comparatively rigid (but not immutable) are relatively specialised and are acquired in a dedicated manner. At the same time, for more general language use, strategies of negotiation are far more important for mutual intelligibility than using identical linguistic forms and that linguistic closeness is attained through accommodation rather than exclusively via the possession of one shared code.

Finally, the de-Anglicisation of English can be attained in the classroom by avoiding unnecessary references to what Wierzbicka (2006) calls 'Anglo' culture. In the same way as the concept of 'target language' makes little sense if language learning is conceived as enrichment of one's total linguistic repertoire, so the idea of 'target culture' becomes meaningless in the context of English 'always local'. Significantly, Zhang and Zeegers (2010, 183) note that 'Learning English, as far as the Chinese people are concerned, has become part of what it means to be a Chinese citizen'. The Houses of Parliament, red double-decker buses or post-boxes, or Manhattan skylines should be confined to the realm of postcards, but should have no special presence within the visual space of English in the classroom. The visual space is, of course, also a metaphor for more substantial cultural content. In this sense, the international TV network *Al Jazeera English* represents a useful example of how the world's cultural flow can be turned on its head by using the very medium that is so often accused of being the vehicle of Americanisation and/or Anglicisation. Teaching materials, in this sense, could operate in a similar vein, by promoting alternative worldviews and empowering learners with the capacity to

express them in ways which no longer need to bow deferentially and self-consciously to the superiority of the legendary Inner Circle.

### Notes on contributor

Mario Saraceni is a Principal Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics at the University of Portsmouth, UK. His main academic interest is in the ideological, psychological and pedagogical implications of English as a global lingua franca. His most recent monograph is *The Relocation of English: Shifting Paradigms in a Global Era* (Palgrave, 2010). Together with Rani Rubdy, he co-edited the volume *English in the World: Global Rules, Global Roles* (Continuum, 2006).

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