

Global English and World Englishes From an Evolutionary Perspective: A Rejoinder to Anna Kristina Hultgren

Salikoko S. Mufwene, *The University of Chicago*

Abstract

The terms Global English and World Englishes reflect two opposite imperial perspectives. The first highlights the success of the British Empire in spreading the language of England to various corners of the world, whereas the second subverts the race-based hierarchy that the European imperial history has added to the speciation that ensued from the geographical spread of English. Kachru (1982, 2017) captured the prestige-laden stratification that has become associated with this differential evolution of English with the opposition “Inner Circle” vs. “Outer Circle” vs “Expanding Circle”, with the latter two apparently merging into one powerless Circle, while speakers of the Inner Circle claim their varieties to be “native” and the only authentic ones. In this commentary, I capitalize on this historical background to explain why Anna Kristina Hultgren is correct in using the term “Red Herring” to characterize the misidentification of English as the cause of social injustice relative to those who do not use it as a mother tongue.

Keywords: Global English; World Englishes; Inner Circle; Outer Circle; indigenized; settlement colonies; exploitation colonies

Associated directly or indirectly with colonization, the initial actuator of the spread of English around the world, the terms *Global English* and *World Englishes* have increased in currency since the 1980s. This increase is connected to the ever-growing invocations of worldwide globalization in the discourse on language endangerment and loss (LEL) in linguistics since the 1990s, although the relevant literature has not been so informative on the actual causes of these processes (Mufwene 2017a).

The terms *Global English* and *World Englishes* reflect two opposite imperial perspectives. The first highlights the success of the British Empire in spreading the language of England to various corners of the world, helped significantly by the dominance of the United States since the early 20th century as a superpower militarily, economically, and in

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the universe of science and technology. By contrast, the second term subverts the race-based hierarchy that the European imperial history has added to the speciation that ensued from the geographical spread of English.

As Kachru (1982, 2017) captured this stratification, the top, identified as the “Inner Circle,” includes varieties spoken in the British metropole and its former English settlement colonies, where populations of European descent have become the demographic majorities, viz., the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. To these are subordinated the varieties identified also as “Nonnative” or “Indigenized Englishes” and produced in the Outer Circle, which roughly includes the British former exploitation colonies since the 19th century and the Philippines. In these polities, the Natives have remained majority populations and the vast majority of them continue to speak their heritage languages as their vernaculars. English has been transmitted primarily through the school system, and it is spoken fluently typically by an elite class of highly educated citizens who use it as a lingua franca, notwithstanding a smaller subset that has also vernacularized it in this indigenized form.¹

This brief background helps explain why Anna Kristina Hultgren is correct in using the term “Red Herring” to characterize the misidentification of English as the cause of social injustice relative to those who do not use it as a mother tongue. The characterization applies more generally also to linguists’ claim that (the spread of) English has gradually been driving most other languages to extinction and leading the world to monolingualism and cultural uniformity. Neither of these widely repeated claims is true, except in in the Inner Circle, where English has become the dominant vernacular,² albeit in an indigenized

¹ It is not clear whether the Englishes of the Expanding Circle, used as a lingua franca in the rest of the world, really stand at the bottom of this hierarchy or are just as less prestigious as those of the Outer Circle. Despite the concerns expressed by, for instance, Phillipson (2003) and Hagège (2006), there is no evidence that English in this tiers endangers the vitality of indigenous languages, although it presents competition to the imperial status of languages such as French and Portuguese in the former exploitation colonies of the relevant metropolises.

² The process is actually complete in England’s former plantation settlement colonies of the Caribbean islands, where the indigenous languages are all extinct (owing largely also to the genocide of the earlier Spanish settlement

form in the former settlement colonies, in the sense that it has been modified by usage in its new ecology (Mufwene 2009). Labels such as “Australian” and “American Englishes,” as well as distinctions such as “Southern” and “Midwestern Englishes” in the USA, evidence the fact that new national and intra-national regional varieties have emerged in especially the former settlement colonies. This evolution is consistent with their respective histories of population movements and language contacts (including dialect contact, Trudgill 2004); and English can indeed be said to have won Pyrrhic victories (Mufwene 2001).

To be sure, the former British exploitation colonies too have contributed to the rise of English as a foremost world language and lingua franca of trade. After all, India, Nigeria, and the like count as Anglophone countries; and English is selected as the lingua franca by nations that want to trade with them. English has spread in the Expanding Circle largely because the relevant polities need it to trade with the “Anglophone world”; and the British Council and similar agencies that dominate the English-teaching industry respond to the demand of the market. As well pointed out by Ostler (2005), it’s the buyer’s language that prevails in international trade.³

Reality check also shows that it’s only in former settlement colonies, where the colonists intended to build “better Europes” than what they relocated from (Crosby 1986), that English has displaced indigenous languages and its other European competitors as a vernacular. The reason is clear: the colonists developed a new socioeconomic structure in which

colonization) and all the other exogenous languages have been displaced by English and related creoles. Unfortunately, the literature of World Englishes hardly discusses these polities, where the new English varieties are spoken as vernaculars by their overwhelming majority populations of African descent (Mufwene 2019).

