

World or International or Global English—and what is it anyway?

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At the end of the twentieth century, there has been growing worldwide discussion, especially among academics, educationists, and journalists, about the use and nature of English—or, more specifically, about “English as a world language”—or “English as an international language” (often abbreviated as EIL)—or “English as a global language”—or more simply “World English” (with or without a capital W)—or “International English” (with or without a capital I and sometimes abbreviated as IE)—or “Global English” (with or without a capital G)—or indeed simply “Global.” Or, again, I could pluralize everything and talk as Braj Kachru and others have done since the late 1970s about such entities as “the Englishes,” “the New Englishes,” and most importantly “World Englishes” (abbreviated as WE, so as to carry also the implication “we,” all of us together as equals, no one excluded). Or, again, I could propose “the English languages,” treating the whole of this vast language complex as a family, like the Romance languages or the Turkic languages, whose members are sometimes mutually intelligible and sometimes not (McArthur 1998).

Not that the matter stops there. Because of the need to be ever more specific and explicit, a range of additional terms are currently widely used, such as “World Standard English” (or “Standard World English”) and “International Standard English” (or “Standard International English”), which perhaps label the same entity, or perhaps don’t. In addition, as a result of further efforts to be clear and precise, such terms have been coined as “World Spoken Standard English,” “World Written Standard English,” “World Standard Printed English,” “International Spoken Standard English,” “International Written Standard English,” and an “international print standard” (for English). All of these in turn contrast with a wider range of lesser territorial terms such as “African English,” “West African English,” “African American Vernacular English,” “West African Pidgin English,” “British Standard Written English,” “Canadian Standard Spoken English,” “South East Asian English,” and “Singapore Colloquial English.” Dozens of such terms are now in use, as can be seen in any issue of the journals *English World-Wide* (formerly edited by Manfred Görlach, currently by Edgar Schneider, and published by John Benjamins, Amsterdam and Philadelphia), *World Englishes*

(edited by Braj Kachru and Larry Smith, and published by Basil Blackwell, Oxford), and my own *English Today* (published by Cambridge University Press).

“World English” appears to be the oldest of the more general terms. It appears to date from just before the Second World War (to use the name favored in Britain) or World War II (as Americans usually call it). A brief aside at this point: In world or international or global English, these two terms—*Second World War* and *World War II*—may well be equal but are unevenly, indeed uncertainly, distributed. This is no small point, because differences between the two main world varieties, American and British, can be tricky matters, and one of the issues attending the idea of an international or a world English is just how the many American and British variants do, or can, or should operate side by side in global terms: Are all such sets of words and phrases currently commensurate beyond the United States and the United Kingdom—as in this instance where both phrases are transparent and pretty well known to everybody? Or are they not at all commensurate beyond the United Kingdom and United States, but marked as socio-culturally distinct—for example, all the *curbs/kerbs*, *pavements*, *highways*, *motorways*, *freeways*, *interstates*, *turnpikes*, *toll roads*, and the like? Could all the easily exchangeable terms become free variants for non-Americans and non-Brits while the Brits and Yanks remain more or less constrained to stick to their own words? Or are Americanisms simply winning out internationally—the phrasal verb “winning out” being, as far as I can tell, itself an Americanism that has already won (out)? American English is, after all, the immense primary engine of English today.

The aim of this paper is to look at two linked issues. My key concern is the emergence for the first time ever of an authentically universal language that is also natural and historical and beset by all kinds of sociocultural pluses and minuses, in contrast, for example, to Esperanto, which is artificial, was deliberately designed for just this role, and is generally considered neutral among all the world’s contending languages and cultures (although this may not in fact be so). My second concern is the names we are currently giving to this natural historical universal language in all its diversity or to the subset that we think of as “standard.” I have taken these names first, however, because their very abundance and range can tell us a great deal about the phenomenon at large and about the socio-cultural positions of the people who create and use them, because all such names are psycholinguistically charged. They are not innocent.

