When does an unconventional form become an innovation?

David C.S. Li and Deyuan He

Introduction

A lingua franca is needed to facilitate ever-expanding cross-border communication on a global scale. For historical reasons, that role has been and is increasingly assigned to English (Crystal 2003; Kirkpatrick 2007, 2014, 2016; McArthur 1998), including 'postcolonial Englishes' which are at different phases of the evolutionary cycle: (i) foundation, (ii) exonormative stabilization, (iii) nativization, (iv) endonormative stabilization, and (v) differentiation (Schneider 2007, 2014; for an update on the evolutionary dynamics of Hong Kong English, see Li 2018). This has direct implications for language education in countries big and small, rich or poor. For the vast majority of English as a second language (ESL)/English as a foreign language (EFL) (hereafter English-L2) learners who have no choice but to study English, typically as a school subject, the coming of age is hardly complete without developing an acute awareness of how important, and yet how difficult, it is to speak and write 'good English'. English is not at all learner friendly, especially to learners whose L1 is linguistically unrelated to English (e.g. Altaic languages Korean and Japanese, Sino-Tibetan languages Chinese and Thai). In the learning process, various kinds of cross-linguistic influence from features in the learners' first language(s) have been shown to be major acquisitional problems. Less well known is the fact that standard Englishes – the varieties of English being targeted for teaching and learning through education – are fraught with untidiness at different linguistic levels. This is not surprising, given that English, like all natural unplanned languages, evolved over time, rather than being consciously designed for meaning-making purposes – unlike artificial, planned languages such as Esperanto (cf. Li 2003). The untidiness is of two main kinds: (i) inconsistencies in various linguistic subsystems and (ii) considerable variation within each of the standard varieties of English (Kirkpatrick 2007; McArthur 1998; Trudgill and Hannah 2017). These two types of untidiness account for a large number of learner-unfriendly features rooted in standard varieties of English, in particular British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). For practical reasons, we will use 'Standard English' to refer to features which are true of one or more standard varieties of English.

In this chapter, we will first illustrate various kinds of learner unfriendliness by examining some examples of untidiness in Standard English. Non-standard features will be exemplified

using data collected from Hong Kong Chinese English-L2 learners and users. The important distinction between errors and innovations will be discussed.

Two sources of learner unfriendliness

Standard English is inconsistent

As a semiotic, meaning-making system, Standard English is inconsistent at various linguistic levels. This is especially clear with regard to orthography and grammar. Take the case of BrE. One of the best-known criticisms of irrational English spelling was made by the British playwright, George Bernard Shaw in the 1900s. He argued that 'fish' might well be spelt as GHOTI, where the [f] sound of *gh* is attested in a word like *laugh*, the [i] sound of *o* in *women*, and the syllable-final sibilant [ʃ] of *ti* in *nation*. Another oft-cited example of inconsistent sound-spelling relationship is the various pronunciations (e.g. in RP) associated with *ough*, as in *thought* [ɔː], *though* [əʊ], rough [ʌ], cough [ɒ], drought [aʊ], through [uː], and *thorough* [ə]. Less eye-catching but nonetheless (or none the less) vexing problems of variation occur across British and American spellings (e.g. *programme* vs. *program*; *towards* vs. *toward*) and word choices (e.g. *different from* vs. *different than*; see, e.g. Trudgill and Hannah 2017: 60–95; cf. Jenkins 2015: 69–74). No wonder 'proper spelling' is sometimes a problem even among English-L1 learners and users.

Paton (2008) reports that 'Standards of spelling among university students [in the United Kingdom] are now so bad that lecturers are being urged to turn a blind eye to mistakes'. Among the high-frequency misspellings are *arguement (argument), Febuary (February), Wensday (Wednesday), ignor (ignore), occured (occurred), opertunity (opportunity), que (queue), speach (speech), thier (their), truely (truly)*, and *twelth (twelfth)*. A number of principles appear to be at work in these misspellings:

- Silent letters are dropped as spelling reflects pronunciation (cf. 'spelling pronunciation', Deterding and Nur Raihan 2016): *ignor, febuary, opertunity, twelth, que, Wensday*
- Regularization or simplification: *truely, arguement, occured*
- Orthographic analogy: *thier* (cf. the rule of spelling 'i before e, except after c' for the [iː] sound); *speach* after the productive model of *beach, peach, reach, teach*, and so on.

At the level of grammar, perhaps no other subsystem is more inconsistent than the choice of singular pronouns for designating indefinite reference, which is more or less equivalent in meaning to 'everyone' or 'anyone'. Traditional grammars allow for the use of the male-gender set of pronouns (*he, him, his*, and *himself*) to designate that meaning (e.g. *let everyone make his own choice*). One consequence is that, unlike Buddhists or bird-lovers who can consciously avoid using such unwanted culture-specific idioms as 'killing two birds with one stone', a Hong Kong tycoon-philanthropist like Mr. Li Ka-Shing could not help being seen as gender-biased in English:

'While an individual has the duty to reach his highest potential, to be the best that he can be, in his mind, he must not delude himself to think that he is better than who he really is', Li said.

