The trouble with World Englishes

Jakob R. E. Leimgruber

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JAKOB R. E. LEIMGRUBER

Rethinking the concept of 'geographical varieties' of English

English in multilingual contexts

Ever since the 1980s, when research interest in the field of 'World Englishes' began to gather speed, the view of the English language around the world has been largely dominated by the construct of so-called 'varieties' of English. These varieties are usually given a geographical label ('Singapore English', 'Welsh English', 'South African English', 'Fiji English', etc), and are described in terms of their pronunciation, their grammar, and their vocabulary. The resulting anthologies (see e.g. Wells, 1982; Trudgill & Hannah, 1982; Kortmann et al., 2004) have contributed a lot to our understanding of how English varies globally, as well as to raising the profile of non-inner circle (Kachru, 1985) varieties, which had previously not benefited from as much attention.

A typical modus operandi for the description of a 'variety' of English in such works includes a brief sociolinguistic sketch of the community in which the variety is spoken, followed by a list of features found in the variety, both at the phonological and the grammatical levels, as well as, prominently, at the lexical level. Often – though by no means always – the data on which these descriptions are based come from large corpora: the ICE (International Corpus of English) is one such ambitious project aiming at gathering corpus data from a large selection of geographical locales, all subjected to the same collection criteria, thus resulting in a body of data that is easily comparable across varieties.

Problems, however, start to emerge when one considers that the data collected for such corpora tend to be restricted to English. While this may seem like an obvious methodological decision given the focus of studies being a particular variety of *English*, or more generally, World *Englishes* (and certainly the ICE corpora are primarily concerned with English), it remains the case that there are few places in which English is used as the only language. More often than not, English co-exists with other languages: for instance, Singapore English lives side by side with Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and a host of varieties of Chinese, Dravidian, and Indo-Aryan; Welsh English obviously co-exists with Welsh and South African English with Afrikaans, with the nine other official languages, as well as with sixteen other spoken languages (Lewis, 2009). The relationship between English and these languages is never one of simple side-by-side co-existence. Rather, speakers use them concurrently to greater or lesser extents, switch from one to the other and back, and regularly draw on elements or features from several of these languages in order to

JAKOB LEIMGRUBER is a lecturer and post-doctoral researcher at the University of Freiburg, Germany. His research has focused on the sociolinguistic situation of Singapore, particularly the interaction between the colloquial Singlish and Standard English from an indexical perspective. A recent monograph Singapore English: Structure, Variation, and Usage *(CUP, 2013) summarises these findings. Further research interests include Singapore's Indian community, the linguistic indexing of authenticity, and the interaction between language policy and language use. His current research takes a comparative approach to language policy and use in Singapore, Wales, and Quebec.*
Email: jakob.leimgruber@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de

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index certain social meanings. Although the extent of multilingualism differs across speakers, 'pure' monolingualism is non-existent, if we take into account even token knowledge of non-English words or phrases by speakers in such settings.

The phenomenon of code-switching is, of course, well documented, and there have been endeavours to create databases and corpora of actual code-switching: the Bangor Siarad Corpus (BSC) is one such example, where a large amount of naturalistic speech is recorded and several switches from Welsh to English and vice versa are being investigated (see e.g. Stammers & Deuchar, 2012; Carter & Deuchar, 2011; Deuchar et al., forthcoming). The sociolinguistic choices involved in the switches and the social meanings they may index are less of a direct concern of such corpora, but they may well be investigated to some extent on the basis of this data. What remains missing from such approaches is their contribution to the field of World Englishes, where code-switching is often (when acknowledged at all) regarded as more of a nuisance to the analysis of monolingual local Englishes.

Features, resources, codes, varieties

A good overview of the development of the concept of the variety is given in Seargeant & Tagg (2011), who approach it from a World Englishes perspective. They highlight the important legitimising act of naming varieties, part of the Kachruvian paradigm, which gives outer-circle Englishes 'the status of a discrete "language" or "variety"' (Seargeant & Tagg, 2011: 498), thus bettering the status of these ways of speaking in the larger methodology of the discipline. A 'post-varieties' approach is then identified in contributions by Bruthiaux (2003), Pennycook (2007), and Park & Wee (2009), which question the nation-state level of naming of such outer-circle varieties in a context of linguistic globalisation that brings different 'varieties' of English into close contact. A similar point is made by Blommaert (2010), who notes the global flow of linguistic resources going well beyond that of varieties of English, giving the example of elements of French found in Japanese advertising (Blommaert, 2010: 29): an up-market chocolate shop in Central Tokyo calling itself *Nina's Derrière*. Blommaert explains how, in this case, the French element in the name is not French in any linguistic sense (i.e., the French equivalent of 'behind'); rather, it acts as an emblematic indexical of a set of social meanings associated with things French – the shop and its merchandise were advertising themselves as classy, *chic*, and refined.

