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The typology of Asian Englishes

Setting the agenda*

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1. Why typology? Why Asian Englishes?

The emergence of myriad varieties of English world-wide has resulted over the decades in scholarly approaches to categorizing the varieties into broad types, for example, the well-known and widely used Three Circles of English (Kachru 1985), or into regional groupings of Asian Englishes, African Englishes, *etc.* (e.g. Kortmann *et al.* 2004; Schneider *et al.* 2004; the journal *Asian Englishes*; the book series *Asian Englishes Today*; *etc.*). But while such categorizations are revealing when used in the ways they were originally intended, namely, for grouping and appreciating English varieties according to their diffusion, status, functions, or geography, i.e. as sociohistorical entities, they are not meant to imply that members of a group by definition share structural properties, which can only be established after close scrutiny of all aspects of grammar; nor do the groupings mean common genesis, an extremely unlikely possibility considering the diversity of contexts from which such varieties emerge. This may seem to be stating the obvious, but a substantial amount of research still examines structural features of specific English varieties on the basis of their being an “Inner Circle” or “Outer Circle” variety, as if their membership of that class defined their grammatical structure; the New Englishes

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have long had a list of linguistic features ascribed to them as tendencies (e.g. Platt, Weber and Ho 1984), and regional groups like “Asian” or “African Englishes” have also often been described as exhibiting common features with the implication that this is by virtue of their belonging to that group (see e.g. Lim 2009a for further discussion on this). If the object of enquiry comprises the structural features of English varieties though, then other factors — and not a reliance on such classifications — are more material. Even if the approach goes further in establishing that a certain group does have certain linguistic features in common, as in Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi’s (2004) survey of shared features in varieties of English,¹ the question is whether these should indeed be viewed as “universals of New Englishes” or in fact be accountable for by other factors.

When considering the structure of New Englishes which have evolved in — multilingual, mostly postcolonial — contexts of Asia (thus, Asian Englishes), the significant factors to be considered are: 1) the variety/ies of the English lexifier that entered the local context; 2) the nature of transmission of English to the local population; and 3) the local, i.e. substrate, languages of the community in which the New English emerges (also see Hickey 2005: 506).² It is worth noting that, as pointed out by Schneider (2007), settlement and transmission types are clear-cut and important mostly for the early phases of settlement, but tend to become increasingly blurred with time in the increasing complexity in the development of society (2007: 25). On the other hand, the substrate languages may be seen to be the more germane factor for accounting for the grammar of the emergent English, in particular at a later — e.g. current — point in time. With this third factor being the focus of this issue, only a brief elaboration of the first two factors follows.

1. Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi (2004) calculate the relative strength of representation of a feature across varieties by averaging its “feature value” for all English varieties and world regions examined; this means that, for instance, even if a feature is not found in all but in three out of a total of four Asian varieties, it receives a high “feature ratio” score (0.75) for Asia and is included as “typical” for the region. The point is that these Asian varieties have a particular feature because one or some of their substrates do, and not simply because the feature is typical for the region, i.e. it is not necessarily a “universal” of New (or here, Asian) Englishes (for detailed exploration into this, see Sharma’s paper in this issue).

2. It should be noted at the outset that an evaluation of the factors relevant to the evolution of a variety must of course also involve the recognition, first, that there are other important parameters involved, such as historical and political events, sociolinguistic determinants, and identity constructions, and, next, that these may be and often are distinct across the different phases or eras in evolution, which affect the dynamics of contact and the structural features that emerge in the evolving English differently at different points in time (see e.g. Schneider 2007 for a model for Postcolonial Englishes; Lim 2007 and in prep for the situation for Singapore English).

With regard to the type of English which comes into contact with the vernaculars, in Asian Englishes, the role of the lexifier can, at least superficially, be a “control”, for the most part being 19th-century British English, in the role of missionaries, teachers, administrators, at the time of formal colonization³ in India, Singapore and Hong Kong, or a variable, e.g. in comparison with the 20th-century American English lexifier of the Philippines. We should of course be cautious of over-simplification; after all, much regional and dialectal variation would have been present, e.g. in Irish priests and nuns in the mission schools, and non-standard varieties would also have been part of the initial input, e.g. of sailors, soldiers, tradesmen, *etc.*⁴ Attention should also be paid to the second-generation users, and thus transmitters, of the emergent English, as well as the other Asian Englishes that would have been in the equation too, e.g. the varieties spoken by Indian and Ceylonese teachers in Singapore, the Eurasian varieties spoken throughout the region, and the English of the Peranakans in the Malay peninsula; more recently, the English varieties available via the media also play an important role for all Asian Englishes.

