

# The concept of 'World English' and its implications for ELT

*Kanavillil Rajagopalan*

*World English (WE) belongs to everybody who speaks it, but it is nobody's mother tongue. Although today ever more people accept the idea that there is such a thing as WE, very few of them seem to have realized that the full implications of admitting it are much more far reaching than they had hitherto imagined. It may be that some of these implications will nowhere be felt so strongly in the foreseeable future as in the sphere of language teaching. At present, we are at best in a position to make some wild guesses concerning the kind of changes in store for us, and I would suggest that ELT is poised to undergo some dramatic changes as native varieties of English give way to WE as the most coveted passport to world citizenship.*

## Introduction

It has become more or less a cliché these days to refer to English as a world language. At the 1984 conference to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the British Council there was a debate between Sir Randolph Quirk and Professor Braj Kachru on the (literally) million dollar question of 'who owns English', and hence whose English must be adopted as the model for teaching the language worldwide (Quirk and Widdowson 1985). Since then, much has been written on the role of English as a language of international communication, and the desirability or otherwise of adopting one of the Inner Circle varieties of English (to all intents and purposes, either British or American) as the canonical model for teaching it as a second or foreign language. The position vigorously defended by Quirk in that debate—succinctly captured in the phrase 'a single monochrome standard' (Quirk 1985: 6)—no longer appeals to the majority of those who are involved in the ELT enterprise in one way or another. Instead, Kachru's equally spirited insistence that 'the native speakers [of English] seem to have lost the exclusive prerogative to control its standardisation' (Kachru 1985: 30), and his plea for a paradigm shift in linguistic and pedagogical research so as to bring it more in tune with the changing landscape, have continued to strike a favourable chord with most ELT professionals. And the idea that English belongs to everyone who speaks it has been steadily gaining ground.

Though still resisted in some quarters, the very idea of World English (henceforward, WE) makes the whole question of the 'ownership' of English problematic, not to say completely anachronistic. Widdowson expressed the idea in a very telling manner when he wrote 'It is a matter

of considerable pride and satisfaction for native speakers of English that their language is an international means of communication. But the point is that *it is only international to the extent that it is not their language.*' (italics mine) (Widdowson 1994: 385).

### Unpacking the full import of WE

One of the objectives of this paper is to explore the full significance of Widdowson's contention, which I believe has not yet been adequately appreciated by the ELT community across the world. In pursuing Widdowson's line of reasoning, I want to argue that, with the advance of English as a world language, the whole idea of 'native speaker' has been rendered somewhat blurred, if not hopelessly meaningless—except perhaps in an ideological sense which, incidentally, was always there, although seldom noticed (Rajagopalan 1997), and hence increasingly questionable as far as ELT practices are concerned. A logical corollary to Widdowson's thesis is this. In its emerging role as a world language, English has no native speakers. Now, this is no doubt a bold claim, and to the extent that it can survive critical scrutiny, it will have far-reaching consequences not only for ELT, but also for the way we have become accustomed to thinking about natural languages.

### The need to distinguish WE from familiar varieties of English

Lest I should be misunderstood here, please note what it is that I am *not* claiming. I am not saying that there are no native speakers of English any more—if by native speakers we mean persons who were born and brought up in monolingual households with no contact with other languages. Indeed, that would be an absurd thing to say. As with every other language, there will—for the immediately foreseeable future at least—continue to be children born into monolingual English-speaking households who will, under the familiar criteria established for the purpose (Davies 1991), qualify as native speakers of English. But what we are interested in at the moment is WE, not the English language as it is spoken in English-speaking households, or the Houses of Parliament in Britain. WE is a language (for want of a better term, that is) spoken across the world—routinely at the check-in desks and in the corridors and departure lounges of some of the world's busiest airports, typically during multi-national business encounters, periodically during the Olympics or World Cup Football seasons, international trade fairs, academic conferences, and so on. And those who speak WE are already legion, and their numbers are currently growing exponentially.

