

English across Cultures and Diversity Management

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ABSTRACT

As most Asian countries recognize English as an indispensable language for intranational and/or international communication, they are increasingly committed to strengthening and improving English language teaching (ELT). In parts of Asia where English serves as an official language and ELT succeeds, people start speaking English among themselves. Wherever this happens, a set of indigenous patterns develop, the kind of patterns people find easier to handle. The same situation can develop in countries where English is taught and learned as an international language, too. We need to fully understand these aspects of present-day English if we are to take advantage of English as a language of intercultural communication. One important issue is mutual communicability among speakers of different varieties. Based on the observation that a common language is not a uniform language, but a diverse language, this paper argues that a plausible way of dealing with English as a multicultural language for intercultural communication is not restrictive conformism but diversity management.

1. Introduction: English as a Multicultural Language

Contemporary English has two functional and structural characteristics that no other languages have developed in the history of linguistic evolution. Functionally speaking, English has conspicuously spread among nonnative speakers as a sizable number of Asian, African, Pacific, and Caribbean countries designate it as their official, associate official, or working language. English is used as such in 70 countries (around 36%) of the 193-nation world (Honna, 2003:14). To this, add more than a hundred countries where students are learning English as a language for international communication! At the same time, the spread of English does not assure the transplantation of American English or British English throughout the world. The fact is that English is becoming a conspicuously diverse language. Everyone speaks English with an accent. As Americans speak American English and Britons British English, Asians, Europeans, Africans, and South Americans speak English with their own characteristics. The internationalization of English has caused the diversification of English.

Actually, when Japanese speak English with Koreans, there is no room for American or British English and culture. It would be clumsy if the Japanese and the Koreans had to conform to American ways of behavior while speaking English to each other. The case is true with English conversations between Turks and Brazilians, French and Swedish people, or in any other interactions that might occur on the global stage.

What then happens is that Japanese behave like Japanese and speak English in Japanese ways, and so do Koreans, Chinese, Philippines, Russians, Italians, Danish, Arabs, and many others respectively. This demonstrates that English now is a multiculturally variegated language. Tolerance toward varieties is a condition for using English as an international lingua franca.

We need to be convinced of this logic and prepared to positively deal with its various ramifications.

2. Diffusion and Adaptation

In order to understand these English language trends, it is important to fully comprehend the relation of diffusion and adaptation. If things are to spread, they must most normally mutate. For example, there would be no McDonald's stores in India if they insisted on offering beef hamburgers. Cows are holy and beef is taboo in Hinduism, which is the religion of many people in India. McDonald's stores in Mumbai (Bombay) and other cities are popular spots because they serve chicken or mutton burgers, a great change needed to assure the spread of this fast-food chain in a place whose cultural tradition is so different from that of the original country.

This principle apparently can be applied to language, too. The internationalization of English prompts the diversification of English. In other words, the diversification is the cost we have to pay for the internationalization of English. Here, it is important to recognize that English has become an international common language simply because it is being created as a culturally diverse language.

The popular assumption might state that a common language should be a uniform language. But this is not true. A common language cannot be but a diverse language. A lot of allowances have to be made, and differences accepted. If American English standards of pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics were imposed upon all users of English, English would never become an international common language.

3. World Englishes

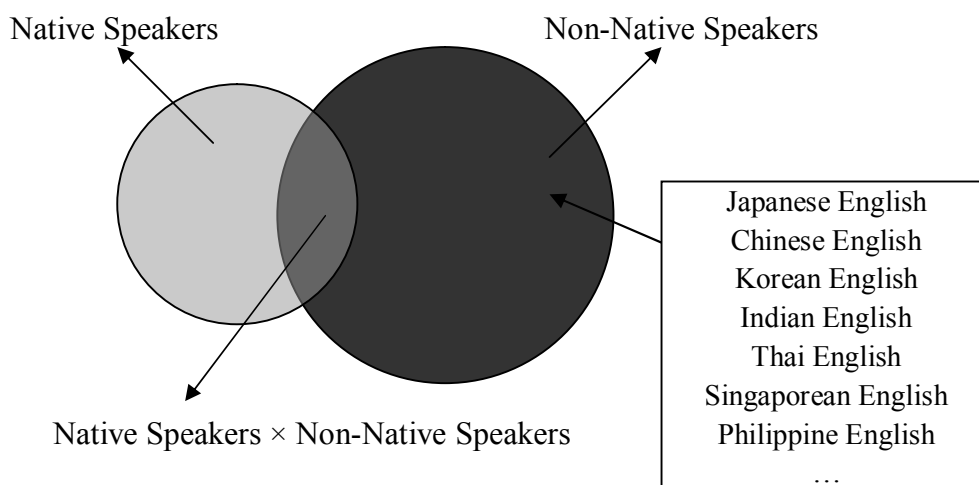
The diffusion and diversification of English is dynamically conceptualized as world Englishes. Perhaps, it is the first case of a language being represented in a plural form in the history of linguistic dynamism. Behind the plural form of Englishes is an interesting idea about English as a world-wide language. The idea suggests that all varieties of English developed or being developed in various parts of the world are equally valid and viable in linguistic and cultural terms---the philosophy of English under constant examination, evaluation, and amendment.

