



Deforeignizing the English language: National identities making the world language

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Abstract

This paper is a brief reflection on the varieties of English around the world. As it stands, English is one of the most popular languages in the world. English is arguably the language that most people seek to learn, hence the popularity. The fact that it has numerous people learning this language, national identities have converged to change it as the world language. The objective of this study is to advocate an epistemology of deforeignization of this language, based on the assumption that many people have recreated it naturally, in lexical, grammatical, and phonological terms. 'To deforeignize' the English language, it is necessary to allow the recreation of this language, so that it can be adapted to the learners' linguistic and cultural patterns. For this purpose, some data are shared. The relevance of this study lies in the possibility to shed light in a topic which still needs to be reflected, mainly because it can support the understanding of how the teaching and learning process of English should be conducted.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that English has become a world language, due to the power of its speakers, mainly the economic and military ones (Crystal, 2012). There is no use in denying, the fact that English is almost everywhere, with more than 1 billion and 350 million non-native speakers living with this language every day, in numerous settings. Thus, English has bursted into different areas of social life, that is why it is possible to say, it is the language of science, of diplomacy, of tourism, of cartoon, of films, of the internet etc.

People have now been attracted to learn English. This has come as no surprise knowing that English is the most common language studied in the world, which, according to the Washington Post, there are 1.5 billion learners. Now that English has countless learners around the world, it is safe to assume that national identities have converged to change this language, making English as the world language. As Seidlhofer (2011) points out, English is not only **an** international language, but **the** international language. Obviously, '**the**' instead of '**an**' has a meaning, especially with implications for the teaching of this language, because as it has already escaped from the hands of North Americans, Australians, New Zealand and all those who believed to have ownership on it, it gives us, at the same time, clear signs of untying with its roots (Rajagopalan, 2014), reaching the status of world language.

For that reason, this paper is about how and why English can be considered as the world language. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to share some information on how this language has been used and modified by different people, in different countries, that it has cemented its current status as the world language. I have called this 'deforeignization of the English language', to refer to a set of changes, adjustments, and recreations of the English language by different speakers. My purpose is to present the underlying assumption that national identities, in many parts of the world, have recreated this language.

The relevance of this study lies in the possibility to shed some light on a topic which still needs to be discussed, mainly because it can support the understanding of how the teaching and learning process of English should be conducted aligned with its current status.

Many English learners feel awkward when they speak English. In regard to this, I had conducted an ethnographic research (Anjos, 2018), with 91 undergraduated students, in Brazil. The results suggested that some of them had negative attitudes when they had to speak English. To put in a context, one of them said to feel 'inferior', when he had to use English. Others used the terms 'insecure', 'ashamed' and even 'illiterate' concerning the same issue. Thus, these data open rooms for researchers to ask why students had these kinds of feelings. The same study pointed that 14 per cent of them overvalued the native speaker of English and 5 per cent said one should imitate these people. The data suggested as well that English learners had the desire to speak just like natives and yet that non-natives feared to express themselves in English. This way, one of my first insights, regarding this issue, was the position of these two identities, being confronted: native and non-native.

Thus, I concluded that identity was a core issue to figure out learners' feelings, because these feelings were related to a notion of supremacy, what might impede learners of expressing themselves from the *locus* of their own identity, impeding them of using a local, a national discourse through the English language, to communicate themselves (Anjos, 2019). I realized this fact was related with power relationship, since learners of English as a foreign language and English native speakers have been put themselves in confrontation. I mean, these are settings of true subjugation toward the new learners of English, in which new ways of using this language receive a stigma of inferior. That is why, in many educational contexts, the ideal model, where the native speaker is built as a user/owner of a homogenous, perfect language, is spread, disseminating an implied message that to speak a good English is to speak the North American and British models.

I confront this assertive, since as English has followed a path of deterritorialisation, the way is opened to make it closer to the new users. I mean, a post-modern approach to teaching English should take into account the fact that a great number of learners of English has the possibility to change it. In this respect, Galloway and Rose (2018) highlight that, in addition to their repertoires, many learners have changed English, what has a very significative impact on this language. According to them, this language has not been spoken anymore as the first language to those who were born in the hegemonic countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

This is aligned with the fact that the spread of English can promote the assumption of new users and owners; what has taken out the native speaker, the enigmatic being (Rajagopalan, 2004), from the position of the only one who owns the language custody, who holds the right to dictate patterns and prescribe rules. Thus, as English has increasingly been used in local perspectives, there is no sense in teaching this language based, exclusively, on the hegemonic cultures, since local users have used and changed this language in a

very idiosyncratic perspective. This converges to what I have called 'deforeignization' of English. Let me explain the meaning behind this word.

