A RESPONSE TO THE ARTICLE ‘ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES’, BY MICHAEL CLYNE AND FARZAD SHARIFIAN

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The brevity of the article makes it difficult for Michael Clyne (MC) and Farzad Sharifian (FS) to do justice to the multiplicity of contexts, functions, and forms of contemporary English. It is a hugely complex scene, as regards forms and functions, myths, ideologies, and realities that are harsh for some people and languages, uplifting for others. There is now a vast literature in this field, only a selection of which is drawn on. The range of topics is doubtless reflected in the variety of responses elicited for this thematic number of the ARAL. MC and FS correctly refer to masses of the relevant parameters of “international” English, but I feel that the article tends to over-generalise because of inadequate clarification of the contextual and functional dimensions in play in any given situation or country.

The first third of the article makes many valid points about the polycentricity of English, but tends to focus more on attitudinal factors than on structural power. This needs to be centre stage when English is entrenched in education systems, specifically certain privileged forms of the language, which are used in the prestige functions that success in education leads to. Exocentric rather than endocentric English norms are still demanded in education in virtually all former colonies (India, Pakistan, Ghana, Zambia, ...), just as they are in foreign language learning. The worldwide movement towards monolingual English-medium education is an aggravating factor, and in effect serves to cement an unsurmountable wall between elites and the rest. It reinforces the position of those who start from a favourable position; it holds down others, whose English remains limited, at the same time as they miss out on consolidating literacy in their own languages, leading to less mastery of subject content in either language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). The expansion of English in recent decades has been a result of English being integral to the global neoliberal project that corporate globalisation has ruthlessly imposed in recent decades.

It might have been better for the authors to concentrate exclusively on international uses of English in the sense of communication, written and spoken, by people operating...
outside the domestic context. This is what Halliday (2006) refers to as *global* uses of English, as distinct from the use of English in national contexts, whether of the UK-USA-Australia type or the many Englishes that have developed more hybrid multilingual roots and offshoots in many former colonies, forms that are *locally* valid, the *world Englishes* that Kachru has been promoting for decades. Halliday misleadingly refers to the latter as “international”. MC and FS report McKay referring to English as a “language of wider communication within multilingual societies”, which again is unhelpful, since “wider communication” generally applies to international uses. Terminology in this field is in fact a minefield. This “international” language happens to be a “national” one in some countries, one that has also gone native in former colonies (Kachru refers to this process as natively, MS and FS as localisation and enculturation) and fulfils local functions, invariably prestige ones, hammered home in education, which of course is normative, privileging elite forms of the language, competence in English in effect functioning as an elite closure mechanism. When English serves these local social hierarchising functions, it is no longer useful or indeed adequate to refer to it as “international” or as a language of “wider communication”. It is a language of social inclusion and exclusion.

MC and FS rightly raise the question of whether the expansion of English in many countries is at the expense of other languages, destructive or empowering, polarities that they regard as “not necessarily incompatible”. Of course not. Any language can serve noble or evil purposes, and English has manifestly done both in the past and continues to do so. It depends entirely on whether the learning and use of any dominant language is additive or subtractive. Formulating the issue as a choice between monolingual policy and “English itself” is false. What is significant is what users of a language (can) do with the language, rather than anything anthropomorphic or intrinsic to a given language.

MC and FS refer briefly to the efforts of two European countries to resist the encroachment of “English-only”. A great deal is happening both at the supranational European Union (EU) level and in member states, a topic that requires book-length treatment (Phillipson, 2003). Language policy developments and initiatives can be followed by consulting the website of the EU Commission, which now has a Commissioner for Multilingualism who is attempting to promote a wide range of policies.¹ A primary goal over the past decade has been to promote the learning of languages other than English, with patchy success. The EU’s internal policies in its institutions tend to reinforce the dominance of a single language, formerly French, now English (Phillipson, 2007; Phillipson, 2008a). Education policy is, like language policy, still in principle a national prerogative, unlike many economic policies where laws and regulations are determined at the EU level. But cultures and languages are no respecters of borders, which is why

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English for certain purposes is shifting from foreign to second language status in some countries, particularly northern European ones.

