

World Englishes: The study of new English varieties. Rahend Meshthrie & Rakesh M. Bhatt. (Key Topics in Sociolinguistics). Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. (xvii, 276)

This text is part of a growingly popular field that calls itself ‘World English Studies’, which focuses on extra-national varieties of English, excepting those spoken as native varieties in North America, New Zealand, and Australia, but including so-called immigrant varieties and English-lexified contact languages. These taken together are called ‘World Englishes’, which term is preferable to the authors to ‘New Englishes’, but whose terminological problems lead them to adopt the somewhat forbidding appellation, the ‘English Language Complex’ (3). Curiously, BVE (or AAVE) is excluded from this “Complex,” despite the assertion that “many” scholars attribute to it a creole development (44), a relatively dated perspective. As would be expected, the text provides a summary of developments in the field and a review of its literature, to which might be added Edgar W. Schneider, *Postcolonial English* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), which substantially develops a model for the expansion of English varieties in the post-colonial world.

In addition to the usual matter, the text includes a ten page glossary for those with less background in language studies. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of the book are presented lists of examples, drawn from nearly a dozen well studied varieties, of what are called “Structural Features of New Englishes.” These add up to a catalogue of features reported in the speech of various regions. Some discussion is offered (40 -41) about categorizing these as “deviations” from standard varieties or “features” of these ‘New Englishes’, but by the time this long section is complete, the many comparisons of the “features” of the varieties under discussion to standard variety features make clear that a deviation paradigm is in fact applied, i.e., that what makes a feature interesting in this text is its divergence from the standard; the numerous comments along

those lines seem to presuppose a single world standard for English. We also hear on numerous occasions that the authors do not wish to be “judgmental” in their discussion of this or that feature; since most students of language variety today are indoctrinated in the principle of the communicative equivalence of language varieties, this leads to a question as to who the intended audience for these remarks might be.

The many example data cited demonstrate a multiplicity of influences in the variegated regional, social, and language contact situations in which the features they exemplify have developed, e.g., “dialect features” of traditional English dialects, features of “early Modern” English, and “innovations within the New English” are cited (47, 48), yet all such “features” seem to be classified in a lump to establish the “linguistic characteristics of the New Englishes” (43), as though they constitute a unified variety. This raises some important conceptual questions.

These involve clarifying and distinguishing the concepts of innovation, interlanguage, and substrate influence, along with persistence and diffusion of features from a native English variety. Traditionally *innovation* refers to changes in a language that arise in the speech community that uses the variety as a native tongue, such as the Great Vowel Shift, the voicing of intervocalic fricatives, and erosion and loss of vowels in affixes leading to the loss of the noun case system over stages of English, the results of analogical processes such as the spread of –s plural in English, the rhoticization of *s* (e.g., *flos*, *flor-*) in Latin, grammaticalization, derivation, coining and compounding, and the like, i.e., *innovation* traditionally subsumes changes that involve the native resources of the language. Borrowing and calquing rest on the margin of this concept.

The second language acquisition concept *interlanguage* is often taken to include *transfer* and *interference*, which are in fact distinct concepts. Piennemann has established that features do

not transfer from L1 to L2 (1998); *interference* involves applying cognitive and neurological processing associated with functions in L1 while performing operations in L2 (e.g., Carroll, et al., 2000). Thus when speakers of Chinese varieties in Shanghai say or write in English *staffs only*, they cognize the noun in the manner of their L1, where nouns have a mass association but may be individuated and counted according to operations involving classifiers, and not having (yet) acquired the cognitive processing operations of the L2, in this case, a collective noun which is grammatically singular, erroneously supply plural *-s* to the notional plural. Thus the oversupply and undersupply of articles (47, f) by EFL speakers reflects a failure to have acquired the complex grammatical and pragmatic processing involved in the English article system.

This is also seen where a seemingly resumptive *one* (83) directly translates a classifier from Fujianese; likewise the utterance *John give his boss scold*, in which *John* is the patient (34) of the scolding is a word-level translation of a Chinese passivizing form (where *gei* ‘give’ in colloquial varieties is grammaticalized to signal agent of notional passive form). So examples of left dislocations (81), which reflect topic – comment utterance organization, characteristic features of discourse organization in the L1. Anomalous utterance forms which result from word-by-word translation from L1s tend to be language specific; other phenomena that are characteristic of failure to acquire L2 processing operations are ubiquitous. Furthermore, when these cognitive processing interactions participate in such phenomena as the use of tags and politeness indicators (as in examples at 133), it is the case that one language is being used, essentially, to do the work of a culture to which it is alien. Such ‘features’ reflect nothing more than a failure to acquire the cognitive and grammatical processing for the target language and reliance on L1 processes, hence *interference*. It is something of a conceit to aggrandize such as “features” under the head of a ‘variety’.

