Chapter 4

The Myth of English as an International Language

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Having striven for many years to come to grips with some of the hard questions that need to be asked about the role of English in the world – the cultural politics of English as an international language, implications of the global spread of English, colonial language policies and English and critical approaches to English language teaching – I here intend to address an issue that might seem contradictory when placed alongside these concerns. Although the effects of the global spread of English are of very real concern (we don’t have to accept all of Phillipson’s (1992) imperialistic claims to nevertheless acknowledge that there are widespread social, cultural, educational, economic and political effects), it is at the same time much less clear that English itself is equally real. While it is evident that vast resources are spent on learning and teaching something called English, and that English plays a key role in global affairs, it is less clear that all this activity operates around something that should be taken to exist in itself.

As Ndebele (1987) remarks, the ‘very concept of an international, or world, language was an invention of Western imperialism’ (1987: 3–4; my emphasis). Lurking behind such claims are sentiments similar to Phillipson’s (1992) that English as an international language (EIL) has been created, promoted and sustained to the benefit of Western powers, global capitalism, the developed world, the centre over the periphery, or neoliberal ideology. Yet what if we take the notion of invention seriously here and question not only the underlying interests behind the global spread of English but also the ontological implications of its invention? To raise such a question is not merely to deal with the implications of a pluralisation of Englishes – though the very notion of the global spread of English is undeniably unsettled once we accept that the appropriation and development of different Englishes around the world divides English into a plurality of languages – since a pluralisation strategy falls short of posing the more crucial question: Why should we accord any particular ontological status to something called
English? As Reagan (2004: 42) puts it, 'there is, or at least there may well be, no such thing as English.'

**Ontological and Empirical Arguments**

Let us consider for a moment the grounds on which we might consider there to be such a thing as English. We might start with arguments based around reference and common sense: why would we have a term 'English' if it didn't refer to anything? But this doesn't take us very far: There are many terms (elves, fairies, democracy, freedom and so on) that don't refer to anything very real. A more likely argument, perhaps, is a 'common sense' one: Surely if people all over the world claim to use English, then we should accept that claim. This we have to take a bit more seriously, though to appeal to majority belief doesn't tell us anything much about the existence of what is believed in. The majority of Americans believe in a Christian god and the majority of people in the world believe in some god or another; this doesn't prove the existence of god. In fact, for any sceptical thinker, the contradictory nature of these beliefs and the fact that they are majority beliefs are reasons precisely to be suspicious.

It might be argued, again on the grounds of common sense, that since people around the world are apparently able to communicate with each other in English, then it's obvious that English exists. Or, from the other side of the coin, since people around the world can't understand each other, they must be speaking different languages. On the face of it, these might appear reasonable arguments, but on closer investigation, it becomes clear that, as with many of these lines of reasoning, they assume as premises what they set out to demonstrate. Thus, to claim that in order to communicate successfully we need a thing called a common language (assuming, therefore, both the successful effects of communication as well as the grounds for its effects), or to assert that if we don't understand each other, we must therefore be using different languages (assuming therefore both the unsuccessful effects of communication and the nature of the impediments to communication), is to have already presupposed that languages exist as distinct entities that facilitate or hinder communication.

Most arguments of this nature can be seen as rationalist ontological arguments, that is, arguments based on rational rather than empirical grounds. In this tradition of thinking, a version of St Anselm's ontological argument might be worth a try. If, by analogy with God, English is a language greater than which no language can be conceived, then, if such a language fails to exist, a greater language (which also exists) can be conceived. Yet, as the argument proceeds, this is absurd since nothing can
be greater than a language greater than which nothing can be conceived. The conclusion must therefore be that a language (English) greater than which no language can be conceived must exist. Such arguments are notoriously hard to refute – though many attempts have been made, notably by Kant (1781/1998) in his *Critique of Pure Reason* – and have been reiterated in various forms throughout the rationalist tradition, from Descartes to Leibnitz (and, perhaps, on to the rationalist school of linguistics and its foremost exponent, Chomsky). While refutation in their own terms may be hard, they can nevertheless be rejected on the grounds that they are simply not persuasive, that is to say they do not provide a convincing argument for those who do not believe in the existence of God or English in the first place: they only provide a form of internal rational argument for the already faithful. Ontological arguments about English in the rationalist tradition are not going to take us very far.

A more obvious starting point, perhaps, is the empirical. Simply put, we might say that English exists in the words, grammar, lexicon, speech of all those books, dictionaries and grammars of English. Such a position, however, presents us with several problems. If we try to define the existence of a language according to its existence in such codifications, we are then left with an awkward argument as to the existence of all those languages that have not been thus codified. It is perhaps possible to argue that codified and standardised languages are the norm and that the proof of the existence of all languages awaits only their mass codification. Yet, as any basic understanding of literacy development will tell us (e.g. Muhlhausler, 1996), the codification of languages is not so much a process of writing down what already exists as it is a process of reducing languages to writing. Thus, whatever may pre-exist dictionary and grammar writing, it cannot be defined on the basis of such texts. Most obviously, however, the process of writing dictionaries of languages is a process of invention par excellence. To argue that the vast materiality of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), for example, attests to the size and existence of English is to overlook the point that this was yet another of those massive projects of Victorian invention.

