Language Ecologies and World English Varieties: Challenging Implications

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of some theoretical considerations guiding an investigation into descriptions of phonological systems of English speakers around the world. The rapid and widespread expansion of English speakers is propelling the field of linguistics forward in search of appropriate and informative investigative frameworks. The field is moving beyond traditional structural approaches (e.g., Biber et al. 1999; Quirk et al. 1985) in order to better account for the emergent, dynamic, and hybrid nature of language. At the same time, our understanding of human cognition is advancing in fundamental ways. It is now understood, for example, that the brain never stops changing (Demarin & Morović, 2014; Draganski et al., 2004; Fuchs & Flügge, 2014; Kelly, Foxe, & Garavan, 2006). Each and every experience we have impacts our cognitive structures in personalized ways. The focus of this paper is current theorization regarding relationships between language, cognition, and communicative experiences.

1. The ecology of language

The notion of ecology in the field of linguistics refers to environmental factors that influence language change and evolution. Evolutionary approaches describe how languages change locally in terms of historical, demographic, economic, social, and linguistic factors. Central to evolutionary perspectives is the idea that every human interaction takes place in a contact setting between individuals. Community languages emerge as a result of convergence upon selected forms among many individuals.

Interaction is essentially a meeting of minds, an exchange between individuals' languages, or idiolects. In other words, interaction is inter-idiolectal communication. Contact with others' idiolects exerts influence to greater or lesser degrees on the processing and storage of information. Idiolects contribute features to a feature pool. Features that are associated with similar functions compete and get negotiated in order to arrive at the most efficient communication tool. Communal forms reflect the features that most effectively serve the communicative needs of language users,

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selected through a process of mutual accommodation (Mufwene, 2001; Thompson, 2017).

Language ecologies encompass internal (i.e. structural) and external (i.e., physiological, social) factors that influence current usage and evolution of language. The most direct external ecology to modern human languages is the species-specific physiological and cognitive architectures that support languages as communicative technologies (Mufwene & Vigouroux, 2012), that is to say, specialized tools of information conveyance. The physical and mental capacities that allow for production and processing of oral, aural, and visual codes underpinning the forms of linguistic encodings are a defining characteristic of humans and our languages. Each one of us is unique in body and mind. The singularity of physiological make-up of individuals yields variation in processing, perception, and production and consequently their idiolects. The social nature of humans brings idiolects into contact. Regular contact among members of social networks promotes the establishment of patterns of use, that is to say, linguistic conventions. Communal languages emerge and evolve in accord with the selections made by their users, selections which vary depending on context, purpose, and participants, for example.

The contributions to and selections from the feature pool vary in accordance with the individuals acting as hosts of a particular linguistic system. A single individual participates in multiple and multiplying networks and is thus inherently heteroglossic, having been in contact with a range of social registers as well as regional dialects. The majority of the world's population is also plurilingual, participating in social conglomerations that bring together various communal languages in addition to a lingua franca or lingua francas when they are in contact with each other. Each one of us embodies an imperfect replication of previously experienced systems shaped by our personal ecologies (Mufwene, 2001).

Usage-based theories of language describe personal ecologies as reflecting cognitive representations in the mind. These mental representations can be likened to a database of memories of utterances that is constantly updating itself based on actually-encountered communicative events (Ellis, 2006). As we are socialized into a network of language users, the cognitive apparatuses that drive processing, perception, and production mechanisms categorize and tally the communicative function of linguistic features, associating patterns with indexical potentials (The Five Graces Group, 2009). Our database of memories is in an infinite state of evolution. Domain-general cognitive processes identify constructions, units, and constituent elements based on actual instantiations of meaningful speech and this knowledge provides reference points for production (Bybee & Hopper, 2001). Domain-specific factors identify methods of encoding meaning particular to a given linguacultural setting. People adapt their means of expression to meet immediate communicative needs. Exposure to and interaction with others reinforces certain constructions through repetition and these become the templates for the formulation of self-produced utterances,

that is to say, self-expression. “This repetition with the context of what humans like to talk about and how they structure their discourse gives shape to the grammar and the lexicon of particular languages” (Bybee, 2010, p. 221). Speakers choose from among myriad stored representations, combine constituents into units, and create constructions in order to arrive at pragmatically-effective utterances tuned to the local, present situation. Language is thus shaped by the use people make of it. And, people are shaped by the ecologies in which they use it.