(Excerpt of speech delivered to all graduates of Shantou University, China; The Standard, 27 June 2008: 2)

The original speech was almost certainly delivered in Chinese (Putonghua or the local dialect), which was rendered into Standard English by some bilingual journalist. That journalist should not be blamed for the sexist overtone, however. As Erving Goffman has observed in his celebrated (1981) monograph *Forms of Talk*, unlike other frames of speech such as lecturing or drama performance, the sexist use of male pronouns to express indefinite reference in English (for academic purposes) is a rare sort of frame which is immune from any 'frame break'.

> He who lectures on speech errors and its correction will inevitably make some of the very errors he analyzes . . . , he who lectures on discourse presuppositions will be utterly tongue-tied unless unself-consciously he makes as many as anyone else. . . . [This] is not to say that other sorts of frame break might be as clearly doomed; for example, a reference at this point to the very questionable procedure of my employing 'he' in the immediately preceding utterances, carefully mingling a sex-biased word for the indefinite nominal pronoun, and an unobjectionable anaphoric term for someone like myself.
> *(Goffman 1981: 163)*

Due to inconsistencies in the pronominal system in Standard English, the use of *he* and *his* to designate 'anyone', as shown in this revealing quotation, is 'unobjectionable', however 'questionable' it might be in the eyes of gender-conscious users of English, including Goffman himself. He or she who feels unhappy about the status quo may try to get around the problem by adopting one of three options: (i) an 'inclusivist' stance (as in this sentence, i.e. using 'he or she', 'his or her', 'himself or herself'), which sounds clumsy and cumbersome, to say the least; (ii) a 'pluralist' stance (e.g. saying *those who do it* instead of *he who does it*); and (iii) an 'exclusivist' stance, that is, reversing the discriminatory stance by using the female set of pronouns to designate 'indefinite reference', as Cameron *et al.* have done in their book on critical sociolinguistic research methods, as illustrated in their generalization: 'Circumventing the Observer's Paradox often involves the researcher in concealing ***herself*** and/or ***her*** purposes from those ***she*** is studying' (Cameron *et al.* 1992: 7, emphasis added).

What is interesting is that in some books published in the 1980s, when feminism was on the rise and gendered language use increasingly a concern to sociolinguists, inserting a disclaimer in the front matters was considered a necessary and useful strategy to distance the writer(s) from a perceived gender-insensitive stance. For example:

> Finally, whenever I have needed to use a pronoun to refer to the nouns 'learner' and 'teacher', I have used 'he', 'him' or 'his'. This is purely a linguistic convention and does not imply that the person is more likely to be male than female.
>
> *(Littlewood 1984: 3)*

The need for such a disclaimer is itself strong evidence that Standard English is an untidy system that leaks. Grammatically embedded gender bias is not universal. For example, a sexist orientation is also found in Chinese writing by the male-gendered pronoun 他 (Putonghua/Mandarin *tā*), but not in speech, for the third-person singular pronouns are pronounced identically in all Chinese varieties (Chao 1968). In French, the choice of singular possessive pronouns (masculine *son*; feminine *sa*) depends on the grammatical *genre* of the common noun rather than the sex of the possessor. Thus the film *Chacun son cinéma* is rendered into English as 'To Each His Own Cinema', a gender bias not found in the original title.

   Another inconsistency is the use of the same form to designate semantically incompatible meanings. This is clearly the case of using the same morpho-phonological exponent '-*s*' (and its allophones and allomorphs) to mark '3rd person singular' present tense verb forms and the plural forms of regular count nouns. Consequently, young English-L2 learners who are taught simple sentences such as *Tom likes dogs* and *Sue likes cats* have to grapple with rather different reasons why '-*s*' is grammatically indispensable: suffixed to the verb *like*, it is required for marking the '3rd person singular' meaning 'one and only one'; suffixed to the count nouns *cat* and *dog*, '-*s*' is needed for signalling the meaning 'necessarily more than one'. Since the two meanings are mutually exclusive, such a semantic discrepancy amounts to logical inconsistency. No wonder in the learning process, the '3rd person singular' and the plural morpheme are among the most slippery grammatical subsystems for English-L2 learners. This is empirically supported by research in ELF communication: detailed analysis of the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE) shows that the '3rd person singular' tops the list of emerging ELF lexico-grammatical features (e.g. *you look very sad, he look very sad*, Seidlhofer 2004, 2005; see also Breiteneder 2005, 2009 for the use of singular noun forms where plural forms are preferred in Standard English; cf. Example 8 subsequently).

Considerable variation in standard English

Another source of learner unfriendliness is considerable variation internal to Standard English. Despite being the most highly codified varieties, there continues to be considerable variation within Standard English. Thus the gradual demise of the subjunctive as a verb form (e.g. *we suggest that she go*) has reached a stage where it is generally seen as a stylistic variant of the verb phrase marked with *should* (e.g. *we suggest that she should go*). Guided by the principle of regularization, the explicit marking of this modal function or meaning using 'should' is a welcome development.

