

General introduction

English as an object of study

This book is about English in the world today. It is about the nature and character of English around the world, but also about the debates and controversies surrounding the language: debates and controversies concerning the forms, functions and status the language has in diverse world contexts. For although it is a seemingly straightforward statement to say that the book will survey the existence of English around the world, such a statement presupposes that we know what we mean when we talk of ‘English’. It presupposes that English, as an object of study, is a clearly definable entity that exists out there in the world, and that people (speakers, learners, teachers, academics) have a mostly solid and mutually compatible understanding of what constitutes this entity.

This is far from being the case, however. Disputes about what counts as English – what constitutes proper English, what role the language does or should play in various contexts, and how it should be evaluated and regulated – are legion. A key intention of this book, therefore, is to provide clarification of what exactly is meant by the concept of English, as it is understood both by the millions of people who use or work with the language and by the large body of scholars who study it. The book is about English in the world today and the roles it plays, as both code and concept, in the lives of a global population.

Concerns about how exactly the object of study (i.e. ‘English’) should be conceptualised can be seen in the proliferation of names used to refer to the language (e.g. American English, Singaporean English, Nigerian English, etc). This book, following a tradition that has emerged in the last two or three decades, opts for the plural noun *Englishes*, thereby suggesting that in the modern world, the language needs to be viewed not as a single, monolithic entity, but as something that has multiple varieties and forms. The use of this term is motivated by an attitude which argues that it is no longer accurate to say that there is just one ‘English’ in existence around the world – but that instead we need to begin our investigation from the perspective that diversity is the norm,

and that the multiple forms the language takes are, each and every one, both linguistically and sociologically interesting. As Braj Kachru writes: “The result of [the language’s global] spread is that, formally and functionally, English now has multicultural identities. The term ‘English’ does not capture this sociolinguistic reality; the term ‘Englishes’ does” (Kachru, 1992b, p. 357).

Some scholars suggest that an even more radical re-baptising is necessary; that the language previously known as ‘English’ should be renamed completely, and be called, for example, something such as ‘Global’ (Toolan, 1997), ‘Englic’ (Suzuki, 1975) or ‘Globish’ (Nerrière, 2006; McCrum, 2010). By suggesting such alternatives, these scholars are arguing that the language as it is used at a global level is now significantly different from the one which developed on the British mainland and came to have the status of national language in England and the United Kingdom. They are arguing that this difference is such that the language needs to be rebranded; that its history should no longer play a determining role in its current or future existence, and so the ties with the past need to be symbolically severed.

These and related issues will be discussed in greater detail later in the book. For the time being, the relevant point is that in studying the English language today we need to pay attention not solely to the forms it takes in different geographical, cultural and social settings, but also to the beliefs that adhere to these different forms, and to the concepts of the language which result from these beliefs.

Why, though, is the issue of what is understood as ‘English’ – and the nature of the various beliefs which coalesce to produce this understanding – of any particular importance? Why should debate about the language matter for a study of the existence and nature of the language? The simple answer is that these beliefs have serious and far-reaching consequences for its use and perception in society. Language operates as a vital resource in society, both in terms of its communicative affordances (what we are able to do through the use of it) and as a marker of identity and a means of social distinction. It is beliefs about the language that play a large part in the way that the value of this resource is determined, and that it is distributed amongst the population. In other words, beliefs about the language have a causal relationship with the way that people are able to effectively use the language. The study of English in the world today is thus both a linguistic issue and a political one.

Disciplinary approaches and linguistic globalisation

Issues concerning what is understood as ‘English’ are also of central importance for the disciplines that study the language. Today, English is in an unprecedented linguistic position in that it is more widely used,

and in more domains, than any other language across the globe. And this pervasiveness – and the diversity that accompanies it – is forcing a recalibration of basic notions of the relationship of language to everyday lived experience. In other words, the way the language is used, the way it is perceived, and the way it is regulated, is so qualitatively different from the circumstances of other languages that it is forcing a rethink about some of the fundamental axioms of modern linguistics. The nature of contemporary English is obliging the discipline to take into consideration issues and dynamics – particularly of a social nature – to which it has previously been mostly oblivious. And so, over the last two decades, the discipline of English language studies has increasingly had to adopt an approach which, by default, takes account of the language's increasingly global character. In short, globalisation has become the point of orientation for all discussions of the language: English today exhibits the trace of globalisation in all aspects of its identity – from the varieties and forms it takes, through the functions it is put to, to the attitudes people have towards it. For this reason *linguistic globalisation* becomes a key theoretical framework within which to view practically all social issues related to the use of the language.