### The uniqueness of WE

In other words, WE is a linguistic phenomenon that is altogether *sui generis*. It defies our time-honoured view of language which is structured around the unargued assumption that every natural language is typically spoken by a community of native speakers, and exceptionally, or marginally (that is to say, from a theoretical point of view, in a none-too-interesting sense) by a group of non-natives. This means that those of us who accept the notion of WE need to go back to the drawing board and rethink our entire approach to ELT, no matter what the specific context we happen to find ourselves working in.

Arguments against WE and what they ignore

Now, it is by no means the case that everyone in the ELT world accepts the notion of WE without demur. Phillipson, for one, has been highly critical of it on the grounds that those who advocate it simply ignore the highly unequal distribution of power among its contemporary users. To say that English belongs to everybody who uses it is, says Phillipson (forthcoming), to be hopelessly naïve about a world order controlled by media giants like the CNN and the BBC that do not act as mouthpieces for everybody but, on the contrary, represent a handful of vested interests. The basic thrust of such allegations is that, in so far as access to information is rigorously controlled by a handful of media outlets, and the corporate interests that maintain them, it is foolhardy to expect that they will in any way represent all and sundry, or speak on behalf of those on the margins.

While Phillipson is no doubt right about the unequal distribution of power as far as linguistic communities in general is concerned, I believe he is misguided in singling out English or WE as a language burdened with colonial legacy and the multiple scars of past and present inequities (Rajagopalan 1999). If anything, all languages bear testimony to the presence of unequal power distribution, and the power politics that invariably and inevitably play out in their respective speech communities. To imagine a speech community entirely rid of such power politics is to deflect the whole discussion from the real to an ideal world. What makes WE an interesting case is that it blows up what is always already there in any speech community (and is reflected by the respective language), thus making it more easily amenable to critical inspection. In other words, it is my contention that the difference between WE and any other natural language in this respect is quantitative rather than qualitative. The more widely spoken a language, the greater will be the visibility of the internal dissensions that mark its speech community. In other words, by studying WE more closely, we may gain valuable insights into the workings of *all* languages, even the supposedly monolithic ones.

In my view, to speak of English as a world language is simply another way of drawing attention to the fact that it is an arena where conflicting interests and ideologies are constantly at play—in fact, more so than ever before in its history. In its passage from a small dialect spoken by a few thousands of people in good old Albion to its present day status as the language in which Saddam Hussein signed his treaty of surrender to the allied troops at the end of the first Gulf War, and in which, as an off duty BBC reporter, John Simpson was able to strike up a sprightly little conversation with a shoeshine boy in New Delhi's Connaught Circus (Simpson 2001: 166), all that has really happened to English is that the power politics being played by those who use it for whatever reason, and in whatever capacity, have become far more complex. And, as noted already, far more visible.

**WE and the need to review ELT practices**

It was mentioned at the outset that my central aim in writing this piece is to press home the claim that ELT practices that have for long been in place need to be reviewed drastically with a view to addressing the new set of challenges being thrown at us by the phenomenon of WE. Up until now a good deal of our taken-for-granted ELT practices have been

threatened with the prospect of being declared obsolete for the simple reason that they do not take into account some of the most significant characteristics of WE.

### The role of the native speaker

As already pointed out, the question of the native speaker is one such. No one can deny that language teaching in general, and ELT in particular, historically evolved around the notion of the native speaker. Theories about language learning typically posited the figure of 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 1981:317). Even when the focus shifted from the Chomsky-inspired ideal of ‘linguistic competence’, to the Hymesian, presumably more liberating, notion of ‘communicative competence’, it was the figure of the native speaker that invariably served as the yardstick with which to measure the adequacy of policy decisions, the efficacy of methods and authenticity of materials, the learner’s proficiency, and so on. In other words, the native’s authority—nay, his or her God-like infallibility—was preserved even in the seemingly more libertarian approaches to language teaching that accompanied the process by which language teaching freed itself from its subservience to theoretical linguistics as its sole feeder discipline, and instead began looking at a host of disciplines for insights to inform its own practice (Rampton 1995, Rajagopalan 2003).