   Another example of variation in Standard English is the prescriptive rule against 'dangling modifiers'. Accordingly, in a complex sentence made up of two clauses – the first one a dependent (subordinate) clause with no apparent subject, the second one an independent (main) clause – the subject in the independent clause (overt or covert) should also be the antecedent of the missing subject in the dependent clause. This rule is, for instance, not respected in (1) (source: http://personal.cityu.edu.hk/~encrproj/dangling1.doc):

1   Entering the stadium, the size of the crowd surprised John.

Here the subject ('the size of the crowd') could not be interpreted as the subject in the first clause ('entering the stadium'), thus leaving it 'dangling'. One way to overcome this seemingly illogical sentence structure is to put 'John' in the subject position (e.g. 'Entering the stadium, <u>John</u> was surprised by . . . '). As Huddleston and Pullum (2005: 207–209) have pointed out, however, such a rule is by no means observed by all users of Standard English; some appear to find nothing wrong in a sentence like (2), which was collected from authentic print media data in an ENL country:

2   Jennifer Lopez stars as Marisa, a maid in a fancy New York City Hotel. While <u>trying on a wealthy woman's dress,</u> a handsome and rich politician mistakes <u>her</u> for a society woman. (Huddleston and Pullum 2005: 208)

Other synchronic variations within Standard English are arguably results of more or less recent diachronic changes; witness the neutralization of what used to be a clear functional division of labour between 'compared with' and 'compared to', which was triggered by a gradual shift of the former's functional load to the latter (e.g. *compared to my situation* used to be considered substandard, when *compared with NP* was widely held to be the norm, which was not to be confused with, e.g. *Cio-Cio-San was compared to a butterfly*). Or, consider the collocation between *the amount of* and count nouns like *books*, which used to be seen as substandard about four decades ago when *the number of* was the norm. These examples, barely the tip of the iceberg, are indicative of perennial language change, including in standard varieties of English (Milroy and Milroy 1985).

In the face of the many learner-unfriendly features exemplified previously, coupled with cross-linguistic influence at various linguistic levels in the learning process, it is not surprising that deviations from Standard English norms tend to occur at all stages of the English-L2 learning process.

Non-standard lexico-grammatical features

In general, an error is an error if it deviates from the norm. But given that language change takes place all the time, the question arises as to when a deviation may stop being seen as an error and start being considered (the onset of) an innovation. Before discussing this issue in detail, let us first look at some salient examples of non-standard features which are commonly found among Cantonese-L1 users of English in Hong Kong. Most of the data cited in the following were collected from undergraduate students' written output, including emails, supplemented by some authentic data from English-language print media. Being undergraduate students, their English proficiency level may be characterized as either intermediate or upper-intermediate.

Some deviations from Standard English are clearly due to overgeneralization resulting from the principle of analogy. This is arguably the case with, for example, the use of *widespread* as a noun after the model of the nominal use of *spread*, as in *the widespread of American culture*; *the widespread of Singlish*. Or, consider the use of the *to*-infinitive as the preferred pattern of complementation after the verbs *suggest* and *recommend* (e.g. *He suggested me to do it*; *we recommend you to stop*), which deviates from the normative use of a *that*-clause (i.e. *He suggested that I do it*; *we recommend that you stop*). Given the dominant pattern of complementation required for many other verbs (compare: *She asked/ expected/told me to do it*; *they order/persuade/want you to stop*), it is understandable why the *to*-infinitive is regarded by so many English-L2 learners/users as the preferred pattern of complementation for *suggest* and *recommend*. Indeed, there is some evidence that such a trend has been spread to proficient English-L2 users (3) as well as English-L1 users (4):

3   As a linguist who worked recently on the matter of how spatial notions of *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside) relate to language and culture, I would like to <u>recommend you very strongly to read</u> Dr. James Stanlaw's [2004] book on loanwords as a fascinating case study of interiorization of exterior things and words from English language and culture. (Seiichi Makino, Princeton University; promotional flyer for a new book, 2004; emphasis added)

4   [Sir Brian Fender] observed that institutions might not have thought sufficiently about the reasons for carrying out knowledge transfer, and as a result might not have accorded sufficient priority to such 'third mission' activities. <u>He recommended institutions to</u>

conduct more detailed forward planning, and gather comparable and comprehensive management data with respect to knowledge transfer so that progress can be better monitored. (Annex to letter by Mr. Michael V. Stone, secretary-general of the University Grants Committee, to the president of the then Hong Kong Institute of Education: 'Proposed Funding & Reporting Mechanism for Strengthening 'Knowledge Transfer' in UGC-funded Institutions', 6 March 2009: 2)

Sometimes variation in Standard English may give rise to disagreement. One such case that happened to the first author of this chapter concerns the correct complementation pattern of the verb *report* (*report using* vs. *report to use*). In response to the first author's query on the grammaticality of *reported to use* in a draft paper, the writer of that paper did a Google search and obtained some interesting results, which are worth quoting at length:

5   I couldn't find any hard and fast grammar rules relating to this, but came across two websites:

www.iei.uiuc.edu/structure/structure1/gerinfvbs.html
www.tlumaczenia-angielski.info/angielski/gerund-infinitive.htm
While the first clearly indicates that 'report' can only take a gerund object, the second seems to suggest that it can take both gerund and infinitive complements (. . .). I also did a Google search for '**reported to use**' (where '**reported**' is in active rather than passive voice) and noted that this usage is found in credible texts, such as published journal articles, although the gerund is more often used. Some of the contexts are as follows:
' . . . respondents' distribution according to how often they **reported to use** different pain control . . . ' [. . .]
' . . . only one in five men and one in ten women **reported to use** no drugs at all'

Of interest here is the indeterminacy of correctness after several rounds of a Google search: while the gerund appears to be the normative pattern of complementation of *report* in active voice (*reported using*), the *to*-infinitive (*reported to use*) is also attested in some credible web pages on grammar and correct usage.

