Focus

Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading

In a globalised world, should we retain different Englishes?

Lynne Murphy

If only the whole world had a language in common, war could be avoided. That's what LL Zamenhof thought when he developed Esperanto in 1887. Esperanto wasn't meant to replace anyone's home language, but it would create a common ground for people from different backgrounds. It would make communication easier and more direct, reducing the need for go-betweens like translators and interpreters.

But in order to effect this world peace, every nation would have to turn its educational resources to a language without native speakers and without widespread currency. Despite the pockets of people still using it today, Esperanto had little chance of becoming the language of diplomacy, commerce and tourism.

> The world doesn't learn English to just speak to native English speakers. The world learns English in order to speak with everyone.

English, on the other hand, has something that no other language in history has had: billions of speakers. It was not a pleasant history that got us to this point, but as more of the world spoke English, more of the world took an interest in learning it.

Now the world doesn't learn English to just speak to native English speakers. The world learns English in order to speak with everyone.

Where people speak English, new Englishes develop – whether that be in another country or in an international setting like the European Parliament or a NATO operation. While all those Englishes are mostly mutually intelligible, they are still Englishes, plural. A global English has not evolved through globalisation, though some of the local edges are filed off in some contexts.

With their huge vocabularies, obscure idioms, and long, complex sentences, the native Englishes of the UK or the US are not the best models for an international English (even if they might be seen as prestige varieties). Serious proponents of a global variety of English take the advanced English learner as their model speaker, and accordingly they simplify the language to make it more straightforward. Vocabulary is the main point of simplification. Language generally follows the 80/20 rule: 20 per cent of the vocabulary accounts for 80 per cent of what we say. Deprioritise the other 80 per cent of the lexicon, and you can communicate most things with no loss of meaning. Variant spellings are reduced to one choice, usually the American form, which is generally the more phonetic spelling.

About the author

Lynne Murphy is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sussex and author of *The Prodigal Tongue: The love–hate relationship between British and American English* (Oneworld, 2018). She congratulates the CIEP on its new chartered status!

Lynne delivered a fascinating and thought-provoking Whitcombe Lecture at our 2018 conference, and many of our members follow her insightful posts on her blog Separated by a Common Language. We are delighted she has written this paper for the CIEP.

Would it work?

I have my doubts about the workability of a standardised Global English. For one, how often do we need our English to be truly global? While the internet makes many more texts available worldwide, each text is generally written with an audience in mind. Even if it is an international audience, chances are that the text's appeal will be specific to a global region or to some other subset of international readers. Sensitivity to common denominators shared by that audience's Englishes can be useful, but adherence to a global set of lowest common denominators is unnecessary. There's no reason to spell like an American for a South African audience or to avoid Latinate vocabulary for a South American audience.

Another problem is determining what the global standard should be. There is no international body regulating English, so proposals for 'Globish' come with no in-built authority (though some come with an aim to line someone's pockets). Which spellings, which words, which pronunciations should be taken as the standard? The powerful national standards, British or American, might be seen as the default options. But to adopt one or the other is to immediately undermine the goal of an internationally neutral English.

Standard Englishes evolve because lots of people made lots of choices and their choices started to converge. Editors and style sheets contribute to that process – but it's always a process. There is no definitive end.

Editing English for global audiences

That's not to say that international standards won't evolve, but they do need to evolve. A living language isn't like a measurement system or even like a terminology set – it is much, much more complex and unrestrained. Standard Englishes evolve because lots of people made lots of choices and their choices started to converge. Editors and style sheets contribute to that process – but it's always a process. There is no definitive end.

The editing considerations differ according to audience, topic and author. A medical journal article on kidney disease speaks to an audience with a common vocabulary and argumentation style and the journal style sheet will impose a spelling and punctuation standard. But patient-oriented websites will need to communicate to a range of people whose linguistic identities and linguistic needs differ. While a text might be available to anyone with internet access, it might benefit from feeling 'local' rather than 'global'. The NHS, for instance, forgoes standard medical spelling (eg *fetus*[1]) in order to avoid accusations of Americanisation and uses informal, idiomatic British English so as to feel more accessible and jargon-free (eg *pass water*, *back passage*). In trying to optimise accessibility, it takes itself further from a globally accessible English. That might seem justified – it is, after all, the *National* Health Service – until one thinks about how 'global' users of the NHS can be. Following Plain English guidelines can often help in communicating with a diverse audience, but it's always worth keeping in mind that 'plainness' is subjective and potentially culture specific.

