English around the world

Sociolinguistic perspectives

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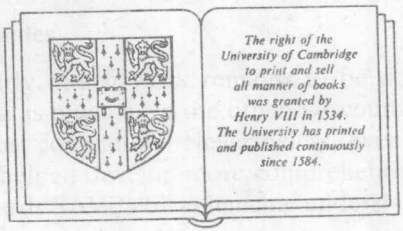

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Only a few centuries ago, the English language consisted of a collection of dialects spoken mainly by monolinguals and only within the shores of a small island. Now the English language includes such typologically distinct varieties as pidgins and creoles, 'new' Englishes, and a range of differing standard and nonstandard varieties that are spoken on a regular basis in many different countries throughout the world. English is also, of course, the main language used for communication at an international level. The use of English in such a diverse range of social contexts around the world provides us with a unique opportunity to analyse and document the linguistic variation and change that is occurring within a single language, on a far greater scale – as far as we know – than has ever happened in the world's linguistic history before.

This volume is intended to give a comprehensive account of our current knowledge of variation in the use of the English language around the world. Overview papers, written by specialist authors, survey the social context in which English is spoken in those parts of the world where it is widely used. Case study papers then provide representative examples of the empirical research that has been carried out into the English that is spoken in the area covered by the overview. The volume therefore contributes both to our understanding of the English language worldwide and to a more general understanding of language as it is used in its social context. It assesses the extent of our current knowledge of variation in the English language and points to gaps in our understanding which future research might set out to remedy.

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Finally, it is sad to have to report that John Platt died while this volume was in press. It was a special privilege to work with him and I am glad to have been able to include a paper in the volume that is representative of the lasting contribution that he made to our knowledge of English around the world.

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Introduction: Sociolinguistics and English around the world

JENNY CHESHIRE

Only a few centuries ago, the English language consisted of a collection of dialects spoken mainly by monolinguals and only within the shores of a small island. Now it includes such typologically distinct varieties as pidgins and creoles, 'new' Englishes, and a range of differing standard and non-standard varieties that are spoken on a regular basis in more than 60 different countries around the world (Crystal 1985). English is also, of course, the main language used for communication at an international level.

Such diversity of form and function within what is nevertheless still thought of as a single language offers a unique opportunity to analyse and document the linguistic variation and change that is occurring on a far greater scale – as far as we know – than has ever happened in the world's linguistic history. It also allows us to investigate the relationship between language and the community in which it is used from a broader perspective than is usual. Academic disciplines tend to fragment into separate specialist fields: dialectology, bilingualism, pidgin and creole studies, and sociolinguistics, for example, are often treated as if they are relatively self-contained areas of study. All four of these fields, however, share the problems of describing and explaining linguistic variation, though the nature of the variation may differ; and all four fields investigate essentially the same social and educational issues arising from community attitudes that assign high prestige to some languages, or varieties of a language, and low prestige to others (see also Rickford 1988). Focusing on world Englishes in their social contexts, then, makes it easier to see what these disciplines have in common.

This introductory chapter does not attempt to summarise the contents of the volume. The papers speak for themselves, illustrating the range of variation that exists within the English language today and the diverse social contexts in which English is used. Instead, this chapter draws attention to the specific contribution that empirical research into English

around the world can make to our understanding of language in its social context and, conversely, to some of the reasons why a sociolinguistic perspective is important for the study of English around the world.