   In extreme cases, both sides would contest what the other side regards as *the* correct usage. This is clearly the case of one email request the first author received in April, 2008, from a former student (MD), a novice NET (native English-speaking) teacher of English in a well-known secondary school. She felt there was something wrong in the fill-in-the-blank question 'How well do you know _____ this little animal?' set by the Head of English, with *about* being the intended answer. The following is an email that the first author received from MD (7) after his affirmative response (6) was pointed out to her:

6   I did a quick Google search using 'How well do you know about . . . '; guess what: no websites were returned (from 1–10). I see this as confirmation of our shared intuition: 'about' collocates best with 'How much . . . ', not 'How well . . . '. I suppose the best way forward is to explain this to your students, and convince them that the so-called 'model answer' is inaccurate. . . . You could instruct them to do a similar Google search to bring home this message I think.
7   The problem isnt [sic] with my students [sic] the problem is with my panel head [of English]. And she used yahoo. . . and searched it using inverted commas and came up with a

> screen full of sites using how well and about. When I explained it to my colleagues they all agreed but my panel head doesn't. She says that it is a common usage. But I disagree. I am not very sure what to do. . . . I am going to search grammar books over the weekend, and collocation books too. I hope I can get some 'evidence' to show her.

Examples (5) to (7) are instructive in that the Internet is increasingly resorted to as a means to determine to what extent a particular lexico-grammatical usage is legitimate or acceptable. Given that the ever-expanding Internet has emerged as a de facto repository or huge English-language database, the popular practice of checking for grammatical correctness on the web is thus gradually altering if not revolutionizing our perceptions of what constitutes correct and normative English usage. One crucial point here is that often it is difficult to tell whether the authors of Internet texts are English-L2 or English-L1 users.

In the domain of 'grammar proper', one of the most slippery grammatical subsystems in Standard English is the distinction between singular and plural forms of a count noun. It is therefore not surprising that even highly proficient English-L2 users sometimes fail to use the appropriate plural form of a count noun. In the following quarter-page advert placed by a prestigious English-medium secondary school in Hong Kong for 'the post of English teacher', three count nouns – *application*, *requirement*, and *purpose* – are in singular form whereas Standard English usage would have them in plural:

8. XXX College invites **application** from qualified candidates for the post of English teacher (native speaker) as from September 1, 2008.

    Requirement

    –   BA major in English
    –   Willing to help organizing activities and creating a rich language environment in school
    –   Salary: negotiable $25,000-$40,000 per month . . .

    [In small print] (All information provided will only be used for recruitment related **purpose**)

    (*The Standard*, Careers Page, 13 June 2008: 23)

Keen readers will have noticed that the verb forms after the verb *help* – *organizing* and *creating* – are also non-standard, since verbs that follow *help* should normally be in infinitive rather than -*ing* forms.

At the level of lexis, the correct usage of many verbs and nouns depends on their usual collocational pattern. Owing to a lack of exposure and practice, English-L2 learners tend to have problems acquiring the collocational patterns associated with target verbs and nouns. This is arguably the case with one subset of transitive verbs like *discuss*, *emphasize*, and *blame* (9a, 10a, 11a), which do not take a preposition, as opposed to their corresponding nominalization supported by a 'delexical verb' ('*have . . . discussion about* NP', 9b; '*place . . . emphasis on* NP', 10b; and '*put . . . blame on* NP', 11b). Non-standard structures as in 9c, 10c and 11c are arguably the result of the English-L2 learner/user confusing the collocational patterns of the (transitive) verb and the associated nominalization (Li 2010a, 2017).

 9 (a) They discussed the project for two hours.
   (b) They <u>had</u> a long <u>discussion about</u> the project.
   (c) ?? They <u>discussed about</u> the project for two hours.

10 (a) We should emphasise this more.
   (b) We should <u>place</u> more <u>emphasis on</u> this.
   (c) ?? We should <u>emphasise on</u> this more.

11 (a) Don't blame her so much!
   (b) Don't <u>put</u> so much <u>blame on</u> her.
   (c) ?? Don't <u>blame on</u> her so much.

Plenty of non-standard usage patterns may be accounted for by a similar misanalysis, as shown in the spread of the non-standard complementation pattern of *recommend* to English-L1 speakers (e.g. '*He recommended institutions to conduct . . .* '; see Examples 3–4 previously). Likewise, *in class* is such a high-frequency prepositional phrase that English-L2 learners might take a long time to realize that *in classroom* is inadmissible without the definite article *the*. Other examples in our data include the use of *behind* as a post-nominal modifier as in *the reason behind* (12), the redundant use of *about* in *concerning about X* (13), the plural form of *room* in the idiom *room for improvement* and the omission of 'if' or 'though' after 'even' (14):

12 After finished my associate degree, I chose English as major in my degree. <u>There were several reasons behind</u>. Firstly . . .
13 May I refer to the following email to Head and Research Degrees Co-ordinator dated 22 November 2007 <u>concerning about</u> the Research Students' Research Output . . .
14 Despite the fact that <u>there are still rooms for improvement</u> in my English, especially the writing skills, I have never forgotten my own identity as a Chinese <u>even</u> I am able to acquaint myself well with English.