Kachru (1992:356-357) classified these plural forms of English into three concentric groups: (1) inner-circle varieties spoken by people in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, (2) outer-circle varieties formed by Asian and African speakers whose countries were former colonies of Britain and America, and (3) extended-circle varieties employed by learners in all other countries. Outer-circle varieties in Asia and Africa are often called New Englishes (Platt, Weber and Ho, 1984; Pride, ed. 1982).

The idea was formalized by the publication of *World Englishes* journal by Blackwell Publishers Ltd in 1982 and the organization of the International Association of World Englishes (IAWE) in the same year. Braj Kachru and Larry Smith were instrumental in

materializing these two entities. A little earlier, Kachru (1976) succinctly depicted the contemporary situation of world Englishes based on his Indian English studies. Smith (1983) also covered most essential domains we should address to further substantiate the idea of world Englishes (or English across cultures here). The possibility of using English in non-Anglo-American cultural contexts depends on a set of sociolinguistic conditions. The most important prerequisite is the fact that English is spreading among nonnative speakers. There are more nonnative speakers using English with other nonnative speakers than native speakers using English with other native-speakers or nonnative speakers. My former students report that they tend to use English more frequently with Asian business people than with Americans now. This situation is illustrated in Diagram 1 above (Honna, 1999:18).

[Figure 1] Speakers of English



4. English as an Asian Language

Thus, the spread of English as a language for multinational and multicultural communication employed by nonnative speakers implies that English is becoming more and more de-Anglo-Americanized all over the world. This creates new structural, pragmatic, and functional dimensions in contemporary English.

As a matter of fact, English has become a very important language in Asia. It is a working language for intranational and international communication in many parts of the region. Bolton (2008:6) estimates that 800 million people speak English for various purposes in Asia, a number that is far larger than the combined populations of the United States and Britain where English is a native tongue for many citizens.

Many Asian nationals are finding themselves using English more frequently with other Asians than with people from the UK, the USA or other “native speaker” countries. As we are expected to have more and more contact with people from other Asian countries in the fields of business, tourism, overseas studies, environmental protection or regional cooperation, it is crucial time for us to start exploring issues in English communication in Asia.

5. The Multiculturalism of English as an Asian Language

Yet, Asian varieties of English are tremendously diverse with different social roles attached to the adopted language. Each country has used the language in its traditional cultural and linguistic contexts, thereby producing a distinct variety characterized by unique structural and functional features. Proficiency levels also differ with countries where English is a second language (ESL) producing more skillful speakers than their counterparts where English is designated as an international language (EIL).

The major factor of diversification is languages in contact. As languages come into contact, they get mingled in many interesting ways. The notion of one language as an independent system is only an imaginary creation. This has become increasingly obvious in Asian English studies, where cross-linguistic analysis is a key to a better understanding of a wide range of new patterns. As a matter of fact, the forms and uses of English in Asia are enormously influenced by other Asian languages. While the influence often gets blurred in syntactic superposition, it is visible in lexical and idiomatic borrowing. Here are some examples of “face” from Singapore and Malaysian English, where Chinese features apparently are reflected.

“Face” is extremely important in Asian societies. In the oriental value system, “face” refers to an individual’s pride, dignity, honor, prestige, and even identity. From the Chinese origin, two expressions (namely, losing and saving face) are universally used in English, such as:

- (1) I lost a lot of face by being unable to answer this question.
- (2) This saved me a great deal of face.