The primary name, *World English*, has been with us long enough to get into some dictionaries, but only in the last decade, and only—as far as I know—in Oxford. In the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), under the entry *world*, the phrase *world English* [with a lowercase w] is glossed simply as “Standard English” (full stop, or period). However, in the *New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (1993), also under *world*, the subentry runs: “*World English* [now with a capital W] a variety of, or the fundamental features of, English

regarded as standard or acceptable wherever English is spoken.” Most recently, the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) gives the phrase an entry to itself, which runs: “*world English* [lowercase w] the English language including all of its regional varieties, such as North American, Australian, New Zealand, and South African English; a basic form of English, consisting of features common to all regional varieties.” In these successive senses we see, as it were, the slow-motion opening of a verbal flower with two intertwined senses: the term *World English* has been used both for all English everywhere and for a common-core or nuclear English that is found within all Englishes everywhere: two very different things indeed.

Just over thirty years ago, in 1967, an article of mine titled “World English” was published in *Opinion* magazine, Bombay, India. In it, I used the term to mean all English everywhere, whatever its form (i.e., Oxford Sense 1), and I did not think for a moment then that it could refer to common-core English (Oxford Sense 2), and I don’t recall ever meeting it in this sense. Much later, about ten years ago, I described *world English* in the *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992) as “an increasingly common term for English as a world language,” adding the comment: “Some scholars use the term cautiously or avoid it, because for them it suggests a global dominance by English and English-speaking countries, with an attendant down-grading of other languages.” That seems to me still to be, by and large, the terminological truth about the phrase *world English*, but I would be glad to hear from others on this subject, because I may have to define it again in due course.

The term *international English* appears to date from around 1980. In the *Companion*, my definition was: “The English language, usually in its standard form, either when used, taught, and studied as a lingua franca throughout the world, or when taken as a whole and used in contrast with *American English*, *British English*, *South African English*, etc., as in *International English: A Guide to Varieties of Standard English*, title of a work by Peter Trudgill and Jean Hannah (1982) that reviews both standard and non-standard varieties worldwide.”

However, this implication of “standardness” in the phrase *international English*—which seems to me to be lacking in the phrase *world English*—can be usefully checked against the following extract from Lise Winer’s paper “Intelligibility of Reggae Lyrics in North America” (1990). She says there, discussing a local and a wider English: “The relationship . . . is very complex, owing to the perception that Jamaican and standard international English are not really that different.” Winer makes the standardness of a certain global kind of English explicit here, a kind of English which for her is as real as Jamaican English, and not something that might (or might not) some day be real. Here, her *standard international English* seems to me to be strictly synonymous with the other fairly common expression *standard world English*, both terms referring to one and the same contemporary reality.

The buzz term of the later 1990s has, however, been “global English,” which belongs in a cluster of usages that relate fairly clearly to *globalization*, a term associated with both a new borderless economic world order and Marshall McLuhan’s phrase “the global village”: We are all global villagers now and English is the medium of that village: no argument. One of the most prominent works to adopt this and comparable phrases has been David Crystal’s *English as a Global Language* (1997), which makes liberal use of all three words (*global*, *world*, and *international*), as in:

- I have thus tried to tell the story of World English [capital W] objectively and without adopting the kind of triumphalist tone which is unfortunately all too common when people write on English in English. (p. viii)
- Even if the New Englishes did become increasingly different, as years went by, the consequences for world English [lowercase w] would not necessarily be fatal. (p. 136)
- How far back do we have to go in order to find the origins of global English? [lowercase g]. (p. 25)
- English has long been recognized as the international language of the sea.” (p. 97)
- English—with all its failings—remains the recommended language of international air travel. (p. 101)

Although Crystal uses “global” in the title and the body of this book, he seems not to be sold on it as a basic technical term: rather, he uses “international” as a handy general term but opts in the end for the following: “A likely scenario is that our current ability to use more than one dialect [of English] would simply extend to meet the fresh demands of the international situation. A new form of English—let us think of it as “World Standard Spoken English” (WSSE)—would almost certainly arise. Indeed, the foundation for such a development is already being laid around us” (pp. 136–137). So we can note that for Winer something like WSSE has been here for some time; for Crystal it is still in the process of establishing itself.

Michael Toolan, another British Anglicist, has taken a rather different tack in his article “Recentering English: New English and Global” (1997). Here he offers us not one but two distinct terms: *New English*, to cover “the English used in mainstream public discourse in countries where English is a major native language,” and *Global*, to cover “the public international English used by globe-trotting professionals, the only kind of English which is beginning to be truly globally dispersed.”