2. Ecologies of English

We are living in an age of superdiversity (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) and the English language is today being used broadly and widely by people from all walks of life for any number of reasons. The field of linguistics is struggling to keep up with the times, to reconfigure itself, because the reality of how and by whom the English language is used does not quite fit into established frameworks. The problem space of linguistic inquiry has expanded rapidly, and continues to do so.

Over the past few decades, a substantial and substantive body of scholarship related to the global spread and use of English has accumulated. Scholars in the domain of world Englishes have made a strong case for the need to reflect pluralism in theory and practice related to the study of English in order to account for linguistic variation and effects of diffusion. The term *world Englishes* was coined with the intention of recognizing the functions of the language in diverse pluralistic contexts. Pluralization of word *English* is proposed to more succinctly capture underlying theoretical, functional, pragmatic, and pedagogical considerations surrounding the spread and use of the English language. Bolton (2005) documents various approaches that have been adopted and the areas to which they have contributed. In the 1960s, the study of varieties was generally approached as an extension of established practices. English corpus linguistics developed out of traditions in English studies, for example (e.g., Greenbaum, 1996). Features-based sociolinguistic approaches extended dialectal and variationist traditions (e.g., Trudgill, 2014). The sociology of language extended notions and methods applied to ethnographic analyses (e.g., Fishman, Conrad, & Rupal-Lopez, 1996).

The Three Circles model proposed by Braj Kachru merits particular mention. In its very conception, Kachru broke out of the confines of the traditional scope of inquiry which focused on monolingual English-speaking communities. The Three Circles paradigm is an inclusive, global framework of analysis which acknowledges historical, educational, and functional factors related to language diffusion and variation (e.g., Kachru, 1990). It takes into account the function of English in all communities around the world, the majority of which are multilingual. Within this model, the distinctiveness of a language variety is discussed in terms of the sociolinguistic status it carries and range of functional domains in which it is used. Function domain considers both range and depth

of use. The Inner Circle is used to refer to communities where English functions as the primary language of administration and society, the Outer Circle is used for communities where English functions as one of the official languages of a nation, and the Expanding Circle for communities where English is used mainly as an international link language without official status.

The Kachruvian framework differentiates two primary diasporas of the language, distinguishing between a major expansion out of the British Isles to North America, Australia, and New Zealand and the spread of the language through colonial expansion. The second diaspora, by transplanting the language in regions of Asia and Africa, brought English into contact with "genetically and culturally unrelated" languages (Kachru, 1997, p. 68). As the English language became entrenched within the local population, it contributed to multilingual milieus in various areas. One result was the creation of diverse ecologies characterized by particular contextually-defined constellations of linguacultural attributes, each influencing the shape and norms that emerge as it is used to serve localized purposes. The role and use of English in a given setting also impacts how and why it is learned and maintained as a community language.

The world Englishes paradigm has also increased the granularity of analysis of localized communicative practices and the distributed functions bestowed upon co-existing languages within a particular society. As helpful as Kachru's three circle classification has been, observations such as those reported in Leimgruber, (2012), Pakir (2010), Pefianco Martin (2014) and Rubdy, Mckay, Alsagoff, & Bokhorst-Heng, (2008) clearly illustrate the multiple expressions of English as well as the distinct functions that co-existing languages and their associated registers serve in different so-called Outer Circle societies. Social standing may be evaluated based on one's ability to not only move between codes but to also demonstrate awareness of a continuum of social registers. "The societies within the Outer Circle countries […] have lived, comfortably or uncomfortably, with many linguistic and ethnic traditions, and have always been made acutely aware of the cultural politics of language" (Pakir, 2010, p. 334).