In the semantic field, 'deforeignize' is to take out what is foreign, strange, unknown. The prefix '*de*' denotes opposition, negation. In Arabic and Hebrew, 'strange' is equivalent to 'demoniacal' and 'horrible'. Freud (1919) said 'strange' was related to what is frightening, fear and horror. In his reflections, he stated that, perhaps, our mother tongue was a foreign one. Thus, as far as I am concerned, our own language ceases to be strange, as we get familiar with it. But how we can do this?

This way, I assume that to be familiar with the new language one learns, it is necessary to take out or change the strange part of it. In this respect, Revuz (2002) draws attention to fact that we always go through a strangeness experience when learning a language. Thus, I assume there is a kind of psychical and corporal discomfort when a person learns for the very first time a new language, which is quite normal. However, we should be careful not to extend this stage. Besides that, we should be careful as well with the identity issue, not to block it, not to allow embarrassment to the learners. This issue is aligned with the recreation of a language, in lexical and phonological terms, including the interference of one's mother tongue and the local culture. However, this is not always seen with good eyes. Jing and Niannian (2006), in the Chinese scenario, for example, make criticism on the fact that undergraduate students' oral expression is far from being satisfactory. They claim Chinglish has been used a lot in their oral expression, what, according to them, is very destructive. However, they do not show clearly, in which extent Chinglish is negative. What happens, actually, is that these researchers do not give credit to non-hegemonic ways of expression of the English language, and as a result, negative attitudes might emerge concerning new varieties of English, what signals, somehow, that national identities all over the world must not be expressed through English, if they recreate, modify this language.

But all of this can be overcome, if we take into account the respect with which different national identities are expressed, when they recreate the English language, especially because this recreation has made the world language itself. Therefore, 'to deforeignize' the English language, it is necessary to allow the recreation of this language, so that it can be adapted to the learners' linguistic and cultural patterns.

This way, I have defined the 'deforeignization' of English as a set of changes new speakers make, in different levels, to make this language closer to them, because a language is deforeignized when it is familiar to us and it does not belong only to others, but to us as well who use it. This way, the learner prints his/her identity in the new language, which upon deforeignizing itself, it is being not only spoken with authentic purposes, but the learner himself/herself speaks in that language, revealing features of his/her identity (Almeida Filho, 1993). This relationship between the language and the learners converges to reshape the language, giving rise to new varieties, with idiosyncratic features of a certain social group. In the next section, I share some data concerning this issue.

METHOD

This study can be considered as a literature review one. To support my assumptions, I took as base some samples of the English language already researched by other scholars in some parts of the world, which ratifies the deforeignization process. It can also be said this study has a qualitative bias, since it was based on the previous findings for which I provided some conclusions.

The qualitative model of research has its origin in the phenomenological conception of knowledge, which emphasizes the subjectivity of human behaviors and advocates the penetration in the individuals' conceptual universe, to understand how and which type of meaning they give to the events and social interactions that happen in their daily lives.

As the deforeignization process is intrinsically related with language change, I truly agree the English language has been opened to the winds of linguistic changes in totally unpredictable ways and the spread of it has already demonstrated this, with the emergence of new varieties where it has taken roots (CRYSTAL, 2012). Aligned to this, I analysed some language occurrences in the English language, from some parts of the world, taking into account the assumption of language variation, which claims that heterogeneity is not random, but ordered by linguistic and extralinguistic restrictions. But it is nonetheless true that these variations are related with space, time and diachronic perspectives. These restrictions make speakers use one form instead of another. Based on that, I made some linguistic descriptions, to support my assumption of the deforeignization process, showing language changes speakers have made in that language. For this purpose, I considered grammatical, phonological and cultural aspects from different speakers of English.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

National Identities Deforeignizing English around The World

In this section, I intend to illustrate briefly how national identities around the world have deforeignized the English language. In historical terms, North-American people are the pioneers in deforeignizing this language. For Kumaravadiveli (2005), these people not only denativized the colonial language imposed to them, but they decolonized it as well. In practical terms, North-American people have changed the lexicon, the grammar, and even the phonology of English. Thus, for instance, while a British might ask “have you got a bike?”, on the other hand, North-Americans might “do you have a bike?” which means the same thing.