Some of these apparent anomalies are arguably due to idiosyncrasies in Standard English. For example, 'the reason behind', in analogy to 'the day before/after' or 'the point above/below', seems quite reasonable. And, it is only relatively recently that *concerning* and *regarding* have been formally recognized as prepositions in some dictionaries (see, e.g. *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*), thanks in part to insights obtained in corpus linguistics. This fine detail has yet to trickle down to the English-L2 classroom. There is some evidence that the usage patterns of the verb *concern* and its derivatives are complex and learner unfriendly. For instance, many English-L2 learners would say/write *father concerns you* or *father concerns about you* (meaning 'father is concerned about you'), partly because they overlook the syntactic constraint of the verb *concern*, partly due to incomplete learning of the periphrastic expression *be concerned about* (e.g. *father is concerned about you*) and the prepositional use of *concerning* (e.g. *concerning your safety*; Li and Chan 2001; see also Li 2017):

   'something <u>concerns</u> someone'
   'someone <u>is concerned about</u> someone/something'

Another group of learner-unfriendly words are adjectives with a meaning related to the degree of difficulty and probability, for example, *difficult, easy, common, convenient, compulsory,*

necessary, unnecessary, possible, impossible, and so on. One syntactic constraint associated with these adjectives is that in general, the clause should start with the dummy subject *it* rather than a 'human' subject. For example:

15 (a) *I am difficult/not easy to learn English well.
    (b) It is difficult/not easy for me to learn English well.

16 (a) *We are inconvenient to see you now.
    (b) It is inconvenient for us to see you now.

For Chinese EFL learners, however, the normative use of this structure (known as 'postponed carrier' in functional grammar, as in 15b and 16b; see Lock 1995) is learner unfriendly for two main reasons: the non-existence of a functional equivalent of 'it' in their native language (unlike many European languages in this regard) and the fact that, in Chinese, sentences with such meanings tend to begin with a human subject. This is probably why even highly educated Chinese bilingual users of English are sometimes prone to produce this non-standard structure known as 'pseudo-tough movement' (see Li and Chan 2001; see also Li 2017). In one seminar given by a Chinese Singaporean lecturer on the impact of the spread of the Chinese language in the world, he said, 'you are difficult to buy non-Chinese products'. (This syntactic constraint is neutralized when the covert object of the verb in the embedded clause is the same as the subject in the matrix clause. Compare: *John is easy to please but difficult to beat*.)

Learner-unfriendliness is also attested in another salient Standard English structure which is known as 'reduced relative clause' (RRC). When a post-nominal modifier consists of a relative clause in the passive voice (e.g. *I bought that book <u>which was published yesterday</u>*), Standard English allows for a stylistic variant whereby the relative pronoun and the finite auxiliary may be ellipted (e.g. *I bought that book <u>published yesterday</u>*). The RRC structure, however, is blocked if the verb is intransitive (e.g. *I saw the accident which happened yesterday*, but not **I saw the accident happened yesterday*). Such a lexico-syntactic constraint is often overlooked by even advanced English-L2 users. In one quarter-page public notice in a leading English daily in Hong Kong, for example, the verb *appeared* was used in the same RRC structure as in *published*:

17. We note from the reports/articles <u>appeared</u> at the front page and page 3 of the South China Sunday Morning Post <u>published</u> on 27th August 2000 . . . that a toy company called 'City Toys Ltd.' . . . has employed underage workers.

<div align="right">(<i>South China Morning Post</i>, 1 September 2000: 3)</div>

Where the verb in a post-nominal modifier is intransitive (e.g. *appear*), it should either be 'introduced' by a relative pronoun (i.e . . . which appeared . . .) or in *-ing* form (i.e . . . appearing . . .).

Previous accounts of learner errors in second language acquisition tended to focus on the source of errors, with the primary factor being either cross-linguistic influence from the learners' L1, incomplete learning of L2, or some combination of these (for a critique of this analytical stance, see Jenkins 2006). While there is some truth in such explanatory accounts, they are incomplete without appreciating the fact that the target language, Standard English, is a system that leaks and, as we have seen, suffers from logical inconsistency in extreme cases. Another source of difficulty is instability, as shown in various stylistic variants at

practically all linguistic levels. Following the emergence of English as a global language, with the result that learners from different L1 backgrounds often have to learn one or more standard varieties of English, a troubling question arises: should English-L2 users' non-standard performance and usage patterns be necessarily dismissed as 'errors'? After more than three decades of research in World Englishes and other related paradigms, few would dispute that at least some of the non-standard features produced by English-L2 users should be regarded as legitimate and recognized as innovations rather than errors. The question is where to draw the line.

Deviations from standard English: errors or innovations?

