Standard Englishes and World Englishes: Living with a Polymorph Business Language

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Many who teach business communication observe gradual changes in Standard English. As do other languages, English changes through contact with other languages and through several other well-understood avenues of language evolution, such as compounding, adding affixes, functional shift, coinage, and so on. As the third millennium begins, new factors are converging to influence Standard English: U.S. work environments are becoming more richly intercultural, newcomers to the United States are increasing their fluency in English, and international business is using English increasingly as a global language of business. (Throughout these remarks, my perspective is that of a native-born Anglo-American speaker of English. Speakers of other Englishes will have different but comparable perspectives.)

Helping my English as Second Language (L2) students gradually master English, I've seen my practical understanding of L2 learning grow, along with my respect for the major language task these students have taken on. I've also sensed Americans' unmerited good luck that English has become the language of international business. Yet the internationality of English is to us a mixed blessing because of our presumptions about what comes with it. As Dennett says, "English may be the language of the global village but the villagers are far from agreement on what is good use of the language" (1992, p. 13). Many communicators mistakenly assume a commonality of understanding when both speakers use the same English words. We know that even two speakers *born* to the same language experience only approximate commonality of meaning; yet we routinely forget to compensate for that fact and end up with cases of bypassing. Internationally, the commonality of understanding can be far more sketchy, and the contextual issues much more complex, than most of us realize.

A truism says that staying with good Standard English will hold problems to a minimum. *But what is Standard English, and what is the place*

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of Standard English in teaching business communication in contexts that are more and more international? How, as teachers, do we make our peace with the multiple, competing standards and values affecting what is "acceptable English"? These questions trouble us in part because business persons approve of others' use of English—or disparage it—depending on their view of what English is and what it's supposed to be used for. Most U.S. business persons say that they expect people who work for them to be highly competent in Standard English. It seems a simple issue to these business persons. To teachers it is far from simple.

This brief treatment cannot hope to show teachers how to satisfy all business persons' expectations but will explore some dimensions of our challenge. Some help is to be found in the works of the Association for Business Communication's (ABC) many scholars, both domestic and international, who have published important books and articles on international and intercultural communication for decades. They make increasing contributions to what we know of international business communication. The field is huge, containing a multiplicity of perspectives from which English for business can be studied. Some include descriptive linguistics, pragmatics, contrastive rhetorical analysis, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, social psychology of language, linguistic anthropology, speech act theory, and politics and activism. Psycholinguistics, for example, is the study of how languages are learned, remembered, and used, and of how linguistic variables influence human behavior. Pragmatics and speech act theory, especially politeness theory, are important lenses for studying English for business. Politics and activism need also to be kept in mind. The spread of English was contemporary with colonialism and domination, and not everyone's feelings toward it are neutral, let alone supportive. (See Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992).

Many Users "Own" English

English is alive, healthy, and "morphing" in many ways, and what we call Standard English is a moving target. Language change carries with it some discomfort. Even where English is spoken as a first language, purists in grammar and usage find much to offend them. Business persons, like many others, tend to take a purist's attitude when they perceive language errors. They are usually not pleased to notice ways in which the English of their younger employees and new hires differs from their own. If variation occurs in domestic workplaces, even more variation occurs where English is used as a second or a common language. But English serves a multitude of different purposes now, for unprecedented numbers of different "owners" of it. Like any other language, English is used for art, for play, for venting of emotion, for philosophical abstraction, and so on. To be sure, the pragmatic purposes of English in international business do not typically call for the same breadth of lexicon and grammar as

some of these other activities. Where English has come to belong to a nation, though, that English has adapted to the culture of the nation, and the fluent and educated users of that English use it very well indeed, for all those purposes. Those nations' Englishes have given rise to different registers and dialects, just as U.S. English has.

Nigeria makes a good illustration of a nation with its own English. In colonialist times Britain, in control of that part of West Africa, arbitrarily drew a line on a map around several very different peoples—the Ibo, the Yoruba, the Hausa, the Fulani, and several others—and designated the result a nation. Nigerians didn't especially want English, but, once imposed, English became the second language of most because it was a means of communicating with the other peoples. When Nigeria declared independence in 1960, English had become basic to its unity. The Constitution is written in English. Government and the professions operate in English. Nigeria made English its own, giving rise to Standard Nigerian English but also to various dialects and registers—and a lot of special-purpose English. A teacher in Lagos says, "Without English, this society wouldn't function. It is what makes Nigeria Nigeria" (Anthony, 2001). For the most part, Nigerians like English. It's theirs. They don't ask other English-speaking nations what Standard English is, any more than U.S. speakers ask Great Britain.

