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English as an International Language:
A Constructivist Approach to
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I am not a linguist, but rather a philosopher with a strong interest in the social sciences, particularly intercultural communication, and I would like to add a philosophical perspective to the debates which have been going on regarding English as an international language and to try to see the issue in the somewhat wider context of recent trends towards globalization. There are two questions that I would specifically like to ask: first, the normative question of what should count as a standard for English as an international language, and second, the procedural question of who decides what those standards are or should be? I think that there are at least three different philosophical perspectives which can be adopted in attempting to answer these questions: universalism, particularism, and constructivism. After arguing against the first two alternatives, universalism and particularism, I will try to show why constructivism offers a better philosophical framework for understanding how standards for English as an international language might be arrived at.

Let's begin with universalism. Universalism is the notion that, in principle, there should be a single standard which can be equally applied to all people and all cultures. Historically universalism has been a characteristic feature of Western thought and culture. Western science, for example, contends that if all humans experience and think about the world in the same way, then it should be possible to arrive at certain universal scientific truths about the world. Economically, politically, and culturally, the West has often set itself up as a model for the rest of the world to follow. In the nineteenth century this gave rise to the imperialistic idea

that it was the “white man’s burden” to raise non-Westerners up to their own standards.

Classical imperialism has been overcome to a large extent in our own age, but universalist ideas continue to express themselves in the movement towards increased globalization. With the end of the cold war, we have witnessed the emergence of a “new world order,” dominated to a large extent by the United States, as the world’s sole remaining superpower — I state this simply as a sociological fact, not as a matter of national pride. Economically, we are in the process of creating a “global market” based on neoliberal principles of free trade. Politically, the power of nation-states is being undermined through the creation of “borderless societies,” in which an increasing number of decisions about how the world is to be run are made not by democratically elected national governments but by international agencies such as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the IMF. Culturally, we are moving towards a homogenized global “monoculture” in which people increasingly tend to dress alike, eat the same food, watch the same movies, listen to the same music, and, indeed, speak the same languages. At present there are some 5,100 languages spoken throughout the world, but it is estimated that this number could decrease to a mere 100 within one or two generations as a result of increased globalization (Sachs 1992, p. 102).

Scholars and teachers in the field of intercultural communication are often called upon to further the goals of globalization, of course, and for better or worse, English has become the lingua franca of this bold new globalized world. There is nothing inevitable about this development, however. We could just as easily imagine some other language — Esperanto perhaps? — serving such a purpose. Or we could imagine a world in which there is no “international language” whatsoever. If a person wants to talk to someone from a country with a different language, he or she should learn that country’s language. The only practical advantage to having an “international language” is that we can learn just one language rather than several, to talk to people from a variety of different countries whose languages also differ.

Persuasive arguments can in fact be offered in support of the view that

English should *not* be used as an international language. First, learning non-English languages exposes a person to ideas and concepts that simply may not translate very well into English. If you really want to get know how someone from another country thinks and feels, don't talk to them in English; talk to them in their own language. Second, English's prominence as an international language is undoubtedly not due to its intrinsic properties, but rather simply to the dominant political and economic position that has been occupied by English-speaking cultures over the past few centuries. In a truly international world, every language should be accorded equal value; no language should be privileged over another simply because of the social, political, or economic position of its native speakers.

Such sentiments come fairly close to my own personal opinion about English as an international language, despite the fact that I earn my living teaching English for international communication. Nonetheless, while there may be good reasons for not using English as an international language, at present nearly one-third of the earth's population uses some form of English for communication, and the number of non-native speakers far exceeds the number of people who speak English as their native tongue (Honna 1999, pp. 55–56). We are obliged, then, to consider what form English as an international language should take. A universalist approach would suggest that since English as it is spoken by native speakers provides a ready-made model, this is the form of English that should be spoken by non-native speakers. This view has the merit of offering a simple solution to the problem of what standards of English should be adopted by non-native speakers, but there are nonetheless several objections to it.

The main objection is that this view rests on what philosophers would call an “essentialist” view of language. Essentialism is the idea that there are certain standards which define the core, or essence, of any given phenomenon — for example, what it means to be a “real Japanese” or a “real American.” Any variation from the “ideal type” is treated as a deviation. Applied to English as an international language essentialism would contend that there is something called “real English,” which is

spoken by native speakers and which non-native forms are deviations from.

Essentialism is an outdated philosophical position, however, that has been effectively refuted by modern developments in physics, biology, and the social sciences. We live in a dynamic world in which nothing is fixed and everything is subject to growth and development. Living languages, including English, are also in a constant state of flux. Any attempt to impose a fixed set of standards on the English language, regarded as universally valid for all people and at all times, would simply stifle the growth of English as a natural language. Essentialists nonetheless propose that there is, or should be, one form of “pure” English which provides the “true standard” non-native speakers of the language should follow. It is sometimes assumed, for example, that British English offers an appropriate model since historically it is the “mother language” out of which other “native” forms of English, such as American and Australian English, developed. Others may argue in favor of American English on the grounds that it is, at present, more widely recognized. It should be clear, however, that a decision in favor of any model is somewhat arbitrary for the simple reason that even among native speakers there is no single standard for how “correct” English should be spoken.

As English becomes more “international,” and hence de-Anglicized, the situation becomes even more complicated. As my colleague, Nobuyuki Honna, has pointed out, “You cannot internationalize things and ideas without having them [become] accommodated to the customs of people who are supposed to use them for their own purposes” (1999, p. 57). Thus, spaghetti, for example, cannot truly become an international food unless it adapts itself to the tastes of non-Italians. Honna writes, “Should it have happened that Italians objected to the Japanese ways of preparing spaghettis, this Italian cuisine would never have been as popular as it is now” (*ibid.*). The same idea applies to English as an international language. If native speakers object to how English is spoken by non-native speakers, then it is impossible, for English to become truly international. In Honna’s words, “. . . diversification is the cost of the internationalization of English” (*ibid.*).