Winchester’s popular history of the OED, *The Meaning of Everything*, clearly locates the development of the dictionary in the context of 19th century empire building:

Huge ships, immense palaces, bridges and roads and docks and railways of daunting scale, brave discoveries in science and medicine, scores of colonies seized, dozens of wars won and revolts suppressed, and missionaries and teachers fanning out into the darkest crannies of the planet – there seemed nothing that the Britain of the day could not
achieve. And now, to add to it all – a plan for a brand new dictionary. A brand new dictionary of what was, after all, the very language of all this greatness and moral suasion and musculely Christian goodness, and a language that had been founded and nurtured in the Britain that was doing it – the idea seemed no more and no less than a natural successor to all of these other majestic ventures of iron and steam and fired brick. (Winchester, 2003: 43)

And yet, while Winchester thus eloquently depicts English as an imperial project, constructed like bridges, encouraged to spread like missionaries, colonising like armies, the implications of this construction are not taken up. Prior to this imperial project, English is still seen as a vast entity just waiting to be described:

No one had ever thought of making a list of all the words and noting down what they seemed to mean – even though from today’s perspective, from a world that seems obsessed with a need to count and codify and define and make categories for everything, there seems no rational reason why this might have been so. (Winchester, 2003: 18)

English, in this view, pre-exists its description as a set of words that are already part of English. Yet this realist claim overlooks the obvious process by which English was produced by such activities, and to allege, as many do, on this basis that English has more words than other languages (see Pennycook, 1998) is akin to claiming that the British Empire included a vast number of territories prior to colonisation. Colonisation produced the empire as dictionary writing produced the language.

In his discussion of ‘the myth of standard English,’ Harris (1988: 1) points out that it is a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’. The view of standard English held by the creator of the Oxford English Dictionary, James Murray, was based on ‘a myth which had been invented to serve the purposes of a typically Victorian brand of national idealism’ (Harris, 1988: 26; my emphasis). As Willinsky (1994) has shown at length, the OED and other great Victorian projects of invented tradition ‘retroactively assembled a historical foundation for a nation worthy of a global empire’ (Willinsky, 1998: 120). Thus, the ‘making of the OED provides its own lessons in how English was imagined as a civilising beacon, a light to guide lesser peoples out of their own dark ages’ (Willinsky, 1998: 200). Any argument, therefore, that English can be taken to exist because of its representation in reference books fails to take into account either the process by which reference books invent languages or the circularity of any argument that proposes that, since something is’
English,' then English exists, and if English exists, then all these uses are clearly ‘in English’.

Empirical linguists might sensibly eschew such arguments based on prior codings of the language and base a belief in languages instead on the ability of the scientific methodology of linguistics to determine the existence of the object. From this line of thinking, a line is drawn between subjective and objective, or political and scientific, approaches to understanding language. Thus Dixon (1997: 7) argues that ‘Once political considerations are firmly discarded, it is generally not a difficult matter to decide whether one is dealing with one language or more than one in a given situation.’ Here, then, linguistic positivism arrogates for itself the ability to distinguish languages as separate entities while disregarding the views of the speakers themselves. The conceit of such a view has of course been widely questioned, especially by linguistic anthropologists who draw our attention to language ideologies and regimes, and thus the need to understand language culturally (Blommaert, 1999; Krookrty, 2000). Linguistics in this vein sets itself an impossible task here, both empirical and epistemological, since it is at least commonplace in most accounts of language variation to acknowledge that languages are political rather than ontological categories.

The epistemological impossibility of describing a language is also a major impediment for an empirical justification for the belief in the existence of English. If a real attempt were made to describe and identify all and every utterance produced under the name of English, the project would be both physically and temporally implausible (corpus linguistics only makes this marginally less so). Descriptive linguistics has of course not operated this way but has instead posited a core (grammar/lexicon) from which deviations are deemed varieties. Yet the impossibility of accounting for English variation through a description of a supposed core, or of making the core a product of the variation renders this too an untenable proposition. Why should we believe that two utterances, mutually incomprehensible, spoken in different ways, with different meanings, by people on opposite sides of the world, with no connection or knowledge of each other, should be considered to be part of the same thing, system, language. English, simply because this label is loosely applied to these moments of language use?

One other linguistic argument that might to be applied to explain the existence of English is a structuralist one. Languages are defined by their differences, and so English exists because of its relationship to all that it is not. Such an argument may suggest the relative existence of English, but obviously collapses if we question the hermetic systems of structuralism.
(all languages exist in relation to each other but not to anything else) or when we consider that it is not only English but all languages that are under question here. To argue that something is English because it is not French, Cornish or Greek is to be caught in a structuralist circularity. One might hold out hope for biological or neurological demonstrations of the representation of languages in the brain, yet these are much more effective at telling us about ways in which language in general operates than about the separability and identification of different languages. Research on bilingual aphasia (Paradis, 2004), for example, may in fact tell us more about the impossibility of distinguishing languages as discrete systems than the possibility of mapping separable neurological systems.

An alternative approach to this linguistic realism is to opt for the phenomenological argument that languages exist only to the extent that speakers perceive them to do so. By contrast with Dixon’s rejection of what people say they speak, a phenomenological approach suggests that this may be the most important consideration, leading to the vast divergence between linguists’ languages (6500) and peoples’ languages (40,000) (see *Ethnologue*). Giving such absolute priority to the observing subject, as Foucault (1970) pointed out, however, is to oppose the impossible realism of structuralism with the impossible idealism of phenomenology. The phenomenological insights of ‘native speaker intuition’ have been a notoriously unreliable grounding for understanding language. Yet, while an argument that we can take English to be what people perceive it to be is probably unhelpful in terms of establishing claims to what English is, this may nevertheless provide some insights into the ways that English may be more usefully understood as a product of the will to certain goods and identities rather than as a linguistic system.