Where the nature of transmission of English is concerned, while originally via the education system and thus acquired as an L2, consideration must also be given to the subsequent spread and evolution of the variety outside of the school, for instance, in the playground between children who have acquired (a variety of) English, and amongst the local population themselves, e.g. the early adoptors such as the Peranakans speaking Peranakan English (Lim 2009b). These are clearly extremely intriguing and significant directions for investigation, but are not the focus of this collection.

What the five papers take on in this special issue is the third factor: they investigate the structure of Asian varieties of English by exploring the relationship between the typological profile of substrate languages in the specific linguistic ecology and the grammatical features of the emerging contact variety of English — in-depth studies of which have been noted to be in need (Kachru 2005: 119) — which are argued to be an illuminating way of exploring the similarities and differences between contact varieties of English (e.g. Ansaldo 2009; Lim 2009).

3. Though Asia's initial contacts with English date back to the 1600s with the East India Company (Mesthrie 2008: 24).

4. Mesthrie (2008: 27) warns that the target language was often “a varied, vexatious and moving target”.

Why are Asian Englishes particularly interesting as an object of enquiry in this regard? We can identify a number of reasons for why they make for an exciting read, mentioning just three here.⁵

Table 1. Summary of range of lexifiers and substrates of Asian Englishes

Asian English ^a	English lexifier(s)			Substrate(s) ^b							
	BrE	AmE	Other	Austronesian		Dra-vidian	Indo-Aryan		Sinitic		
				Malay	Filipino	Tamil	Hindi	Sinhala	Can-tonese	Hok-kien	Man-darin
Hong Kong	✓								✓		✓
Singapore	✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
Malaysia	✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
India	✓		✓			✓	✓				
Sri Lanka	✓		✓			✓		✓			
Philippines		✓			✓						

^a The list of Asian Englishes reflected here is not exhaustive. Here they are listed in an order so as to group the Asian Englishes with similar substrates together. Of course, in some cases there may be distinguishable regional subvarieties which have different substrates and exhibit different features, e.g. north, south, and northeast IndE varieties.

^b The list of substrates reflected here is not exhaustive but is meant to represent the main or dominant varieties in each ecology; obviously many other languages are present in each ecology. The relative dominance of each substrate is also not reflected in this table, nor is any change in dominance at different time periods shown.

5. The reasons listed here are those most closely relevant to the issue at hand, i.e. a typological investigation of the structural features of Asian Englishes. Obviously many other factors may be identified for why Asian Englishes are interesting objects of (sociolinguistic, cultural, *etc.*) study; Bolton (1992), for example, highlights three obvious connections: 1) all major states in the Asian region are confronting questions related to language policy and planning, which in many cases involves the adoption of English; 2) many Asian societies share linguistic and ethnic similarities, and co-opt in language planning; and 3) in all Asian societies the English language still has strong association with higher education, internationalism, modernity, job mobility and career development; these three connections may be seen, as pointed out by Kachru (2005), as contributing to a regional profile of English in Asia and to the gradual process of acculturation of Asian Englishes. An additional factor for why Asian Englishes call for attention is their demographic profile, which is overwhelming and historically unparalleled (Kachru 2005: 206): the total English-using population of Asia is now more than that of the Inner Circle, and English is the main medium in demand for bi- / multilingualism in the region (Kachru 2005: 15); in other words, comprising 60% of the world population (Kachru 2005: 206), English users in Asia are a heavyweight, and warrant serious consideration in World Englishes.

1) Diverse typologies.

First, Asian Englishes show diversity on two fronts: they develop in contact with a rich range of languages, which are, for the most part, genetically unrelated to English, and which have typologically different grammars, such as Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austronesian and Sinitic, examples of which are summarized in Table 1. This means that the emergent Englishes have the potential for displaying features typologically distinct from those of English. It also means that the collection of substrates offers us a comprehensive range of languages in which to view the dynamics of typologies in contact. For example, if Asian Englishes A and B have substrates X and Y respectively, with features P and Q respectively, do we see P and Q in A and B respectively (but not the other way around)? Or if Asian Englishes A and B both exhibit feature Q, is it because we find Q in substrates X and Y? In all permutations afforded, such careful and specific investigation permits us to query the universality question. Also evident in the table is the fact that different Asian Englishes have certain substrates in common, which afford a comparison to attempt to answer questions such as, for example, if Asian Englishes A and B both have substrate X with feature Q, will feature Q be selected in both A and B? Singapore English (SgE) and Hong Kong English (HKE) both having Sinitic substrates Cantonese and Mandarin are a case in point, and a question may be whether the features of Cantonese particles and Sinitic tone manifest in both SgE and HKE (Lim this volume). Whatever the answers, the possibilities afford a contemplation of the contribution of substrate typology alongside other factors in the mechanics of contact. Related to this is the fact that the contexts in which the majority of Asian Englishes emerge involve multilingual communities: such linguistic and cultural pluralism certainly holds implications not only for bilinguals' competence and creativity in appropriating a new variety (Kachru 2005) but also for the kind of identity alignments that multilingual speakers engage in (Ansaldo 2009).

