

THE RIGMAROLE OF INTELLIGIBILITY
IN WORLD ENGLISH(ES)
— OR, ON MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL OR,
IF YOU LIKE, MAKING THE VERY IDEA
OF INTELLIGIBILITY INTELLIGIBLE¹

Kanavillil RAJAGOPALAN

Professor Doutor Titular da Universidade Estadual de Campinas – Unicamp.
E-mail: klrajagopalan@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the hot-button issue of *mutual intelligibility* among the different varieties of English, as they are currently spreading across the world at large, that has preoccupied a growing number of scholars in the field. I argue that such worries are largely misguided and are the result of mistaken assumptions concerning the expansion of English worldwide, as well as the fact that the phenomenon that I have for some time been calling “World English” is unique and *sui generis*. In the final analysis, our difficulty in viewing World English as a phenomenon unprecedented in history probably has to do with the fact that many of us are still trapped in a way of thinking about language typical of the 19th century.

Keywords

intelligibility; World English(es); language and communication; politics of language

¹ I am grateful to the CNPq for financing my research (Process no. 301589/2009-7).

This paper is a reflection on the challenge of grappling with the question of intelligibility in the context of World English(es). The issue of intelligibility has been raised by a number of scholars recently. But, in one way or another, it has figured in discussions about the spread of English for a much longer time (RAJAGOPALAN, 2009). In the 1980s, Maley (1985, p.31) warned of a clear possibility that the different “regional varieties will develop independently to the point where they become different languages rather than varieties of the same language”. Crystal (1997) dramatized the mounting apprehension further by raising the bogey of what he called “the spectre of fragmentation”, which he himself went on to describe somewhat apocalyptically as “the eventual dissolution of English into a range of mutually unintelligible languages”. In her turn, Jenkins (2007, p.27) spoke more recently of “the goal of mutual intelligibility,” implying of course that there is a real danger of the installation of a modern-day version of the Tower of Babel if the English language goes on expanding worldwide at this rate. Finally, the question of intelligibility was prominently foregrounded by the participants in a ‘Symposium on intelligibility and cross-cultural communication in world Englishes’, promoted by the journal *World Englishes* (2008). It seems fair to say that there is a growing number of scholars around the world worrying about the destiny that awaits the English language as it continues its triumphant march across the globe. No doubt, there are others who get ecstatic about the prospect and see it as a sure sign of the decline of the linguistic imperialism supposed to be brazenly sponsored by Great Britain up until the end of World War II and from then on by the United States (PHILLIPSON, 1992).

This paper offers, if not a sustained critique of the position taken by these scholars, at least a skein of reflections prompted by their views. To begin with, an attempt is made to interrogate the very idea of intelligibility, by exploring what unacknowledged beliefs about language and communication underlie the frequent discussions of the topic. I argue that, in the context of World English(es), intelligibility crucially hinges on whether the phenomenon in question is being considered in the singular or plural. The issue of progressive hybridization often raised in connection with the way English is spreading across the world by leaps and bounds further complicates matters. I also claim that intelligibility is also a politically loaded question, though many brute facts of the matter — slippery and fast-changing, even as we speak about them — impinge on the issue and, that, when all is said and done, intelligibility must be viewed as an issue squarely within what one might call the “politics of World English(es)”.

The symposium of four papers on the question of intelligibility among speakers of English from different parts of the world, published in *World Englishes* (v. 27, n. 3/4), offers us an excellent opportunity and a useful spring-board for jump-starting a more in-depth and much wider discussion of the topic. Kachru (2008, p.294), who kick-starts the whole discussion with his opening remarks hits the nail on the head when he laments that

The question of intelligibility across the Three Circles of Englishes continues to be constructed essentially in terms of traditional pedagogical norms and economic advantages, without taking into consideration linguistic ecology, interactional pragmatics, and sociocultural realities.