**Constructions and Myths**

What, then, if we take seriously the proposition that English does not exist? Surely this takes us into the rather difficult position of having to account for what it is that all those English users, English textbooks, English departments, are really doing. Here we need to explore further two important ways of talking about non-reality: construction and myth. Just as it is difficult to account for the existence of something called English, so it is also important to consider carefully what we might mean by its non-existence. Let us turn, then, to the notion of myth. A useful place to start is with Roland Barthes’ (1957/1972: 142) classic *Mythologies*, in which he argues that myth ‘has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal.’ Barthes goes on,

Myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made. The world enters language as a dialectical relation between activities, between human activities, between human actions; it comes out of myth as a harmonious display of essences. A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. (Barthes, 1957/1972: 142–3)

Myth, therefore, is ‘depoliticised speech,’ where the ‘political’ is understood as ‘describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world’ (Barthes, 1957/1972: 143). Myth, he argues:

... does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. (Barthes, 1957/1972: 143)

Barthes’ understanding of myth raises a number of important points for an understanding of the construction of English. If we wish to argue that there is no such thing as English, we may be claiming, for example, that languages are constructions. Many would be happy to acknowledge that standard English was constructed in the sense that it was actively standardised or produced rather than having either immutable historical, or natural evolutionary, origins. On this view, languages are the products of social actors, and particular versions of languages, such as standard languages, are the very particular constructions of overt political activity. This version of construction potentially leaves languages as real entities while questioning any argument that suggests they have some status outside the social, cultural and political forces that make them. We might call this a general social constructionist position, a view common enough in the social sciences. Thus, while sociolinguists such as Trudgill (1999) can point to the historical process of standardisation that produced standard English, he is also happy to accord standard English a relatively unproblematic ontological status. Standard English, Trudgill (1999: 118) tells us, is a variety of English; it is the variety normally used in writing; it is the variety associated with education systems and therefore ‘the variety spoken by those who are often referred to as “educated people”’. It has no connection to accent, register or style, but rather is a dialect defined by various grammatical rules. From this perspective, then, although the processes by which a variety of English became standard English might be seen as a form of
social construction, the object that resulted – standard English – is an objectively describable entity, a variety of English with a set of rules, used by a certain group of people.

A further step in this thinking, however, suggests that this construction itself produced a metalanguage rather than a language, or put another way, that the standardisation of English produced not so much standard English but rather discourses about standard English. Milroy (1999: 18), for example, suggests that ‘standard languages are fixed and uniform-state idealisations’ and that ‘no one actually speaks a standard language’ (Milroy, 1999: 27). As he points out, in addition to this idealisation, there is a standard language culture that inculcates and maintains a set of beliefs about standard English. He goes on to argue that ‘language experts’ have failed to appreciate either their role in supporting standard language ideologies or that ‘what is involved is only superficially a debate about language and is more fundamentally a debate about ideologies’ (Milroy, 1999: 23). Thus, from this point of view, the construction of standard English was a project that produced a set of beliefs about the supposed objects enshrined in dictionaries, grammars, and style manuals; it did not produce a ‘real thing’ called ‘standard English’.

This understanding of construction adds an important dimension to the discussion so far: Like the first notion of construction, it draws our attention to the ways in which the supposedly natural (the existence of languages, of English, of standard English) has to be understood historically; it points to the ways in which myths work by constantly talking about things, by constantly assuming the existence of things; it highlights the idea of heroic stories that tell us about the origins or nature of various phenomena, or explain how something came to be. From this perspective, the question of reality is put on hold. As Watts (1999: 73) notes in his discussion of the myth of standard English, the notion of myth should not be taken to imply ‘a false, unfounded or wrong-headed belief in the origin of a phenomenon’ but rather as narratives that ‘contain elements of reality in them since they derive from the past experiences of a group’. This position on myth is somewhat akin to the poststructuralist turn to discourse: if we cannot gain unmediated access to the real world, let us focus instead on the modes of representation (discourse) through which the world is constructed, on the naturalisations of language and the productions of metalanguage.

Construction and myth present us with several ways of addressing issues of reality. First, a social constructionist position aims to challenge views that suggest non-social origins to social phenomena: ideas, ideologies, research and knowledge all have their origins in social and cultural fields. Social constructionism is largely interested in challenging radical
realist or foundationalist arguments that suggest an objective status outside human action. The notion of invention, viewed from this perspective, suggests that languages may exist, but they do so only as a product of human interests. This first meaning is linked to our basic concern about the very real invention of languages. Many languages were the products of specific processes of invention. While this position may usefully counter claims such as Dixon’s (1997) that we can put aside political definitions of language and engage only with the scientific/linguistic, it does not necessarily challenge the ontological status of languages as social constructions, or the significance of the construction of metalanguages through which languages are made. Social constructionism, then, is useful only insofar as it dispels foundationalist myths of origin by showing how human action has produced current entities and beliefs about those entities.

A second position, which we might term ontological constructionism, is concerned with a more radical epistemology that suggests that the notion of ‘language’ does not refer to any real object. This position consequently goes further than merely suggesting that languages have been constructed: it suggests that the notions of languages themselves are constructions. Languages and the metalanguages that attend them are very particular cultural orientations towards understanding the world that produce what they purport to describe. Rather than suggesting therefore that different languages have been invented within particular contexts, this position argues that the very notion of languages themselves is an invention. Thus not only were languages invented but they were invented on invented terrain. There are no languages. And thus, the question of whether there is such a thing as English is not about a special case for English as a result of its widespread use or division into different varieties, but rather about English as the currently most significant invention amid all the other invented languages of our times.

To this position, however, it is important to add another dimension, which we might call historical constructionism, or the acknowledgement that the effects of repeated construction and reconstruction are very real. Although languages were invented on invented terrain, and although the dubious attempts to trace the linear linguistic origins of languages do so along invented genealogies, these inventions have a reality for the people who deal with them. In his discussion of Anderson’s (1983) imagined communities, Žižek (1993: 202) argues that to emphasise:

in a ‘deconstructionist’ mode that the Nation is not a biological or transhistorical fact but a contingent discursive construction, an overdetermined result of textual practices, is ... misleading: such an
emphasis overlooks the remainder of some real, nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the Nation qua discursive entity-effect to achieve its ontological consistency. (Žižek, 1993: 202)

The point here, then, is that it is not enough just to suggest that language is not a biological or transhistorical fact but a contingent discursive construction, since this fails to account for people’s engagement with the concept of language, the pleasure that is to be had in the belief in the ontological consistency of language. This is not, it should be noted, another version of the old ideology-as-false-consciousness argument, which would suggest that people are ideologically duped into believing in language, but rather an argument that the historical construction of language creates realities that we need to deal with.