Perspectives offered by scholars such as Chambers (2004) and Van Rooy (2010) prompt speculation regarding the interplay between underlying cognitive processes and situational functionality in the shaping of linguistic varieties. In Chambers' view, the expansion of sociolinguistic study beyond borders of specific communities encourages cross-community comparisons. Results from comparative studies are one way that generalizations across language communities and speakers might be revealed and insights regarding primitive features of the human language faculty, 'vernacular roots' (Chambers, 2004, p. 129), gained. Van Rooy (2010) proposes that individuals' cognitive representations and the conventions of different societies of English users "cast new light on the role of variability in language" (p. 16). Van Rooy's discussion raises interesting questions regarding the nature of input, its role in impacting cognitive schemata and, consequently, mediating

variability as well as shaping varieties. Overlapping social experiences with similar linguistic input are likely to impact individuals in similar ways thus increasing the probabilities of congruencies in mental representations. Repeated exposure and contact among a group of individuals who have developed common linguistic habitus could provide the onus of conventionalized forms of use, reflecting the recycling and reuse of forms of expression that have high communicative valence. "Speakers/signers understand each other not because they use identical systems but because similar minds deriving similar patterns from similar data can 'read' each other" (Mufwene, 2001, p. 17). We can envision how preferred ways and means of expression would diffuse through a community as new members are socialized into the group. Novice members pick up and propagate the group's expressive preferences not only out of communicative efficacy but also as a means of demonstrating belonging and alignment (Ochs, 1993). A particular linguistic variety can thus be seen as a snapshot of the forms that have been converged upon by the group, subject to variability brought about by individuals' preferences yet stabilized by the use of the majority.

Understanding of the complexity surrounding linguistic varieties, variability, and variation has been deepened by descriptive accounts such as those compiled by Görlach (1991, 1998) and Schneider (1997). These researchers brought a coherence and systematicity to the task of description by applying classification criteria based on functional range and norms of correctness. Schneider's (2014) review of his Dynamic Model depicts an approach that encompasses intricate processes relating to language contact, sociolinguistics, social identity, and language evolution.

The Dynamic Model (DM: Schneider, 2007) adopts a holistic and unifying perspective in order to account for emergence of language varieties. Central to his analysis of Post-colonial Englishes (PCE) are processes related to language contact and identity construction. Schneider proposes that dialect development may be accounted for by fundamental processes theories in communication, accommodation, and identity construction explained by similar structural and sociolinguistic results produced from contact situations. The DM approaches description of PCE from an ecological perspective and provides analytical mechanisms with which to document the interplay between the languages of local people (the indigenous strand) and the language introduced by colonizers (the settler strand). Within this framework, varieties emerge as a consequence of contact among distinct strands. Each strand offers potential contributions to the feature pool created among the systems in contact. The amount of contribution that a particular strand makes to emergent forms depends on a range of factors including cognitive, typological, ecological, situational, sociological, and temporal.

Five phases are used to describe a continuum along which local varieties emerge and evolve. The first phase, *foundation*, involves the introduction of English by settlers to the local population. Contact between the settler group and the indigenous group is initially limited and there is little mixing of peoples and languages. Members of each group are aware of the other but

identity is firmly rooted in one or the other. That is to say, there is a strong sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

As time goes on, English becomes more entrenched as a language used for administration and education. The second phase of *exonormative stabilization* ensues. Contact increases as the settler group expands its territory and members of the indigenous population become involved in administrative duties. Social status and economic prosperity become associated with the language. Children born into this ecology take on a kind of hybrid identity, influenced by both the settler group and the indigenous group. Multilingualism spreads as some members of both groups learn, to some extent or other, the language of the other. Precisely because of this perceived otherness, the norms of use are not questioned. The model for learning is the one promoted by the authorities of the settler group.

The third phase, *nativization*, is central to cultural and linguistic transformation. Members of the settler group by this time no longer feel like foreigners in a strange land. They have become residents and members of a local community. This contributes to a weakening of ties with the mother country as the region becomes more and more politically autonomous. Contact between groups becomes a regular part of daily life. Languages mix and new forms emerge as people develop communicatively effective linguistic conventions that serve local and immediate needs. Young people, in particular, come to use their multi-linguistic resources for self-expression in playful and identificatory ways. The language is no longer a foreign import. It has become a locally-made product, a shared variety resulting from mutual accommodations made among its users and reflecting systemic conventions reached by convergence upon entrenched, preferred forms. This shift in reality presents challenges to beliefs about norms of use. Tensions arise between the tendency to conserve external, imported norms and the desire to accept local adaptions. The question of standards and models becomes a topic of discussion among administrative authorities.