Although he does not put it this way himself, it is clear that the main problem with trying to approach the issue as a purely pedagogical one lies in the fact that there is a danger of the political dimensions of inter- and cross-cultural communication tending to get sidelined or simply overlooked. And when it comes to the teaching of English, precious little seems to have come about by way of real change and, as Seidlhofer has remarked, “assumptions about the ‘E’ in TEFL have remained curiously unaffected” (SEIDLHOFER, 2001, p. 135)

I also find Berns’ (2008) paper very helpful in bringing out subtle, but nevertheless important, differences between “the world Englishes paradigm” and many of the claims made by the advocates of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), notably Jenkins (2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006) whose over-emphasis (in my view, that is) on pronunciation, it seems to me, threatens to skew an overall appreciation of the question of intelligibility. By the way, her quest for a minimum central core of intelligibility (JENKINS, 2007), which I find objectionable on the grounds that English, in its role as a world language, simply can have no center, no model speaker, and therefore no minimum core of intelligibility (on this, see what Canagarajah has to say in RUBDY and SARACENI, 2006, p.208²) is also implicit, I think, in Kachru’s original formulation of the three *concentric* circles (KACHRU, 1985), though his more recent emphasis (cf. KACHRU, 1998) on the *pluricentricity* of World Englishes would seem to point in the opposite direction (cf. PARK and WEE, 2009).

In what follows my aim is to contribute to the ongoing discussion by raising some of what I regard as fundamental questions that have not been adequately taken into consideration, though many of them have been alluded to *en passant* by some of the discussants thus far. In particular, I want to draw attention to some of the implicit beliefs against the backdrop of which many of the issues that we have been raising make sense to begin with. I do this on the strength of my conviction that, when dealing with issues of such complexity and consequence as the intelligibility of a language still in the making (I sincerely believe that is what we are all, in the ultimate analysis, talking about;³

² Here is an excerpt which I reproduce if only to whet the readers’ appetite: “There is a suspicion that the core features will still come from the politically powerful communities. (When have language norms been divorced from power?) Besides, this manufactured variety will be another exonormative norm, imposed from outside, and not developed locally within communities of usage.”

³ Someone might object that this is true of all languages, *tout court*, with the exception of so-called “dead languages”. But I want to insist that World English (differently from the English language, as it is spoken in the UK or USA) stands apart in that it has no as-yet codified grammar, no rigid rules of pronunciation and so forth. Some may even hesitate to accord it the status of a fully-fledged language.

more on this, later), it often behooves us to, as it were, take a distance and ask ourselves why at all we are asking the questions that we are at any given moment in history and, in particular, what hidden premises and presuppositions are behind our very effort to find answers to those questions. As Nelson (2008, p.299) puts it, “Clearly, we allow, consciously or unconsciously, our mindsets and other non-linguistic criteria to affect our estimations of general ‘intelligibility’”.

Let me begin then with the very idea of intelligibility (RAJAGOPALAN, in preparation). Why do we at all worry about this? Let us, first of all, note that those of us who worry about the issue of intelligibility are assuming that lack of intelligibility is an impediment to smooth communication. Now, there is a widely held assumption that intelligibility is primarily an attribute of the message or text being transmitted, though the medium often contributes to it. Furthermore, it is up to the sender to make the text intelligible or otherwise. The receiver of the message can do precious little by way of making the already transmitted message any more intelligible than it already is, although he/she can fail to grasp it, but then that is an altogether different problem and need not concern us here. Note that all this discussion is possible because we have implicitly assumed the celebrated “Shannon-Weaver (1949) model of communication.” Total absence of intelligibility would therefore imply a complete breakdown of communication. Furthermore, implicit in this line of reasoning is the idea that perfect intelligibility is not only desirable but perfectly possible and indeed achievable. Or, at the very least, it is an end worth striving for.

Incidentally, part of the reason why the myth of the native speaker (RAJAGOPALAN, 1997, 2005) persists till to date is that perfect intelligibility is believed to be possible between two native-speaking interlocutors. One will take care of perfect encoding and perfect decoding can be entrusted to the other, on the condition that he/she too is a full-blooded native speaker, not a half-baked one (by the same token, the situation would be hopelessly muddled if the encoder happens to be a non-native speaker or a “foreigner”). To make this *Milliarium Aureum* of perfect communication absolutely guaranteed, the idea of the other-worldly figure of “the ideal native speaker-listener in a homogeneous community” (CHOMSKY, 1965, p.3) was conjured up by generative grammarians who added the tautological — that is, tautological given the set of axiomatic assumptions that prop up the theoretical model — rider “who knows its language perfectly”.⁴ Anyhow, the idea that there is perfect intelligibility between two native speakers of the language is assumed tacitly by many of us. It is, however, important to bear in mind that this “perfect intelligibility” is supposed to exist only from the point of view of native speakers apropos of

