

IACCM 10th Annual Conference and 3rd CEMS CCM / IACCM Doctoral
Workshop, University of Ruse, Bulgaria – 2011
CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION:
Cometences and Capabilities

‘GLOBAL ENGLISH’: PRO ET CONTRA

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the term ‘Global English’ alongside other similar terms such as ‘International English’, ‘General English’, ‘World English’, ‘Euro/European English’, ‘Globish’, etc. in relation to, and in contrast with, the current and long-established varieties of Standard English – British English, American English, Australian English, New Zealand English, Canadian English, South African English, etc. The linguistic legitimacy of this term is contested on the grounds of the lack of true cultural background serving as the true soil for the growth of such a variety of the English language.*

Key Words: *Global English; International English; Standard English; Varieties of English; Linguistic Culturology.*

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It is a widely acknowledged fact that today, in the beginning of the third millennium AD, English has secured itself the status of the language of international communication of our planet. The historical, cultural and economic reasons underlying this unprecedented phenomenon have long been analyzed and discussed by quite a number of scholars, British, American, or non-English-speaking alike. One of them, the Italian linguist Umberto Eco (Eco 1995: 331), less than two decades wrote that “the predominant position currently enjoyed by English is a historical contingency arising from the mercantile and colonial expansion of the British Empire, which was followed by American economic and technological hegemony”, while another linguist, the American professor of Indian background Braj B. Kachru suggested the term ‘world Englishes’ for the different varieties of Standard English spoken on our planet today (see Chandrasekhar) and predicted the future possible branching of English into several different languages.

Like any other natural language under the sun, English has its own phonological system, vocabulary, grammar, folklore and literature, as well as its own history and geography, all of which have been studied extensively at least since the publication of the *Dictionary of the English Language* by Dr. Samuel Johnson in the 18th century (1755). Diverse studies into the history of English generally agree on several basic facts related to its major periods and present-day status. They all tell us that having emerged about fifteen centuries ago as a group of Old English dialects spoken by the peoples of Germanic origin inhabiting present-day England in the British Isles and struggling for supremacy throughout the whole of the Middle Ages, in more recent times a more monolithic form of the English language known as Early Modern English emerged and began to be transplanted to other continents and islands across the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Ocean, where in the course of the next several centuries it evolved into its present-day varieties. Today its destiny has changed again: apart from the traditional varieties of the English language, spoken by the populations of the British Isles, North America, Australia, New Zealand, and the use of English as the official language in some countries in Africa, Central America and many islands in almost every ocean in the world, an ever growing number of people in almost all countries all over the world are using it as a second language and a

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lingua franca. This unprecedented, spontaneous, uninterrupted growth of the English language, not to mention its many dialects (which is another and very different 'story'), alongside the unparalleled proliferation of an ever-increasing number of locally tinged Englishes that have arisen from its prolonged contact with other natural languages, tend to raise not only deep concerns over its adequacy as a truly effective and reliable tool of communication, but also some fundamental questions concerning the very essence of the phenomenon 'natural language' *per se*.

The aim of this paper is to show that **notwithstanding the widely accepted belief that a new variety of English, known as Global English, is said to be on the rise, the present-day status of this entity is either that of an artificial language, like Esperanto, or of a pidgin, rather than that of a natural language proper, or of a variety of a natural language.** This claim will be supported with some evidence from the basic tenets of linguistic culturology, from Anna Wierzbicka's works on the inseparableness of a language from its culture, as well as from the author's own observations in the course of more than two decades.