Some of the consequences of conducting ELT practices around the central figure of the ‘omniscient’ native speaker—elevated to the status of a totem—have been profoundly deleterious to the whole enterprise. Among other things, it has bred an extremely enervating inferiority complex among many a non-native speaker learner/teacher, and helped spawn unfair and discriminatory hiring practices.

Why is it incumbent upon us to undertake a radical rethinking of our past practices in respect of the native speaker-centred approaches to ELT in light of the new role assumed by English as it metamorphosed into a world language? Here is one obvious reason. Our past practices were premised on the key belief that someone who wants to learn English as a second or a foreign language does so in order to be able to communicate with the so-called native speakers of English. He or she wants to be able to order a pint of beer in a London pub or hail a taxi on the southern end of Manhattan. Furthermore, it was tacitly assumed that, in order to be able to do all these things and much more, all that a tourist needed was some ‘neutral’ variety of English or, to use Quirk’s phrase, ‘a single monochrome standard’. Now, perhaps some fifty years or so ago, the chances were that the visitor could indeed hope to do these things with the help of the kind of English (mostly some standard variety, such as the Queen’s English or the General American) they picked up in their EFL lessons. But not so any longer, as anyone who has been through these experiences in more recent years has learnt the hard way. A person unable to cope with the Punjabi or Greek accent of the waiter or the taxi driver is communicatively deficient and ill-equipped to that very extent. It is WE at work, whether we like it or not. And part of the price we have to pay if we decide to pay more than lip service to the concept of WE is to be

prepared to cope with a wide variety of accents, both native and non-native.

Is WE a language?

Closer inspection reveals that WE is a hotchpotch of dialects and accents at different stages of nativization (or, contrariwise, fossilization) where there are no real rules of the game; if anything, the rules are constantly being revised or reinvented even as the game progresses. And with the digital revolution under way, according to some doomsday pundits the situation is threatening to go awry once and for all. Heim (1993: 2), for one, gives vent to his apprehensions thus: 'What is the state of the English language? No state at all. It is in process. Our language is being word processed. If languages have states of health, sick or well, then ours is manic.'

With even the crudest guestimates pointing to the existence of twice as many non-native speakers using English for whatever purposes in their daily lives as their native counterparts, the day is not far off (if it has not come already) when more and more people across the globe will be using the language for communication between non-English speakers than for linguistic encounters involving at least one native speaker, considered the stereotypical case by most curriculum planners and course designers. This new WE, which is already a fact of the matter, is nobody's mother tongue. Now, faced with this unusual linguistic phenomenon, a linguist may be tempted to jump to the smug conclusion that WE is a pidgin *par excellence*. Dismissively characterized as 'contact languages', or forms of speech that 'spontaneously' spring up when people from mutually unintelligible speech communities find themselves all of a sudden having to communicate to one another, while pidgins constitute a ragbag category of makeshift languages that are, by definition, unstable and ephemeral. But such an argumentative tack will hardly help us get any purchase on what WE is really all about. Because to call WE a pidgin is to entertain the vain hope that some day it will evolve into a full-fledged language and that the present difficulties are only a passing phase. It is, moreover, to deny the possibility of there ever existing mixed languages the way linguists in the 19th century used to. Max Müller, the great German linguist and man of letters, is on record as having made the confident claim '*Es gibt keine Mischsprache*'—in English, 'There is no such thing as a mixed language', not realizing, of course, that fear of the loss of the putative 'purity' of individual languages that such claims harbour is part of a wider ideological agenda that also spurns miscegenation, thereby endorsing the putative purity of races.

**WE and the place of the 'native speaker' of English**

If we took the notion of WE seriously, it would follow that the so-called native speaker of English, whose presumed one-upmanship in relation to non-natives (that is to say, so long as discussion was confined to speaking English in one of the native environments) primarily rested on his/her having been brought up in a monolingual environment, is at a clear disadvantage vis-à-vis the large mass of people performing routine tasks in it. Any head start he or she may be claimed to have in virtue of a privileged command of the linguistic code is offset by the indisputable fact that WE itself is at best code-referenced rather than code-bound.