⁴ For what else is a native speaker other than someone considered to be a perfect speaker of his/her language? The qualifier “ideal” in Chomsky’s definition has the aim of pre-empting any charges of verifiable cases of “manufacturing defects”. As Kumaravadivelu has observed, “Clearly, the speaker-hearer Chomsky is talking about is an artificially constructed ideal person; not an actual language-user” (KUMARAVADIVELU, 2006: 6).

their own native language. Smith and Rafiqzad's rather surprising conclusion that "the native speaker was *always* found to be among the *least intelligible* speakers" (SMITH and RAFIQZAD, 1979, p.375; cited in NELSON, 2008, p.301), which Nelson describes as "[t]he striking interpretation of the findings in the study", will turn out to be not so striking when weighed against the fact that it was a judgment made by "[o]ver 1,300 subjects across eleven countries in Asia, South Asia and the Pacific region" (Nelson, *ibid.*) — by definition, non-natives.

Here, it may help to clarify matters if we recall that, from an etymological point of view, communication and communion are closely linked. In both cases, the ideal case scenario (*Milliarium Aureum*) would be the one where what one member of the community says is readily and unproblematically understood by another. Another way of putting this is to say that, ideally, there would be total transparency between what one says and what one (i.e. he or she) intends, and also, between what one says and what one's interlocutor understands or how he/she interprets it. In the ideal native speaker-hearer case that Chomsky postulated, there was a further rider that said that the ideal speaker is "unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance" (CHOMSKY, 1965, p.3). In terms of a mathematical model of information transmission all this would be grouped under the category of *outside disturbances* that affect the medium, best ignored if one is interested in capturing the essence of the smooth functioning of the system.

But we must move from mathematical models of robotic conversation to dialogic exchanges between men and women of flesh and blood. Apart from the obvious objection as to whether or not one can or must really mean what one (i.e. he or she) has in mind, we must concede that such ideal communicative encounters are a far cry from what obtains in the real world. But the impressive thing is that a lot of our routine talk about language and how it works in our day-to-day reality is based on something like the ideal community interaction thumb-nailed in the foregoing paragraph. The idea of communion, sharing, and spirituality that underlies our, shall we say, *romantic* view of communication and derivatively of language is carried over to the Myth of Babel — i.e. negatively, in the form of a lamentation that, alas, the days of pristine glory are a thing of the past — that too informs much our imagination concerning communicative breakdowns. To begin with, unintelligibility or communicative breakdowns result from the divine malediction. Unintelligibility among mutually incomprehensible languages is only the limiting case of unintelligibility within one and the same language — if only for the reason that theoretical linguists still owe us a satisfactory account, using only language-related criteria (not geographic or geo-political ones, for instance) as to what makes one language different from another, although their discipline itself seems to be founded on the assumption that there is one, or there isn't one already, it can be had.

But then languages do spread. At the very least, their speakers do. And in some cases, like that of English, they spread like wildfire and, in the process, acquire new speakers at a breakneck speed. From its idyllic state of pristine transparency (more imagined than anything else), from the days of yore when it was confined to “a precious stone set in the silver sea” called Albion, it has spilled over to far-off lands and continue to do. So we have a hell let loose, communication-wise. As Nelson (2008) makes it amply clear through her citations, the complaint that the English language is losing its Englishness has long been around and initially started being vented with respect to American English, the first *major renegade* threatening to outshine the *precious stone* and ultimately succeeding in it. The ethnocentric subtext of such complaints has been exposed by scholars like Nelson (1995, p.273) and Bhatt (1995, p.247). With American English in mind, Robert Bridges (1965 [1925], p.88), Poet Laureate of England and one of the founding members of a tell-tale “Society for Pure English” is on record as having expressed his concerns in the following words:

It would seem that no other language can ever have had its central force so dissipated — and even this does not exhaust the description of our special peril, because there is furthermore this most obnoxious condition, namely, that wherever our countrymen are settled abroad there are alongside of them communities of other-speaking races, who, maintaining among themselves their native speech, learn yet enough of ours to mutilate it, and establishing among themselves all kinds of blundering corruptions, through habitual intercourse infect therewith the neighbouring English. We can see this menace without any guess as to what may come of it, and in the United States, where it is more evident [...] (BRIDGES, 1965 [1925], p.88).

The irony of it all is that the logic of *if you can't beat them, join them* soon replaced the initial grumblings. The idea of pan-national native-speaking *core* or what Jenkins (2007) herself has derisively termed “standard language ideology” (but unwittingly ends up lending her support to it) was born of this half-hearted condescension. This is so because the standard language ideology, as defended by, among others, Quirk (1990)⁵ and Davies (2003) is but a tactical “softening-up” of the position of standard British English (RP) ideology (RAJAGOPALAN, 2007).