Besides audiences, we need to think about the author and their English, particularly when the author's and the editor's backgrounds differ. In an age when English is for everyone, editors need to appraise their assumptions about what makes good, clear English and their ability to recognise good English that is different from their own. I know well the experience of having my words changed by well-meaning American editors who assume my English has become very British, and well-meaning British editors who see their job as de-Americanising me. In both directions, I risk having my most creative writing – the novel metaphors or plays on words – unstuck by an editor's expectation that my writing will bear defects rather than innovations. When I read 'AU: did you mean X? *Here* we say X', I think, 'this person isn't reading my text as much as they're reading their expectations of what needs to be "fixed" about my "foreignness"'. But I know that I've done the same when editing the English texts of competent non-native speakers, and I know how easy it is for native speakers to claim expertise. If there is to be a global English, it should be the kind of English that is open to different voices. Editors have a role to play in enabling those voices rather than putting them all on the same narrow track.

If there is to be a global English, it should be the kind of English that is open to different voices.

Generosity, curiosity, humility and teamwork

Good editors are supposed to have *a good ear for the language*. That expression makes it sound like there's one language to have an ear for. But the English language contains multitudes, and the best editors know that. They need not just an ear for English, but an ear for the author and an eye on the audience. That's a lot to ask of one person. It might be too much to ask when an English text must work for a global range of audiences.

When a text is expected to reach a global audience, it can be put into a 'global' English or it can be repeatedly localised. Both approaches require multiple perspectives on the text and the language, but it's unclear to me how often texts get those perspectives. To give a minor example, non-American editors often tell me that they edit in (or into) American English and that always gives me pause. If it's just a matter of following US spelling and a US punctuation style for an international academic publication, then that seems very doable, since academic registers are fairly international to start with. But the localisation or globalisation issues for, say, journalism or marketing may well be much broader. They require a sensitivity to what's done in other places, and, more importantly, a sensitivity to the strangeness of what's done in one's own place. People (even those of us with a close eye on English) are very good at recognising the oddness of others' Englishes, but not very good at knowing which of their own turns of phrase won't be understood elsewhere.

Any editing requires elements of generosity, curiosity and humility – towards the language, the author and the audience. These characteristics become more important in global contexts where many Englishes come together. When working with international texts and audiences, these traits could be amplified by teamwork – something that I've seen discussed more at translators' conferences than editors' ones. For texts that are meant to be truly global, a second pair of eyes, looking through a different linguistic/contextual lens, could give a final read-through to help ensure that what is intended as a 'global' text truly is. Such editorial partnerships between freelancers might be rare, but they might also open the door to new work and to new standards of working in this globalised world. (If you're in one, I'd love to hear about it.)

Note

1 For more on *f(o)etus*, see: **separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com/2015/05/foetus-and-foetal-and-bit-on.html** and/or further discussion in *The Prodigal Tongue* (Oneworld, 2018).

Some ideas for you to think about

Lynne's paper shows us that language does not stand still, so as professionals working with words we need to think about how this affects our practice and the assumptions we may make about what's 'right' or 'wrong' when we edit. Here are some ideas to think about for starters. If you're a CIEP member, why not continue the discussion on the forums?

- English has something that no language in history has had: billions of speakers. How might that influence the way English develops globally?
- Wherever people speak English, new Englishes develop, in contexts from whole countries to discrete groups, such as in NATO operations. What new Englishes could emerge in the near future?
- A truly global English has not yet evolved through globalisation, but perhaps some localisms are used less or are being replaced with more global alternatives. Can you think of examples?
- On the other hand, some organisations, in trying to optimise accessibility by using informal 'local' language, may be moving further away from a globally accessible English. Will that help or hinder their audiences?
- Editors need to regularly question their assumptions about what makes good, clear English and sharpen their ability to recognise good English that is different from their own. How could you play your part in enabling diverse voices?
- Editors need not just an ear for English, but an ear for the author and an eye on the audience. That's a lot to ask of one person. What are some good ways to learn these skills?
- People are very good at recognising the oddness of others' Englishes, but not very good at knowing which of their own turns of phrase won't be understood elsewhere. Can you think of some examples of phrases in your own English that might be hard to understand?
- Editorial partnerships across countries and contexts could open the door to new standards of language working in this globalised world. Who could you work with to bring this about?

Resources

Lynne Murphy. Separated by a Common Language (blog). **separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com**.

Lynne Murphy (2018). *The Prodigal Tongue: The love–hate relationship between British and American English*. London: Oneworld.

Mario Saraceni (2015). *World Englishes: A critical introduction*. London: Routledge.

Christina Thomas, with Abi Saffrey (2020). *Your House Style: Styling your words for maximum impact*. **ciep.uk/resources/guides**.

Written by Lynne Murphy

The Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP) is a non-profit body promoting excellence in English-language editing. We set and demonstrate editorial standards, and we are a community, training hub and support network for editorial professionals – the people who work to make text accurate, clear and fit for purpose.

facebook.com/EditProof

twitter.com/The_CIEP

linkedin.com/company/the-ciep

ciep.uk

Apsley House, 176 Upper Richmond Road, London SW15 2SH, 020 8785 6155