Political independence and cultural self-reliance bring about the fourth phase, *endonormative stabilization*. This phase is often associated with an ‘Event X’, some incident that leaves the settler group feeling isolated or abandoned by the mother country. In light of this event, the settler group undergoes a revision of identity, a radical reconceptualization of self. The newly constructed identity perceives the former view of the supremacy of the mother country as misguided and unrewarding. It embraces the colony as a new homeland, full of future possibilities and potentialities. This shift in perspective contributes to unifying efforts of nation building. The national discourse emphasizes shared traits and full integration is perceived as advantageous for the society as a whole. Localized linguistic conventions become positively evaluated and are seen as identity markers, as community assets. English is integrated and embraced as integral to the local ecology. It comes to function as an additional means of creative expression in literature. Efforts to document and codify the local English variety indicate official recognition of a valued national asset.

If stability, security, and autonomy become the status quo for the new nation, the final phase, *differentiation*, comes about. Free of domineering external forces, the nation begins a process of internal demarcation based on regional, economic, and social parameters. Social categorization of individuals becomes more important than collective identity as a nation. Individuals define themselves in terms of smaller social subgroups based on, for example, educational, regional, or ethnic affiliations. Linguistic repertoires diversify to reflect social networks and expand to include identity-marking functions of English.

The Dynamic Model has been used to characterize a good number of varieties around the world. The data set of the present research was extracted from corpora representing eight varieties, namely, from Canada, East Africa, India, Ireland, Jamaica, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Singapore. The language ecology of each of these nations is evidently unique. The objective is to produce usage-based descriptions of their phonological systems by combining structural and functional information. The results will contribute to more comprehensive documentation of specific varieties as well as a more complete description of the English language by means of composite analyses of features as they behave in its varieties.

3. Implications for research and pedagogy

For those of us involved in language education, it is likely that the discussion of the Dynamic Model has brought the tricky question of norms to mind. The question of referent models is a complex one. The adoption of idealized, abstracted models based on so-called standard varieties has provided a means of isolating and targeting discrete features to guide empirical inquiry and theorization as well as instructional design and implementations. It has at the same time, to a large extent, hidden the fact that language in use, standard or otherwise, is variable. Its users adapt linguistic codes to meet their needs, and preferred patterns of usage (i.e., grammar) will vary depending on the grouping of speakers and the personal experiences of each member.

Cook (1992) proposed that second language research and teaching could benefit from a reconceptualization that acknowledged multilingual L2 users as the norm rather than monolingual mother-tongue speakers. Since then, he and others have been developing and refining the notion of multicompetence, proffered as a more appropriate alternative for pedagogical models and research paradigms.

Multicompetence refers to “the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community” (Cook, 2012, p. 3768). The notion approaches language acquisition and use from a bilingual perspective. Bilingual is used in its most encompassing sense meaning more than one. It takes the coexistence of multiple language systems as the default mode of operation of the human brain, affecting cognitive organization and processing. The framework encompasses mental and

social aspects involved in the use of two or more languages. It draws a distinction between L2 users and L2 learners based on functionality. For L2 learners, a language is an abstract object of study. For L2 users, it is a practical tool put to active use. Individuals can take on either role depending on the situation they find themselves in.

Proponents of a multicompetence perspective propose that all humans are potentially multilingual. The brain is equipped to handle multiple language systems. A language will be learned depending on the input available. Children grow up speaking the languages they hear. Adults learn the languages that they need or want to. Indeed, most of the world's population speak two or more languages (see Swaan, 2001 for comprehensive perspective). Yet when it comes to SLA research and pedagogy, idealized monolingual models are prevalent. The disparity is generally not taken into consideration, which means that interpretations of findings as well as instructional applications based on those findings are overlooking important and influential factors. As Cook (2012, p. 5) observes: "The fundamental questions of linguistic competence and language acquisition are different if most human minds in fact know more than one language."