2) Dynamic ecologies.

The ecologies of emerging Englishes are always dynamic, as explicitly recognized in Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model of the evolution of Postcolonial Englishes. What is perhaps notable for Asian (and African) Englishes is how rapidly their ecologies have changed and continue to do so, in some cases within a matter of decades. Post-independence policies in Asia have had significant and swift impact on the ecologies, and consequently on the structure, of Asian Englishes. For instance, during colonial rule, the sociopolitical situations in Singapore and Malaysia were comparable, and the long-standing lingua franca of the region, Bazaar Malay, was dominant in both ecologies, and SgE and Malaysian English were seen as similar. However, language policies in Singapore in the second half of the 20th century meant not only that English became lingua franca especially in the younger

generation but also that Mandarin became dominant; this together with a later ascendancy of Cantonese, due in part to immigration policies, has led to a change in Singapore's ecology to one that is more Sinitic-dominant and much closer, for example, to that of Hong Kong (see e.g. Lim 2009a, in prep, this volume for details) — does SgE then become more similar to HKE? Such dynamism makes for interesting investigations of Asian Englishes at different points in time.

3) Different phases.

The various Englishes found in Asia represent different phases of the “spread” of English and thus of evolution: many of them, e.g. those of Brunei, Hong Kong, India, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, to name a few, are institutionalized varieties of the Outer Circle, where the English lexifier has been present in the ecology since colonial times and certainly very much entrenched in the ecology. However, because of other factors — date of independence, post-independence language and education policies, resources for English education, proportion of population having access to the language — the state of the evolution of the emergent English differs, with SgE considered as having already attained endonormative stabilization in Phase 4 of the Dynamic Model, while Indian English and HKE are still only in Phase 3 of nativization (Schneider 2007).⁶ At the same time there is the other group of Englishes in Asia, non-institutionalized varieties of the Expanding Circle, where the presence and significance of English is increasing. Such a range of stages of nativization and stabilization of the emergent English affords reflection on whether patterns of features observed may be considered L2 learners' acquisitional patterns or patterns not significantly different from features deriving from the substrates of nativized varieties.

2. Thrusts and themes of the collection

Rather than provide a blow-by-blow account of the five papers in this special issue — by Umberto Ansaldo; Nikolas Gisborne; Devyani Sharma; Priyankoo Sarmah, Divya Verma Gogoi and Caroline Wiltshire; and Lisa Lim, in that order — here we present the collection in terms of its thrusts and foci — its typology, as it were. The first paper in this issue, however, needs special mention at the outset. Intended to set the theoretical scene, Ansaldo's paper presents a summarized but detailed account of an evolutionary perspective needed for viewing Asian Englishes, which involves a reflection of the typological matrix in which each

6. In fact, it is only very recently that the existence of a “Hong Kong English”, as opposed to a variety of “English in Hong Kong” has been recognized.

variety evolves, in the sense of the pool of features that defines the multilingual speech community in which language contact takes place (Mufwene 2001, 2008; Ansaldo 2009); this, the paper proposes, is best achieved by seriously considering the typology of the substrate language(s) involved in the contact situation and the competition and selection between features of different grammars in the multilingual pool. It is in this spirit that the collection of papers in this issue is best appreciated.

In terms of linguistic focus, the contributions in the issue span a range of structural features: two papers delve into the sound system, both segmental and suprasegmental, examining vowel realization and rhythm (Sarmah, Gogoi and Wiltshire), and tone and intonation (Lim); the other three papers take up various aspects of morphology and syntax, such as finiteness (Gisborne), tense and aspect (past tense and progressive marking for perfective and imperfective expressions) (Sharma), the copula (Ansaldo; Gisborne; Sharma), predicative adjectives, and topic prominence (Ansaldo); and discourse/pragmatics is not neglected either, with attention to discourse particles (Lim). This range of topics demonstrates how the influence of the typologies of the substrates is evident at all levels of structure in the emergent Asian English.