Toolan’s primary point is that “with the spread of Global, and as a result of changed attitudes to New English, these two standard Englishes are increasingly treated not as Anglo-Saxon and metropolitan properties, found by or shared with

others, but as resources owned by larger constituencies of users. . . . In the case of Global, its non-English majority of users are increasingly claiming ownership of it.” An important second point for Toolan is that the mainstream usage of the traditional Anglophone countries has changed in at least one marked respect: it is “more democratized, and is conceptualized as a joint stock enterprise in which we are all invested stakeholders” (a description that uses an economic metaphor popular with the New Labour party of the British Prime Minister Tony Blair rather than the unfettered free-marketeering and globalizing style of the Reagan-Thatcher heritage).

At the end of the day, however, while stressing the enormous role of technological change in the spread and consolidation of some kind of worldwide English, Toolan considers that the phenomenal spread of English is “a kind of linguistic counterpart of the global spread of Microsoft” and therefore “is simply a banal fact”: it’s there—live with it. It is also for him a banal fact that non-native users of the language now greatly outnumber its native users. For Toolan, as an Englishman of Irish descent (as indeed for me as a Scot), names matter, and “Global” without “English” has a certain appeal; yet it seeks an inclusiveness that would, if adopted (even with the best of intentions in the world) consign the proud and ancient name of this vast linguistic phenomenon to an Orwellian memory hole. Toolan’s is a challenging and intriguing approach, and I know others who with similar excellent intentions have wished to re-name English, but this is probably the least likely of all the options open to us.

I am currently engaged in writing a book for Oxford University Press, the fourth in a series that began with the *Oxford Companion to the English Language*, which was followed by an abridged edition in 1996 and a concise updating edition in 1998. This fourth book will describe the current condition of the English language (or languages) continent by continent. It will be a guide this time rather than a companion, and I would have liked to call it *The Oxford Guide to International English*, following in the tradition of Trudgill and Hannah’s *International English* (above). Oxford, however, already knew what they wanted: it would be *The Oxford Guide to World English*: no further discussion. For them this was a snappier, more comprehensive term, because the book does indeed deal with every conceivable kind of English. So I conceded the point as gracefully as I could, since I had no choice anyway: the marketeers knew what they wanted.

In the meantime, Oxford has brought out its *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (NODE, which they cheerfully pronounce as “Noddy”). Their publicists notably describe Noddy as both “the first dictionary of English as a world language” and “the first genuinely international dictionary of English,” and only just fail to call it a dictionary of *World English*. However, an even newer but very non-Oxford dictionary was published in August 1999, masterminded in London by the publishers Bloomsbury (in Soho Square), who marketed the British version while St Martin’s Press in New York brought out the American version, each edition

putting its own variants first wherever appropriate. I'm told that half a million copies of the first edition have been printed, a truly formidable print run, but more significant than this (and something that is entirely missing from "Noddy") is the parallel electronic version, which is entirely controlled by Microsoft. As a result, both the paper and the electronic versions are entitled (British), titled (American) *The Encarta World English Dictionary* to match Microsoft's *Encarta Encyclopedia*. I am credited in this work as its adviser for *World English*, and my approach in it has been traditional: that is, to treat "World English" as meaning all English everywhere, standard and nonstandard.

So, it would appear that if one is aiming at the general, the familiar, the established, and the comprehensive, then *World English* is the choice. If a loftier term with an egalitarian pedigree, good social intentions, and a suggestion of standardness is desired, then *International English* is the choice. And if one has climbed on board the free-market bandwagon or wants to focus on McLuhan's universal village or wants to get away from the mild authoritarianism of *world* and the receding socialist echoes of *international*, then it will be *global*. Yet, although the general tendency favors *World English*, there is a curious idiosyncrasy about the phrase. American publishers of English-language materials, it seems, tend to contrast the *American editions* with the *World English* editions of some of their products; in this, the United States is perceived as not only not part of the world, but the "global" edition is likely to be given British conventions, because that is apparently what the publishers think the rest of the world expects. This seems odd and out of step, because (as I noted earlier) the engine that powers *World English* is American. (This rather puzzles me, and I would be glad to have some hard information on this practice.)