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Much has been written about the spread of English across the world in the nineteenth and the twentieth century and its present-day role in politics, international business, science, travel, tourism and the arts. In this, English has been compared to Latin in the days of Rome and in the European Middle Ages and beyond. Prominent English-speaking linguists, such as Albert C. Baugh, Thomas Cable (Baugh, Cable 1993: 8; 330), Tom McArthur (McArthur 1992: 352–353), Sir Randolph Quirk (Quirk et al 1992: 7–10) and David Crystal (Crystal) unanimously agree on its global spread and universal usage by practically billions of people today (see Globalization Report). But although the most common term that is being used by them all is 'English', it need be stressed that each of these authors actually discusses this word as a general term covering the group of the existing varieties of English known as British English, American English, Canadian English, Australian English, New Zealand English, South African English, Indian English, Caribbean English, Singapore English, etc. Many of these varieties, whose total number may vary (cf. Varieties of English), have long been described in greater or lesser detail, and even 'bilingual' dictionaries, for example American and British English dictionaries, have been compiled for teaching and practical purposes. A good example illustrating the latter is Jean Weber's list of several hundred English words used in the U.S.A., UK, Canada, Australasia and India (Weber). In this list, the word 'vacation', for instance, is cited as the American English word for the British 'holiday', a word also used in India, while Canadians are said to be using both 'vacation' and 'holiday', and Australians – 'holiday' and 'leave', but not 'vacation'. Still another example is the meaning of 'bush' in British and American English (meaning 'shrub') and in Australian English, where it denotes the forests of very tall eucalyptus trees surrounding the deserts in the heart of the continent.

Today, more and more English-speaking authors of textbooks in Business/International English begin to draw their readers' attention to the differences between the varieties of English. In the fourth edition of their university textbook, *Managing Cultural Differences*, for example, the American authors Philip Robert Harris and Robert T. Moran (Harris, Moran 1996: 37) state that "American English is different from, though rooted in, British English, which is further modified as it is used in the British Commonwealth nations". This universally known fact is however often forgotten or neglected, which is probably due to the existence of a

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common core underlying all the different varieties of English. They all derive from one and the same language, British English, and this can easily be seen in their common grammar and vocabulary. Another explanation may be the strong tendency in human thinking towards generalization and simplification.

The few instances above are just a tiny part of the impressive mass of evidence that shows that the noun 'English', when used correctly and responsibly by linguists or other scholars, is actually an umbrella term denoting any or all of the existing, traditional, historically evolved standard varieties of the English language spoken in various parts in the world, in which literatures have been written, some of very long standing, others still young, rather than a single, monolithic, global language that is spoken by the whole planet, or some sort of vaguely defined, arbitrary mass of loosely arranged English words, following the non-English native speaker's own language patterns. In this context, the term 'Global English', or its variants, 'Globish', 'International English' or 'General English', as well as their European variety, 'Euro English', should be taken to mean 'English for global/European communication' or 'English used all over the globe/Europe' rather than 'a (kind of) global language based on English'.²⁵ A very simple touchstone can be asking questions like the following: "What nationality are the people who speak Global English as a native language and what part of the earth do they inhabit"? "What is their culture, geography and history", "Has this language been described and codified systematically in dictionaries and textbooks?", "Is there any folklore created in this language?", "Is there any literature (prose works, poetry, drama) written in it"? "Have the world's major authors been translated into this language?" If one or all the answers are negative, then we are dealing with a purely artificial, virtual, entity and not with a natural language proper. This is because "a language is the 'materialization' of the collective experience and conscience in sound symbols that have been developed in the process of communication. Any given collective conscience finds its expression not just in language, but also in folklore, literature and the arts. Thus, the language, folklore, literature and the arts [of a given community] as different forms of the collective conscience make up a unified 'humanitarian' world of their own" (Slovar).

The difference between the first and the second – incorrect – meaning of the term 'Global English' becomes even more explicit, if we look at some more definitions of the two fundamental concepts, 'natural language' and 'interlanguage'. Still another definition of language describes it is "a system of conventional spoken or written symbols used by people in a shared culture to communicate with each other. [...] A language both reflects and affects a culture's way of thinking, and changes in a culture influence the development of its language" (Reference). The term 'interlanguage' arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the attempts at overcoming the diverse problems teachers typically confront in foreign language teaching. It was first described in detail by Larry Selinker (Selinker 1972). A Bulgarian linguist, Andrei Danchev (Danchev 1988: 4), further wrote that "foreign language

²⁵ International English is the concept of the English language as a global means of communication in numerous dialects, and also the movement towards an international standard for the language. It is also referred to as Global English [...], World English, Common English, Continental English or General English. *Sometimes these terms refer simply to the array of varieties of English spoken throughout the world* (International English 2011). – Italics mine, R.P.