English in the world today is thus a fertile area for the theoretical investigation of the use and nature of natural language, and the research and theoretical investigations being pursued in this field are having implications for the discipline of linguistics in general. In addition, the unprecedented position that English now occupies brings with it new *practical* challenges – challenges both for those who use the language as part of their everyday life, and for language professionals whose job revolves around English. It is within this context that this book initially approaches its subject. The book examines how English has evolved to become a 'global language' and looks at the political and cultural history that has influenced this evolution. Beginning with a discussion of real-life challenges relating to World Englishes that are faced by language professionals, this book explores and illustrates the ways in which the actual use and management of English, as well as the beliefs and ideologies associated with it, play an increasingly important role in contemporary globalised society. In taking this approach, the book both surveys the formal nature and functional existence of English in the world, while also looking at how an examination of World Englishes provides insights about the interplay between the language and everyday social existence.

Beginning with the evidence

The structure of this book is one which begins with the evidence and works outwards to arrive at a body of theory which is capable of explaining the nature and significance of this evidence. In other words,

we start, in Section A, with the actual phenomenon of English in the world today and the various ‘problems’ related to its worldwide spread, along with the contexts which give rise to these problems. In Sections B and C, we then plot how people have aimed to regulate this phenomenon (i.e. how language professionals have, through the pursuit of their profession, dealt with the language and the problems associated with it), and how this practical knowledge can then be abstracted into theoretical knowledge – which results in the disciplinary knowledge which constitutes ‘World Englishes studies’. In certain respects, this approach is an unconventional one: as the series editors explain in their introduction, it has a ‘back-to-front’ structure when compared to traditional introductions which begin with the theory (which constitutes the core knowledge of the discipline), and turn to the phenomena for the purposes of illustration and exemplification.

Yet there are sound philosophical reasons for employing the present structure. Although theories are often promoted as having a general and a historical validity (Nagel, 1989), they always begin life as responses to particular problems. They are developed at a particular time and a particular place as a means of explaining certain observed phenomena that have been perplexing a particular scientific community. In other words, theories are the result of historical events. It is within this context that the pragmatist philosopher William James contends that truth can be understood as being *that which works*, and that “our beliefs are really rules for action” (1997 [1907], p. 94). For James, what we take as established theoretical knowledge (i.e. truth) is the retrospective interpretation of the process of problem solving. However much we may abstract and generalise theories, they exist for the solving of particular problems – and though the details of these problems may get erased from the retelling of the solution (i.e. from the formula which gains the status of a theory) – they are, in fact, its inevitable starting point. Thus it makes sense to start with the problems themselves – as it is these which will determine the truth value (or usefulness) of our theories.

The need for theory

If theories are tools to assist with the solving of problems, the question then arises: what is the nature of the problem we wish to solve here? One answer would be that it concerns successful communication. Languages are, among other things, instruments for communicating, and as English spreads across the globe the communication afforded by it can, presumably, operate on a global level. In other words, a global English can presumably function as a language that operates across traditional linguistic and cultural borders, and become an international *lingua franca*. ‘Problems’ related to this aspect of the

language's role would concern intelligibility – the extent to which the spread of the language and the diversity in linguistic form that results from this spread produce difficulties in understanding across the different varieties which develop. And certainly, issues relating to the mechanics of successful communication are touched upon by much of the debate about and research into World Englishes.

But possibly the most pervasive issue – the issue which exists as a context for all the other concrete issues and problems we shall be looking at – relates to the role played by the language in power relations around the world. This is an issue directly related to *beliefs about* the language rather than simply the use of the language. It relates to the way the language's development in different contexts is perceived by different communities, to the impact of the history that is responsible for the spread of the language, and to the way that English language resources are differentially distributed across the globe. The theory we will work towards in Section C will therefore seek to explain the role played by English in the organisation of various societies around the world, and the inequalities which can arise as a consequence of this organisation.