Standard varieties of English are products of successive stages of standardization as a direct result of decades (e.g. AusE) or even centuries (e.g. BE and AmE) of codification and/or language planning (Kirkpatrick 2007, 2014). To some extent, what standards do is impose some order on a state of unsystematic variation. For a long time, standards of English were modeled prescriptively on the lexico-grammar in Latin, regardless of how English was actually used by its speakers (Milroy and Milroy 1985). Over time, the prescriptive approach gave way to a descriptive stance among contemporary linguists and grammarians; in the process, dogmatic usage patterns (e.g. *it's I*) modelled on Latin gradually succumbed to the collective forces of popular usage and choice (e.g. *it's me*). Before English emerged as the world's de facto global language, such collective forces naturally referred to those exerted by the everyday language use patterns of its English-L1 users. Now that English is a required additional language in most non-English-L1 countries in the world, especially in view of the fact that English-L1 users are increasingly outnumbered by English-L2 users, the question arises whether such forces of language change should be attributed to English-L1 users alone. To cite one classic example: why should *prepone*, a well-motivated verb – an antonym for that matter – coined in analogy to *postpone*, be dismissed as a non-English word, even though it has been widely attested among speakers of English on the Indian subcontinent (Widdowson 1994; cf. *discuss about* NP, *emphasise on* NP, and *blame on* NP, see Examples 9–11)? A Wikipedia entry reads:

> 'Prepone' is not an English word. It's commonly used in Indian subcontinent to mean the opposite of 'post-pone', but the rest of the world is largely unaware of it.
> *(http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Why_the_word_'prepone'_is_not_in_any_dictionary)*

Public awareness of a new coinage, however, is far from being the reason why that coinage is not accepted as an innovation in World Englishes (1,390,000 hits were returned in a Google search in December, 2018). Clearly other more potent factors are at stake here. First and foremost, the status of *prepone* is low because its active use to date tends to be limited to the popular parlance of users who are labelled as non-native speakers. Second, more importantly, innovation – including the power to label new coinage as such – was traditionally thought to be the exclusive right of native speakers, notably those residing in United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland. So what needs to be done before such an ingenious coinage as *prepone* is accepted as part of the lexicon in Standard English?

To our knowledge, Bamgbose (1998) is the most elaborate treatise on the theoretical distinction between English-L2 errors and innovations. Coming from a World Englishes perspective, he asks 'why should a native-variety-based standard continue to license the

norms of non-native Englishes?' (p. 3). As he explains, the current state of affairs favours standard varieties of English, partly because all existing standards are upheld to be correct until otherwise replaced with alternative standards or complemented by stylistic variants but also because they are the most elaborately codified to date: '[b]y default, the only codified norms available (which are based on native varieties) will continue to license what is acceptable and what is not, even when there is a desire to encourage and institutionalize non-native English norms' (Bamgbose 1998: 5).

Owing to this prestige factor, English-L2 speakers tend to admire native accents, even though their own pronunciation does not sound native-like, reflecting thereby a kind of 'love-hate relationship' (p. 7). This point has received empirical support in a study of Chinese speakers' perceptions of English accents (Li 2009, cf. Jenkins 2007).

To calibrate the status of a local usage as either an error or innovation, Bamgbose (1998) indicates that there are five inter-related internal factors or measures:

> **Demographic**: how many acrolectal speakers use it? Since the language use patterns of basilectal and mesolectal speakers tend to be socially stigmatized, the prospect of the usage being favourably received in the local community is dim if it is not used by acrolectal speakers.
>
> **Geographical**: how widely has it spread? In principle, the farther it spreads, the higher its acceptance rate.
>
> **Authoritative**: what is the social status of those who use it? In general, people who are knowledgeable are vested with authority. Thus 'writers, teachers, media practitioners, examination bodies, publishing houses, and influential opinion leaders' (p. 4) tend to be viewed favourably as credible sources of linguistic innovations, for 'the use of unconventional forms may become hallowed, simply because such use has become associated with respected authorities or writers' (p. 4).
>
> **Codification**: where is the usage sanctioned? One sure way to legitimate a local usage is to have it included in all kinds of written 'authorities', such as dictionaries, course books, and reference manuals for teachers.
>
> **Acceptability**: what are the attitudes of users and non-users toward this usage? In general, compared with linguistic innovations, cultural and pragmatic innovations tend to get accepted more easily and are more likely to be tolerated and nativized.

Of these five internal measures, Bamgbose points out rightly that codification and acceptability are the most important. Beyond any doubt, the key to language change is codification, a point which 'is too important to be belabored' (p. 4). Once a local usage is enshrined in the dictionary or even in a course book, the legitimation process is complete (Butler 2007; Dolezal 2006). This in turn will help tilt the balance, if gradually, in favour of accepting that local usage although, as Bamgbose (1998) has observed, English-L2 users, including decision-makers in the education domain, tend to resist making this move.