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learners usually acquire only an approximation, that is an interlanguage variety, of the target language” and coined the term BEIL (Bulgarian English Interlanguage) to describe the specific Bulgarian approximation of English. The most crucial factor determining the character of an interlanguage is therefore the native language and the native culture interference. It is obvious that when using these two terms, special attention must be paid to their cultural aspect. Any well-grounded, scholarly discussion of ‘natural language’ and ‘interlanguage’ must begin with the very obvious truth that neither of these entities can be understood in isolation and torn away from the people who speak them, from the specific culture (or cultural hybrid) they store and represent. It is often forgotten that human beings are not isolated atoms. We need to constantly bear in mind that we are always part of very complex, hierarchically arranged communities, each having its own history, usually at least several generations old, and that each of these communities has been inhabiting a specific part of this planet with its own specific physical environment in the course of many generations, the phenomenon of the diaspora being just an exception proving the rule. Individuals are always ‘immersed’ in their culture, which is itself ‘immersed’ in its specific natural habitat. Culture both holds a community together and guarantees its survival in the environment it inhabits, and language (the unity of vocabulary, grammar, phraseology and the whole body of precedent texts²⁶), while being the storehouse and transmitter of the individual and collective experience of a community, makes possible not only communication, but also the intergroup cohesion of all individuals. All of these aspects are immediately reflected in the vocabulary, while the thought patterns of the members of a community are deeply ‘buried’, or ‘embedded’, in the grammar. As has so often been commented since the publication of Wilhelm von Humboldt’s groundbreaking work on the language-cum-culture integral in the early nineteenth century, it is precisely this intrinsic relatedness and interdependence between a culture, its habitat, and its language that explains why Eskimo languages have so many words for the different types of snow, why Australian English has a great variety of words for the different kinds of reptiles and marsupials, why *судьба, тоска, душа* are key words in Russian culture (Wierzbicka 2001) and why Bulgarian has the specific pair of words *човещина* (noblemness, charity, fairness and all other good human qualities) and *човещинка* (human foibles and weaknesses) and a proverb like *От работа се става гърбат, а не богат* (Work makes one a hunchback, it doesn’t make one rich).

The Australian professor of Polish background Anna Wierzbicka is a prominent linguist of modern times, who has explored this relatedness in very great detail in the course of several decades of uninterrupted work. In her book, *English: Meaning and Culture* (Wierzbicka 2006) Wierzbicka applies her original semantic method of semantic primes to reveal the inseparableness of the English language from its native, historically rooted, ‘Anglo’ culture, coming up with the phrase ‘cultural baggage of English’. She traces the evolution of some common English words, such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘fair’, ‘correct’, ‘reasonable’ and others, placing them in their proper historical contexts and showing how their meanings changed when these and other English words were transplanted to places outside the ‘inner circle’, that is the countries where English is spoken as a native language – Britain, Ireland, the USA,

²⁶ For the term ‘precedent text’ in Linguistic Culturology see Petrova’s Ph.D. dissertation (Petrova 2006: 19).

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Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The author of this paper, too, has explored this problem in a series of papers, such as “Teaching Englishness in English or English through Englishness” (Petrova 2009) and others, as well as in the book *Anglophone Area Studies: an Introduction* (Petrova 2010b) with the aim of articulating and describing the various aspects of ‘Englishness’ as a linguo-cultural entity.