For instance, university MA degree programmes are increasingly offered in English in continental Europe: in 2007, 774 degrees in the Netherlands, in Germany 415, Finland 235, Sweden 123 (figures quoted in Wächter and Maiworm, 2008). A much higher figure for Sweden in 2007 is given by The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education – 480 out of 680 MA degrees. It would, however, be incorrect to conclude that local students are substituting English for the mother tongue: even if, for instance, 50 per cent of MA degrees at a given university are in English, the students may well be mainly foreign rather than nationals.

The wisdom of switching to English in higher education in Scandinavia has been questioned for a decade or more. Does the move into English for “internationalisation” purposes mean that vets, psychologists and other professionals will be educated entirely in English rather than the local language? There has been talk of the risk of domain loss, when referring to an increased use of English in research publication, or as the medium of instruction for higher education, business, the media etc. Invariably the assumption is that any expansion in the use of English is at the expense of Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish, which is by no means necessarily the case. Such argumentation reflects a monolingual mindset (which MC and FS deplore), and is far from the reality of much higher education teaching, especially in the natural sciences. This is often bilingual – in all but name – using textbooks written in English and a Scandinavian language as the language of the classroom and examinations. The fact that natural scientists choose to publish scholarly articles primarily in English does not necessarily mean that they are incapable of writing textbooks or popularising articles on the same topic in their mother tongue. How far domain loss is a reality in Scandinavia has yet to be researched adequately, and preliminary surveys are of limited theoretical and empirical validity. A recent analysis published by a senior researcher at the Danish Language Board (Dansk Sprognævn) argues convincingly that there is no evidence of the Danish language suffering domain loss (Ravnholt, 2008), which flatly contradicts earlier claims by the Board. Existing diagnostic efforts are hampered by loose terminology, in that “domain” may refer to a vast range of activities or to a narrow spectrum, and “loss” is inappropriate in that it obscures the agency of both the losers and the gainers. In reality, domains are not “lost”: if and when it occurs, it is when specific spoken or written activities are subjected to linguistic capital accumulation by dispossession due to forces behind an increased use of English, the result being the marginalisation of other languages (Phillipson, 2006; Phillipson, 2008b).
The Swedish government has for years been seriously investigating how best to maintain a balance between English for internationalisation purposes and Swedish and other languages for national purposes. The culmination of a considerable amount of reporting and consultation is a 2008 White Paper of 265 pages setting out the case for legislation, *Värna språken – förslag till språklag. Betänkande av Språklagsutredningen* (Protecting the language-bill for a Language Law. A White Paper on the case for a language law). This covers legislating to secure the status of Swedish; the linguistic human rights of minority language users (five legally recognised minority languages, and Swedish Sign language); the maintenance of the languages and cultures of immigrants. Substantial sections cover many aspects of the use and learning of English. The White Paper stresses the need for higher education institutions to formulate explicit language policies, citing the University of Göteborg/Gothenburg, which has a programmatic position paper (several Nordic universities now have quite detailed language policies, mostly aimed at ensuring the multilingualism of staff and students, but often with a gap between proclamation and implementation). It refers to the risk of capacity loss when Swedes are obliged to function in English rather than their mother tongue, whether in higher education or in the EU system. In other words people’s linguistic or communicative competence may be reduced, and if this is allowed to take place, this erodes the main instrument of a well-functioning democracy, in speech and in writing. Effectively what is happening here is capacity dispossession of the individual, in the worst case in both languages.