As Englishes evolve, skilled users of each English search for solutions to the problem of using the full richness of the new, evolved English while still keeping their utterances comprehensible to users of other Englishes. A comment by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe expresses this challenge well and is applicable to most of the world's Englishes:

> The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. . . . I feel that English 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 (1975, pp. 100-103).

For business and other international purposes, a core of English has to remain understandable to all English users. But England, the U.S., and Australia do not own English. No one nation or culture is in charge of English now.

English a Genuinely Global Language

English continues to spread. Here are some "markers" of its globalization:

- "Of the top 50 schools in the Financial Times MBA 2001 rankings, 43 are located where English is the mother tongue. Of the remaining seven—INSEAD [Fontainebleau], IMD [Lausanne], IESE [Barcelona], Rotterdam School of Management, Instituto de Empresa [Madrid], SDA Bocconi [Milan], and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology," all except IESE "either teach their full-time MBA in English or offer the opportunity for some elements of the programme to be taught in the school's native language" (Anderson, 2001).

- As of 1998, "Half of all Europeans aged 15 to 24 can now converse in English, according to the European Union. In 1987, only 1 in 3 could do so" (Baker & Dallas, 1998). This percentage continues to rise.

- "English is money" (Pakir, 1997, p. 171). Where investment dollars and pounds have gone, oftentimes English has gone as well.

- About 75 percent of pages on the Web are in English. Machine translation, dependent on embedded rules and algorithms, is rough, sometimes so rough as to be laughable, and translation by a skilled translator is costly. Ideally, sellers and buyers on the Web both need English; that both have it, let alone have it fluently, is not routinely the case. Numbers of non-English users on the Web are rising fast, and as they do, of course, non-English content on the Web will rise (Wallraff, 2000). Still, the Web is one more strong medium of dissemination of English.

- The journal *World Englishes* has been published since 1982. Although business is not its central focus, it touches the dozens of countries using English either as first language, intra-national second language, or international language for a great array of purposes, including business and commerce.

English is Englishes

English is, of course, multiple Englishes. We are familiar with the U.S.'s regional dialects and to some degree with British English, Australian English, and Irish English, and perhaps a few others. Differences can be considerable. The English spoken in India shares much with U.S. and British English, but its phonology is quite different, and so is quite a bit of its lexicon. Many nations, such as Singapore and the Philippines, use English as a first language, but most speakers also use another language, a co-language for that region, as well. (For example, in the Philippines speakers might use Tagalog, Ilocano, or another language, depending on the region.) Here are some of the world's Englishes:

> Australian English
> British English
> Canadian English
> Caribbean English
> Hong Kong English

Indian English
Irish English
Malaysian English
New Zealand English
Nigerian English
Philippine English
Scots English
Singaporean English
South African English
U.S. English
Zambian English

In the process of formation is the Euro-English that is increasingly becoming the language of business among members of the Eurozone. There are still other Englishes, and also other languages built on English that have not been codified as English, including pidgins and Creoles.