Finally, we also need to deal with discursive constructionism, or the realisation that languages are produced in different ways at different times. In the same way that Appadurai (1996) sees the modes of production of locality shifting under changing global conditions, so I would argue that the modes of production of language are at a very particular juncture. If the current understanding of languages was invented and maintained during an era of nation-building, modernity and a particular framing of identity, the global changes in recent years suggest new forms of construction. This is one reason why invention, disinvention and reconstruction of languages is so important at this current moment. It is also why a focus on English is of particular significance, since English is subject to a set of discursive formations that are quite different from those at different historical moments. And this is where the notion of myth is so important, since it draws our attention to the ways in which stories are constantly being told about English.

As Woolard (2004: 58) notes, ‘the history of languages often function as Malinowskian charter myths, projecting from the present to an originary past a legitimation of contemporary power relations and interested positions’. Malinowski’s insight here was to view myths in terms of the ways in which they validate current social customs and institutions. A typical myth about a people’s origins not only ‘conveys, expresses and strengthens the fundamental fact of local unity and of the kinship unity of the group of people’ but also ‘literally contains the legal charter of the community’ (Malinowski, 1954: 116). Thus, myths justify social orders, institutions and languages; they define not only an imagined origin but also a current status, both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And the charter myth of English, invoking certain origins, histories and lineages legitimates the current status of English, imagining into being a language that has spread from its
insular origins into a world language. It is on this that I intend to focus in
the next part of this chapter, looking briefly at the ways stories are told
about English that constantly reconstruct it in particular ways.

English as Mythical Hero

Work such as Bailey’s (1991) cultural history of English presents us with
a broad picture of the cultural production of English. In light of both the focus
of this book and this long history of producing myths around English, it is
interesting to look at statements such as Read’s (1849) not just as prescient and
triumphalist but also as productive of the mythology of English.

Ours is the language of the arts and sciences, of trade and commerce, of
civilisation and religious liberty... It is a store-house of the varied
knowledge which brings a nation within the pale of civilisation and
Christianity... Already it is the language of the Bible... So prevalent is
this language already become, as to betoken that it may soon become the
language of international communication for the world. (Read, 1849,

I have already written extensively on myths about English as an interna
tional language, arguing for example that the myths of the global spread of
English as natural (having evolved into the global language without overt
political action), neutral (as disconnected to social, economic and political
concerns) and beneficial (as being inherently beneficial to all that learn and
use it) are untenable (Pennycook, 1994). I have also argued that the many
myths about English as a ‘marvellous tongue’ need to be seen as ‘cultural
constructs of colonialism,’ with a long history of colonial promotion and
contemporary production (Pennycook, 1998).

The effect of the ongoing myth-making around English is not only to
produce particular images about English, but also through their constant
reiteration to incessantly invoke a thing called English. Myths about
English put English into discourse. One of the casually insidious ways in
which the notion of English as an international language (EIL) is employed
is in the counts of English speakers/users around the globe (see for
example Crystal, 1997; Kachru, 1986). Figures based on language policies,
educational programs and estimates of use are added together to produce a
figure of more than one billion users of English. But what sense does this
make? Does this not have more to do with English myth-making than any
useful description of global language use? Particularly salient today are
claims that English is merely a ‘language of international communication’
rather than a language embedded in processes of globalisation; that
English holds out promise of social and economic development to all those who learn it (rather than a language tied to very particular class positions and possibilities of development); and that English is a language of equal opportunity (rather than a language that creates barriers as much as it presents possibilities). Although my central focus here is on the ways such myths put English into discourse rather than on debunking such myths, it is worth looking at each briefly in terms of the collusional, delusionary and exclusionary effects of English. This thing called English colludes with many of the pernicious processes of globalisation, deludes many learners through the false promises it holds out for social and material gain, and excludes many people by operating as an exclusionary class dialect, favouring particular people, countries, cultures and forms of knowledge.

It would seem hard to deny that English, in a sense, colludes with globalisation. One of the problems in drawing these connections, however, has been the tendency to paint a simplistic version of globalisation. Thus, reviewing David Crystal’s (1997) book on the global spread of English, Sir John Hanson, the former Director-General of the British Council, is able to proclaim: ‘On it still strides: we can argue about what globalisation is till the cows come – but that globalisation exists is beyond question, with English its accompanist. The accompanist is indispensable to the performance’ (Hanson, 1997: 22). Phillipson, by contrast, in his review of the same book, takes a more critical line, suggesting that ‘Crystal’s celebration of the growth of English’ is tied to:

an uncritical endorsement of capitalism, its science and technology, a modernisation ideology, monolingualism as a norm, ideological globalisation and internationalisation, transnationalisation, the Americanisation and homogenisation of world culture, linguistic, culture and media imperialism ... (Phillipson, 1999: 274)

If Hanson’s and Crystal’s position simply fails to engage with questions of globalisation and English, Phillipson’s position rather problematically presents us only with an image of homogenisation within a neocolonial global polity (which I have elsewhere categorised as the ‘homogeny’ position on global English; see Pennycook, 2003b). Given that there is now a vast range of work looking at the complexities of globalisation (e.g. Appadurai, 1996; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Mignolo, 2000), studies of global English deserve better than this. At the very least, we need to understand how English is involved in global flows of culture and knowledge, how English is used and appropriated by users of English round the world, how English colludes with multiple domains of globalisation, from popular culture to unpopular politics, from international capital to local transac-
tion, from ostensible diplomacy to purported peace-keeping, from religious proselytising to secular resistance. The incessant invocation of ‘English as an international language’ avoids the obligation to deal with the complexity of English in relation to globalisation while simultaneously reiterating the existence of English as being in the world.

