Communicating in English: Flexibility Within a Norm

英語によるコミュニケーシヨン:
標準における柔軟性

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Throughout the years there has been much controversy concerning the question of whether a standard English actually does exist and, if so, how should it be defined? A study of the wide variety of materials published on this issue reveals that the opinions and conclusions are as varied and far-reaching as the topic itself. From this it could be concluded that a standard English does not exist simply because no consensus can be reached on this subject and because, in reality, there are a wide variety of English dialects presently in use. It might be asked whether it would be beneficial or even desirable to label and define some form as standard and attempt to spread this "superior" form to all non-native (as well as native) speakers as the only officially accepted form of English. In dealing with these questions this paper suggests that any attempt to define a standard English is essentially futile and that the form English will take is naturally determined by usage and communicability - factors which are beyond control.

1. The existence of a variety of dialects.

There exists a distinct difference between the English of America and that of England, and likewise, the English which is spoken and taught in foreign countries is also unique. Within America and England it is common to find many regional accents and expressions which are not used in other areas as they reflect that region's peculiar heritage and values. It is not surprising, then, to find in foreign countries new forms of English which have been adapted to that country's environment and to meet its needs.

That a variety of English dialects do exist, dialects which are in constant use and accepted in their own context, cannot be disputed. Yet there are many native speakers (sometimes called "elitists" or "purists") who would have the non-native varieties eliminated in favor of the "correct" native form, forcing this "superior" form on the foreign language student. But to insist that non-native speakers of English speak "standard" English (even if one knew what that was), or some special form of native English, is to demand that the non-native speaker view things as a native English speaker would - an unreasonable, if not impossible, proposition. Language must necessarily relate to and reflect the speaker's heritage and culture. One main incentive to learn a second or foreign language is to convey one's own views as understood in one's own culture, from one's own background, and not to be transformed into a product of the foreign language and its culture. (However, as one gains greater knowledge of the foreign

culture through language study, a more receptive and sympathetic attitude could result paving the way to better communication and a deeper cultural understanding and ex-change.)[1]

Many who favor enforcing a standard form of English pose the "tower of Babel" argument. The proponents of this view claim that by allowing or tolerating the use of different forms of English, with their differences in pronunciation, gram-mar, and expressions, English would eventually become unintelligible to others. Paradoxically then, we would be faced with a growing lack of communication in a language which is fast becoming international since it would become fragmented into various types of English, producing less universal forms.

Others cite mockery as a problem. If an unusual variation of native English is used, people will tend to look down on the speakers as uneducated or they may openly ridicule them. According to this "elitist" argument, it is important to use "standard" English in educated circles.

2. Dialects naturally conform to the norm.

However, in this dispute over standard English and its application, not enough attention is paid to a single, fundamental point. Although in essence it is very simple, the full impli-cations are often overlooked. This is the fact that, out of necessity, there do exist basic boundaries in which the English language fluctuates and flows while readjusting to modern usage. This is the "norm". Unlike the term "standard", the norm need not be strictly defined nor specified for it includes all forms of English which are intelligible to others as an effective means of communication. It is, if somewhat abstract, self-sufficient.

With this in mind, all further discussion concerning a "correct", "standard", or some determined "acceptable" form of English becomes meaningless. That which people are able to understand and the reaction toward the spoken form determine the boundaries and naturally produce a norm preventing off-shoots of English which are incomprehensible to others.[2] In his book, "Our Language", Potter states that given the cos-mopolitan nature of the United States, "never has there existed any real danger that English might not prove capable of completely assimilating these immigrant tongues or that the children of the French in Louisiana, the Germans in Pennsylvania, the Scandinavians in Minnesota, or the Slavs and Italians in Michigan might