English around the world and sociolinguistics

Analysing sociolinguistic variation in the English that is used around the world poses an enormous challenge to sociolinguistics. One reason for this is that many fundamental concepts that have long been taken for granted within sociolinguistics become problematic when they are viewed from a multilingual perspective, rather than from the monolingual perspective in which they were originally developed. An example is the concept of the speech community. Early sociolinguistic surveys showed that social and stylistic variation could be incorporated into a single model of 'orderly heterogeneity' (Labov 1972), where all socioeconomic classes followed the usage of the higher socioeconomic classes in their more careful speech styles. Figure 1.1 (see chapter 1, page 18) illustrates this pattern of variation for the (th) variable in New York City. Such sociolinguistic patterning, together with tests of speakers' subjective evaluations of linguistic variants, led Labov to define the speech community as a group of speakers sharing a common set of evaluative norms (Labov 1966; see further Labov 1989). Romaine (1982) has already drawn attention to some of the problems that arise when applying this definition to (mainly) monolingual situations; the problems become still greater, however, when we investigate Creole communities (see Winford 1988) or the multilingual urban centres in 'developing' societies. As Guy (1988: 46) points out, in some cities of the 'third world' a majority of the population may have been born elsewhere, and many people may not even speak the official language or the standard dialect, so that they can hardly be said to form a speech community in the same way that New York City can.

There are other sociolinguistic concepts which are often taken as self-evident but which we are forced to question when analysing English as it is used around the world. 'Mother tongue' is not necessarily a useful or a meaningful concept in cities such as Lusaka, where population movement, language loss, language shift, and language attitudes may all affect the language that speakers consider to be their first language (see Siachitema, this volume). Furthermore, the distinction that has been drawn conventionally between the 'native speaker' and the 'non-native speaker' is becoming blurred and increasingly difficult to operationalise. At one time it may have been possible to make a distinction on the grounds that a non-native speaker of English had learnt the language through formal instruction, rather than acquired it as a mother tongue; but in many multilingual countries the functional range of English is changing rapidly, so that English is now used in informal domains as well as in more formal, official

domains. This means that although English may still be learnt at school, it may also be acquired through informal use in everyday life (see further Kandiah, this volume). Similarly, some pidgin and creole varieties of English are easily identifiable as native speaker varieties (this is so for the varieties reported in the Caribbean and Pacific sections of this volume), but others may be second language varieties, learnt at school (Liberian English is an example; see Singler, this volume). Some pidgins are not termed 'English' and although English may have played an important role in their linguistic development it is not clear if they are perceived within the community as 'English': one such pidgin is represented in this volume (Faraclas' paper on Nigerian Pidgin). Other typological classifications of varieties of English as they are used around the world can also pose problems: it has been pointed out, for example, that the criteria used to identify ESL, EFL and other varieties of English that were once thought to be relatively discrete (such as the five types of English distinguished by Moag 1982) cannot do justice to the multiplicity of situations in which English is used (Görlach 1988: 181). All these problems of classification and description, then, challenge the early assumptions that were made in sociolinguistics, and force us to reflect on their validity. The discipline stands to benefit greatly from being forced to reassess its terminology and its conceptual frameworks in this way.

A second challenge that the analysis of English around the world offers to sociolinguistics concerns the methodology that is used in research. Many of the most widely used frameworks of analysis were developed during investigations into language use in Western industrial societies and have been shaped by underlying theoretical assumptions that were not always made explicit (see, for discussion, Milroy 1987). For example, the early Labovian framework of analysis linked the stylistic continuum to a functionalist model of social class, without explicitly acknowledging its dependence on this model. This meant that research results were interpreted as if they had resulted from a neutral, objective analysis rather than from an analysis tied to a theory-dependent model of class. For instance, the recurrent pattern of social and stylistic variation illustrated in figure 1.1 (chapter 1 below) was explained in terms of the prestige of the variants preferred by the higher socioeconomic classes; the persistence and spread of other, low-status, variants was then, correspondingly, accounted for by the notion of covert prestige (see, for example, Labov 1966; and, for further discussion, Milroy, this volume). As Milroy (1987: 99) points out, this type of interpretation can be illuminating, but the failure to acknowledge the dependence of Labov's view of sociolinguistic variation on a specific model of social class has meant that interpretations in terms of prestige have until recently been taken for granted. There has been very little consideration of alternative models of social class in sociolinguistics, and little meaningful debate on how linguistic variability