With respect to English as a delusory language, there are many myths that surround English as a language that will better people’s lives. A common view, as expressed in an article in the EL Gazette (1999) a few years ago, suggests that the widespread introduction of English into primary sectors around the world should lead to the alleviation of poverty. Next to a picture of laughing children on the front page is the claim that ‘English is key to a better life for the poor’. An editorial on the next page explains further that ‘for many of the world’s poorest people, English can hold the key to escape from grinding poverty’ (emphasis in original). And finally on page 3 the article itself carries the title ‘English language could be the key to a better life for the underprivileged’, and the subtitle ‘The benefits of primary English language teaching are finally being recognised’. But the key question we need to look at here is what the effects of English education might actually be. In order to understand this, we need to look at English in terms of class, and thus at poverty alleviation not in terms of individual escape from poverty but in terms of larger social and economic relations (Appleby et al., 2002). We need to be clear about whether we are looking at individual rights to English or whether we are looking at how access to English can alleviate poverty across a broader domain. The question, then, is how English may be related to economic change. As Tollefson (2000: 8) warns, ‘At a time when English is widely seen as a key to the economic success of nations and the economic well-being of individuals, the spread of English also contributes to significant social, political, and economic inequalities.’ There is something rather bizarre in the belief that if everyone learned English, everyone would be better off.

Bruthiaux (2002: 292–3) argues convincingly that for many of the world’s poor English language education is ‘an outlandish irrelevance’ and ‘talk of a role for English language education in facilitating the process of poverty reduction and a major allocation of public resources to that end is likely to prove misguided and wasteful.’ Grin (2001), one of the few to study the relationship between English and economic gain in any depth, argues that there is also an issue of diminishing returns here, since the more people learn English, the less the skill of knowing English will count. And bringing a sophisticated economic analysis to the question of global English, Lysandrou and Lysandrou (2003: 230) argue that ‘the embrace of the English language is to the detriment of the majorities of communities
the world over insofar as it contributes to their systematic dispossession. Thus we need to distinguish very clearly between individually-oriented access arguments about escape from poverty, and class-oriented arguments about large-scale poverty reduction. The challenge here is to get beyond liberal arguments for access, and look instead at the broad effects of educational provision in all their complexity. We need to ask what constellation of concerns comes to bear in the contextual relationships among what I call, following Janks (2000), dominion (the contingent and contextual effects of power), disparity (inequality and the need for access), difference (engaging with diversity) and desire (understanding how identity and agency are related). Without such analyses of English, the myth of English as a language of development and opportunity will continue to make English a delusional language. And these constant calls for English as a solution to poverty not only hold out few prospects for change for the recipients of such policies but also reinforce a belief in the existence of English.

And finally, rather than offering opportunity for all, English operates as a deeply exclusionary language. Tollefson suggests that:

For those who already speak English, the economic value of the language translates directly into greater opportunities in education, business and employment. For those who must learn English, however, particularly those who do not have access to high-quality English language education, the spread of English presents a formidable obstacle to education, employment, and other activities requiring English proficiency. (Tollefson, 2000: 9)

As Ramanathan’s (2005) study of English medium (EM) and Vernacular education in India shows, English is a deeply divisive language: English and power circulate through the social system, ‘producing a selective tradition that actively dilutes Vernaculars and Vernacular ways of knowing, learning and teaching’ (Ramanathan, 2005: 38; emphasis in original). While Vernacular languages and cultures are thus denigrated and excluded, the education system ‘dovetails with the values and aspirations of the elite Indian middle class: not only are all tertiary disciplines within their reach, they also bring with them cultural models that resonate with the thought structures of EM classrooms and institutions’ (Ramanathan, 2005: 112). While English opens doors to some, it is simultaneously a barrier to learning, development and employment for others, and thus keeps out far more than it lets in. The myths that surround English as a language of opportunity, advancement and equality are beliefs that have profound effects for the (mis)education of many around the world. Addressing these collusory, delusional and exclusionary roles of English is only part of
the story, however, since we also need to come to terms with the ways in which these stories mythologise English more generally. The concerns I have outlined here are part of a larger imperative to investigate the sociological functions of ‘the Myth of English as an international language’ (Krishnaswamy & Burde, 1998: 19).

**English as Mythical Entity**

To describe and refute such myths, therefore, is not a sufficient goal. Of greater significance are the ways in which such myths are incessant stories told about English, constantly putting English into discourses about education, development and poverty, chronicling English as a language of opportunity, equality and access. Such myths relentlessly construct the illusion of English, presenting the world with a view that there is an identifiable language called English. It might be assumed that the notion of a global entity called English is challenged by a World Englishes perspective, which suggests that English has now become a set of separable regional languages. From this perspective, at the very least, we have a plurality of Englishes. Yet the World Englishes perspective in fact does little more than pluralise the notion of English while at the same time positing a core entity that is English and excluding any other possibilities that destabilise this notion of global English in more fundamental ways. If we seek a more contextual and contingent understanding of language use, it becomes clear that both the monolithic presence of a language called English and the pluralistic belief in many Englishes are both myths. What we have instead are the ‘language effects’ of a particular set of claims about language and English.