not be able to understand, speak, read, and write English in the third and fourth generations." (p.158). Inaccurate pronunciation which is clearly understandable is forgiven whereas pronunciation which is not understood is, and must necessarily be, perfected if the speakers wish to make themselves understood and if the listeners wish to understand (this being the fundamental rule of communication). Thus, certain "bad" or inaccurate pronunciations are permitted and others are not, even among non-native speakers themselves. Furthermore, if one wishes to appear educated or move in educated circles, that person will necessarily need to conform to the presently popular or socially accepted form(s) of English. (The accepted form, of course, could vary from group to group.) In his book, Potter poses the following questions: "Why has England no authoritative linguistic academy, like the Italian Accademia della Crus (1582) or the Academie Francaise (1635) . . . why, it may be asked, should linguistic societies be so reluctant to assume responsibility for the control of 'good usage'?" (p.117). In answering these questions he maintains that the reason lies in the fact that not many people see such control as desirable and even very practicable. In the past when one such attempt was made and failed, Potter

says that it was because "correctness was felt to be a relative term.... correctness was not to be prescribed by any sort of committee: it was to be measured by the standards of 'good use.'" (p.123).

Non-native speakers of English will naturally conform their use of English to meet the demands of the environment or situation with which they are most often confronted. This is also true of native English speakers, for most are competent in only one or two forms of English and are obviously out-of-place or feel uneasy when communicating in a different milieu. The scholar is usually unable to use the distinctive type of "street talk" found in predominantly blue collar districts and, conversely, the blue collar worker's colorful form of English clearly stands out and apart when used in a white collar or "educated" setting. In his book, Bolinger cites Evans as saying that "the only question that has any bearing on the propriety of a form of speech is: Is it in reputable use?" ("Aspects of Language", p.103). We must realize, though, that this "reputable use" varies from place to place and situation to situation as much as it does from one generation to another.

3. Flexibility is integral to a dynamic, living language.

The boundaries of the norm are obviously quite broad - encompassing all forms of comprehensible English. But they do nevertheless exist. That English remains fluid and flexible within the norm is a healthy sign of a living, dynamic language. This is necessary for survival for no rigid language would, nor could, be grasped and accepted by such a variety of peoples with differences in heritage, culture, attitude, social environment, etc. "The rhythmic transitions from synthesis to analysis and from analysis to synthesis," Potter states, "are the systole and diastole of the human heart in language . . . In the resuscitation of old affixes and in the creation of new ones English is showing these synthetic powers. Without growth and change there is neither life nor vigour in language." (p.87). Although there are many causes for this "English language imperialism" (as some would call it), one definitive factor is that the English language is pliable and easily adaptable to the needs and demands of all, allowing it to so quickly become an international language.

It should be noted here that the purpose of this paper is not to examine the philosophical issues as to whether or not the inherently desirable qualities (if any do exist) of English are in the process of being destroyed by this internationalization. Neither will it examine whether steps should be taken to ensure its survival in its present form or whether preventative measures should be taken against any "corruption" of the language - such as the French and Germans are doing in the attempt to preserve the "purity" of their language and culture by stemming the influx of English into their own tongues (creating a type of language xenophobia). However, this desire to designate or perhaps to create an officially recognized standard form and then to encourage its use is both impractical and unnecessary, if not impossible. In all things, change is the key to healthy growth and development, and language is no exception. It would be virtually impossible to keep up with the changes that are constantly occurring in language and harder still to limit and control them. Fortunately this is unnecessary for, as previously noted, any vernacular will naturally conform to present-day usage (that which is perceived as acceptable in that context) while still retaining the flexibility to easily change and adapt to new demands as they arise within the norm (which is naturally governed by communicability and efficiency). We must appreciate that the English language itself is merely a product of the older languages and herein lies its advantage: it has its roots in a tradition of change.[3] Even as other

people adapt the English language to their needs, the native English speaker finds himself embracing new English terms and phrases which are products of other countries. "Our language," says Potter, "is ever adapting itself to changing circumstances. It is slowly shifting from day to day . . . As in the past, so in the future, it will adapt itself unceasingly to meet new needs, and in that incessant reshaping and adaptation every speaker and writer, consciously or unconsciously, will play some part." (pp.178 & 181). This is not the language's weakness, but its strength.