⁵ Quirk, however, is an excellent example of someone who has been accused of changing horses in the midstream and, in what may appear to be a blatantly contradictory stance, defending a much-hardened position with respect to what standard to adopt even as he practices the “softening up” in regard to what that standard is made up of. Thus, Bolton calls him a “linguistic liberal” in his 1962 remark “English is not the prerogative or possession of the English ... Acknowledging this must — as a corollary — involve our questioning of the propriety of claiming that the English of one area is more ‘correct’ than the English of another” (QUIRK, 1962: 17-18; cited in BOLTON, 2006: 243). But his 1990 (QUIRK, 1990) paper marked a *volte face* when he pleaded for native-speaker norms to be adopted worldwide in the sphere of EFL teaching.

But the problem was only solved for the time being. The rise of other *Englishes* had only just begun. The reason why I am referring to all this is that I want to highlight that we are only half-way through a long process and we can only make some educated guesses as to where it will take us to. And, as of now, the situation is so fluid that it is unclear whether one should be talking in terms of *World Englishes* or *World English*.

Also relevant in this context is the rise of certain forms of English that are explicitly designed to sound different so that its speakers can claim an exclusive and, so to speak, *defiant* identity for themselves. An excellent example of this is so-called *Hinglish*. Various descriptions include “a portmanteau of the words Hindi and English, usage of Hindu and English words, combining both, in one sentence.” (WIKIPEDIA, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinglish>), “a Hindi-English jumble spoken by 350 million people” (BALDAUF, 2004), “a hybrid of English and south Asian languages, used both in Asia and the UK” (COUGHLAN, 2006), a “seamless blend of Hindi and English spoken in modern India” (QURESHI, 2008), and even “a pukka way to talk” (DHILLON, 2004). *Hinglish* seems to be here to stay, not as a passing fad but, from the looks of it, a mark of diasporic identity or the desire of a people for a new linguistic identity. Likewise, Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, and Pitzl (2006) have reported the emergence of a new phenomenon called “bad English” in Europe. This is how they describe it:

What strikes one immediately is the degree of deliberate appropriation of the language, the denial of the authority of the established norm — not surprising in an anarchist publication of course. So the “bad English” is not only used in the interest of effective communication but to represent the anarchic cause: It serves both a pragmatic as well as an ideological function. (SEIDLHOFER, BREITENEDER and PITZL, 2006, p.6)

And they add

Whether pragmatic or ideological or both, this use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) is a reality. It declares itself independent of the norms of English as a native language (ENL), and the authors who use it are confident that the ELF they use is better suited to express their identity, and more intelligible for their readers than a “better” English. (SEIDLHOFER, BREITENEDER and PITZL, 2006, p.6)

These remarks are reminiscent of the following observation by Khushwant Singh, widely respected as a doyen of Indian journalism:

I am entirely in favour of making English an Indian language on our terms. Maul it, misuse it, mangle it out of shape but make it our own *bhasha*. The English may not recognise it as their language; they can stew in their own juice. It is not their *baap ki jaidaad* — ancestral property. (SINGH, 2001)

What I identify as a common thread that runs through all these diverse attempts to play havoc with *standard English* is a desire to claim the English language from the jealously guarded bastion of *purity* or native *authenticity* or whatever, thereby creating a space where everyone can freely participate and create, untrammelled by constant policing by self-styled pundits who think they have the right to prescribe to others the do's and don'ts of correct usage and idiomaticity. If there is something carnivalesque about such a gesture, well, it is fully intentional. Such cases of recalcitrance, as we have seen, are neither temperamental nor sporadic. It is my firm conviction these cases must be looked into more carefully and seen as an essential and entirely predictable part of the spread of English world wide. In part at least, it is also a resounding popular response to the widely-held assumption — in my view, completely misguided — tacitly entertained by many that learners want to sound like a native or at least learn to pass for one when they learn a foreign language. Consider that many foreign learners of English were brain-washed to look upon the native speaker “as the ultimate state at which first and second language learners may arrive and as the ultimate goal in language pedagogy.” (VAN der GEEST, 1981, p.317). In the ultimate analysis, then, it all boils down to a question of just how much of your identity you are prepared to surrender or sacrifice in the name of a language that you are not willing as yet to consider your own.