The idea of World Englishes, then, seeks to challenge the notion of a monolithic English emanating from the central Anglo-institutions of global hegemony. While the homogeny position outlined above suggests that English is playing a role in world homogenisation, here we get the other side of the coin, the heterogeny position, focusing on the implications of pluricentricity ..., the new and emerging norms of performance, and the bilingual’s creativity as a manifestation of the contextual and formal hybridity of Englishes’ (Kachru, 1997: 66). Thus the World Englishes paradigm has focused on the ways in which English has become locally adapted and institutionalised to create different varieties of English (different Englishes) around the world. I have discussed many of the problems with World Englishes at greater length elsewhere (Pennycook, 2002, 2003a, 2003b), including the ubiquitous, insistent, unsubstantiated and unexplained ‘pleas for the neutrality of English in the post-colonial contexts’ (Parakrama, 1995: 22), and the inadequacy of the concentric circles model to
capture the complexity of Engishes, since it fails, as Holborow (1999: 59-60) points out, ‘to take adequate account of social factors and social differences within the circles,’ and meanwhile continues problematically to locate native speakers and their norms in the centre, and non-native speakers elsewhere.

For the discussion here, however, of particular concern is the way in which these new Engishes are constructed along nationalist and exclusionary lines. As Krishnaswamy and Burde (1998: 30) observe, if Randolph Quirk represented ‘the imperialistic attitude’ to English, the World Engishes approach represents a ‘nationalistic point of view,’ whereby nations and their varieties of English are conjured into existence: ‘Like Indian nationalism, “Indian English” is “fundamentally insecure” since the notion “nation-India” is insecure’ (Krishnaswamy & Burde, 1998: 63). As Dasgupta (1993: 137) laments, ‘... seldom have so many talented men and women worked so long and so hard and achieved so little’ since the linguistics on which it relies cannot capture the complexity of language use that it claims to investigate, a point emphasised by Krishnaswamy and Burde’s (1998: 64) call for ‘a reinvestigation of several concepts currently used by scholars.’ By focusing centrally on the development of new national Engishes, the World Engishes approach reproduces precisely those linguistic paradigms that fell into the trap of believing the nationalist dream. Thus, not only does it fail to take into account Anderson’s (1983) understanding of the process of imagining communities, but it also misses the point that languages were part of this dialectical co-imagining.

As Bruthiaux (2003: 161) points out, the descriptive and analytic inconsistency of the concentric circle model gives it little explanatory power. This ‘superficially appealing and convenient model conceals more than it reveals’ since it attempts to compare varieties of English, different speaker types and geographical locations all at once. Its use of inconsistent criteria to categorise so-called varieties of English is confounded by a ‘primarily nation-based model.’ Thus it overlooks difference within regions and ascribes variety based on postcolonial political history: where a nation state was created, so a variety emerged. Ultimately, concludes Bruthiaux (2003: 161), ‘the Three Circles model is a 20th century construct that has outlived its usefulness’. By positing these new Engishes, it perpetuates the myth of national languages that the global spread of English allows us to start to rethink, and does so by focusing on a narrow selection of standardised forms in particular communities. As Parakrama (1995: 25–6) argues, ‘The smoothing out of struggle within and without language is replicated in the homogenising of the varieties of English on the basis of “upper-class” forms. Kachru is thus able to theorise on the nature of a monolithic Indian
English.' While appearing, therefore, to work from an inclusionary political agenda in its attempt to have the new Englishes acknowledged as varieties of English, this approach to language is remorselessly exclusionary.

The process of constructing these new national varieties of English therefore involves a host of exclusions. Mufwene (1994, 1998) laments that the distinction between native and indigenised varieties of English 'excludes English creoles, most of which are spoken as native languages and vernaculars' (Mufwene, 1994: 24). This exclusion, he suggests, ultimately concerns the identity of creole speakers: 'the naming practices of new Englishes has to do more with the racial identity of those who speak them than with how these varieties developed and the extent of their structural deviations' (Mufwene, 2001: 107). The inclusion of creoles, furthermore, would profoundly challenge the notion of World Englishes. Not only would it challenge the racist exclusion of the wrong sorts of speakers, but it would also challenge what is understood by language in general, and English in particular. As Sebba (1997: 289) notes, following Mühlhäusler (1992), 'the study of pidgins and creoles forces us to stop conceptualising language as a thing, an object which can be captured and put under a microscope and dissected using a set of tools developed by linguists.' The dynamism of creoles, therefore, throws out a challenge to all study of languages as objects. This argument using the examples of creoles is not, it should be noted, an example of what Degraff (2005) calls 'linguists' most dangerous myth: the fallacy of creole exceptionalism,' which posits creoles as different from other languages. Rather, it is the opposite: It takes creoles as the norm (and not by the strategy of reducing them to 'real languages') and asks other theories of language to justify themselves.

The inclusion of creoles within an understanding of English questions not only the reification of English and World Englishes as objects on which linguists can do their work, but also how we think about languages. Although much debated (see e.g. Degraff, 2005; Mufwene, 2001), a broad consensus on creoles is that rather than being debased or distorted versions of European (or other) languages, they are best conceived as mixed languages, possibly with a base in various grammatical systems from one set of languages, and a vocabulary drawn from one or more lexifying languages. An 'English creole' is therefore generally understood as a language with recognisably English words but a grammar derived from a range of sources including African languages, non-standard versions of English and other developmental processes. Such a notion immediately destabilises the concept of World Englishes, which by and large relies on a belief in a core, central grammar and lexicon of English (which is what makes new Englishes still English), with new Englishes characterised by a few grammatical shifts,
new lexical items and different pragmatic and phonological features. In this view, divergences from the core are viewed as ‘localisations’ as long as the overarching system remains intact. English from a creole-inclusive point of view, however, not only embraces a wide variety of mutually incomprehensible uses of language but also potentially a wide variety of grammars. Creole languages have to be excluded from World Englishes, therefore, since they perform destabilise the very definitions of language and grammar that underlie this version of a global language.