³ Note in fact that, among numerous examples, Americans trade with China in Mandarin, not in English, while China trades with the USA, the United Kingdom, India, Nigeria, etc. in English. Although retailers in India and Nigeria resort to indigenous languages, this practice does not discourage Chinese, Japanese, and German companies from assuming that India and Nigeria are Anglophone. What appears to matter to them is not so much what proportions of the populations in the Outer Circle speak English (fluently) but rather the fact that those with the most buying power and those who can sell the commodities locally at the retail market speak English. Trading partnerships can be negotiated in English.

the command of English became critical to the citizens' economic survival and their cultural assimilationist population structure, which integrated other European immigrants first, gradually made the practice of other languages redundant, as English crept gradually into all domains of their social lives (Fishman 1971). At least in the case of the USA, it is telling that Native American languages were affected later than other European languages, reflecting the extent to which their speakers were marginalized from the new socioeconomic world order.⁴

The British Colonial Office did not plan to share English with the entirety of the indigenous populations in the former exploitation colonies. It followed literally Thomas Babington Macaulay's (1835) recommendation, in the "Minute on Indian Education," to train in English only a small class of colonial auxiliaries that would interface between the colonizers and the masses of the Natives. Moreover, English was introduced to the exploitation colonies primarily for domains and functions associated with administering and exploiting the colonies for the success of the Industrial Revolution in the metropole (Mufwene 2017b). The indigenous languages maintained their traditional functions; English may thus be said to have been superposed to the indigenous languages but not to compete with them. This division of labor between the colonial/imperial and the indigenous languages has been maintained to date in the post-Independence regimes. Claims that English has been a threat to indigenous languages in these polities reflects a misunderstanding of the state of affairs, owing largely to an undifferentiated interpretation of colonization.

This demonstration is not a denial of social injustice. The spread of English as a byproduct of colonization and of the rise of the USA as a superpower (see above) were unjust processes of subjugation relative to the rest of the world. In the academic world and in international trade, one cannot deny the fact that it is more demanding and challenging to

⁴ More or less the same explanation also applies to the late endangerment of French in Louisiana (Dubois 2014), although the isolation of the Francophones was a choice of their resistance to the Anglophone American assimilationist occupation since the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and the geographical isolation of the rural population in the bayous. Quebec's exceptionalism to the trend lies in mobilizing the economic system to carry on its language revitalization commitment. French was thereby empowered to sustain the economic vitality of its heritage speakers.

communicate in a language that is not one's vernacular. Hultgren is correct in arguing that the injustice must be fought otherwise, I surmise, at the level of nonlinguistic power competition that has produced this language inequality.

I submit that one way is to develop strong(er) economies in indigenous or national languages, and to conduct rigorous scholarship and publish in them. This should level the playing field on the national or regional level. It has certainly worked in Quebec and South Africa, for Afrikaans, at least from the late 19th century to the end of the apartheid regime.⁵ However, based on the fact that even the French, Germans, and Russians are publishing in English, to disseminate their findings internationally and more widely, it may be more realistic to accept the division of labor between the language of scholarship and the vernacular in which one lives their life. It has worked well in all countries of the Outer and Expanding Circles and the relevant polities show no evidence of the endangerment of their indigenous or national languages by English in their vernacular functions.⁶

The experience appears to have been similar in European Nordic countries, which have been very accommodating to foreign travelers in this respect.⁷ If it is true that the quality of scholarship weighs more than

⁵ It is an open question whether or not Afrikaans will remain strong in the public domain and in the world of academic publications now that English is increasingly being used as a vernacular or lingua franca by educated non-Afrikaner South Africans and by the government in official functions.

⁶ An important caveat is that long-distance mobility has been constrained by the economic poverty of the majorities in countries of the Global South. This means that they have experienced negligible pressure for language shift, especially when they can receive administrative services and health care in indigenous languages; and marriages remain primarily endogamous. For the same economic reasons, even rural exodus for city life has often created conditions where people of the same ethnolinguistic backgrounds either live in the same neighborhoods or mostly socialize with each other, especially where people stick to their cultural traditions and language serves as an important identity marker (Mufwene 2017a).

⁷ One can notice an interesting asymmetry in this regard. It is almost normal for a citizen of the Inner Circle of World Englishes to travel to Nordic European countries without speaking a single word of Danish or Norwegian than the other way around. Airlines are exceptional in accommodating passengers that do not speak English on flights to Inner Circle countries.

the mastery of the lingua franca, as argued by Hultgren, then science rather than the Anglophone Inner Circle, stands to benefit from the domination of English in academia—although I would like to argue for more tolerance for variation in the spirit of World Englishes. Therefore, the fight must be against using only Inner Circle standards and for allowing other standards from at least the Outer Circle, although this may also disadvantage those who publish in the latter varieties. A real irony of this discourse is that the advocates for justice publish in the standard varieties of the Inner Circle, even when they are from the Outer and Expanding Circles.

I would be remiss not to point out that language practice has hardly reflected social justice in modern nation-states, because some powerful institutions, in the form of academies or schools, have applied the so-called “verbal hygiene” in determining specific varieties that are better than others for literacy, for the public domain, for official functions, and therefore for publications. Even among native speakers, there have always been inequities, with some having a harder time than others to write in the standard variety, depending on their ethnic or socioeconomic background, among other factors. The issue about publishing in English, in which English varieties, or in any other language amounts to discussing the injustice on a world scale. For now, things may boil down to the practical question of who a scholar writes for and what language is the most appropriate for their purpose. One may also ask whether, in the first place, (applied) linguists can really weigh in on these language evolution issues, which are the outcome of socioeconomic dynamics beyond their expertise.

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