4. The role of the norm in the classroom.

The implications of this in the English language classroom is that the teacher of English (as a representative of the norm) needs to be sensitive to the students' needs and goals which they have set for themselves in learning a foreign language and, accordingly, teach the appropriate style(s). Of course, the future "need" or use of English is often difficult to determine (particularly among beginners or young students). Furthermore, the purpose of learning a foreign language will most likely vary from student to student. It would be best, ideally, to expose the students to a variety of forms and ensure that

they are aware of the different situations and settings in which each is appropriate. In many foreign language classes, the students are forced to learn a single greeting or conversational pattern which they are expected to use at all times, regardless of the situation. Obviously it is virtually impossible to teach, or at least to expect, the student of English to memorize and to use multiple forms of English, especially in the beginning stage. The student, then, must be allowed to develop naturally, as even native speakers do, in first acquiring a broken and "childish" form which is at least communicable (quick results being a crucial factor in motivation and provide a strong basis for the perseverance necessary to attain a higher level of proficiency). From this initial stage, students can advance to a more mature form and should be allowed the freedom to eventually create their own style to which they can relate which has been adapted and developed to fit the uses to which they plan to put the language. "The real reason," says Stevick "why people use a language is not to produce right answers, or even to increase their competence in it, but simply to say things to one another." ("Teaching and Learning Languages" p.98).

5. Flexibility within a norm permits non-destructive inter-

nationalization of the language.

For most people the purpose of learning and speaking English is to communicate with others who also speak English. Regardless of how far removed English may seem to be drifting from the native form, out of necessity, boundaries will remain, providing a norm simply because the ultimate purpose is effective and efficient communication. There is no cause for concern that the pronunciation and grammar will be turned on end and that the English language, as we know it, will be hopelessly rearranged. On the contrary, the English language stands to benefit from this international interaction with the influx of fresh terms and phrases pertaining to new ideas and concepts. Bolinger says:

> Every living language is in a state of dynamic equilibrium. Infinitesimal changes occur in every act of speech, and mostly make no impression. Now and then a scintillation is captured and held. We hear a novel expression and like it. It is adaptive - fits a style or names a new object or expresses an idea succinctly. Others take it up and it "becomes part of the language." The equilibrium is temporarily upset but reestablishes itself quickly. The new expression, like an invading predator, marks out its territory, and the older inhabitants defend what is left of theirs.
> The vast open-endedness of language that results from multiple reinvestment is what makes it both systematic and receptive to change. The parts are intricately interwoven, and this maintains the fabric; but they are also infinitely recombinable, and this makes for gradual, nondestructive variation. (p.17).

There are no inherently "good" nor "bad" forms of English if they fit the norm.

It would be valuable to have an international language with which all could be at ease, containing terms for the peculiar concepts of varying cultures and practices. If English (or any other language) can fulfill this need and aid in international understanding, then we should welcome it rather than becoming alarmed by it. At the moment, English is merely experiencing the growing pains of becoming the first modern-day international language.

Notes

1. Obviously much more could be said on this point. To become truly fluent in a target language, a deep understanding of the foreign culture is necessary to avoid tripping up on the subtle differences in nuance or on the hidden or implied "real" meanings. However, this can hardly be expected of all (or even the majority of) learners since it involves spending much time living or working within the framework of that culture. Yet regardless of how much exchange and immersion in the foreign culture takes

place, this does not require that one become transformed into a "new person" as a product of the foreign culture.

2. Of course there do exist distinctive forms of English which are generally referred to as Pidgin. It is often difficult to understand these Pidgin forms, although they are not entirely incomprehensible. However, they are isolated forms and must be viewed as a new and different language in their own right (no longer just a form of English), for they are a colorful blend of English and the local tongue. It is not possible (nor would it be desirable if it were) to prevent new languages from evolving from the English language just as Latin produced many languages, including English itself.

3. According to Potter, the English spoken today is a blended form of the Germanic and Romance languages, the former including Scandinavian and the latter French and Latin. This blending of various languages is, of course, not unique to the English language. However, it is a fundamental characteristic of the language as it has experienced numerous changes through Chaucer, Tyndale, Shakespeare, Carlyle, Milton and Swift,

each borrowing, blending and adding to the language which has been versatile enough to readily adopt new words, spellings, pronunciations and expressions.

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