If it can be argued, furthermore, that African American English, for example, is a creole-based language derived from African languages with English lexifiers, which approaches standard American English at one end of the creole continuum (see Mufwene, 2001, for discussion; and similar arguments can be made for a host of other varieties of English such as Aboriginal English in Australia), then we clearly have not only the possibility of mutually incomprehensible versions of English with grammars from other languages, but also what may appear mutually comprehensible versions of the same language (American English) that are in fact languages with different histories that have come to take on the appearance of similarity. Once we accept this possibility, the argument that mutual comprehensibility may be a way of defining whether one is using the same language is challenged not only by the obvious difficulty that versions of some languages are not comprehensible to each other, but also by the notion that mutually comprehensible speakers may be using different languages. This is not the same as noting that speakers of politically divided language domains (say Swedish and Norwegian) may be able to understand each other; rather it raises the more interesting possibilities that speakers of apparently comprehensible versions of a language may be speaking very different languages. And once again, this suggests that the World Englishes paradigm, while supposedly emphasising diversity, in fact has at its core an underlying emphasis on the constraining similarities of English.

Pluralisation of English, therefore, does not take us far enough and remains an exclusionary paradigm. Just as Makoni (1998) has argued that the concept of multilingualism may do little more than pluralise monolingualism, so I am suggesting that the concept of World Englishes does little more than pluralise monolithic English. The notion of World Englishes leaves out all those Other Englishes that do not fit the paradigm of an emergent national standard, and in doing so, falls into the trap of mapping centre linguists’ images of language and the world on to the periphery. As Parakrama argues, the World Englishes approach to diversity in English:
cannot do justice to those Other Englishes as long as they remain within the over-arching structures that these Englishes bring to crisis. To take these new/other Englishes seriously would require a fundamental revaluation of linguistic paradigms, and not merely a slight accommodation or adjustment. (Parakrama 1995: 17)

Similarly, Canagarajah argues that in Kachru’s:

attempt to systematise the periphery variants, he has to standardise the language himself, leaving out many eccentric, hybrid forms of local Englishes as too unsystematic. In this, the Kachruvian paradigm follows the logic of the prescriptive and elitist tendencies of the center linguists. (Canagarajah, 1999: 180)

The irony here is that while looking like a pluralist, localised version of English, this paradigm reinforces both centrist views on language and dangerous myths about English.

We need, then, to ask some rather different questions that go beyond strategies of pluralisation. Let us return to Harris’ (1990: 45) argument that ‘linguistics does not need to postulate the existence of languages as part of its theoretical apparatus.’ Surely at the heart of the problem of understanding English here is the continued belief in the existence of ‘a language’ called English. And this problem is not overcome simply by a strategy of pluralisation of Englishes since this does little more than reproduce the same normative linguistic paradigm. As Harris goes on to argue, the question here is whether

the concept of ‘a language,’ as defined by orthodox modern linguistics, corresponds to any determinate or determinable object of analysis at all, whether social or individual, whether institutional or psychological. If there is no such object, it is difficult to evade the conclusion that modern linguistics has been based upon a myth. (Harris, 1990: 45)

And given the scale of English and the scale of work on English, it is tempting to conclude that what we have here is the mother of all myths: English as an international language. Indeed one reason for focusing on English here is to avoid the suggestion that strategies of disinvention apply to so-called multilingual or minority contexts. Strategies of disinvention and reconstruction apply to all languages, and especially those on which so much effort at invention has been spent.

If we take a step back from this myth, it is indeed puzzling to observe the extraordinary continuation of the idea that something called English exists, a myth perpetuated by strategies of exclusion and circularity. It is assumed
a priori that there is such a thing as English. This view is reinforced by excluding those types of English and, as Mufwene (2001) notes, those types of speakers, that don’t fit what is deemed to be English, and then employing the circular argument that, if it doesn’t fit, it isn’t English. A core system of English is assumed, with deviations from this core that destabilise the notion of system discounted. The World English paradigm, while attempting to achieve sociolinguistic equality for its varieties, is not epistemologically different from this model of core, variation and exclusion. For a world English to be such, it must adhere to the underlying grammar of central English, demonstrate enough variety to make it interestingly different, but not diverge to the extent that it undermines the myth of English. If we acknowledge creole languages, however, if we refuse to draw a line down the middle of a creole continuum (exclaiming that one end is English while the other is not), if we decide that those ‘Other Englishes’ may be part of English, then we are not dealing with a language held in place by a core structure but rather a notion of language status that is not definable by interior criteria.

Conclusion: Language Effects and Mobilisations

Returning to and rewriting Barthes for a moment, we can suggest that the myth (or myths) of English as an international language (EIL) can be understood as making the local contingencies of English appear to have broader ontological and temporal validity and a natural justification. The myth(s) of EIL erase the memory that English is a fabrication, that languages are inventions and that talk of English as an international language is a piece of intellectual slippage that replaces the history of this invention with a belief in its natural identity. The myth of EIL depoliticises English, and does so not by ignoring English but by constantly talking about it, making English innocent, giving it a natural and eternal justification, a clarity that is not that of a description but an assumption of fact. The myth of EIL deals not merely with the invention of English, but with the strategies that constantly keep that invention in place, with the relentless repetition of the stories and tales about this thing called English. We need to disinvent English, to demythologise it, and then to look at how a reinvention of English may help us understand more clearly what it is we are dealing with here.

Taking Hopper’s (1998: 157) proposition seriously that ‘there is no natural fixed structure to language,’ the idea of a core that defines English seems hard to maintain. This takes us into rather different territory. Kandiah (1998: 100) points out that most approaches to the new Englishes
miss the crucial point that these Englishes 'fundamentally involve a radical act of semiotic reconstruction and reconstitution which of itself confers native userhood on the subjects involved in the act.' Language use is centrally an agentive act, an act of reconstruction rather than act of reproduction, as an argument that languages have fixed structures that we repeat would suggest. Linking this notion to Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1985) proposition that linguistic and cultural identities are constituted through the performance of acts of identity, we can suggest that language use is not so much the repetition of prior grammatical structure but rather a semiotic restructuring as a claim to a particular identity.