In the matter of accent (phonetic substitution and intonation), the neuromuscular process does what it has become habituated to doing through hundreds of thousands of repetitions. Thus speakers of Northern Chinese who have not acquired θ may substitute s to produce [sɪŋk] for *think* (in text messaging, English *thank you* is represented with 3Q, i.e., *sanQ*). With instruction and practice, though, those who acquire control of the articulators in question produce more instances of [θɪŋk]. The late phonetician Peter Ladefoged believed that each person possesses a variable degree of capacity to control and change the neuromuscular operations involved in speech sound production (*A Course in Phonetics*), and observably, individuals speak their L2 in distinct idiolects. It can take a long time to for an individual speaker to acquire, for example, vowel lengthening before voiced consonants or adjust to stress timing, but over the generations in the language shift scenario, acquisition of such processes does occur, witness the completely native speech productions of second, third, fourth, and fifth generation Americans of Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican descent. To classify such productions as features of a distinct variety of English misses the point that they in fact characterize a moveable, transient, and individual stage on a cline of acquisition, whose target is a native variety, i.e., that we confuse a stage of development in individuals within a group with a stable and enduring regional variety.

The term *substrate influence* arose in pidginistics and creolistics to refer to contributions of the phonological and grammatical processes of the nondominant languages to the structure of a contact variety, such as the five vowel system and the well documented $-Vm$ ‘transitive marker’ in Melanesian pidgins (*mi lukim pikipiki* ‘I saw the/a pig’). The term is borrowed for bilingual and language shift scenarios to designate like influence among speakers of the language being replaced in their productions with the new one. The development of pidgins and creoles remain categorically distinct phenomena from dialect dispersion and interference, though.

These conceptual problems lead us to inquire if *innovation* = *interlanguage* = *substrate influence*, as they are treated here. The concept *interlanguage* seems to be out of fashion in the field of the English Language Complex; perhaps it undermines the notion of independent varietyhood, as is ascribed to the English spoken in various regions. But here the question is ideological, not scientific. Post-Modernism is cited as a philosophical basis for the study of New Englishes. It seems to be the case, under the influence of the decentralizing tendencies of post-Modernism (15), that these ‘varieties’ are being asserted as somehow independent of standard English. It does need to be pointed out, however, that where *substrate influence* counts as just another form of *innovation*, terminologically, anything goes.

Similarly, the term *nativization* occurs in creolistics for the process whereby the contact language used by parents in a forming community becomes the native tongue of new generations, in whose mouths and minds it develops in various ways into a native variety. In the context of “New Englishes” the term is used for cases where English, while not a native tongue, is used in some situations “like a native language” (11). This terminological recycling and concomitant ambiguity is a feature of these New English studies.

As James H. Sledd points out, “fundamental structural similarities justify the one name *English* for a multitude of varieties” (1993). The pidgins and creoles subsumed in the “New Englishes” label are lexified chiefly by English. But in *gras bilong salwara* ‘grass GEN salt water (= seaweed)’ and *mi lukim pikipiki* ‘I saw-TRANS a/the pig’, do “fundamental structural similarities” occur that we recognize as English? While English serves as the lexifier, these grammatical and word formation systems are not English or derived from English. To ignore the latter fact and history is reduce ‘language’ to its vocabulary, and to strip a variety of all save its lexifier. By the same argument, Modern English could be considered a variety of French.

If traditional varieties, EFL/ESL varieties, and contact languages are each seen as independent Englishes, then the distinction between EFL and ESL situations can be blurred (7). But in an environment such as Shanghai, where a small percentage of persons have at least a minimally useful command of spoken English, the English that one hears is characterized by the neuromuscular and cognitive-linguistic interactions that identify it as an EFL situation, where English is being learned in a non English environment, with what that entails in terms of variable models and its absence of general use in communicative situations. It must be recognized that in such situations, the explicit target of acquisition is the norms of standard British English.

In Los Angeles, where, in contrast, the models are native speakers of American varieties, English is used (outside the founder generation in restricted immigrant communities) in all communicative situations, the implicit target being the local variety of American English. Los Angeles offers a case of an environment where we are witnessing the early stages of language shift in numerous ESL communities. To comprehend what is going on in each situation, we must determine if it is one of stable bilingualism or language shift. To equate the phenomena observed in the two disparate groups of Chinese speakers (those learning English on the Asian continent and those shifting to English in Los Angeles) is, *reductio ad absurdum*, to miss what is in fact transpiring.