Based on this, it is possible to state that a single English pattern is a fallacy, since many varieties of English are emerging with their own lexical and pronunciation norms (Rainhan; Deterding, 2018). Because of this, the English language has been under a process of deforeignization, mainly taking as reference countries and emergent regions:

Among the countries of the outer circle, several varieties have also grown in distinctiveness in recent decades. There is one group in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, often collectively called South Asian English. There is another group in the former British colonies in East Africa. Other emerging varieties have been noted in the Caribbean and in parts of South-east Asia, such as Singapore. [...] They are an inevitable consequence of the spread of English on a world scale. (Crystal, 2012, p. 144)

Crystal (2012) argues that several changes can be identified in the English language, describing some grammatical and lexical features of these changes, what he thinks illustrates trends in the formation of new regional grammatical identities. In this perspective, he draws attention to the fact that the spread of English has demonstrated that this language is open to the winds of linguistic change, converging to the emergence of new varieties in different places this language has taken root.

In this respect is that in the South of Nigeria, people use ‘*pidgin English*’, especially in the urban perimeter. This version of English combines local language terms with a more simplified English in phonological terms. Actually, the English language, in the Nigerian context, has been under a redefinition process, because it has been pidginized, nativized and assimilated (Dangana, 2014), since it has deviated itself from the British and North-American norms, and it has, thus, consolidated itself as a local language.

In Indian, *English* has been spoken by more than sixty million speakers, what makes this version the third more used in that nation. *English* is a kind of deforeignized English, with so many features to ratify this assumption. For instance, though normative grammar advocates that the ‘ING’ form must not be used with certain verbs, mainly those which express feelings, in India, it is common the use of sentences such as “he is *knowing* you’ and ‘she is *understanding* you’. Concerning pronunciation, ‘w’ has the sound of ‘v’, that is why the personal pronoun ‘we’ is pronounced /vi/ and ‘water’, /vater/. About this, Bansal (1991), upon analyzing the pronunciation of English in India, states that the deviations from native are much greater concerning the phonological and phonetic patterns. However, he also draws attention to the fact that differences in lexis and grammar also exist. These features point to the deforeignization of English in a multicultural country.

In Brunei, a country located in the Borneo island, in Asia, with a population of 400 million inhabitants, they used ‘*Brunei English*’. Rainhan and Deterding (2018) highlight that although this variety of English had been built based on the British English, it evolved naturally, developing its own traces, pointing to the deforeignization process. As an example, Rainhan and Deterding (2018) mention that speakers of *Brunei English* reproduce the sound of /t/ instead of /th/, in words such as ‘thought’ and ‘third’.

In this line of thought, Gough (1996) describes black English in South Africa, signaling the existence of many particular features. He describes some features in terms of its phonology, grammar, intonation, stylistic etc. In this respect, he says, for example, that the consonantal systems are fairly complex and that the native English phonemes lacking generally are /^o/ and /⁰/, which are replaced by /t/ and /d/ respectively.

Still concerning the African context, Simo Bodba (2000) claims that most of the features common to all African accents of English are shared by many other New Englishes, including pronunciation and deviations. He mentions the fact that all Africans are likely to pronounce the ‘b’ of ‘bombing’ and ‘plumbing’ as well as the ‘f’ of ‘of’. Besides that, this researcher lists that other phonological features are related with any African accent of English, such as the non-application of vowel reduction, consonant cluster simplification, r- phenomena, glide formation, pre-ion devoicing and processes involving the alveolar fricative.

Japlish is the Japanese variety of English. According to Stanlaw (2009), English in Japan is like the air, it is everywhere, with 95% of Japanese people using this language. For him, Japan, today, can not exist

without this variety, because it is essential for the Japanese society. This language has deeply entrenched in the Japanese people's life, rewriting the local culture, art, economy and consumism. However, this language has been reshaped by Japanese people as well. In this sense is that **Rice** becomes **Raisu**, **Bus** is **Busu**, **Apartment** is **Apaato**, **Home** é **Hoomu** and **Hot** is **Hootu**, clearly following the path of deforeignization.

Spanglish is another deforeignized variety of English. For Orsi (2008), *Spanglish* is a kind of code mix; an alternance of use between English and Spanish, marked by factors such as nationality, identity and social class. Orsi (2008) claims that *Spanglish* serves to express feelings and emotions and it is potentially understood and spoken by 45 millions of speakers in the United States. He also thinks *Spanglish* has become a unifying vehicle of communication of a bigger group, from different countries that use Spanish. He mentions for instance 'troka', 'trailer', 'chimney', 'lunch' and 'mall' which have replaced respectively 'truck', 'trailer', 'chimney', 'leaking', 'lunch' and 'mall'. These examples of lexical changes also validate that *Spanglish* is nothing more than a deforeignized version of the English language.