Just as recent thinking (e.g., Butler, 1990; 1993) has focused on gendered and other identities in a non-foundational light, so may language itself be seen as a product of performative acts. It is instructive in this context to compare Butler's comments on gender with Hopper's discussion of emergent grammar: 'The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition' (Butler, 1990: 145; emphasis in original). For Hopper, the apparent structure or regularity of grammar is an emergent property that 'is shaped by discourse in an ongoing process. Grammar is, in this view, simply the name for certain categories of observed repetitions in discourse' (Hopper, 1998: 156). Thus, just as Butler (1999: 120) argues that identities are a product of ritualised social performatives calling the subject into being and 'sedimented through time,' so for Hopper (1998: 158), systematicity 'is an illusion produced by the partial settling or sedimentation of frequently used forms into temporary subsystems'. And by analogy English is an illusion of systematicity produced by ritualised social and linguistic activities that have become sedimented through time.

Where, then, does this leave us? English is a social, ideological, historical and discursive construction, the product of ritualised social performatives that become sedimented into temporary subsystems. These social performatives are acts of identity, investment and semiotic (re)construction. That is to say, the temporary sedimentation of English subsystems is a result of agentive acts, particular moves to identify, to use and adapt available semiotic resources for a variety of goals. And given the global status of the English myth, acts of English identification are used to perform, invent and (re)fashion identities across innumerable domains. English, like other languages, does not exist as a prior system but is produced and sedimented through acts of identity. Similar to the way that we perform identity with words (rather than reflect identities in language), we also perform languages with words. What we therefore have to understand is not this 'thing' 'English' that does or does not do things to and for people, but rather the
multiple investments people bring to their acts, desires and performances in ‘English’. English as an international language is not merely a set of social, cultural and political myths about what English can do, but is also based on the untenable myth that there is a real world object called English.

It might be asked what use all of this might be to teachers, users, or learners of English. Surely it is not helpful to teachers and learners to read that this activity we are engaged in – whether it is writing an e-mail to a friend in English, going over the meanings of vocabulary in an English comprehension passage, practising a dialogue in English, writing a poem in English, conducting a business meeting in English, calling air traffic control at an international airport in English – is in fact a myth, that while we have always reasonably believed that this thing we know, use, learn, teach, is something called English, we have in fact been deluded. The teacher is teaching nothing, the student is learning nothing, and the language users are fooling themselves in believing that they are communicating through English. This is of course not the point of the argument here. This project of disinvention is aimed neither to discredit the work of teachers, students, writers or poets, nor merely to engage in a form of linguistic deconstruction for its own sake. There is clearly a certain materiality to the products and processes of activities such as English language education; indeed, if we reflect for a moment on what people are currently doing around the world, after sleeping, eating and engaging in various forms of work, ‘learning English’ must surely account for quite a considerable part of current global human activity.

As Joseph (2002: 44) suggests, however, this activity might best be conceived in terms of a verb, of doing things with language, in terms, perhaps, of Englishing. This is different from the engagement with:

the institution of the language, the noun-like thing that they ultimately cannot ignore, but must comprehend, grapple with, accept in some respects and resist in others, as they construct their own linguistic identities simultaneously within it and in opposition to it. (Joseph, 2002: 44)

It is clear that many people are engaged in activities such as ‘teaching English,’ ‘learning English,’ ‘writing in English’ and so forth, but much less clear what this implies about the institutional entity English. The argument here, then, is that once we grasp the implications of understanding languages as inventions, an alternative way forward presents itself for how we consider what it is we are doing. Thus, if we are concerned about the relation between English and lesser used languages, the way forward may be not so much in terms of language policies to support other languages
over English but rather in terms of opposing language ideologies that construct English in particular ways.

Just as Butler (1993: 12) describes her project as ‘a poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialisation of sex’, so my interest here is in a poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialisation of language. If Foucault (e.g. 1980) was concerned with the ‘truth effects’ of discourse, and Butler (1993) with the ‘body effects’ of discourse, we are here concerned with the ‘language effects’ of discourse, the ways in which languages are materialised through discourse. By analogy, then, with Foucault’s (1980) argument that we need to give up asking if something is true or false and instead focus on the truth effects of making different epistemological claims, so we would do better to go beyond asking whether English exists or not, and rather focus on the ‘language effects’ produced by language industries. A range of interested industries, from linguists to educationalists, from policy makers to publishers, constantly reproduce myths of English. This focus on language effects does not, I would argue, lessen the impact of something called the global spread of English but focuses our attention on the effects of the claims to the ontological status of English. While EIL may be a myth, the language effects of this myth are very real.

When we talk of English today we mean many things, and not many of them to do with some core notion of language. English is not so much a language as a discursive field: English is neoliberalism, English is globalisation, English is human capital. The question, then, is what is it that people do in their claims that something is English? Once we understand that languages are inventions and that we need to disinvent and reinvent what they are seen to be, we can start to work towards a quite different way of thinking about what English language teaching may be. The question then becomes not whether some monolithic thing called English is imperialistic or an escape from poverty, nor how many varieties there may be of this thing called English, but rather what kind of mobilisations underlie acts of English use or learning. In order to come to terms with such questions, we need a much more contextualised understanding of language as locally derived. Something called English is mobilised by English language industries with particular language effects. But something called English is also part of complex language chains, mobilised as part of multiple acts of identity; it is caught in a constant process of semiotic reconstruction.

Notes

1. Lysandrou and Lysandrou (2003) argue, however, that this does not mean that English should be opposed since (1) such dispossession occurs only in ‘price
space’ as opposed to ‘physical space’; and (2) the solution to such a role for English is an economic one, not one of language policy.

References


EL Gazette (1999) English language could be the key to a better life for the underprivileged. Issue 237 (October), p. 3.