There is definitely a risk of this occurring in the ongoing European integration process. Similar moves to ensure a balance between English and national languages are afoot in Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway, though language policy is seldom a high priority for politicians. They naively assume that English is the only foreign language that matters, unlike the business world, where at least some leaders appreciate that competence in many languages is necessary. Some European countries – among them Germany and Finland – are working seriously to ensure competence in more than one foreign language, but the scene is very uneven. Contrary to what MV and FS state, foreign language learning in France does not suffer from under-investment but rather from being ineffective. The UK and Ireland benefit economically by choosing not to stress foreign language learning in education (in conflict with EU commitments), and by continental European countries investing massively in English learning (Grin, 2005).

MC and FS rightly point out that Kachru’s Three Circles model is sociolinguistically crude, as demonstrated in Bruthiaux (2003). The slippery term “English as a lingua franca” is open to abuse, since everyday use of the term is so multifarious, and research into it tends to decontextualise users. It seems to imply symmetrical, equitable commu-
communication, which is often not the case, and fails to make a clear distinction between receptive and productive competence. It conceals the actual functions that the language performs, English as a lingua academica, lingua bellica, lingua cultura, lingua economica, lingua frankensteinia etc. (Phillipson, 2008c).

MC and FS rightly endorse sensitivity to “multiple systems of norms”, and much of their concluding section appeals for education and testing to cover this systematically. However, this stance presumably is restricted to spoken language interaction. The primary focus of formal education is literacy practices and their evaluation. The authors refer in passing to what Brutt-Griffler optimistically refers to as the “macroacquisition” of English by societies, but this relates in fact only to local English, as distinct from World English (WE), which she concedes is “the dominant socio-political language form” (2002, p. 114), i.e. Halliday’s global English, which only an elite acquire access to. I disagree fundamentally with Brutt-Griffler’s approach and conclusions (Phillipson, 2004). She makes the claim that WE is “superseding national languages” entirely as a result of a “world historical process” (p. 124) that is presumed to be universally democratic and beneficial. She sees WE as doing away with “hierarchy among speech communities” (p. 180), and non-Western nations “take equal part in the creation of the world econocultural system and its linguistic expression, WE” (p. 108). Does she really think that the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the North American Free Trade Association and their like serve the whole of humanity equally and equitably? Alas, there is not one shred of evidence for this. Nor is there any evidence that UK and USA standard English norms (think of global sales of Webster and Oxford dictionaries, and their very limited coverage of less prestigious variants of English) are no more influential than those of, say New Zealand or New Brunswick? “New” Englishes are for local consumption. Global English continues, never static, ever influential.

The need to make a clear distinction between international and local forms of English, external and internal ones, leads me to question the wisdom of those who claim that native speaker influence on the forms of the language is declining, and that second language users of English are taking over from native speakers as norm-defining role models (which Graddol, Jenkins and others claim, and which MC and FS implicitly endorse). I agree with Anna Wierzbicka’s assessment (2006, pp. 13, 14) that too many “Publications on “global English”, “international English”, “world English”, “standard English” and “English as a lingua franca” … neglect the Anglo cultural heritage … the semantics embedded in the words and grammar.[…] In the present-day world it is Anglo English that remains the touchstone and guarantor of English-based global communication”. This is definitely the case in written communication in prestige domains, which MC and FS ac-
knowledge in relation to academic contexts (on the increasing role of English in the integration of European higher education see Phillipson, 2006). Nor does an insistence on a standardised norm for many functions conflict with the fact that English is used in a large variety of ways, polycentricity within and across countries. There is indeed huge variation within English mother-tongue communities, primarily in the spoken language, as even a few hours of BBC television reveals. When Germans or Bangladeshis use German- or Bangla-influenced English with their own nationals, the context and norms in force differ radically from what is required in international publications, whether scholarly, political, corporate, or popular. English-medium newspapers in India, Singapore or Thailand are fully comprehensible worldwide. Market pressures dictate that novelists from Australia who wish their work to sell worldwide need to restrict local colour (Butler, 2002). The remarkable novelists from the Indian subcontinent who succeed in winning the (British) Booker Mann prize and delight a global readership are typically people with bicultural experience, Indian and Western, creative globe-trotters. The readership in their country of origin, India, is probably much less than 5 per cent of the population.