All the same, one would be well advised not to rush to any sweeping generalizations here. For instance, Chew (2007, p.75) points out: “The narrative of ‘Western science, Asian values’ prevalent in the 1990s in Singapore, has now given way to one that views culture and identity as commodities tradable in a volatile market.” This is indeed a far cry from the attitude summed up in a 1984 *Speak Mandarin campaign* speech by the country's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who claimed:

One abiding reason why we have to persist in bilingualism is that English will not be emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. To have no emotionally acceptable language as our mother tongue is to be emotionally crippled ... Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. (cited in BOKHORST-HENG, ALSAGOFF, MCKAY and RUBDY, 2007, p.424)

In 2002, the Government of Singapore famously launched a nation-wide campaign called “Speak Good English Movement” and in the words of Farrell and Kun (2008, p.382),

The Singapore press ... specifically pointed an accusing finger at Singapore's English language teachers stating that they should play a more active role in halting the alleged deterioration of the standard of English in Singapore although they do not provide any evidence that this is in fact the case in Singapore's classrooms.

There is, on the other hand, also another emergent trend in the opposite direction whereby hybridity and linguistic *melange* are seen as perfectly normal and indeed of the natural order of things. The following remark by Thapar (2008) shows how perfectly at ease many contemporary Indians are with the way English has crept into their daily lives, albeit in ways that would scandalize language puritans and many apologists of Standard English:

The ever-multiplying reliance and acceptability of English shows that we have become comfortable with ourselves and our unique history and circumstances. The colonial hangover which led an earlier generation to protest against English is past and forgotten. We've internalised the language. It's no longer "phoren",⁶ it's become Indian. Second, we're now sure of our identity. Borrowed phrases or concepts don't undermine it. In fact, we often prefer foreign words to express ourselves.

World Englishes — singular or plural?

As I broach this theme, I can't help being reminded of a joke — a rather insipid one at that but, nevertheless, one that is strikingly similar to the problem at hand. It asks: Is *pants* (or *trousers*, depending on which side of the Atlantic you happen to be in) singular or plural? And the answer is: well it depends; it is singular at the top, but obviously plural at the bottom. I suspect that the idea of World English(es) is rather like the familiar piece from one's wardrobe. But it does not take any sartorial ingenuity to see that, in the end, it all depends on which aspect of the phenomenon you want to highlight. Furthermore, depending on the angle you want to take, both alternatives are equally valid and useful. In one sense, there is just one language: how else can one even assume that people can communicate in it? In another sense, there are many: that is the condition in which one may ask: do they constitute a family of languages (CRYSTAL, 1998) or distinct ones, barely or hardly comprehensible to one another (McARTHUR, 1998)?

But the picture changes as soon as one raises the question of intelligibility. If we are raising it with the bottom end of the World English pants in mind, we are already proceeding on the assumption that some kind of unintelligibility is the expected answer. This idea was implicit in Burchfield's (1985) characterization of English as a "fissiparous language" and his somber prognostication: "It will continue to divide and subdivide and to exhibit a thousand different faces in the centuries ahead". "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold", he might have added, wittingly or unwittingly quoting the poet William Butler Yeats, concluding, "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". (Anarchy of course is but another name for the curse of Babel).

With the top end, we would be surprised to learn that mutual intelligibi-

⁶ A typically Indian corruption, partly upcountry and partly uneducated and also partly a pejorative version of *foreign*.

lity is under threat at all. In fact, to talk of World English (in the singular) is already to assume that it is legitimate to assume a single language, no matter the degree of abstraction needed to hypostatize such an entity. We might note in passing here that World English (in the singular) is still a project or, if you will, it is a language (for want of a better word) still in the making. World Englishes, on the other hand, do exist in the world of everyday reality and the surest evidence for this is the fact that more and more scholars are being forced to recognize them willy-nilly. I find the following remark by Wright (2006, p.44) very useful in this context:

Whether appropriation and the development of new varieties are positive or negative is of course debatable. On the negative side, a lingua franca that did not maintain mutual comprehensibility among its speakers would lose some of its utility. On the positive side, the development shows that the danger of the world becoming a monotonous, monolingual space is highly unlikely ...

It is noteworthy that what Wright has identified as the positive and negative sides of the tricky question of mutual comprehensibility, or intelligibility if you will, is what I have referred to as the top end and the bottom end, respectively, of the cline — from World English to World Englishes.

The ultimate choice of the one or the other may involve political interests at play rather than additional forays into the putative facts of the matter. But there are also some reasons to believe that the much dreaded dissipation of English may not come to pass.