Kachru (1992) diagrammed the spread of English as a series of inter-linked circles. The First—or Inner—Circle nations are those for which English has been strongly L1 (i.e., First Language) and from which English has spread to other countries.
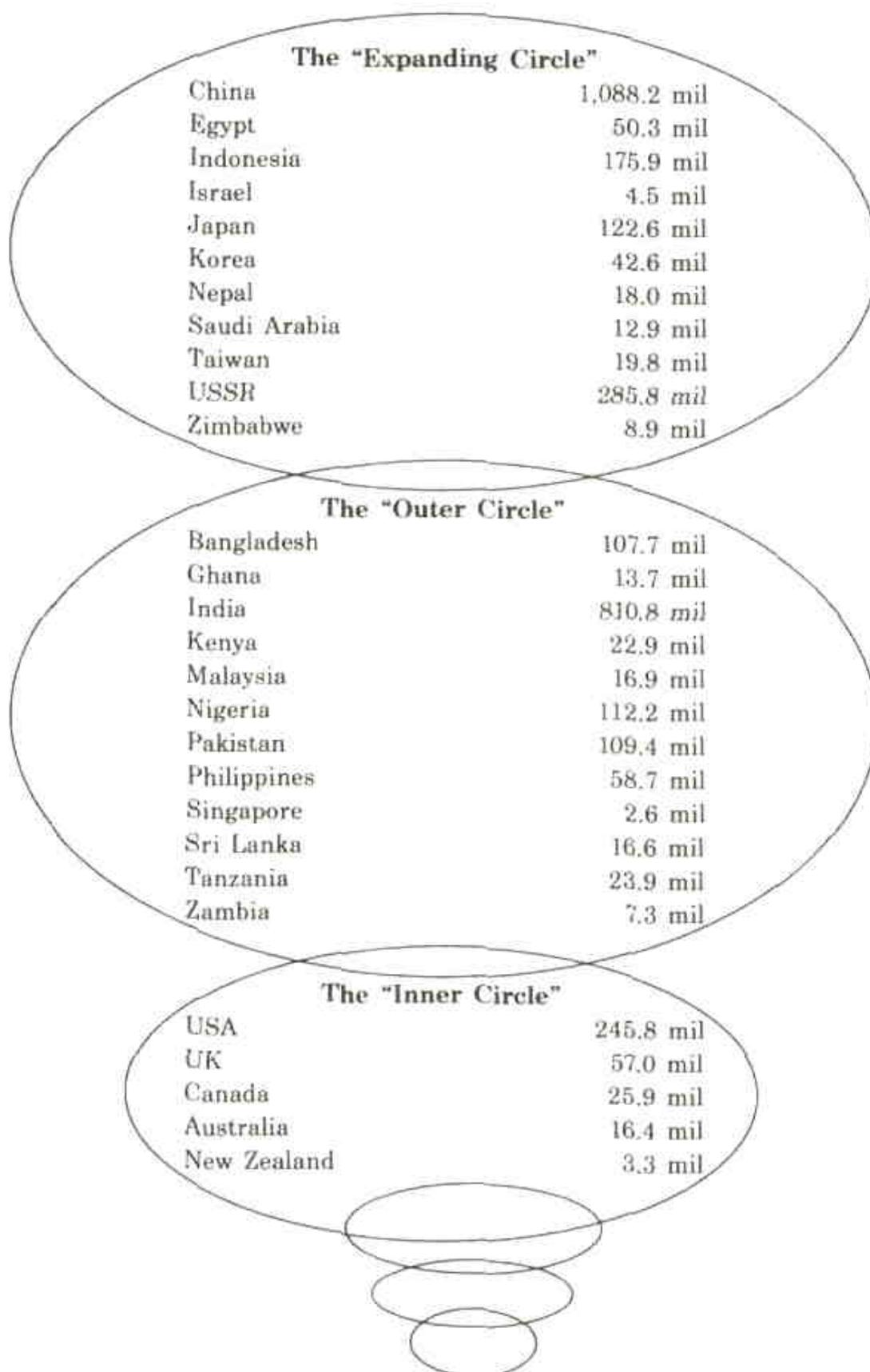
The Second—or Outer—Circle includes those where English has taken strong root as an intranational official language or co-language. The Third—or Expanding—Circle shows those nations now increasing their use of English as an inter- or intra-national language of business, technology, and/or government.

Few Americans are very language-conscious. English in its rich variety of uses and kinds is not a concern of many of our students, nor is it a concern of most U.S. business persons, even those who seek to do business internationally. U.S. English-speakers considering international markets are slow to look below the surface of their first language. If they have studied a foreign language, they might have an inkling of different world-views and cultures, but rarely do they become fully fluent in both language and culture of the second language. Instead, invited to use English abroad, they tend to feel complacent and therefore may be blind to linguistic and cultural interference that may underlie a foreigner's ostensible facility in English. We ought to be reminded of the pitfalls just by the common misunderstandings between two fluent American English speakers. But we forget; and, internationally, the more fluent the foreign English speaker sounds, the more the American feels free to forget about the potential interlanguage interference.

