

# The English Language Today

*Edited by*

SIDNEY GREENBAUM

*Quain Professor of English Language and Literature,  
University College London*

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## Foreword

ONE could not select a more appropriate and comprehensive volume to launch the series "English in the International Context" than *The English Language Today*, edited by Sidney Greenbaum. This inaugural volume aptly captures the vital issues which concern the researchers, teachers, and teacher trainers in English in every country where English is used and taught, whether natively or non-natively.

What are the goals of this series? One key motivation for its initiation is to provide thorough, data-oriented descriptions of the uses, usages, and users of English across cultures and languages. In planning the series, and in inviting the contributors for the future volumes, we are involving scholars from every area of the world to demonstrate the multicultural and multilingual nature of the English-using speech fellowships. The series will focus on linguistic, sociolinguistic, literary and historical topics related to the spread and uses of English.

In the future volumes, we propose to include two types of works written for a general readership interested in the "English studies", as this term is understood in its broader implications: first, studies related to varieties of English specific to particular regions, including Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and so on; and secondly, theme-oriented studies which cut across native and non-native varieties of English, such as discourse strategies and styles, grammatical studies, studies concerned with "mixing" and "switching" with English, and variety-specific or comparative lexical studies. The literary aspects of what may be termed the "literatures in English" will primarily focus on the stylistic characteristics of such texts. The other dimension of World Englishes—the impact of English on other major world literatures, languages, and cultures—is also within the scope of this series. In fact, this aspect has not yet been fully researched and we welcome contributions in this area.

This initial volume brings to the forefront the most debated concern of the day: the attitudes toward changing uses and usages of English. Even in scholarly and professional meetings, both in the Western and non-Western countries, the debate on this topic very rarely is characterized by equanimity, pragmatism, or linguistic realism. Such discussions often reflect judgements and biases which do not necessarily show any awareness of how human languages work. They do, however, touch the most delicate linguistic chords—those of linguistic attitudes.

The thirty-one instructive and provocative papers included in this volume, therefore, have important theoretical, applied and pedagogical implications. They represent the major English-speaking areas of the world, and are written by professionals who are well recognized for their contributions to English

studies as linguists, teachers, literary specialists, or academic administrators. They certainly have one thing in common: their concern for English studies and their experience in the "real world" where English is used. The section on "Personal Reactions" is very stimulating from this perspective, for it introduces a dimension normally ignored in scholarly publications. The discussions are not restricted to the U.S.A., Australia, Canada, and New Zealand; rather the issues are seen in a broader global context, especially in the five papers in Section IV (Attitudes and Usage: English in the World Context).

This volume is of interest not only to linguists and sociolinguists. It has direct relevance to classroom teachers, textbook writers, lexicographers, and language planners. The emotional reactions this topic generates are clearly seen in the frequency with which related issues are discussed in the press, in public debates, and in official documents in such diverse sociolinguistic settings as the U.S.A., India, Singapore, Britain and Kenya, to name just a few. Wherever there are users of English in the world, attitudinal questions are alive.

I am, therefore, grateful to Sidney Greenbaum for commissioning contributions on a topic which has more than just linguistic significance; it has social and educational importance, as well, and it transcends cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries. I am particularly happy that this volume has become a flagship, as it were, of this new series.

BRAJ B. KACHRU

## **Preface**

THIS volume was conceived at a meeting of the Commission on the English Language of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), of which I was a member. I was there asked to edit a volume of papers on public attitudes to the English language in the United States. I have enlarged the scope of the book by inviting papers outlining views on the state of the language expressed in earlier periods, papers on attitudes and usage in countries other than the United States, and papers discussing the implications of current attitudes for education at various levels. All the papers except one (by Donald Davie) were specially written for this volume.

As several of the papers indicate, the state of the English language is of concern to many who are not professionally involved with the teaching of the language. The book should therefore be of interest to the general public as well as to teachers of English and students taking courses in the English language, education, or sociolinguistics.

I wish to express my gratitude for their encouragement and advice to Professor John Algeo, who was Director of the Commission on the English Language when I assembled the papers for the volume, and to Professor Braj B. Kachru, who is editor of the series of which this is the first volume.

SIDNEY GREENBAUM

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# ***I: Issues and Implications***

SIDNEY GREENBAUM

A NARROW conception of English language studies focuses on the description of the English language as a formal system at a particular period (synchronic studies) or on the changes in the formal system from period to period (diachronic studies). For example, we can describe the rules for forming questions in present-day English or trace the changes in the formation of questions from earlier periods till today, in either instance without considering how questions are used. A broader view takes into account the uses of the language or of a variety of the language in social contexts. Social contexts may be conceived at a lower (micro-) or higher (macro-) level of abstraction. The study of the micro-level is concerned with the use of linguistic expressions or forms. It includes such matters as the communicative force of linguistic expressions when uttered in particular types of situation (according to the situation *Why don't you shave?* may be a genuine inquiry or a request for action) or the language variation that correlates with particular types of situation (*Is it not time for dinner?* is a variant in formal style for the more usual *Isn't it time for dinner?*). The study of the macro-level, on the other hand, deals with the range of functions available to the language as a whole or to a variety within the language.