The global village and its centripetal forces

While raising the question of intelligibility among World Englishes (or different varieties of World English), it is absolutely essential that we bear in mind that the current expansion of the language is taking place against the backdrop of globalization. No matter one's ideologically colored view of what is happening under our very noses, what one cannot deny is that the world we live in is shrinking at a pace unimaginable even twenty or thirty years ago. Communication across distances and cultural barriers is taking place. Now, one way of looking at this is to see it as *the Babel threat in retreat* by which I mean the progressive receding of the danger of peoples and their forms of speech becoming increasingly distant from one another, ultimately becoming mutually incomprehensible. However, we should not overlook the fact that many postcolonial countries (here I have mostly the ex-colonies of Great Britain in mind) were caught in a crossfire in relation to the opposing demands of recently won independence and the tornado of globalization which took them by surprise. Canagarajah describes this state of affairs admirably well when he says:

ELF presents communities with a dilemma. [With regard to] postcolonial communities (...), while they were busy with the project of decolonization, they suddenly found themselves addressing the demands of globalization. These two historical movements present different challenges for the nation-state: although the first involved affirming the local language against the neglect suffered during the imposition of English during the colonial period, globalization reinserts the need for English for postmodern life. (CANAGARAJAH, 2006, p. 202)

However, to think, as Phillipson (1992) and many other have done, that this is the ultimate triumph of the British empire or its American successor is to lose sight of the fact that the language that is spreading is neither British nor American, but a new linguistic phenomenon altogether. This was emphasized by Brutt-Griffler when she proposed an important amendment to Widdowson's claim "English has spread to become an international language" (WIDDOWSON, 1997, p.135) so as to make it read: "English has spread *and changed* to become an international language." (the italics are Brutt-Griffler's) (BRUTT-GRIFFLER, 1998, p.381). On my part, I have for some time been insisting on the use of the term *linguistic phenomenon* because to refer to it as a language like any other would only obfuscate relevant features of it that make it unique in the history of mankind. The most important of those distinguishing traits is that, in its role as a lingua franca, World English has no native speakers, hence no lawful owners — or, what amounts to the same, everybody who speaks it is a stake-holder in it. (RAJAGOPALAN, 2004). To be sure, understood in this way, what I am calling World English is a language only because, as I have already said, there is perhaps no better way to describe it (Though it would be interesting and instructive to look for one). At least there is no established term in the literature simply for the reason that nothing like it is ever known to have existed in recorded history. It has all the trimmings of a language in the full-blooded sense, but lacks many of the attributes that professional linguists have long identified and isolated, such as the presence of native speakers who are deemed to have the right to claim it as exclusively theirs and jealously guard it.

Politics of World English

One final point that must be raised in regard to the question of intelligibility is that it is, first and foremost, a politically charged theme. Let me explain what I mean by that. We have long lived with the myth — enshrined in many text-book introductions — that intelligibility is a matter of having the right linguistic wherewithal at our disposal. The closer that wherewithal, the greater the chances of attaining intelligibility. This in turn rests on the unargued assumption that the availability of a common language is the key to successful communication, to perfect or near-perfect intelligibility of what we say. I have argued elsewhere that it is precisely the other way around (RAJAGOPALAN, 2001). It is a willingness to communicate that makes it possible for a group of

people to claim that they have a common language. This works just as well as within the bounds of what is already recognized as one and the same community, as it does across different communities. It works, in other words, equally well between different dialects of what is recognized as one and the same language, and across recognized language boundaries.

So the question of what would guarantee communication across different varieties of World English (or, if you insist, different World Englishes), or equivalently what would guarantee mutual intelligibility is to be answered by first ascertaining if there is willingness on the part of the speakers to understand one another. To that extent, this is a politically loaded question.