In Singapore and Malaysian English, however, there are a lot more expressions related to “face” such as:

- (3) You failed again.... I don’t know where to hide my face.
- (4) Why did you treat me like that the other night? I really got no face now.
- (5) You must go to his son’s wedding dinner. You must give him face.
- (6) Since I don’t know where to put my face in this company, I might as well leave and save what little face I have left.
- (7) Just tell him what you really think. There is no need to give him any face.
- (8) Let’s ask Datok Ali for help. He knows the right people and he’s got a lot of face.

In this connection, it has to be stressed that although these phrases are not part of British English or American English, they are not to be denigrated or stigmatized. If they are useful for certain purposes in Singapore and Malaysian societies, they tend to get deeply rooted there. Just because nonnative speakers do not use English the way native speakers do, does not mean they are wrong or using the language incorrectly. This applies to many other forms of English as an Asian language. Actually, many Asians seem to have little difficulty understanding these Singaporean and Malaysian expressions rendered into English, because they have similar phrases in their regional and national languages.

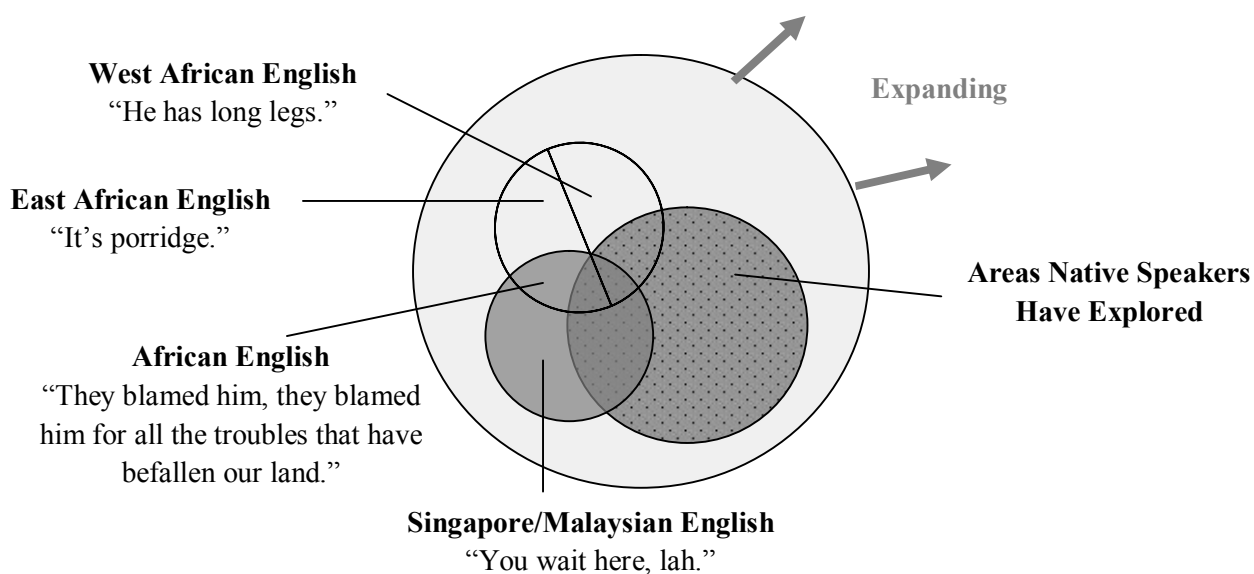
At this juncture, it is important to note that teachers do not teach local varieties of English in the school. They teach “International Standard English,” whatever it may refer to, in the classroom in Singapore and Malaysia. But if people are compelled or expected to speak English, it is natural that they should do so only in the way best fit for them. The same

phenomenon can spring up in countries where English is taught as an international language if we encourage our students to speak English, as we must for various good reasons.

6. Expanding the Capacity of English as a Multicultural Language

As the spread of English progresses, English is bound to reflect a diversity of disparate cultures. Every language has an indefinite capacity of structural and functional modulation and expansion. There is no language that has used up its inherent potentiality. The portion that the native speakers have explored is very limited. See Diagram 2 (Honna 2008:57). There is still a lot to be exploited by the nonnative speakers. Once a language is transferred to nonnative speakers, they start exploring certain aspects of the language that have not been touched upon by the native speakers. On a global scale, the nonnative speakers explore those areas based on their own linguistic, cultural, and cognitive experiences.