## The native speaker and the teaching of the four skills in WE

If the native speaker's status in the context of WE is markedly different from that which he or she enjoyed in their regional variety, it is interesting to consider separately each of the four skills that are widely believed to collectively make up one's command of a given language, and ask if there are any differences among them with regard to the changes under way.

To begin with, let us note that even in their own 'mother-tongue' the native speaker is never equally at home in all four of the skills, if by 'native' we mean what one is in virtue of one's native endowment (as professional linguists are wont to remind us). The sense in which the native speaker was said to be a consummate speaker of the language was an incredibly impoverished sense, one from which the whole idea of speaking for a real purpose or speaking with a view to getting things done (often competitively and under adverse circumstances—which is what many non-native learners are ultimately interested in) had been systematically subtracted so as to concentrate on the purely grammatical competence of producing an infinite number of sentences *ad nauseam*. Even granted that the native is the ultimate yardstick to be considered in speaking, the same was never true—not at least in the same sense—to listening. The native speaker-*hearer* is not, in other words, automatically a native speaker-*listener*.

As for the remaining two skills, namely reading and writing, the situation gets even more complicated. From the native as a speaking animal (which is what theoretical linguistics has always concentrated on) to the person who is a skilled reader or a talented writer, it is a long road indeed. It stretches from the purely linguistic through the communicative all the way to the discursive/rhetorical, the cognitive, and the logical. Success along this path was never guaranteed by genetics or birth right alone, but by training and practice.

We have already seen how WE is only quantitatively different from its earlier stages. If the native's claims to one-upmanship when it came to speaking the language rested on a notion of speaking in a none-too-exciting sense of the term, imagine how he or she is likely to be judged in the context of WE. What Rampton (1990: 97) called 'the whole mystique of the native speaker and [his/her] mother tongue' becomes totally irrelevant as we contemplate the scenario unveiled by the spread of WE. This is because, for all we know, being a rigorously monolingual speaker of English may actually turn out to be a disadvantage when it comes to getting by in WE. If that claim is not convincing enough, consider the following. If the native-speaker's supremacy is already under threat from the currently attested native/non-native ratio of 1:2, imagine their lot when the ratio reaches 1:10 in the not-so-remote future, thanks to the millions of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America eager to learn the language.

## WE and the status of native-speaker teachers

If, as we have seen, a native speaker of English is not *thereby* a privileged user of WE, an obvious follow up question we need to raise is: 'Does the native speaker continue to retain his/her former privileged status as an EFL professional?' The answer is, I think, a resounding no. For, to begin

with, the native is no longer a model speaker of WE. If anything, the native speaker may even be handicapped when it comes to performing some of the routine tasks in WE. Communicative competence in WE is in large measure of an interlingual or even multilingual nature, and therefore, far from being an asset, being a monolingual may actually turn out to be an encumbrance. Indeed, the day may not be all that far off when native speakers of English may need to take crash courses in WE, in order to be able to cope with the demands of an increasingly competitive world market. A native speaker of English who is not well-versed in WE is most likely to find him/herself left out in the linguistic cold. In a way, this is already happening, as anyone who has taken time to study the kind of English used in instruction manuals accompanying computer software, electronic gadgets, and the like, has had the opportunity to verify for themselves.

## Conclusion

WE is a linguistic phenomenon the like of which we have never seen before. Many of its long-term implications still evade our most fertile imagination, but if our initial speculations are in the right direction, they may turn out to be even more staggering than any we have so far encountered.

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## The author

**Kanavillil Rajagopalan** is Professor of Linguistics at the State University at Campinas (Unicamp), Brazil. He was born in India, and has studied in India, Britain, the United States, and Brazil. His research interests include the philosophy of language, linguistic pragmatics, poststructuralism, critical linguistics, and English language teaching. He is co-editor of *DELTA*, Brazil's leading journal of theoretical and applied linguistics.  
**Email: rajan@iel.unicamp.br**