That said, it is always useful to remember that the conditions are ripe for there to be a political will in favor of communication across geographical and cultural barriers. As noted earlier, such conditions have been engendered by globalization and the progressive dismantling worldwide of trade barriers and state-sponsored impediments to free circulation of information (such as censorship and prohibition on free internet access). More than ever before in history, countries need one another and this alone will guarantee that we continue to talk to one another and overcome traditional barriers that until recently made it difficult to do so. ☒

Recebido em 18/06/2010. Aceito em 30/07/2010

RAJAGOPALAN, K. A CONFUSÃO EM TORNO DA INTELIGIBILIDADE DE “WORLD ENGLISH(ES)” — OU, FAZENDO SENTIDO DE TUDO ISSO, OU AINDA, TORNANDO INTELIGÍVEL A PRÓPRIA NOÇÃO DE INTELIGIBILIDADE

Resumo

Neste trabalho, discuto a questão de inteligibilidade mútua entre as diversas variedades da língua inglesa que vem se espalhando no mundo afora, questão essa que tem ocupado, nos últimos tempos, as atenções de um número cada vez maior de estudiosos no campo. Argumento que tal preocupação é, em larga medida, improcedente e resultado de equívocos no que diz respeito à forma como abordamos a expansão da língua inglesa, bem como a natureza sui generis do fenômeno que venho chamando de World English. Em última análise, a nossa dificuldade em aceitar o World English como um fenômeno linguístico sem precedentes talvez tenha a ver com o fato de que muitos entre nós ainda estamos presos a uma forma de pensar a linguagem nos moldes em que ela foi concebida no século XIX.

Palavras-chave

inteligibilidade; World English(es); linguagem e comunicação; política linguística

References

- BALDAUFF, S. A Hindi-English jumble, spoken by 350 million. *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2004. Available on <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/1123/p01s03-wosc.html>.
- BERNS, M. World Englishes, English as a lingua franca, and intelligibility. *World Englishes*, (27) 3/4, p. 327-334, 2008.
- BHATT, R. M. Prescriptivism, creativity and world Englishes. *World Englishes*, (14) 2, p. 247-259, 1995.
- BOLTON, K. World Englishes today. In: KACHRU, B., KACHRU, Y. and NELSON, C. L. (eds.). *The handbook of World Englishes*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006, p. 240-270.
- BOKHORST-HENG, W.D.; ALSAGOFF, L.; MCKAY, S. and RUBDY, R. English language ownership among Singaporean Malays: going beyond the NS/NNS dichotomy. *World Englishes*, (26) 4, p. 424-445, 2007.
- BRIDGES, R. 1969 [1925]. The society's work. In: BOLTON, W. F. and CRYSTAL, D. (eds.). *The English language*. Essays by Linguists and Men of Letters, 1858-1964. 2 v. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969 [1925]. V. 2: p. 86-99.
- BRUTT-GRIFFLER, J. Conceptual questions in English as a world language: taking up an issue. *World Englishes*, 17 (3), p. 381-392, 1998.
- BURCHFIELD, R. (1985). *The English language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- CANAGARAJAH, A. Negotiating the local in English as a lingua franca. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, p. 197-218, 2006.
- CHEW, P.G. Remaking Singapore: Language, Culture and identity in a globalized world. In: TSUI, A. and TOLLEFSON, J.W. (eds.). *Language policy, culture and identity in Asian contexts*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2007, p.73-94.
- CHOMSKY, N.A. *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965.
- COUGHLAN, S. It's Hinglish, innit? *BBC News Magazine*. Available on http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/6122072.stm, 2006.
- CRYSTAL, D. The language that took over the world. *The Guardian*, 22 February 1997, 21. Reprinted in *Spotlight* (Germany), 7, 1997, p. 12-16.
- CRYSTAL, D. Moving towards an English family of languages? *Folia Anglistica*, n.2, p. 84-95, 1998.
- DAVIES, A. *The native speaker: myth and reality*. Clevedon, USA: Multilingual Matters, 2003.
- DHILLON, A. Hinglish is the pukka way to talk. *The Sunday Times*. Available on <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article495245.ece>, 2004.

FARRELL, T. S. C. and KUN, S. T. K. Language policy, language teachers' beliefs, and classroom practices. *Applied Linguistics*, 29 (3), p. 381-403, 2008.

JENKINS, J. *The Phonology of English as an international language: New models, new norms, new goals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

JENKINS, J. A sociolinguistically based, empirically researched pronunciation syllabus for English as an international language. *Applied Linguistics*, 23, p. 83-103, 2002.

JENKINS, J. Research in teaching pronunciation and intonation. In: McGROARTY, M. (ed.). *Advances in Language Pedagogy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p.109-125.

JENKINS, J. Teaching pronunciation for English as a lingua franca: a sociopolitical perspective. In GNUTZMANN, C. and INTEMANN, F. (eds.). *The Globalisation of English and the English language classroom* Tübingen: Narr, 2005, p. 145-159.

JENKINS, J. Current perspectives on teaching World English and English as a Lingua Franca. *TESOL Journal* 40, p.157-81, 2006.