These considerations give rise to a new problem, however, namely, how far do we go with this process of diversification? How much can we change a recipe for spaghetti before it ceases to be spaghetti? How much variation in the English language can be tolerated before it becomes mutually unintelligible to persons who speak different varieties? Such questions lead us directly to the second philosophical framework for understanding English as an international language, namely particularism. Particularism, simply defined, is the idea that since standards (in whatever field) arise out of particular historical and cultural contexts, there can, in principle, never be any universal standards which hold for all people and at all times.

Particularism easily degenerates into a simple relativism, however, which claims that there are no valid standards whatsoever. The problem with relativism is that it provides no basis for people from different cultures to engage in joint action on problems of mutual concern. If we simply say, "You have your way of doing things and I have mine, and the best that we can do is to respect each other's differences," it becomes impossible for us to ever work together. Clearly there are a great many problems which transcend cultural boundaries and therefore require transcultural solutions. We must move beyond the view, which is still widespread in the field of intercultural communication, that cultural differences should simply be "respected," towards a position which allows us to build bridges across cultural gaps and to create a common ground for cross-cultural understanding where none existed before.

This idea forms the basis of our third philosophical position, namely, constructivism. Constructivism recognizes the empirical fact that different cultures develop different ways of looking at the world, but nonetheless argues that when problems transcend cultural borders, there must be sufficient levels of cross-cultural agreement to allow for joint action. Success can be judged by the pragmatic criterion of whether or not the problems we face are solved to the mutual satisfaction of those who are affected by them. Since all standards arise in specific historical or cultural contexts, they may nonetheless be inadequate to solve new problems that emerge in new historical circumstances or problems which transcend cultural boundaries. Global warming is a prime example of both. The

standards of any given culture tell people how to deal with familiar problems and interact with people from their own culture; they tell us absolutely nothing about how to deal with newly emergent problems or with people from cultures whose standards may differ from our own. In the absence of any universal standards, rather than adopt a relativist stance which simply says that cultural differences are incommensurable and therefore cannot be reconciled, we need to actively *construct* new norms and standards that will enable us to effectively solve problems of mutual concern and that can be used to govern interactions between people from different cultures.

Standards in this view are not “universal” but are intended to solve only particular problems faced by particular groups of people in particular contexts. We do not need to establish, for example, a universal standard of intercultural marriage; rather each couple must work out the particular norms that will govern their particular relationship. With respect to English as an international language, we do not need a single standard of what constitutes “pure” English. It is perfectly natural that different countries, such as Japan or Singapore, should develop their own local variations of English for use within particular linguistic communities. I agree here with those, such as Smith (1983) and Honna (1999), who contend that it makes no sense in such contexts to impose British or American standards on how English is spoken, or moreover, to see English language teaching as a means for diffusing British or American cultural values.

Nonetheless, if English is to be successfully used as a medium for *international* communication, it must still be intelligible across cultures. We should not simply adopt the relativist position that because each country adapts English to its own situation that no cross-cultural standards are necessary. Standards are still necessary simply because without them communication breaks down. Honna (1999, p. 62) gives the example of a Japanese businessman asking a Filipino taxi driver to pick him up at 8:00 the next morning. When the taxi driver replied “I will try,” the Japanese businessman interpreted this to mean that the taxi driver would pick him up, whereas “I will try” in Philippine English in fact means “I

don't think I can."

In solving problems of this sort, we cannot simply fall back on a universalist model which takes American or British English as the standard, but rather must adopt a transactional approach to communication (*cf.* Barnlund 1970) which sees meaning itself as something that must be negotiated by the particular groups of people who are interacting with each other. If a group of Japanese are using English as an international language to communicate with a group of Chinese, for example, there is no need for the two groups to follow the conventions of standard American or British English but there is still the need for the two groups to arrive at a set of common standards that will govern their particular interactions.

If an American were to suddenly appear on the scene there would, moreover, be no particular reason why "standard American English" should suddenly become the norm. Even in encounters between native and non-native speakers of English there is the need for both sides to adjust their communication styles to accommodate the communication style of the other. For example, when I myself speak English with Japanese I intentionally speak more slowly, employ simpler vocabulary, avoid slang and culture-bound expressions, and at times even use convoluted grammar because it may be more easily understood. Conversely, Japanese speakers of English who are talking to Americans must meet certain minimal standards if what they say is to be intelligible to native speakers. If a Japanese says, for example, "I live in a mansion and have a yacht," the American may get the impression that the speaker is quite rich. "Mansion" is the Japanese-English word for "apartment house," however, and "yacht" is "sailboat." Therefore, the intended meaning would be more readily understood if the Japanese had said, "I live in an apartment house and have a sailboat."

The point, then, is that if English is to be an international language it must simultaneously be able to adapt itself to varying local cultures *and* to maintain certain minimal international standards. Moreover, in any given situation, all speakers of English, whether native or non-native, should be able to participate in the process of forging what these standards should

be. As Honna writes, “Standards of acceptability and correctness are not absolute but negotiable. The bottom line is mutual intelligibility” (1999, p. 76). From a constructivist perspective, mutual intelligibility in an intercultural context can be best insured not by simply adopting American or British English as the universal norm which all non-native speakers of English should follow, nor by simply encouraging each group to speak whatever English they want, but rather by allowing everyone who uses English as a means of international communication, whether as native or non-native speakers, to actively participate in constructing the standards that will be applied in any given situation.

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