Language Encodes Cultural Activity

Implicit in words is the culture of those who use them. Say that we're talking about common English words that are known to most English L2

Figure 1.
Kachru's Model of World Englishes

The **"Expanding Circle"**

China	1,088.2 mil
Egypt	50.3 mil
Indonesia	175.9 mil
Israel	4.5 mil
Japan	122.6 mil
Korea	42.6 mil
Nepal	18.0 mil
Saudi Arabia	12.9 mil
Taiwan	19.8 mil
USSR	285.8 mil
Zimbabwe	8.9 mil

The **"Outer Circle"**

Bangladesh	107.7 mil
Ghana	13.7 mil
India	810.8 mil
Kenya	22.9 mil
Malaysia	16.9 mil
Nigeria	112.2 mil
Pakistan	109.4 mil
Philippines	58.7 mil
Singapore	2.6 mil
Sri Lanka	16.6 mil
Tanzania	23.9 mil
Zambia	7.3 mil

The **"Inner Circle"**

USA	245.8 mil
UK	57.0 mil
Canada	25.9 mil
Australia	16.4 mil
New Zealand	3.3 mil

Note: Number is population of nation, not number of English speakers (Kachru, 1992, p. 356).

Figure 2.
Not Only Is the Map Not the Territory—
Your Territory Is Not My Territory
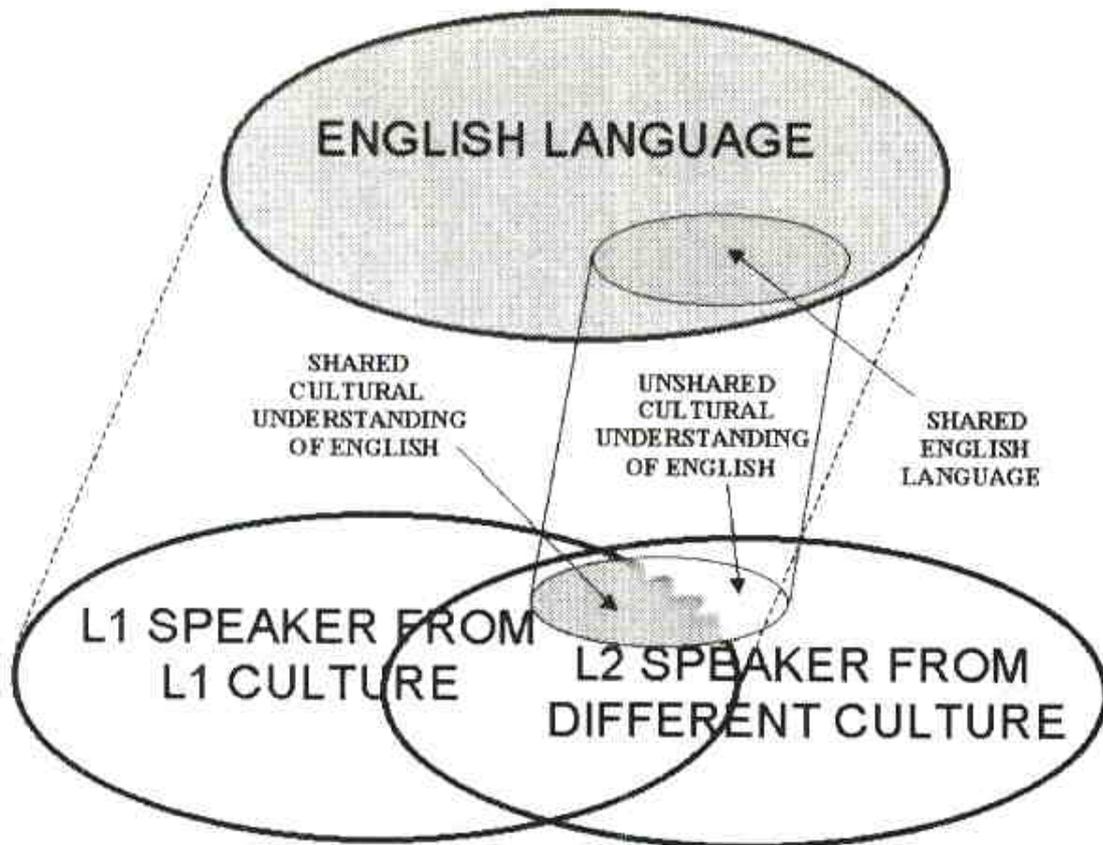
speakers. The various cultures of the L2 speakers are potentially different sets of frames of reference for many of those words. When people from different cultures use an English word both recognize, the English word often carries different assumptions underlying the meaning and sometimes an entirely different meaning. To the extent that it does so, it creates a problem. This can be the case even with the most common words. Take, for example, the word "guest," which is used in the hospitality industry to mean a paying customer. This sense of the word is not old, and its more widely understood meaning definitely does not include payment.