JENKINS, J. *English as a lingua franca: attitude and identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

KACHRU, B. B. Standards, codifications and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In: QUIRK, R. and WIDDOWSON, H. W. (eds.). *English in the world: teaching and learning the language and literatures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. p.11-30.

KACHRU, B. B. English as an Asian language. *Links & Letters*, 5, p. 89-108, 1998.

KACHRU, B. B. The first step: the Smith paradigm for intelligibility in world Englishes. *World Englishes*, (27) 3/4, p. 293-296, 2008.

KUMARAVADIVELU, B. *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum. Associates, 2006.

MALEY, A. The most chameleon of all languages: the perceptions of English abroad. *English Today*, 1/30-33, 1985.

McARTHUR, T. *The English languages*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

NELSON, C. L. Intelligibility and world Englishes in the classroom. *World Englishes*, (14) 2, p. 273-79, 1995.

NELSON, C. L. Intelligibility since 1969. *World Englishes*, (27) 3/4, p. 297-308, 2008.

PARK, J.S. and WEE, L. The Circle Redux: A market-theoretic perspective on World Englishes. *Applied Linguistics*, (30) 3, p. 383-406, 2009.

PHILLIPSON, R. *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

- QUERESHI, B. "Hinglish" Films: Translating India For U.S. Audiences. NPR. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96914703>, 2008.
- QUIRK, R. *The use of English*. London: Longman, 1962.
- QUIRK, R. Language varieties and standard language. *English Today*, 21, p. 3-10, 1990.
- RAJAGOPALAN, K. Linguistics and the myth of nativity: comments on the controversy over "new/non-native" Englishes. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 27, p. 225-231, 1997.
- RAJAGOPALAN, K. The politics of language and the concept of linguistic identity. *CAUCE: Revista de Filología y su Didáctica*, 24. p.17-28, 2001.
- RAJAGOPALAN, K. The concept of "World English" and its implications for ELT. *ELT Journal*, (58) 1, p.111-117, 2004.
- RAJAGOPALAN, K. Non-native speaker teachers of English and their anxieties: Ingredients for an experiment in action research. In: LLURDA, E. (ed.) *Non-native language teachers: perceptions, challenges, and contributions to the profession*. Boston, MA: Springer, 2005. p.283-303.
- RAJAGOPALAN, K. Revisiting the nativity scene. *Studies in Language*, (31), p.193-205, 2007.
- RAJAGOPALAN, K. "World English" and the Latin analogy: where we get it wrong. *English Today*, (25) 2, p. 49-54, 2009.
- RAJAGOPALAN, K. The soft ideological underbelly of the notion of intelligibility in discussions about "World Englishes". *Applied Linguistics*, 31, p. 465-470, 2010.
- RUBDY, R. and SARACENI, M. An interview with Suresh Canagarajah. In: RUBDY, R. and SARACENI, M. (eds.). *English in the World: global rules, global roles*. London: Continuum, 2006. p. 200-212.
- SEIDLHOFER, B. Closing a conceptual gap: the case for a description of English as a lingua franca. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), p. 133-158, 2001.
- SEIDLHOFER, B., BREITENEDER, A. and PITZL, M. English as a lingua franca in Europe: challenges for applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, p. 3-34, 2006.
- SHANNON, C.E. and WEAVER, W. *A Mathematical model of communication*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1949.
- SINGH, K. Making English an Indian language. *The Tribune*, (Oct. 21). <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2001/20011020/windows/above.htm>, 2001.
- SMITH, L. E. Spread of English and issues of intelligibility. In: KACHRU, B. (ed.). *The other tongue*, 2.ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. p. 75-90.
- SMITH, L. E. and RAFIQZAD, K. English for cross-cultural communication: the question of intelligibility. *TESOL Quarterly* 13, p. 71-80, 1979.

THAPAR, K. What an idea, Sirjee! *Hindustan Times*, August 2, 2008. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print.aspx?Id=1b34d765-08ce-45f0-ac9a-80ed441a91ac>.

VAN der GEEST, T. How to become a native speaker: one simple way. In: COULMAS, F. (ed.) *A Festschrift for Native Speaker*. The Hague: Mouton, 1981, p. 317-353.

WIDDOWSON, H. EIL, ESL, EFL: global issues and local interests. *World Englishes*, 16 (3), p.135-146, 1997.

WRIGHT, S. French as a lingua franca. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, p.35-60, 2006.