These authors have their origins in the local elite who benefit from English-medium education. MC and FS rightly refer to the way elites in India and Singapore are becoming monolingual English users, in the home as well as in education and professional life. Acquisition of English by the privileged detaches them from the languages and cultures of the many in their own countries. Language competence functions as a crucial mechanism for distinguishing between societal Haves and Never-to-Haves: “In today’s India, English is the language of power, used as an indication of greater control over outcomes of social activities. […] Over the post-Independence years, English has become the single most important predictor of socio-economic mobility. […] With the globalized economy, English education widens the discrepancy between the social classes” (Mohanty, 2006, pp. 268–269). The Singapore situation differs in many respects, and has been copiously analysed.

David Graddol’s two reports draw together a large number of variables that influence the worldwide position of English. But one can scarcely claim that this is “independent” research. Both reports were commissioned by the British Council, which defines itself in Thatcherite terms as “the UK’s international organisation for educational opportunities and cultural relations. We work in 110 countries worldwide to build engagement and trust for the UK through the exchange of knowledge and ideas between people”. Nearly two-thirds of their £565 million budget in 2007/8 was earned income, mainly from English teaching and testing. Graddol admittedly writes that the UK may lose out if it
fails to equip its own citizens for a multilingual world, but a primary concern of both reports was to prepare the extremely profitable English teaching business for a changing world. The BC dispatches Graddol round the world to advocate more English teaching, as though this is the solution to the world's educational problems, and as if the British know how to do it in all parts of the world. The latest thrust of the British government is Gordon Brown's plan to make British English the global language of “choice”, announced on the occasion of his first visit as Prime Minister to China and India in February 2008, along with a battery of measures to accomplish this, spearheaded by the British Council. The worldwide prestige of English gives its native speakers massive advantages, and gives the British economy one of its major “industries”, the English Language Teaching business and all its ramifications. The huge expansion of higher education in Australia – its marketisation, its export business – has also cashed in on English in this way.

The “success” of global English is viscerally connected to US power in the twentieth century and the many dimensions of what has been labelled as globalisation, the neoliberal mission that the post-1945 financial and economic arrangements facilitated and that have been ruthlessly implemented by a combination of “soft” and “hard” power, including military invasion and the torture techniques that the USA has “perfected”. The most powerful analysis of the interconnections between economics and political and military suppression, from Chile to Iraq, is Naomi Klein’s impressive *The shock doctrine* (2007), though, like many other social scientists, she ignores the language dimension of globalisation. I have attempted to analyse the interlocking of English with neo-imperialism and the impact on other languages (Phillipson, 2008b; 2008c; 2009). The idea that the USA had a “moral” advantage over alternative systems, which MC and FS accept, merely shows how successful US propaganda has been. The USA is a warfare society, initially in the Americas, now worldwide (Hixson, 2008), though the financial meltdown and economic recession of 2008, along with the shift of economic growth to China, India and Brazil, plus the disastrous wars of Bush II, all suggest that a shift of global power relations is under way.

There is clearly a need to re-think language policies too, local and international ones, if a more just world is to emerge. This is the context within which the challenges and possibilities of “English as an international language” need to be addressed – though the urgent challenges are those that need addressing locally, building on local resources. Celebrating diversity in local varieties of English is locally important. A changed focus in this direction in education, as one element of multilingual education (García, Skutnabb-Kangas and Torres-Guzmán, 2006; Mohanty, Panda, Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas,
2009), in particular in postcolonial societies, could potentially lead to a democratisation of English, with it only being learned additively, as is aimed at in the Nordic countries. Thank you, Michael and Farzad, for contributing to this discussion.

ENDNOTES

3 www.britishcouncil.org.

REFERENCES


Phillipson, Robert (2008c). Lingua franca or lingua frankensteinia? English in European integration and globalisation. *World Englishes*, 27 (2), 250–284; which is a ‘Forum’ consisting of the article, responses by seven scholars, and a closing word by Robert Phillipson.