As regards the entity or entities that these competing terms refer to, three factors seem to be crucial: the relationship of English to other languages worldwide; the difference between Standard English and other Englishes; and the question of whether there is or can be a universal standard, and how such an entity might relate to the territorial standards we already know.

The ecological concept of the *pecking order* seems to me to be useful in considering the hard realities of language wherever we go. There is and probably always has been a pecking order of languages and within languages a pecking order of dialects. So-called "world languages" such as Arabic, Babylonian, French, Greek, Latin, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Sanskrit, and Spanish have at various times and in various places headed distinctive regional and even continental pecking orders, and for at least three centuries English has occupied such a position, steadily spreading and consolidating to the exclusion at this time of all other languages on a planet-wide basis. The potential for love-hate relationships, for triumphalism and resentment, and for adulation and rejection is vast.

Such terms as *standard*, *non-standard*, and *substandard*, *acrolect*, *mesolect*, and *basilect*, and even *language of wider communication*, *world language*, and

international language relate and refer to matters like these, and while they are useful, they should not be used as ways of palliating or ignoring reality. There are imbalances, inequities, and downright injustices in matters of language and communication, whether they are perceived as hegemonist or imperialist or racist or classist or sexist or linguicist or all of the above. A case can easily be made for, if not worldwide language planning, then certainly an accredited public dialogue regarding language and communication worldwide, so that a consensus can be found for handling everything from the languages that are too powerful to the languages that are so weak that they will cease to exist next year or a decade from now or maybe stagger on into the middle of the next century.

One of the curious features of language contact, past and present, is the degree of hybridization that takes place in multilingual settings. This was true for English in the British Isles, when it ran up against the Celtic languages in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, and the Isle of Man—unfortunately, to the great detriment of those languages. That initial process is now planet wide, as world or international or global English interacts with innumerable other tongues, producing what I call the *Anglo-hybrids*, with such suspect, humorous yet picturesque and accurate names as Frenglish or *français*, Spanglish or *englañol*, Gerlish or *Engleutsch*, Italglish or *itagliano*, and Japlish or *wasei-eigo* (“Made-in-Japan English”). It is far more natural or normal in the world to be multilingual than to be monolingual, and part of that naturalness is and has always been the creation of fertile and fluid hybrids. Indeed, present-day English is the outcome of just such massive disruption in the past, and within it the disruption continues as strongly as ever. Our sense of what “World English” is and what it might become, I suggest, will—and should—be colored as much by its interplay with other languages as by the application of norms from within which might seek to make its most prestigious international standard variety less flexible and absorptive, and less able in its turn to pass words and concepts on to other tongues. I confess though that I don’t lose much sleep over that prospect.

Not that clarity and consistency aren’t virtues in appropriate situations, as for example in an international airport or on the Internet; yet even here we find chaos as often as we find order. In this regard I would like to mention in closing the observations of Marko Modiano of Gävle University in Sweden, in his appropriately (en)titled article “International English in the Global Village” (1999). The term he uses throughout this piece is “English as an international language” (*EIL* for short), and his main assertion is that the native users of English (including especially its multitudes of non-standard speakers) can no longer be regarded as the owners and arbiters of the world’s key language: “I would argue,” he says, “that the proficient non-native speakers of EIL, rather than the native speakers who are not proficient in EIL, are better equipped to define and develop English as a tool in cross-cultural communication. . . . A variety is defined by speakers of the variety. A *lingua franca* by definition is not geographically restricted.”

One notes here immediately that Modiano's EIL is separated out from the larger mass (presumably of world English in all its diversity), which makes it pretty much like Toolan's "Global": a standard-driven variety with a specific high-level globetrotting role. In Modiano's argument I sense the frustration of a competent non-native language professional who is finally saying what he feels must be said—and said *now*. There is a certain elitism behind what he says, but we should accept—gladly or grimly, but accept—that there has always been an inherent elitism (even a necessary and perhaps a humane elitism) in the idea of a standard language, and what Modiano is talking about is certainly Standard World English (or whatever other name we may elect to give it). I invited a number of established commentators on English worldwide to reply to Modiano's paper, and their thoughtful, varied, and cogent responses appear after his article in the same issue of *ET*. Also in that issue, David Crystal has an article, "The future of Englishes," which he begins with a deceptively simple sentence: "The pace is hotting up." It is indeed.

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