Prepositions and phrasal verbs are a fruitful field in which to find deviations in EFL and ESL situations, as are exemplified in *good in* for *good at* (Ind. Eng.) (72). I should point out that the verbal particles are not prepositions, which the following demonstrates: *I got up at six o'clock*, where the prepositional phrase (time adverbial) is *at six o'clock* and *up* is a phrasal verb particle (has no object). I am not so sure that *dish out* (food) for *dish up* (ibid.) is deviant, though. In any case, such productions are commonly heard among bilingual students in our universities

and even among monolingual native speakers who have not read book and have been raised in day care without significant adult speech interaction. Certain items, like *discuss about* for *discuss* (ibid.), on the analogy of *talk about*, are ubiquitous in immigrant and foreign student speech. Such are the result of incomplete acquisition. On the other hand, items *voice out* for *voice* and *pick* for *pick up* (Sg. Eng.) (ibid.) occur in a contact language situation as a result of very different circumstances. The former translates a Chinese form (from *shuo chu* ‘say out’, i.e., substrate influence); the latter reduces an English form (i.e., reduction process in contact language). Creative explanations are offered as generalizations for the features catalogued under “New Englishes” (72, f), but the facts of each case follow from its social and linguistic history.

It is important to recognize that in the case of EFL pockets and groups of immigrant English learners, speakers of native English varieties, although they may certainly make accommodations to their interlocutors, do not acquire their “variety.” In contrast, in areas where a contact language is the vernacular, often as L in distribution with a M or H, such as the vernacular contact languages in Singapore (e.g., 27), Hawai’i, the Caribbean, the mines of S. Africa, and the Melanesian pidgin areas, the vernacular is an independent acquisition target, one which outsiders do not understand, cannot produce, and must therefore learn in order to function in the society that uses it. These contact speech varieties exist alongside a traditional variety of English, which speakers of the traditional variety must target, just as their speakers must target acquisition of the traditional English variety for use in its contexts.

Assigning such contact languages even “partial membership” among the ‘Englishes’ of the “English Language Complex” (28) obscures and falsifies their unique history and composition. This is a fundamentally important point in distinguishing contact languages from Englishes, of whatever stripe. Even in Hawai’i, where under the shadow of standard English in

schools, business, and the professions, language shift from Hawaiian Creole to English appears to be advancing apace, *howlies* find the native productions of *locals* incomprehensible until they have acquired the variety, and in their turn the vernacular speech of the children of *locals* who migrate to the United States mainland is unintelligible to their new peers there.

I will point out two curious contradictions. In the World Englishes model, W. African English is said to have skipped the phase of endormative stabilization (35). This is impossible to comprehend in the integrity of the model cited: in Nigeria, e.g., the urban vernacular English is an EFL variety, in an environment where the target in education, law, and other high culture institutions is, quite overtly, the British standard. Where, then, are the endonormative standards that characterize the last phase? And in the treatment of contact languages in the “New English” paradigm, it is recognized that “relexification” is observable in creoles, but not in other varieties (162). This observation should give one pause.

Emerging Englishes and contact languages make a fascinating, diverse topic of study, especially given the resources of research in traditional English varieties. At present, extensive scholarship on vernacular varieties of English in the British Isles makes it possible to trace the transportation of features to and their diffusion in extranational locales. This is the correct direction for inquiries in developing Englishes; from that standpoint we are in a position to observe feature diffusion, what occurred as innovation, as borrowing, and where in the contact situation language genesis occurred. Otherwise, we simply encounter features that seem novel to us, and we do not know what to make of them so just add them to a list.

Meanwhile, the major languages of the world are well studied, so it is easy to determine what interference may be present in language shift and bilingual situations. Pidgins and creoles may similarly be studied, on the one hand by looking at the features of the specific English

varieties used by the English speaking community(ies) in contact, and on the other at those of the substrate languages, where information is available, of other speakers. Thus on the one hand we can recognize in *tok* in *Tok Pisin* a regional British pronunciation like *talk* (= [t k]) and in *Pisin* with [s] the result of phonemic reduction/simplification (ɾ → s); likewise in the aforementioned Melanesian –*Vm* transitive marker, a feature of the substrate system onto which lexemes modeled on English were grafted.

Just as each word has a history, each variety of speech has a unique development, and each developed in its own particular social and historical context. To carry matters further, each socio-historical situation studied can provide insights into the sociolinguistic and stylistic study of what language is used to do and how it is used to do it in the regions of these developing varieties. These seem to be much more fruitful goals than collecting lists of disparate features that deviate from recognized standards.

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Robert D. Angus

California State University, Fullerton