Internet as catalyst of acceptance: web-enabled innovations in cyberspace

In the two decades since Bamgbose's (1998) article, the question of grammaticality and acceptability has become considerably more complex following significant breakthroughs in information and communication technologies (ICT) and global advances in bi- or multilingual e-literacy, which invariably includes some English. In the first two decades of the new

millennium, in some real sense, the 'global village' has rendered the world smaller following dramatic improvements in telecommunication mediated by the Internet. Physical barriers marked by political and geographical boundaries, real or imagined, are increasingly rendered obsolete relative to people's desire to access information or communicate with others in cyberspace, wherever their smartphone or Internet work station is located. For about three decades, information on the Internet has been and continues to expand at an exponential rate, in more languages than ever, but search engines like Google, Yahoo, and Baidu have made this task increasingly manageable for web-surfers (cf. Graddol 2006). Today, whatever the information in the public domain, be it language- or image-dominant, it is rarely more than just a few clicks away. As a result of this development, 'geography' and 'demography' as measures of English users' perception of the correctness of a local usage have become comparatively less significant. Much more pervasive today is what may be termed 'virtual vitality': whatever query about normative English usage one has, a quick check through Google or Yahoo (or any other search engine) can instantiate as many glocal examples as there are in various 'cyber communities', be they English-L2 or English-L1 users (Gupta 2005, 2006, 2007; cf. Pakir 1999).

Gupta (2007), for example, examines the extent of Anglophony in official websites of the ten ASEAN nations and found that with few exceptions (notably Myanmar), English is widely used in the key domains of government and education. She also found a 'hierarchy of Anglophony' (p. 366), with English being more commonly used for internal purposes in some ASEAN nations (notably former British colonies) than in others. In terms of the extent of variation, despite minor divergence in spelling and usage patterns, which Gupta regards as 'differences of preference rather than categorical' (p. 357), the formal features of English across ASEAN websites are remarkably similar. This high degree of unity of Standard English is attributed to a loose consensus of elite users, suggesting that 'codification of English follows practice, rather than determining it' (p. 357).

Recent developments on the Internet are thus exerting considerable impact on our perceptions of what counts as an error (i.e. the form is an unintended violation of some Standard English norm), as opposed to a linguistic innovation (i.e. the form is intended as a carrier of a new, probably culture-specific meaning with a local or glocal character). We have seen that more and more users of English turn to the Internet as an act of licensing or means of legitimation (see Examples 5–7): if an English usage is attested by a large enough number of users on the Internet, especially if glocal and English-L1 users are included, it is difficult to insist that it is an error. One instructive example is the status of the collocation *advanced booking*, which appears to be non-standard but which is found on a large number of websites, including those of international hotel-booking agencies (see, e.g. https://vilavitaparc. com/en/offers/advanced-booking) and a journal article on travel research (see Chen and Schwartz 2008). Or, consider the spelling of *irresistable* which, while non-standard according to dictionaries in standard varieties of English and Microsoft Word, is no less popular than the normative counterpart *irresistible*, probably because the suffix -*able* is semantically and orthographically more transparent (compare the increasingly popular trend of writing *everyday* to mean 'every day', *can not* [VERB] instead of *cannot* [VERB]). These examples show that the spread of a new usage has the potential to catch on and command a mass following, especially if it is well motivated. When a lexico-grammatically non-standard but well-motivated usage later spreads to formal communication among educated English users on the Internet, the legitimation process is half complete. When that happens, it is the duty of the lexicographer and/or grammarian to have its legitimate status – as an acceptable variant – formally recognized. In short, advances in ICT help explain why our attitudes

toward the perceived legitimacy of a new English usage are less bound today by geography or demography than the popular choice of acrolectal English users in cyberspace, who tend to be educated, independent of their first language background.

Why acrolectal, educated English users? This is related to Bamgbose's third factor or measure: authority. Just as renowned literary figures, writing in any language, enjoy the unquestioned prerogative or poetic licence to deviate from existing lexico-grammatical norms of the language, so educated speakers and writers have the unparalleled privilege to 'bend' the language at times to suit their context-specific needs. Such a move from an 'authority' would rarely raise any eyebrows, for it is generally perceived as a novel way of meaning-making, whatever the communicative purpose (e.g. new concept, imagery or metaphor). The same expression, produced by learners in the classroom or in some language-learning context (e.g. students' assessed class- or homework), would tend to be dismissed as 'interlanguage' in need of correction. For instance, a student of English who feels inspired by the former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's rendition of *weiji* (危機, 'crisis') in Mandarin as a disyllabic word composed of the morphemes 'crisis' and 'opportunity' (Wen's official visit to London, February, 2009), and who is tempted to capture both morphemes by the coinage *crisistunity*, may be praised by the teacher as 'a good attempt', but it would nonetheless be dismissed as 'non-standard' – along with other 'interlanguage' errors. Yet when this coinage appears in a feature article of an English daily, as it did (Gao 2009), complete with sound justification and supportive illustrations, no reader will question its status as a well-conceived innovation. A Google search of *crisistunity* in mid-February 2009 failed to yield any hits. Another Google search two months later (13 April 2009), however, returned over 330 hits, including translations of the original English article into foreign languages such as Italian and Russian. Interestingly, the 330 plus hits also include a few other websites containing a similar word 'crisitunity' (with only one 's'), which was apparently coined by Homer Simpson:

> Crisitunity: A Chinese word refered [sic] to by Homer Simpson that means both crisis and oppertunity [sic], just like Ercle.
> *(Urban Dictionary, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Crisitunity)*