[Figure 2] A Capacity of English



(African examples are from McArthur (ed.), 1992:22)

For instance, Singapore and Malaysian English, although sharing much with native speaker English, introduces the use of tens of different sentence-final particles, like "Wait here, la." The rationale for these expletives is that they express a wide range of delicate shades of meaning: in other words, the ethos of the speakers. African speakers also enrich the language with an array of lexical and syntactic creations. The African expressions here are representative of many metaphorical innovations New Englishes can contribute to the English language. There are a myriad of new patterns being constantly added to English, and the capacity of English is invariably expanding.

7. English across Cultures and Diversity Management: Needs for a Pedagogical

Response

Thus, the world-wide spread of English has not ended up with the global acceptance of American English or British English as the norm of usage. Rather, the global spread of English has prompted the multicultural diversification of English. One of the implications, or rather complications, of these multicultural enrichments continuously added to the English language concerns mutual communicability among speakers of world Englishes. This is an actual and immediate problem as well as a potential concern. Cases of zero-/miscommunication in intervarietal interaction are abundant.

In fear of a new Babel, people often cry for a return to American English or British English as the standardized norm. However, it is important to recognize here that standardization or eventually re-standardization of the de-standardized standards is not a plausible way of dealing with the current multiculturalism and multiformalism of world Englishes. If we are to establish English as a multicultural language and use it as an international language, we have to address the issue of diversity management pedagogically.

I have explored issues of diversity management in terms of a pedagogical concept of intercultural literacy. Here is my definition of intercultural literacy (Honna, 2003:165-170):

- (1) Intercultural literacy is an attitude, preparedness, and competence to express one's message and understand others' appropriately in a cross-cultural encounter;
- (2) It involves an ability to adjust intercultural differences in a mutually beneficial manner;
- (3) Intercultural literacy is the literacy of the fourth kind after basic literacy (reading and writing plus arithmetic), media literacy, and information literacy; and
- (4) It is expected to be introduced to the school curriculums across disciplines from primary, through secondary, to tertiary education.

At the same time, I have placed teaching awareness of language as a fundamental component in intercultural literacy. The role of language awareness in intercultural literacy is based on the assumption that a major part of language awareness is to improve sensitivity to, and tolerance of linguistic diversity, as is witnessed in Hawkins (1987, 1992) and many others.

The key here is the improved sensitivity to, and tolerance of linguistic diversity (that may occur intralingually and/or interlingually). Understanding linguistic diversity can be promoted most effectively by educated awareness of how language is designed (cognitive linguistics) and how people use language (sociolinguistics). It is essential that these fundamental elements of language awareness should be incorporated into teaching English as an international language (TEIL).

Since I discussed the importance of cognitive linguistics in teaching awareness of language elsewhere (Honna, 2008:76-89), a mention will be made here of some of the sociolinguistic nature of language to show that diversity should not be such a cause of confusion and disorder as it is often believed to be. If English is to be taught as an international language as well as a multicultural language, pedagogical programs ought to be developed to address these issues.

Human beings often tend to dislike differences. They suspect that differences can hinder and diminish order and harmony. But differences are everywhere. Every language is a variegated one. If we are made aware that we, users of our native or first language, need to have many

different variables and that we are capable of managing them properly, we will hopefully be able to see intervarietal differences in an enlightened perspective.

Thus, a first awareness issue in our TEIL is diversity in language: why we develop different ways of saying one and the same thing in our language. Studies of language in social contexts indicate that linguistic diversity is a reflection of the social reality in which language is used. People use language to express their social position, their social relation with addressees, and their perception and understanding of the social context in which the discourse is conducted. Linguistic diversity increases with the complexity of social structure.

Yet, human beings choose the most appropriate unit out of their repertory of a huge number of different forms meant for one semantic denotation. Every person has chains of these bundles that constitute a wide range of linguistic units characterized by phonological, through morphological and syntactic, to (dia)lectal and linguistic features. The speech act is represented as a consecutive series of constant choices of linguistic formatives. The choice is governed by the sociolinguistic variable rules: Who Says What to Whom When/Where (How) Socialization is the process in which young children learn these rules, which are incorporated into the socio-cultural norm of behavior in a given society.