From the perspective of linguistic culturology, then, ‘Global English’, when used to denote ‘a common variety of the English language, spoken by non-native speakers of English’, simply does not exist. David Crystal (Crystal 1994: 113) coined a similar term, ‘World Standard English’, explaining that this global variety seems to be “acting as a strong unifying force among the vast range of variation which exists”, but added that “a totally uniform, regionally neutral and unarguably prestigious variety does not yet exist worldwide”. What does exist is a diverse group of non-native English interlanguages, in which neither folklore, nor literature has so far been created and whose populations cannot be located in a single spot on the map of the globe. Functionally, these interlanguages are no different than Esperanto or some other International Auxilliary Language (IAL), to use Umberto Eco’s term. They can also be described as pidgins because they serve exclusively practical, and not cultural, purposes. Let us recall that a pidgin is an ‘over-simplified’, ‘childish’, ‘inferior’, simple-minded’ ‘contact’ language, which draws on elements from two or more languages. A notable feature of a pidgin is the lack of grammatical complexity and its very limited vocabulary (McArthur 1992: 778–779). Pidgins can therefore hardly function as transmitters of culture. And it needs to be stressed that a natural language is not only a tool that makes communication possible, but also a transmitter of culture – the way of life of a people, centred on a specific set of values, together with their highest achievements. In contrast, the various English interlanguages are characterized by simplified structures, minimal vocabulary and a strong disregard to standard norm, idiom, appropriateness, and knowledge of cultural background (cf. Global Communication in English), which is certainly not conducive to transmitting culture. In their article “Bringing Europe’s lingua franca into the classroom”, Jenifer Jenkins and Barbara Seidlhofer (Jenkins, Seidlhofer 2001) for example describe the kind of English spoken by non-English West Europeans, focusing on its simplified phonology, morphology and syntax and come up with two practical proposals: for “the development of a continental European hybrid variety of English that does not look to Britain or America for its standards of correctness”, and for a new “focus on contexts of use that are relevant to European speakers of English”. The authors claim that “descriptions of spoken English offered to these learners should not be grounded in British or American uses of English but in ELFE [English as a lingua franca in Europe] or other non-native contexts (depending on where the particular learners intend to use their English in future)”. The phrase “ELFE or other non-native context” used by Jenkins and Seidlhofer means just any context that is other than English or American, e.g. Italian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Spanish, etc., but this immediately presupposes this other, specific cultural setting of the language in question, be it German, Italian, French, or Turkish. Using simplified English in such settings may certainly solve some survival or practical problems of non-native speakers of English who happen to be visiting this foreign country. But if one needs to be fully understood by the local people, it will surely serve one better if one either resorts to the native language, or finds a qualified interpreter, neither of which has been suggested by the authors. Jenkins and Seidlhofer’s project implies that all the typical, characteristic flavour of the English language, its true ‘cultural baggage’, will

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be stripped off and replaced with this purely functional interlanguage or pidgin. One more problem arises. What would be the common code of signification, i.e. the content plane, for each of the communicants using two different interlanguages or pidgins? Can we indeed speak of proper communication if the common background system of meanings is in question? Wouldn't such communication be ambiguous, confused and inefficient? What if, for example, two interlanguage speakers of English use the word 'bush', cited earlier, with its two different meanings? The logical answer is that proper communication entails a system of signification that is meant to ensure maximum clarity, and this can only be achieved by means of speaking the same language or the same language variety.

Luckily, not all authors celebrate the emergence of a simplified version of Global/Euro English as the lingua franca of the planet. More often than not, we hear individual voices deploring the decline of standards in education in general and in foreign language teaching in particular and the vogue for simplification and reductionism. Language is one of the basic characteristics of the human species and one begins to wonder if this massive modern trend towards simplifying the existing human languages, English included, is something for the human species to be so proud of. There is certainly an ethical problem involved in this debate. Language, like music, painting, architecture, science and technology, is one of the major achievements of the human race and must be guarded, cared for and respected. Natural, living languages are extremely complex and highly specific ways of seeing one and the same reality, different windows open to the world. They have come as a result of long, steady, uninterrupted natural growths, none of which can be imitated successfully in 'laboratory conditions'. They, like every great human achievement (or gift from God), are part of the cultural legacy of humanity and should be treated accordingly, that is, with reverence. Tampering with a language is no different than tampering with the genes of a given species. Seen in this perspective, then, Global English is perhaps no different than a kind of 'genetically modified' English. If the idea is to create a simplified version, specifically tailored to suit the projected needs of large masses of people, we are entering a discussion in which the next question may very well be: Do we have to simplify Mozart's symphonies to make them digestible for all? What about the formulas in physics and chemistry, mathematics or biology? Do we have to simplify these too? Do we have to discard Dante, Shakespeare, Racine, Kant, or Goethe from the school and university curricula and syllabuses only because they are not easily understood by all? Or the Bible? Or the Vedas? Or translate all the major works of humanity into simple and abridged versions and adapt them for this obscure, statistical entity, the 'average' citizen, very much like the mass-produced music in the shopping malls?

A responsible, informed approach is certainly different: we need to make an effort and teach people more reverence instead, awakening in them their true human essence.

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