A trio of Asian Englishes is converged upon by all the papers: Indian English (IndE; Sharma), Singapore English (SgE; Ansaldo; Lim; Sarmah, Gogoi and Wiltshire; Sharma) and Hong Kong English (HKE; Gisborne; Lim; Sarmah, Gogoi and Wiltshire). As mentioned earlier, all Outer Circle varieties, SgE is considered as having already attained endonormative stabilization, while IndE and HKE are still only in the phase of nativization; this allows us a look at potential differences in emerging patterns. The apparent “outlier” which is the focus of one of the papers (Sarmah, Gogoi and Wiltshire) is a variety which has not garnered much attention to date; English in Thailand is a relatively recent phenomenon and considered an L2 variety, and in this sense is a valuable inclusion as an example of an Expanding Circle variety. In short, the papers provide a view of Asian Englishes which range from extremely established and nativized varieties such as IndE and SgE to very much newer ones still considered L2 varieties, like Thai English (ThaiE). Interestingly, both similarities and differences in the patterns observed across the varieties — e.g. in vowel realizations and rhythmic patterns respectively in ThaiE and SgE — find explanation in comparable features of the substrates, lending support to the argument for looking at typologies and not at “classifications” or “universals”.

Where data is concerned, the various papers conduct their investigations using a range of methods and corpora: e.g. carefully controlled data are elicited for instrumental phonetic analysis (Sarmah, Gogoi and Wiltshire for ThaiE), spoken corpora are used for intonation patterns of spontaneous speech (Lim for SgE), and the *International Corpus of English* (ICE) of a number of varieties is utilized

for close quantitative analysis of morphosyntactic features (Gisborne for HKE; Sharma for IndE and SgE).

Finally, the papers are not just descriptive/analytical, but also boldly take on what are traditional classifications or analyses. For instance, the idea of “angloversals” is challenged, with specific investigation into three of Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi’s (2004) “candidates for universals of New Englishes” (Sharma); and it is proposed that the traditional classification of English as a stress/intonation language be reconsidered and, instead, that some Asian Englishes be considered tone languages (Lim).

3. To conclude, but only for now

We end this introduction with a note of caution: that even while we proceed a step further in taking the typology of the substrate languages seriously in a consideration of Asian Englishes, we must not fall into yet another trap of reductionism or assume a view that is blinkered.

It is important to recognize, first, that it is not just the presence (or absence) of a feature in a substrate that determines the pattern in the emergent English, but also its frequency and consistency of use in each of the substrates, as Sharma’s paper clearly demonstrates. Even if two different substrates of two Asian Englishes may have the same feature, e.g. imperfectivity marking, one needs to scratch below the surface: a different distribution of the feature in the different substrates can indeed lead to different configurations in each Asian English. Hindi has a narrow progressive form and a robust, obligatory imperfective marker, and IndE speakers consequently interpret English *-ing* as a global imperfectivity marker; in contrast, Chinese has highly restricted and optional imperfective markers, and SgE *-ing* usage thus approximates that of Standard English. The importance of frequency of a feature across substrates is also seen in instances where typological congruence can shift the balance and increase the likelihood that certain features get selected over others, as shown in Ansaldo’s paper, where the congruence between features in Hokkien and Bazaar Malay leads to those features emerging in SgE.

Finally, in line with the ecology paradigm (after Mufwene 2001, 2008) explicitly ascribed to in a number of the papers (Ansaldo; Gisborne; Lim), as well as approaches such as the dynamic model (Schneider 2007) and those which contextualize Asian Englishes in their functional realities (Kachru 2005), it is also crucial to recognize that the typologies of the substrates (and of the superstrates, or adstrates) are by no means the sole or main determinant of the emergent English, constituting only a component of the internal ecology. Factors of the external ecology are just as crucial in the process of selection and subsequent replication and

reinforcement of features: these include the proportion that speakers of a language comprise in a population, and their prestige; the status and penetration that the New English has in the society; whether speakers adopt an endo- or exonormative standard; the kind and extent of identity construction, and consequent stability and focussing of the emergent English; and so on; and embracing all aspects of both internal and external ecology and its dynamism (see e.g. Mufwene 2001, 2008; Kachru 2005; Schneider 2007; Ansaldo 2009) must certainly take place for a complete appreciation of Asian Englishes.

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