> Upon being told that the Chinese word for 'crisis' is the same as their word for 'opportunity,' Homer Simpson gave the word 'crisitunity' to the English-speaking world.
> *(Crisitunities in Humanist Parenting: The Science Project, http://danceswithanxiety.*
> *blogspot.com/2008/05/crisitunities-in-humanist-parenting.html)*

Crisistunity (coined by a Chinese-L1, English-L2 speaker) or *crisitunity* (coined or adapted by an English-L1 speaker) may sound clumsy to the ear phonologically, but they appear to be catching on, since Google search of these two words one decade later (23 December 2018) yielded 21,100 and 7,880 hits, respectively. This is a clear example of lexical innovations inspired by Chinese 'equivalents' which are similar in meaning, albeit with subtle semantic nuances.

In terms of process, the spread of *crisistunity* seems not so different in kind from the popularization of an English-L1 coinage like *nonebrity*, denoting a celebrity who is famous for nothing in particular. There is thus some indication that hybrids and bilingual creativity (Kachru 1995) by English-L2 users have good potential to be appropriated by English-L2 and English-L1 users alike – thanks to forces of globalization mediated and facilitated by the Internet.

A second example comes from Phan Le Ha's (2008) book where, in the section 'Ha and English', she writes:

> [My parents] did not have the right to choose the language they liked [to study] at that time, Russian or Chinese or French. For historical and political reasons, these languages had high status in Vietnam in those days. It also meant that learning and teaching English then would lead people to an 'insecure' future with almost no chance for further study overseas. And going overseas in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s did not just bring about new knowledge but also meant 'changing one's material life' to 'wealthi-ness' or at least 'well-furituredness'.

(Phan 2008: 15)

The author is unmistakable about her Vietnamese-L1 and English-L2 background. The use of scare quotes in 'well-furituredness' (and 'wealthi-ness') is a sign of its potentially objectionable status. This is partly confirmed by the result of a Google search (December, 2018), which returns no other entry than Phan's (2008) book page itself and the reference to the book by the first edition of this chapter (Li 2010b), suggesting that this usage is idiosyncratic. Be that as it may, the fact that it has survived the copy-editing stage of the book-production process is suggestive of a high level of tolerance of non-standard English usage in works written by acrolectal, educated English-L2 writers.

To sum up, Bamgbose's five internal factors or measures of innovation discussed previously should be complemented by a sixth, namely the popular choice of acrolectal English-L2 users in cyberspace.

Conclusion

One consequence of the emergence of English as the world's de facto global language is that, whatever a person's first-language background, he or she will be disadvantaged without learning at least some English. The variety of English which has the greatest currency is Standard English (He 2017a, 2017b; Li 2007). Despite being standardized and codified for decades (e.g. AusE) or centuries (e.g. BrE and AmE), a standard variety of English is a system that leaks. For millions of English-L2 users, this is one source of learner unfriendliness. Another source is considerable variation within a standard variety of English. These two sources of learner unfriendliness, coupled with cross-linguistic influence from the previously acquired language(s), help account for English-L2 learners' propensity to produce all kinds of non-standard features at all stages of the learning process.

For a long time, deviations from Standard English norms were characterized as unsuccessful attempts at imitating the ways native-speakers use English, or 'errors' in short. Research in World Englishes and other related paradigms for over three decades, however, has made a very strong case for the legitimacy of non-standard features found in the Englishes of ESL users who use English for intra-ethnic communication. The fine line between errors and innovations has been challenged. It has been shown that many of the seemingly non-standard ESL usage patterns are in fact well-motivated innovations, subject to five factors or measures (Bamgbose 1998): 'demographic' (i.e. percentage of acrolectal users vis-à-vis mesolectal and basilectal users), 'geographical', 'authoritative', 'codification', and 'acceptability' (i.e. attitudes).

Two decades after Bamgbose's (1998) seminal article, 'authoritative', 'codification', and 'acceptability' remain important measures of innovation, but 'demographic' and

'geographical' are arguably declining in relative significance following dramatic advances worldwide in ICT – Internet communication in particular. Increasingly, English-L2 and English-L1 users alike may turn to the Internet to ascertain the 'virtual vitality' of a given coinage or usage pattern with the help of a search engine like Google, Yahoo, or Baidu. This practice has significant impact on the degree of its perceived legitimacy and acceptability. Therefore, Bamgbose's five internal factors or measures need to be complemented with a sixth, namely the popular choice of acrolectal, educated users of English on the Internet, whatever their first language may be (cf. Gupta 2005, 2006, 2007).

Suggestions for further reading

Bamgbose (1998) is a seminal article covering the key issues in the debate concerning the slippery distinction between errors and innovations. Breiteneder's (2005) paper provides empirical evidence how the 'third person -s' is systematically flouted by speakers of English as a European lingua franca (cf. Breiteneder 2009). For a theoretically informed discussion of identity-driven 'user English' as opposed to acquisition-based 'learner English', see Kirkpatrick (2007). Schneider (2014) discusses the new reflections on the evolutionary dynamics of world Englishes, especially the varieties in the expanding circle.

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