All these changes around the English language is perfectly understandable, since international varieties, emerged from communities separated by different climates, fauna and flora, express national identities and are a way of reducing the conflict between intelligibility and identity (Crystal, 2012).

In the following part, I will briefly discuss the implications of this process for the teaching/learning of English.

Implications for The Teaching/Learning Process

A question emerges in front of this diverse scenario: which English to teach? It might prove to be problematic for teachers, because they have faced with many English varieties. However, it could be a good thing that they can choose any model of English they want to teach. The teachers need to take into account the varieties that suit their students. In relation to that, a more local version would be a better option that it might empower new learners. It is mainly because using the language aligned with local culture make it possible the empowerment of new learners, since using the language aligned with local culture would give these learners the sense of ownership. I do not mean we should ban the hegemonic cultures of classrooms, but decentralize the position they get in many educational settings. Teachers should balance local culture with the hegemonic ones.

In regard to that case, Kumaravadivelu (2012) proposes an epistemic break of our indelible colonial dependence. As teachers, we have to ignite a discontinuity in the way English has been taught recently. Other experts also question this old-fashioned approach based on native speaker norms. McKay (2012) is one of them, she rejects the native speaker model as a pedagogic practice to teach English. Matsuda (2009) also emphasizes that English as an international language requires new ways of approaching it, different from the ones based on the hegemonic cultures. Canagarajah and Said (2010) argue that learners of English need to acquire the ability to negotiate with the varieties of English, developing the competence to deal with different norms. Rajagopalan (2004) also claims that it is the speaker's decision to undertake a radical rethinking of our practices, concerning ELT approaches centred in the native speaker model in light of the new role assumed by English as this language metamorphoses itself into a world language. He alerts our practices need to be drastically reviewed because of the challenges English as a world language puts upon us. He draws attention to the need in deconstructing the belief that someone wants to learn English to be able to communicate with the so-called native speaker, because ELT practices based on this premise has been profoundly deleterious, resulting in an extremely enervating inferiority complex on the part of learners.

In this perspective, it is necessary changes in ELT. If we live in a diverse world, we need to acknowledge this premise even in linguistic terms. We should know and respect new linguistic versions as much as possible. New formations around the language should be considered, in terms of grammar, lexicon, phonology etc. This leads to the understanding and occurrence of English in the means of a *língua franca*.

From my own experience in the last years, as a professor at a federal university in Brazil, I have realized a series of new occurrences, when my students use English. Initially I thought these occurrences seemed to be specific of Brazilian students, such as the use of the verb 'have' to talk about age - 'I have 19 years old' - instead of using the verb to be. However, Spanish speakers also use this verb in the same way. This is perfectly understandable, since here in Brazil we use the verb 'to have' to talk about age. That is why it is true and it should be acceptable the fact that the mother tongue influences the way a speaker build the new language he/she is learning. Also, some students use prepositions they use in our mother tongue - 'she is married **with** John' instead of 'she is married **to** John'. Still some students do not mark the third singular person, such as in 'she work(s) hard every day'. Thus, these data point to the fact that many new features

emerge within a language, with characteristics of the social groups, in grammatical, lexical and phonological terms, different of the native versions (Jenkins, 2014).

These occurrences should not be taken as mistakes, but as contingent examples of creativity and adaptation of a language affected by many cultures (Jenkins, 2014), because as Crystal (2012) argues, English spoken in each nation has its own distinction, reflecting the society it is part of.

CONCLUSION

Now that I have explained some facts regarding English as a world language, in front of these facts, what are the implications expected for ELT? This implies, among other things, changes need to occur in the way textbooks and teachers approach the language, recognizing its status of world language, respecting new features which belong to different cultures. If textbooks are accompanied with audio recordings, for example, they should bring a diversity of Englishes.

One of the things I want to draw attention is the fact that teachers, before making an abrupt correction, that can oppress and silence learners, should understand the dynamic of languages, upon analysing these recreations, through the lens of diversity, there are not reasons to condemn these new linguistic innovations, based on the fact that these constructions are not in accordance with the preconceived notion of how a language must be or sound (Crystal, 1963). That is why I have also called attention to the fact that, as teachers, we should be sensible to local issues, balancing our approaches with local and global cultural aspects, to evidence the diverse feature of a language.

The need for change in ELT is aligned with the status of world language English achieves today. Native English should be shared as well as local versions of this language. This is a key issue to avoid negative feelings on the part of the learners, paving the way for a harmonic learning.

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