Mixing distinct linguistic features, traditionally thought to come from (and historically indeed deriving from) different languages or varieties, is perfectly natural and very much the unmarked way of speaking in many contact situations – situations which include many present-day urban settings in conceptually, traditionally, and officially monolingual polities. Even examples such as Blommaert's Tokyo gem are not hard to come by, though perhaps less abundant in everyday spoken interaction. A brief look at the 'variety' called Singapore English, especially its vernacular form, Singlish, shows a high degree of etymological heterogeneity. Lexical items present in traditional descriptions of the variety include elements from English (obviously), Hokkien, Malay, Teochew, Cantonese, and some other languages. In actual production, however, it is common for speakers to code-switch extensively between Singlish and any other language they may have at their disposal. Picture the (quite unremarkable) case of a Singaporean speaker who grew up speaking Hokkien with his grandparents, Hokkien, Mandarin, and English with his parents, and Mandarin and English with his siblings. When such a speaker uses Singlish and its Hokkien loanwords, is he doing just that, or code-switching between English/Singlish and Hokkien? The question may be more easily answered for a Tamil speaker, who, in a similar situation, could be said to code-switch between Tamil and Singlish, but only because there are fewer loanwords of Tamil origin in what is commonly recognised as prototypical Singlish.

The variety as seen by its speakers

Notwithstanding these considerations, it remains that speakers are very happy to identify individual varieties by means of a convenient label, even in highly multilingual societies. In a small questionnaire-based survey, administered online to Chinese Singaporean university students, many respondents, for instance, were happy to say that they were fluent in Singlish, English, and any number of official and non-official varieties. Non-official varieties of Chinese were often labelled as 'dialects' in keeping with the terminology of the nation's language planners. The ease with which these are used presupposes a degree of shared knowledge and of agreement on what these terms refer to (for example, *Mandarin* in Singapore is not the same as *Mandarin* in

Beijing, Shanghai, or Taipei), but at the same time, they are imprecise in the extreme (the term *English* alone does not reveal whether it covers Singlish, Standard English, something in between, or the whole continuum). After all, the ostensibly simple distinction between Singlish and English has proven to be rather more complex than it is usually thought to be by both planners and speakers (Platt, 1975; Gupta, 1994; Alsagoff, 2010; Leimgruber, 2012).

To come back to the possibility of Hokkien–Singlish/English code-switching, and given the abundance of Hokkien loanwords in Singlish, one wonders to what extent Hokkien and Singlish are distinguished by speakers. When presented with the sentence in (1), which is entirely in Hokkien and has the pragmatic status of the prototypical interjection that precedes a fight, respondents were split on what to answer to the question 'Is this Singlish?' There was agreement 'Yes, it's Hokkien', disagreement 'No, it's Hokkien', as well as more differenced (and more interesting) opinions such as 'Yes – to a Chinese Singlish speaker', 'Hokkien, which can be said to be part of Singlish', 'Hokkien, but may be viewed as Singlish if used in part of a sentence in Singlish', and 'Depends on what language you were using beforehand'. There is, therefore, an awareness among speakers that not only does (1) represent the normal borrowing process involved in contact situations such as those leading to the emergence of Singlish, it also exists as a Hokkien string which can very well be used in all-Hokkien discourse, or, on the other hand, in multilingual, code-switching interaction.

(1) Khoà^{n} sím-mih?
look what
'What are you looking at?'

Similarly, the question 'What is Singlish? Give a definition' resulted in a range of responses, some of which are given in (2). The more straightforward answers simply equated *Singlish* with *Singapore English* or a colloquial form thereof. Many (2d–h) focused on the admixture of non-English elements in Singlish, often listing the other three official languages. Others carry some form of value-judgement or highlight the local relevance of Singlish: according to (2j) Singlish is used when 'being friendly and casual', (2k) calls Singlish efficient and concise, whereas (2l,m) regard Singlish as intrinsically Singaporean, (2l) highlighting its role in expressing a Singaporean identity.