A full consideration of the social contexts in which English is used requires also an understanding of linguistic attitudes, which involved evaluations of, and beliefs about, the language, varieties of the language, and specific linguistic features. These attitudes influence linguistic choices and reactions to other speakers.

English has come a long way from its obscure beginnings in the southern part of an island off the European continent. From the middle of the fifth century and for the next hundred years, waves of invading tribes of Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians brought their Germanic dialects from Europe to more comfortable settlements in Britain, driving the Celtic-speaking Britons westward to Wales and Cornwall. Isolated from other Germanic speakers, the settlers subsequently acknowledged their dialects as constituting a separate common language that they called English. A thousand years later a mere six

million people spoke English, almost all of them confined to England. Now English is a world-wide language. About 300 million people speak it as their mother-tongue, and there are as many – if not more – for whom it is an additional language.

Transplanted mainly through British colonies, English has survived the political independence of the colonies and their cravings for linguistic independence. In some former colonies, notably the United States, English has remained the mother tongue of most of the inhabitants despite massive immigration of speakers of other tongues. In those countries where it is predominantly the mother tongue, it caters for the full range of functions for which language is used today: from casual conversation to philosophical argument, from poetry to technical manuals, from prayer to communication between pilot and control tower, from popular songs to business memoranda. In most of the colonies where the English-speaking settlers were always in a minority, for example India and Nigeria, English has been retained as a second language, politically attractive as a neutral language where no one native language is generally acceptable; it is often designated legally as an official language and is used internally for a variety of functions – particularly for government, law, and education, and for communication between speakers who have no other language in common, but also increasingly for literature. For most other countries – not only in the Third World but also in developed countries such as Russia – English is the primary foreign language, eagerly studied for access to Western science and technology, for international commerce and tourism, or for international economic and military aid. It is a major language of diplomacy and international conferences. In much of the world, a knowledge of English is required for many of the best jobs.

The unparalleled status of English as an international language reflects the economic and technological power of the English-speaking countries, predominantly the United States. A radical shift in power would undoubtedly result in the eventual displacement of English as the paramount international language. Even so, it will remain the national language of many countries where the majority of the population now speak it as their first or second language.

English has not always served the full range of language functions for those who spoke it as a mother tongue. There were earlier periods when English encountered competition within its original homeland in England from other languages, which displaced it for certain functions, or in some regions of the country, or among particular social classes. Indeed, for most of its history it has not been the normal language for serious writing. As late as the end of the sixteenth century scholars doubted whether English was fit for learned writing, arguing that its syntax and vocabulary were deficient for that purpose, that it was unstable and open to wide variation, and that it could not match the rhetorical and stylistic effects of Latin. If English was to be used for law, medicine, science, and other scholarly functions, its deficiencies had to be remedied. During the Renaissance period conscious efforts were made to expand the vocabulary of English and to experiment with a range of styles, provoking considerable controversy over what should be accounted appropriate usage. By the end of the Renaissance period there was no longer any



doubt that English was, or could be made, adequate for intellectual discourse. And by the end of the seventeenth century, after a period of augmentation and refinement, English was considered to be in good shape. By that time too, there had been considerable movement towards the standardization of English spelling, syntax, and vocabulary.

In the eighteenth century, new concerns developed about the language. Most of the learned agreed that English had reached a near-perfect stage in its progress, having been purified of its inconsistencies; they now feared that unless changes were prevented it would deteriorate and become corrupted by the uneducated and half-educated. Moreover, writers were worried that changes in the language would render their works unintelligible to future generations. Eighteenth-century writers engaged in public debate on linguistic propriety, taking into account appropriateness to both social status and to rhetorical requirements. By the nineteenth century social propriety was the main issue, and a tradition had been established as to what constituted good language; it was claimed to be derived from the usage of the best writers and speakers after that usage was subjected to the tests of logic and the decisions of eighteenth-century writers who were accepted as authorities on language. This authoritarian approach emphasized correctness in language, and some writers went so far as to claim that good language reflected good character, introducing a moral argument for their precepts.

The prescriptive tradition of the nineteenth century has continued into the twentieth century. In addition, popular writers of this century have inveighed against misuses and abuses of language. Language, it was pointed out, can be employed to confuse, mislead, stimulate desires, and arouse fear or hate. The mass media enable the messages of politicians and advertisers to reach vast audiences, multiplying the dangers of manipulation through language, and the public must therefore be made critically aware of the devices that can distort their thinking and arouse their feelings. Linguistic engineering, it has been argued, can be employed to improve language use as well as to corrupt it. Most recently, attention has been drawn to the bias against women in some vocabulary and grammatical forms of the language, a bias that may subconsciously influence behaviour and attitudes, and attempts have been and are being made to engineer changes that will counter that bias. In the United States at least, there is increasing sensitivity to the effects of sexist language.

We have so far assumed that there is one English language. But does it make sense to talk about *the* English language? After all, there are differences between the language used, for example, in the United States and in England. If we agree that these two countries speak national varieties of a common language, it is because the populations of the two countries want to recognize them as such, despite the occasional assertions of linguistic independence for the American Language. Similarly, Indian English and Nigerian English are beginning to gain recognition as independent national varieties, rather than as deviant versions of British English, because of the changing attitudes of their speakers to their own varieties and to other varieties, attitudes that now express greater acceptance of local variation from British norms. The institutionaliza-