Two differently acculturated communicators must attempt the cognitive matching process. Beamer (1992, p. 288) has diagrammed this process under three conditions: First, when an identical signifier is linked to a known signified—i.e., when the match is good; second, when a signifier is linked to a presumedly *similar* signified; and third, when a signifier is not linked to a signified—i.e., when the sign or word does not correspond to anything in the receiver's experience. The second condition is the dangerous one for international communicators in English. They may assume they have a match for a word like "guest," but their respective understandings may be quite dissimilar. One can imagine the loss of face to which such different understandings might lead.

To illustrate further, a 1999 article on stereotypes that interfere with Americans' and Russians' efforts to communicate internationally (Aksenova & Beadle) mentions the different meanings and values given to, and assumptions underlying, such words as "competition," "the state," "plan," "individual rights," and "economic priority." If an American and a Russian speaker each do not probe in order to learn how the other understands these terms, wrong assumptions are likely to cause problems. Then too—to move from semiotics into the related area of rhetoric—the two cultures have different styles and expectations for a discussion requiring problem-solving, the Russian style being much more aggressive than the American. The words chosen by American discussants might seem weak to the Russians. Words chosen on each side to express politeness, or humor, or doubt, might not translate at all well, either.

We know that "the map is not the territory" (Hayakawa, 1948, pp. 15-18). We are not so conscious that the *territory* of one user of English might not be the territory of another, and our students might be even less aware than we. Consider a few more examples of this sometime or approximate or nonexistent commonality:

- What does "should" mean, in a sentence like "You should arrive by 6 p.m."? Obligation? Moral pressure? Or just likelihood? Our modal auxiliaries can be baffling.
- Another example is saying "We apologize" when one is not necessarily at fault but the other is displeased. In Japan, the sender apologizes to a displeased receiver. Period. Not to apologize would be perceived as shirking one's responsibility. In the U.S., if a sender is not at fault but apologizes, a U.S. receiver tends to infer that the sender has admitted fault and that something is therefore owed.
- Honorifics are essential in the Korean language, and I sometimes sense in fluent English-speaking Korean colleagues and students a frustration that English is so blunt, so lacking in means of showing courtesy (and of withholding it). (See Rhee, 1994).
- In all languages there are "rich" words—those that are very meaningful within a culture but that do not translate easily. The word "Schmäh" in Austria means, in part, a kind of ironic language play something like the good-natured trading of insults—but that only begins to explain it. The writer discussed it for two or three pages (Agar, 1994). English-speakers do not have a synonym. Incidentally, I don't have immediate access to Austrians, but I asked two German friends their meaning for that word. Theirs was less rich and more literal. Some American "rich" words might include "legal," "leisure," "career," and "wealthy." The implications, the various uses, and the values attached to each of these words would take a long time to explain. Most Americans have complex mental sets for each word, and the way they

might change from context to context might not be obvious to a speaker of a different English.

- Different languages—and different Englishes—might not share Americans' conversation conventions. The topics and styles for small talk in the U.S. might give offense in France or Japan. To Arabs, U. S. conversation can seem tepid and unenthusiastic. To Americans, German Swiss sometimes seem brusquely inconsiderate of "face." To Dutch listeners, Americans can seem too prone to self-promotion, while to Germans, Americans often sound absurdly optimistic.
- Different Englishes have different ways of hedging, qualifying, softening, joking, insulting. They have different expectations for when indirection is appropriate—and for what is perceived as indirect—for what is perceived as friendly/personal/overfamiliar—and for what is perceived as polite/distant/hostile (Trosberg, 1995).

Linguistic effects of co-languages or of L1 on L2 go by the name of "interference." The most obvious example is probably the complex rules about definite and indefinite articles that are so baffling to L2 students whose first language has no articles. Here are just two other examples of interference in Standard English because of locutions that are standard in the L2 person's L1:

- When I was a kid, my German-American classmates sometimes said things like "Where's his book? Didn't he bring it with?" because "Er bracht es mit" is good German.
- Many Asian speakers find the consonant clusters at ends of some English words (e.g., "texts," with its /ksts/) very hard to pronounce because their own languages don't end words that way.