Canagarajah (2007) also calls for a reconstruction of disciplinary paradigms, asserting that dominant constructs in SLA based on monolingual norms and practices impose misleading and deceptive views of language, its acquisition, and use. The rationale resonates with Cook's observations that inadequate attention has been given to the plurilingual nature of communicative events involving multilingual individuals. Hence, understanding of language acquisition and observable indicators of linguistic habitus interpreted from a monolingual perspective is ill-fitting and of questionable applicability. A practice-based model is proposed in order to accommodate "the indeterminacy, multimodality, and heterogeneity" that is inherent to human communication (Canagarajah, 2007, p. 934).

Practice-based models describe communities by the interests to be accomplished by its members rather than shared language, location, or values. Individuals are seen as moving in and out of multiple communities which embody contact zones where people of diverse backgrounds meet in order to accomplish their goals. Goals are accomplished by means of collaborative negotiation practices and expertise is developed through acquiring a repertoire of strategies through active engagement in purposive activities. Individuals' identities are viewed in terms of affiliation and expertise, unrelated to nationality, social status, or ethnicity. Language and discourse are shaped by the participants' practices as they collaboratively pursue their goals. Grammar (i.e., patterns of usage) emerges as forms are constructed to suit the needs and interests of the group.

Alptekin (2010) discusses multicompetence in terms of usage-based theories of development. This perspective situates development of language knowledge within socially constructed cultural activities, artifacts, and concepts. As previously mentioned, usage-based approaches perceive

language as shaped by its users. Actual instances of language use impact cognitive structures and contribute to the establishment of mental representations. Individuals build up a personalized inventory of constructions through interaction. Each encounter adds detail to mental representations, including information related to linguistic form (e.g., frequency tallies, phonetic shapes, co-text, collocational contexts and the like) and pragmatic function (e.g., purposeful applications to achieve communicative intent). Constructions that are encountered frequently have more robust representations and are more readily accessible (Bybee, 2006), manifesting conventionalization of preferred patterns among groups of speakers. Individuals develop intercultural awareness and cross-cultural versatility alongside linguistic encodings through engagement with diverse interactants in varied communicative scenarios. Language knowledge is thought to be "the cognitive organization of an individual's social experience with language in particular cultural contexts" (Alptekin, 2010, p. 101). As experience broadens so will the categories and constructions contained within the mind of the language user.

Kirkpatrick's (2010) discussion of the value in adopting a multilingual model for language teaching resonates with the idea of locally-situated socially-constructed linguistic and cultural norms. Kirkpatrick focuses on English as a lingua franca in ASEAN nations, identifying linguistic features and pragmatic practices that are similar and shared among the multicompetent L2 users in the region. The evidence supports the proposition that intelligibility is likely to be enhanced by ways of talking and behaving that are more readily accessible to a given interlocutor, even though they may not coincide with those that mimic so-called standard practices. A logical conclusion is that the goals of language learning need to be "significantly re-shaped in contexts where the major role of English is as a lingua franca" (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 9). From a usage-based perspective, it could be said that the commonalities across communities would contribute to similar social experiences with languages and thus somewhat comparable cognitive organization of linguacultural resources. Thus, the adoption of a more socially-oriented perspective toward language, its users, and its uses might lead to more appropriate and effective investigative and pedagogical approaches.

4. Conclusion

This paper has presented some of the theoretical perspectives shaping an on-going investigation intended to provide a corpus-driven, features-based descriptions of phonological systems of English speakers around the world. We can see from this review of literature that language ecologies help to understand the interplay between individual repertoires and communal linguistic conventions. Usage-based theories help explain the influence that experience has on mental representations. The Dynamic Model provides a framework with which to characterize the communal language ecologies in light of sociopolitical and historical considerations. The diversity and plurality

of English speakers challenges established modes of thinking and methods of inquiry. Results obtained from the present research endeavor should broaden and deepen current understanding by filling gaps in the literature. They might also go some way toward furthering the discussion regarding informative and appropriate research and pedagogy designs.

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（2017.9.22 受稿 , 2018.1.15 受理）