

Ofelia García
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(Editors)

English across Cultures **Cultures across English**

**A Reader in Cross-cultural
Communication**

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A Reader in Cross-cultural Communication

edited by

Ofelia García

Ricardo Otheguy



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**Para nuestros hijos,
Eric Anthony, Raquel Alicia y Emma Adelaida,
para que algún día nos lean, y nos recuerden.**

Foreword

That languages spread to new populations is a historical commonplace, as is the fact that, as a result, they are often spoken by groups whose culture is very different from that of the original users. At least since Boas (1911), we take it as a given that in many settings there will be little congruence between language and ethnicity. It is therefore relatively unremarkable that the English language, on the one hand, and English, or even British ethnicity, on the other, should be found together in an increasingly small proportion of the total number of speakers of the language. A new collection of articles that dealt simply with the spread of English, or even with linguistic diffusion in general, might thus be difficult to justify. After all, that people adopt new languages and new cultures is the stuff of which the disciplines of Linguistics and Anthropology were long ago first made. Moreover, the transfer of a linguistic system to a new place and a new society has been studied not only diachronically, but also as an unfolding synchronic process. The fields of dialectology and historical-comparative linguistics testify to our thorough familiarity with the outcome of the process of language diffusion. And advances in the field of creolization, bilingualism and language contact bear witness to our growing understanding of what happens to spreading linguistic systems – and to others they meet – as the process of expansion takes place.

But if both the diachronic outcome and the synchronic dynamics of spreading linguistic systems have received, and continue to get, the attention they deserve, there has been considerably less study of the daily language exchanges in which the users of these diffusing systems must have engaged, and engage still today. The spread of any language soon gives rise to conversations in that language between pairs of interlocutors who are very differently situated with respect to both linguistic and cultural norms. In many instances, one of the participants in the conversation speaks the language natively, the other one as a second or foreign language. In other cases, both of them speak it natively, but bring to the encounter very different communicative norms, the process of diffusion of language having outpaced that of culture.

It is these conversations that sorely need detailed study. At present,

we know little about the interactive successes and failures experienced by pairs of interlocutors caught in the midst of language expansion. Such interlocutors are using a language that at least for one of them is very likely to be either (a) a language of recent acquisition, or (b) a language acquired long ago, perhaps from birth, but nevertheless of still – perhaps strongly felt – foreign identity, or (c) one that is spoken while relying on communicative norms based on, and for the purpose of getting across messages derived from, a culture originally associated with another, perhaps very different language. Students of, say, Romance linguistics know much about the historical outcome of the diffusion of Latin, and it comes as no news to them, for example, that time came when most speakers of Latin in Hispania were not of Roman ethnicity. But they have a much more limited knowledge of the nature of the encounters in Latin between Romans and Iberians or Romans and Euskareans; of what this form of cross-cultural communication was like, of where it succeeded, or of the points at which it failed; of where the areas of comfortable understanding lay, or of what pitfalls and misunderstandings marred it.

When the period of expansion of a language has past, the nature of the novel interactions that a spreading linguistic system brings about become obscured. Though not impossible, it will be difficult to learn about the Latin-related problems of the interlocutors mentioned above. (And this not simply because these conversations took place so long ago; just as importantly, the difficulty arises because, as time has passed, the cultural gaps across which the novel interchanges took place have tended to close.) But languages whose period of expansion is recent or still current afford us a valuable opportunity to study the nature of these encounters first hand.

English is clearly one of the languages that today provides us with such an opportunity, one which researchers have started to take advantage of only recently (Pride 1985). It is the purpose of this volume, then, to study cross-cultural interactions between people who have come to have access to the same English language system, but whose cultural and conceptual system have not yet reached high levels of convergence. One should note, parenthetically, that it is of course an oversimplification to refer in such a facile manner to “the same linguistic system,” even when both interlocutors are native speakers. That these interactions across cultures created by the spread of English are sometimes also across what have become, and are likely to remain, at least partially different systems of English also occupies

some of the writers in this volume (see, for instance, the papers by Algeo and by Kinloch).

To study these problematic interactions, we have brought together authors from Britain, Ireland, and continental Europe, as well as from North America, the Caribbean, India, Sri Lanka, and several areas of Africa, the Pacific, and the Far East. Although we have carefully edited their papers, and have standardized the formal apparatus of sections, footnotes, and references, we have studiously refrained from any attempt to impose uniform usage or diction. The richness and variety of English across cultures is thus exemplified by the contributors themselves. Our authors study the problems of cross-cultural communication in English in settings whose specific characteristics arose during several periods of the history of the language. They do not go back to the time of English expansion through Britain — or to its continental roots — for that would defeat the purpose of seizing the opportunity of relatively recent contact. But they do study problematic interactions still taking place in what Kachru (1986b) has called the inner circle of English — Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand — whose formation started more than three hundred years ago; and they also study interactions whose roots lie in the push of British empire during the last century, as well as interactions that have come about because of United States territorial and commercial expansion during the last two centuries, as well as because of the recent rise of Australia and New Zealand to the status of economic powers.

A word is needed about the title of this volume, whose Janus-like quality derives from suggestions by John Pride (for the first half, *English across cultures*) and by J.L. Dillard (for the second half, *Cultures across English*). As English has spread, it has taken over new expressive functions; extended to new domains; come to rely on new systems of belief and behavior; and become significant for new interlocutors: English across cultures. But the new expressive functions overtaken by English have themselves taken it over. In order to make sense of exchanges in English today, researchers and interlocutors alike must now come to some understanding of its new domains; they must develop an appreciation for the systems of behavior and belief that are now relied on by its speakers; and they must come to apprehend the significance for English of those very interlocutors for whom English has become significant: Cultures across English. The research models and the detailed empirical studies presented here

are motivated by the belief that only by understanding cultures across English can there be communicative success in, and theoretical understanding of, the interactions that are now so prevalent in English across cultures.

The editors of this volume — across whom English has been, and who hope to have put something across it too — have much to thank John Pride. As part of a project to expand his *Cross-cultural encounters: Communication and mis-communication* (1985), it was Pride who first proposed the volume and who initially asked for some of the contributions which now appear here. We have expanded his initial theoretical framework and have invited many other contributions. We remain indebted to him for all the initial work of conceptualization and actual preparation of this book, which would not have been possible without his initiative and effort.

The editors also wish to acknowledge the help and trust of the Series Editor, Joshua A. Fishman, who over the years has been a most generous colleague and inspiring teacher. We are fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with him and to benefit from his intellectual stimulation, dedication, and energy.

Finally, the editors wish to acknowledge the support of the National Academy of Education of the United States in the form of a Spencer Fellowship to Ofelia García, and of the City College of New York through a sabbatical leave to Ricardo Otheguy. Both editors wish to acknowledge as well the support given to them by the School of Education of the City College of New York.

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