I have barely even mentioned registers and dialects, which can also be a source of problems. The world's Englishes contain many different registers, a register being a language variety chosen by users depending on what social activity they are involved in. For instance, the same English-speaker could use one register for informal story-telling, another for religious services, another for negotiating, and still another for a technological discussion. As for dialects, one language can differ greatly from region to region in phonology, vocabulary, and even grammar. The English spoken in Yorkshire, England, is different from that spoken in Cornwall, and the U.S. English spoken in Boston is different from that spoken in Houston. There are Englishes within Englishes.

"Good English(es)" and "Bad English(es)"

The business public and many educators think of Standard English as "good English" and English that varies from it as "bad English." U.S. Americans, geographically isolated and rather complacently Anglophone,

tend to feel so proprietary about our Standard English that many know little about the other Good Englishes, let alone the so-so English(es) with which much of the rest of the business world gets along pretty well. "[Foreigners are] good at getting points across in English. They don't joke. They ignore gaffes. They pay no attention to grammar. They don't mind pauses. They don't care if two people speak at once. They aim for normality, and live with confusion" (Newman, 1995, p. A-18).

It's fairly easy to learn a little English. The grammar of English is simpler than that of many other languages. (But its vocabulary is enormous and its spelling, because of its voluminous borrowings from other languages, is preposterously irregular.) M. H. Heim of UCLA, professor of Slavic literatures and a professional translator with about ten languages, is quoted as saying "English is much easier to learn poorly and to communicate in poorly than any other language. I'm sure that if Hungary were the leader of the world, Hungarian would not be the world language. To communicate on a day-to-day basis—to order a meal, to book a room—there's no language as simple as English" (Wallraff, 2000). For optimal communication, two business communicators need strong mastery of and linguistic parity in a common language. Internationally, optimal conditions are rare. A translator is helpful but not always available or affordable—and not all are equally qualified and impartial. Slippage is the norm rather than the exception. A few business people become fluent in one or more additional languages deliberately for business purposes, but the rank-and-file, especially the small-business persons, often learn the L2 just well enough to get by. There is no particular attachment to English for many L2 business users, as Louhiala-Salminen has pointed out. Her respondents and interviewees said that for their business purposes, English was "just a code I use," "cultureless" (1997, p. 317). The language they love—the language with resonance for them—is their own language, not English.

English as a world language, just through use, will probably employ a limited lexicon and fairly uncomplicated grammatical structures. In the literature there is considerable discussion of ISSE, International Standard Spoken English, which is, observers feel, in the process of formation (Crystal, 1997). Englishes—what we've called "Good Englishes"—in their respective nations and discourse communities, will continue to be used with subtlety and variety for a broad array of humankind's purposes. Most L2 business persons, then, possess much less of the second language than would enable them to say in it what they could say eloquently in their native language. They say, "Please excuse my Bahdeenglais" and they soldier on, regularly risking loss of face, making mistakes, and continuing toward their business goal. They are far outside their comfort zone. Meanwhile, few of us Anglophones in the U.S. ever move more than a step away from ours.

Ideally, international business requires "a particularly sophisticated mastery of the subtleties and nuances of the target language." (Vande

Berg, 1997, p. 17). But unless this detracts from the bottom line, many business people don't care. In practice, international business English, rather than being "Bad English," falls to some extent into the category of *special subject languages*. These "use special text forms, a restricted syntax, and arguably a limited morphology but do not, on the whole, redesign syntactic forms or evolve quite separate ones. . ." (Sager, Dungworth, & McDonald, 1980, p. 40). "They derive from and are a subset of common language" (Ulijn, 1995, p. 95).

The everyday speech acts of business are indeed complex. They include everything from informing to negotiating to evaluating performance. In daily business we persuade, solve problems, build relationships, give and solicit feedback, listen, create contracts, nurture post-contract business relationships, question, give instructions, motivate, manage conflict, and exchange routine information. Internationally, people routinely do many of these things by using a limited vocabulary and choosing uncomplicated structures—and *trying* much harder.

These brief remarks have offered just a glance at the changing set of languages that English is becoming. Paradoxically, it is owned by other cultures, by us, by everyone, and by no one. For business's purposes, much depends on a core of language remaining intelligible to all speakers of English. But language does not grow by anyone's organized plans; it just grows. We can standardize only so much. It would be foolish to overemphasize a conservative position. No one would like to be in the position of being the sole remaining speaker of a really, really, really correct English.