It is for this reason I suggested at the beginning that English in the world today is a political issue. English in the world today operates as a means of communication – and many of the English language-related problems people struggle with concern how to ensure that it acts efficiently in this capacity. But it is also implicated in practices and debates relating to cultural identity, and in this capacity can play a crucial role in the most fundamental aspects of people's everyday lives. The languages people speak – or aspire to speak – relate to who they are, and thus prejudices towards the language become prejudices towards people themselves. The relationship between language and culture has to do with the ideas, histories and belief systems that adhere to the language. In looking at English today, the questions we need to ask are not simply what the nature of the language around the world is, but what the consequences of its variegated nature are; not simply how it is that people around the globe use English, but also what it means for them to use it. The theory we will work towards will thus attempt to help explain the implications – both linguistic and social – of English as a global language.

Another brief word about names

One of the consequences of postponing the theoretical overview until Section C is that certain issues that are often presented as central to a discussion of the topic are not covered in detail until later in the book. As has been suggested, there are philosophical advantages to this strategy; namely, that empirical foundations can be securely laid in the

earlier sections of the book, and then built upon in the final section. On occasions, however, it is necessary to disrupt this structure in order to introduce aspects of the conceptual vocabulary and background context that are needed to provide an accurate and insightful description of the spread of English worldwide. This is particularly the case in the early parts of the book, where the conceptual and contextual foundations are laid for the introduction to the issues which preoccupy World Englishes studies. In such circumstances, therefore, I will succinctly gloss the concepts that are required for this initial explanation, and then return to the full discussion of them in the later section, where they can be related to the wider theoretical concerns of the discipline as a whole.

One such need to jump ahead occurs here at the very outset of the project, and concerns the choice of name for the book. In using the title *Exploring World Englishes*, I am, as noted above, following a recent tradition which stresses the multiplex nature of the language today and the need to take account of this multiplicity when studying the subject. This term 'World Englishes' is often used to refer to the general discipline that examines the nature and use of English worldwide or of English in globalised contexts, and it is this meaning which is being invoked in the title. But the term can also be used to refer to a specific school within the discipline (the approach associated most closely with Braj Kachru), and is sometimes taken to indicate an allegiance to this school's particular approach to the subject. The ambiguity over the use of this term and the significance it has for rival theoretical approaches is just one of the many points of debate which animate the discipline – and all of these will be covered in detail in Section C. In an attempt to avoid too much in the way of terminological confusion, however, throughout the book I will use the phrase 'World Englishes studies' to refer to the discipline as it is most broadly conceived (and which constitutes the subject of the book), and will highlight in the text whenever I am referring to particular schools or approaches within the broader academic field.

In summary then, this book presents an investigation of the nature of English in the world today, of how this nature presents 'problems' for those who use or work with the language, and of how we can understand the linguistic and social dynamics which produce these 'problems'. The contention that the book begins with is that worldwide English is as much a political as a linguistic issue, and for this reason we need to pay attention not only to what people do with the language but also what they think about it. And finally, while the subject of the book is English in the world today, English would not exist without its speakers; thus perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the subject of the book is the role of English in the lived experience of a global population for whom English is a vital part of everyday existence.

A note about the organisation of the book

The book is divided into two parts: *Part I: English in the world today*, which deals predominantly with practical issues; and *Part II: World Englishes as an academic discipline*, which deals with theoretical issues. Part I comprises two sections – the first (Section A) exploring the ‘Problems and Contexts’ of World Englishes studies (and including an overview of the history of the development and spread of English, and the scope of its current distribution across the globe), and the second (Section B) focusing on the ‘Interventions’ made by practitioners in the field. Part II of the book consists of only one section (Section C), which looks at the body of ‘Theory’ which comprises the core knowledge base of World Englishes studies.

The text is punctuated throughout by a number of ‘Tasks’, which are located at the end of each chapter. These take the form of study questions asking you to reflect on particular issues addressed in the text, and they can be used either as a reflective tactic for self-study purposes or as a prompt for classroom activities. At the end of the book there is a ‘Commentary on tasks’ section which provides feedback on these questions, and offers concise summaries of the key issues that each of the chapters contribute to the overall picture of what, how and why the topic of World Englishes is studied today.

At the end of the book there is also an annotated section on ‘Further reading’, which highlights some of the important and foundational texts associated with the topics discussed in the chapters. Finally, there is a ‘Glossary’ which provides short definitions of the key technical terms introduced in the text. When these terms are first introduced in the text (or when they are first dealt with in a significant way), they are highlighted in bold.