(2) a. Singlish is Singapore English.
b. Colloquail [sic] form of English in Singapore.
c. A dialect of English used in Singapore
d. It's a pidgin or creole of all the 'native' languages of Singapore namely, Mandarin/Hokkien, Tamil and Malay.
e. A hybrid of English, Malay, Hokkien and spoken in the intonation of Chinese.
f. Singlish is a mixture of the different languages that can be found in Singapore, namely English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.
g. English laced with Mandarin Chinese, Malay, Tamil and a variety of dialects.
h. Singaporean's English, with lexicon from languages used by its people, such as Malay, Hokkien, Chinese, English, etc.
i. 1. the use of "la", "lor", "leh", "meh"
2. incorporation of common terms from dialects and Bahasa Malayu [sic]
j. It is a form of English that Singaporeans speak when they are being friendly and casual with others.
k. Efficient and consice [sic] English, with a heavy influence of mandarin, hokkien and malay
l. A singapore identity
m. Singlish is the most comprehensive way a singaporean expresses himself.

These definitions are interesting in their own right, but – perhaps expectedly so – they differ substantially from descriptions of Singapore English in the scholarly literature. The discourse particles mentioned in (2i), for instance, are indeed a hallmark of Singlish; however, the often-named input of Tamil (2d,f,g) has been minimal at best. Similarly, the 'mixture' referred to in (2f) is anything but straightforward, and the ways in which substrate grammars have or have not contributed to the emergence of present-day Singlish is a matter of ongoing debate. What the replies in (2) do show, however, is the absence of a single clear definition of the variety 'Singapore English' or 'Singlish'. Not all of them even include the term *Singapore*: (2k) calls Singlish 'efficient and concise English', whereas (2e,g,i) are attempts at a description that does not specify the locale where it is used.

There is, therefore, among users of the variety, a mismatch between the carefree use of labelled varieties and the large degree of variability in their definitions of said variety. More worryingly, however, there is a comparable mismatch between the

use, among linguists, of similarly-labelled varieties and their interest in an accurate description. Such labels suggest a certain degree of uniformity within the variety which is often lacking. In the case of 'Singapore English', internal variation is considerable, and the only uncontroversially shared feature is the geographical delimitation of the unit of analysis: the English used within the confines of the city-state of Singapore is 'Singapore English'. Such a definition is not linguistic but geographical and political, and a close analysis of the varieties of English on both sides of the Singapore Straits would show that Singapore English and Malaysian English are in fact quite comparable in form. What distinguishes them most is their sociolinguistic status within their respective countries. Similar arguments could be made for the distinction between northern Welsh English and Merseyside English, for instance.

Conclusions

It may seem impractical to completely do away with such a useful concept as the variety, which has for so long been the basic unit of analysis in many fields of linguistics, including World Englishes. It remains, however, that the concept is often under-defined in works setting out to describe such varieties – terms like 'Singapore English', 'Malaysian English', 'Welsh English', etc., are taken for granted because, after all, they contain a geographical component everyone can relate to. The actual linguistic form of the 'variety' is then described post hoc, with the analytical unit 'variety' conditioning the analysis. Of course, typological and comparative works exist (Lim & Gisborne, 2009; Sharma, 2009; Kortmann & Szmrecsanyi, 2011), but they too make extensive use of the concept. There are quantitative alternatives, such as the dialectometric method (see e.g. Szmrecsanyi, 2011) and measures of phonetic similarity (McMahon et al., 2007), but here too, the starting point is, more often than not, a conceptual linguistic system tied to a particular locale, not least because of the sampling and collection methods employed in the corpora they use. Research in the field of 'sociolinguistics of globalisation' (Blommaert, 2010; see also Pennycook, 1994; 2007), where the concept of the variety is truly challenged (resulting in *variety* as well as *language* being cast aside to be replaced by *linguistic resources*; see e.g. Blommaert, 2010: 180–1), has largely been qualitative in nature, a methodological approach that is perhaps better suited for its purpose. However, it is conceivable – and desirable – to complement these qualitative approaches with quantitative data: the compilation of non-monolingual corpora (Deuchar et al, forthcoming; Lyu et al., 2010) is a first step in the right direction, and may provide us with data that may have the potential to better inform our understanding of how language variation in multilingual settings is best modelled. ■

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