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**The Routes of English**  
**(Un)Mapping the Language**



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## Introduction

For good or ill, at the end of the second millennium AD and the fifth full millennium since recorded history began, English is unique. No language has ever before been put to so many uses so massively by so many people in so many places – on every continent and in every sea; in the air and in space; in thought, speech, writing; in print on paper and screen; in sound on tape and film; by radio, television, and telephone; and via electronic networks and multimedia. It is also used as mother tongue or other tongue – fluently, adequately, or haltingly; constantly, intermittently, or seldom; happily, unhappily, or ambivalently – by over a billion people.

(Tom McArthur, *The English Languages*)

Claiming that English is a global language today is an understatement if one considers the countless fields in which it plays a central role for international communication. As the epigraph suggests, English is used around the world for various purposes and in several contexts, whether they be legislative, administrative, legal, educational, socio-cultural or literary. As the range is so wide, the use of English offers a constant challenge to scholars, teachers and students of English studies, attempting to address the issues involved when discussing about language. In fact, the unprecedented spread of English and its current status continue to give rise to an increasing number of debates and researches about language across cultures and global movements.

While emphasizing that in our globalized society, individuals communicate across national and cultural boundaries by using one language in particular, English, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has stressed the need to envision the subject of English within the context of global movements and migrations and to

equip students with the critical awareness of how globalization is (re)shaping the English language and its role worldwide. Language change results in uses and forms that diverge from a single standard, since communicators use (and create) multiple Englishes. Although we all speak varieties of English determined by our backgrounds, the (surprisingly recent) idea of Standard English – referred to as ‘Queen’s English’, ‘BBC English’, ‘Oxford English’ or ‘public school English’<sup>1</sup> – represents the correct or proper way to speak and is still the most popular system to which users are expected to conform when communicating (especially as far as grammar and lexicon are concerned). Therefore, there is a persistent monolithic view of the language that mainly advocates conformity to Standard English norms. Indeed, one of the main concerns regarding the spread of English has been standardization, since unlike other international languages – such as Spanish and French – English lacks any official body prescribing stable norms in opposition to its apparent anarchy. However, there are growing drives of linguistic diversity acting upon the language and making the issue of language diversity an extremely complex one supported by a pluricentric view of the language that promotes non-conformity to Standard English. The global predominance gained by English has resulted in the fact that non-native speakers outnumber native speakers: significantly, the number of people learning English in China is greater than the total number of speakers of English in the USA (Taylor in Jiang, 2003: 3). This inevitably affects the (numerical) balance of power between native and non-native speaker groups. Consequently, the importance of the

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<sup>1</sup> It was Victorian England that introduced the idea of ‘Queen’s English’ (a spoken standard constituting a model) following the appearance of the first English dictionaries in the eighteenth century which pushed towards written standardization. The emergence of Received Pronunciation (RP) – the educated accent of London and south-east England – and the 1870 Education Act established public schools as a place where children (mostly boys) from many parts of the country were enabled to speak the Queen’s English and thus gain a condition of social acceptance. In fact, RP and Standard English were identified with power, education and material success. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the BBC also actively contributed to the spread of RP first on radio, then on television, reinforcing the connection between education and standard English that was mainly perceived as the pronunciation found in public schools, universities, the government and the church (on the subject see McCrum, Cran, MacNeil, 1989: 21-28).



## Postcolonial Englishes

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The study of Postcolonial Englishes (henceforth PCEs) as a coherent field of scholarly investigation was introduced within the branch of ‘World Englishes’ in the early 1980s and was built upon some precursor disciplines – such as sociolinguistics, contact linguistics, dialect geography – investigating all kinds of language variation. From the late 1920s in the USA and from the 1940s in England, linguists turned their attention to the first phenomena of language variability, comparing English from one country to another and collecting evidence of differences both in North America and Britain in order to establish linguistic atlases. Differences between the so-called ‘new Englishes’ can be regarded as a continuation of such studies, comparing English as spoken in India, Nigeria, or other locations, and basically questioning the idea that there is only one ‘standard’ variant, a correct (and, to a certain extent, monolithic) form of English that is superior to other forms being ‘deviant’ or ‘broken’.

PCEs have emerged in a variety of socio-historical circumstances on all continents; different scenarios account for their general variability, even if what they have in common is that “they have originated in contact settings, involving intercultural encounters: contact between immigrants of various social and regional backgrounds (including speakers of different English dialects), and contact between English-speaking immigrants and indigenous populations” (Schneider, 2007: 4). According to Edgar M. Schneider, who theorized PCEs in 2007, investigations in the field have been greatly influenced by the two major approaches of sociolinguistics: macro-sociolinguistics, on the one hand, which is concerned with the functions of languages and language varieties in a society (i.e. questions of language policy and uses, educational policies, multilingualism, diglossia and so on), and micro-sociolinguistics, on the other hand, focused on detailed correlations between individual language variants (i.e. features of pronunciation, morphology, and syntax). Both approaches are of immediate concern to PCEs as they document the emergence of new varieties of English as the product of

language contact, thus providing a common framework for reference and research. Despite the fact that branches such as historical linguistics have underlined the purity of languages through models representing languages like family trees, the ubiquity and inevitability of language contact in all cultures around the globe has recently been recognized, so that language contact theory has come to be an important sub-discipline (for a further discussion of the issue, see Schneider, 2007: 21-26).

The evolution of PCEs is fundamentally regarded as a sequence of stages of identity rewritings and associated linguistic changes affecting all parties involved in colonial contacts and reconstructing group identities along the lines that define ‘us’ and ‘the others’. In fact, settlers in a foreign land “consider themselves as an extension of the ‘us’ of their country of origin, clearly separated from the ‘other’ of the indigenous population of their country of destination” (Schneider, 2007: 30). In the settler community, however, bonds with the mother country weaken while a new concept of ‘us’ incorporates the indigenous population; similarly, from the perspective of the indigenous population, the erstwhile ‘others’ are integrated into ‘us’, once they become permanent residents. Identity constructions and negotiations together with their symbolic linguistic expressions are thus at the heart of the emergence of PCEs. Once in (cultural and linguistic) contact, the individual parties involved in colonial contexts need to redefine themselves and their roles in the light of the presence of the other groups sharing the same territory. As their identities change, their images of themselves in relation to others change, and their language usage (expressing those identities) change too. What Schneider proposes, then, is that linguistic usage and language varieties are closely associated to identity changes, so that “to a considerable extent, the emergence of PCEs is an identity-driven process of linguistic convergence” (Schneider, 2007: 30).

### **3.1 – The Dynamic Model of Evolution of Postcolonial Englishes**

It has been customary to study individual PCEs in isolation as if they were unique cases, proceeding by categorizing countries and types of