Conclusion

How then do we respond to a need to teach in a world where the English of business is polymorphic? Seven suggestions will give us at least a start.

- For our own development as teachers, we should become increasingly aware of the reasons why L2 English learners experience the problems they do—of the sources of interference. We can read published scholarship on TOEFL and ESL, and we can read more of the work of other nations' influential writers, either in the Englishes they use, or in translation if they do not write in English, or in the original languages where we are able. More awareness will allow us to intervene more intelligently.
- For L2 English learners who will live outside the United States, we should try to teach useful basic English and help learners see where interference problems are most likely.
- For L2 English learners who will live in the United States, we should work hard to perfect the full range of their English—just as we do that

of those born here—while reminding ourselves that many of our students are still uncomfortably poised between cultures, or straddling them: Often, immigrant students' parents and grandparents are less acculturated, and English is often *not* the language spoken in the home.

- As we learn more about what kinds of English are used between L2 *English speakers in business, we should take a lesson from the extra* efforts at active listening, encoding, and decoding that the speakers exhibit. Motivated by the same profit motive emphasized in all business curricula, they try very hard to adapt their own English to something familiar to the other. When we teach listening, some examples from international English could be used to illustrate problems and solutions.

- We should watch the changes in Standard U.S. English and refrain from making automatic judgments of those who do not use it exactly as we might. "Standard" language is a tool, but it's also an ideology, and an ideal rather than a reality (Pakir, 1997, p. 172). We are going to see changes in Inner-Circle English coming from all the other Englishes, just as English has absorbed influences from other languages throughout its long history.

- For Americans doing business in English outside the U.S.—and this category includes increasing numbers of home-grown students—we should urge more understanding of linguistic and cultural differences underlying a foreigner's ostensible facility in English. Quoting Smith— "Native speakers need as much help as non-natives when using English to interact internationally. There is no room for linguistic chauvinism" (1983). We should raise our home-grown students' "language consciousness" by means of assignments aimed at discovery of other contexts and schemata. (This is one way of addressing Rogers' 1999 call to reflect the global business environment in class writing and speaking activities.) Language researchers say native speakers of English are already outnumbered by second-language and foreign-language speakers of English, and will be more heavily outnumbered as time goes on. If we want to be well prepared players in tomorrow's business, looking beyond the lens of the domestic world view will be essential.

- Finally, we should recognize that the worldwide use of English for business is an accident of history, not a superiority of language, and that history moves on. Internet use of Mandarin, Hindi, and Spanish is rising (Wells and Teather, 2000). If regional trading blocs increase in number and in influence, English could become irrelevant within some of the blocs (Graddol, 1997). Or if translation software becomes a *lot* better than it is at present, we might see business people needing a common language less.

For the present, it's English. Currently, Americans can get along pretty well doing business abroad because America is such an important buyer.

But many other nations' buying power is rising, and our English is not likely to serve us as well in selling as it has done in buying. As (former German chancellor) Willy Brandt has famously said, "If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, *dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen*" (quoted in Saskin, 2001). His words should be understood both literally and figuratively. To sell better, we'll need other languages, but we'll also need better understanding of cultural contexts that underlie the forms of global English others use with us. Many of us kid ourselves that the U.S. will be dominant indefinitely. Maybe so, but America, while a wonderful nation, has a short history and an even shorter memory of the time before its present ascendancy.

One source wrote, "You can't *use* a new language unless you change the consciousness that is tied to the old one, unless you stretch beyond the circle of grammar and dictionary, out of the old world and into a new one. And Americans are famous for thinking they've got the best consciousness around" (Agar, 1994, p. 22). The typical U.S. resident is still insular, with little notion of the kinds and uses of English in the larger world.

The well-known Whorfian hypothesis says that the way people experience, organize, and interpret reality is influenced, to a considerable extent, by the language they speak, that is, by the words and other language structures they have learned from the culture that has shaped them (Whorf, 1956, p. 213). The language we grow up in shapes our view of things—the way we see the world and think about it. The Whorfian hypothesis may not be entirely supportable, but it's true-ish. All people wishing to succeed in business, but especially we Americans, have to get better at seeing beyond our cultural shaping—and people can and do learn new views of the world and of words. International English is a powerful tool for obtaining the best business outcomes for ourselves and our trading partners and counterparts—if we are able to understand, acknowledge and transcend our assumptions.

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