For Japanese students of English, Suzuki (1973:148) provides a good example. Unlike English and many other languages, there are several terms for first person singular and second person singular in Japanese. Japanese speakers have always to choose one of them in accordance with the social relation they maintain with their addressee, with the relationship built on the social concepts of family structure, power, seniority (age, position), familiarity, and formality.

A simple pair of *watashi* (I) and *anata* (you) is often taught foreign students of Japanese as the first person singular and the second person singular, respectively, but it is unlikely that Japanese can get by with them in their daily lives. The Japanese system of personal terms is a symbolization of the social organization with reference to human relationships like kinship, friendship, and others. We need these different words because we are expected to express delicate shades of socio-psychological meaning appropriately. On a daily basis, we are capable to deal with these differences. We live in diversity. We cannot live without it.

This ability to accommodate intralingual differences can be extended to the interlingual situation. Linguistic conformism is not wanted. It is important for students of English to understand, based on the mother tongue experience, that differences are to be needed and thus to be accepted to enlarge our expressive power, absolutely not to be discarded. This concept of linguistic diversity should be extensively explored in TEIL.

For instance, there are hundreds of differences between American English and British English. These differences can often be a cause of a serious problem. A NATO military exercise is a case in point. An American soldier declaring “We’ve cleared the wood” meaning “the wood is safe” can be interpreted by a British counterpart as “We’ve come out of the wood” (Reeves & Wright, 1996:1). However, differences across the Atlantic Ocean are normally taken for granted. Thus, flat/apartment, lift/elevator, ground floor/first floor coexist in the lexicon of English. Idioms are no exception: a storm (tempest) in a teacup, blow one’s own trumpet (horn). Grammar varies, too: I demanded that he should leave/I demanded he leave. The saying “A rolling stone gathers no moss” is interpreted positively in the U.K. and

negatively in the U.S.A.

Differences are conspicuous in many semantic domains. Take automobile terms for example (Table 1). To my knowledge, there has been no serious talk between American and British peoples about eliminating differences in an effort to unify them. They get along with the differences, simply accepting them as part of their linguistic customs.

[Table 1] Automobile Terms

| | American | British |
|---|-----------------|----------------|
| 1 | Hood | bonnet |
| 2 | Trunk | boot |
| 3 | Fender | bumper |
| 4 | Dimmer | dip switch |
| 5 | stick shift | gear lever |
| 6 | Dashboard | fascia |
| 7 | Blinker | indicator |
| 8 | Muffler | silencer |
| 9 | Windshield | windscreen |

These attitudes could hopefully be applied to the pedagogy of English as a multicultural language for intercultural communication so that intervarietal differences are accepted as a fact of life as well as a resource of mutual self-enrichment. In a larger sense, the issues involved in diversity management in world Englishes are in parallel with those in symbiotic societies being created in many parts of the world. In view of these trends, our efforts to establish English as a multicultural language are expected to identify and analyze actual and potential issues of our changing society and propose ways to solve its urgent problems based on the spirit of mutual understanding.

8. Conclusion

The concept of English as a multicultural language is based on the fact that English is here to stay as an indispensable language for intranational and/or international communication in Asia and other parts of the world. This paper dealt with issues in intervarietal communicability among speakers of different varieties of English. As a pedagogical response to these actual and potential inconveniences caused and to be caused by the diffusion of English as a multicultural language, teaching diversity management by means of educated awareness of language was explored as an indispensable component in intercultural literacy/awareness.

While current English has a centrifugal tendency for intracultural and intranational purposes, it also has a centripetal force for intercultural and international engagements. When speakers of English converge for information exchange and mutual understanding, they are strongly motivated to adjust their respective speech manners. They are eager to learn how they can make it. This is where diversity management training comes in, to help them help themselves in this endeavor. These pedagogical efforts are needed to improve our competence in using English across cultures.

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About the Speaker



Before his retirement in March 2009 from active teaching, Professor Nobuyuki Honna taught sociolinguistics, language policy, and international communication at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo. Now a professor emeritus and a research fellow at the University, he still works with international colleagues on a wide range of sociolinguistic research projects, while serving as President (2007-9) in the U.S.-based International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS), and as chief editor for *Asian Englishes* and an editorial adviser for *English Today* and *World Englishes*. He is also a member of Japan's Ministry of Education and Science committee on foreign language.