World English: a study of its development
Janina Brutt-Griffler, 2002
Multilingual Matters

The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses,
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me…

Janina Brutt-Griffler opens her book on the development of World English with this telling extract from a poem by Kamala Das and over the course of the subsequent two hundred pages she weaves together a fascinating narrative to tell the tale of how English has developed (and fractured) into this strange and wonderful creature known as World English.

For those of us who thought that arguments in favour of developing a child's first language began in the 1970s she provides such interesting snippets as this from a *Select Committee on Education in the Straits Settlements* in 1870:

Committee is of the opinion that a boy, whether he be Chinese or Malay, can make no real progress in education until well grounded in his own language.

or this resolution from Lord Curzon's government in 1904:

No scholar in a secondary school should … be allowed to abandon the study of his vernacular which should be kept up until the end of the school course.

Eat your hearts out Jim and Ginger!

Brutt-Griffler also provides a fascinating account of the different ways in which English spread through demographic change (the mass migration of English-speakers to America, for example) as opposed to political and economic reasons (as in Asia and Africa). She also charts the very different linguistic consequences of English developing in contexts that were essentially monolingual as opposed to multilingual.

The central concern of the book, however, is to show that the spread of English throughout Asia and Africa was not so much due to the efforts of the imperialists to colonise the native inhabitants so much as the efforts of those same people to liberate themselves from the empire and other tyrannies. This is not to say that the British colonialists had a benevolent language policy, far from it. Unlike the French, however, who were concerned to turn their colonies Francophone, the British colonialists sought to limit the spread of English to as small a group of local people as they needed to run their administration:

'… good government in Egypt, like in other parts of the empire, meant inexpensive government. Hence, … a plan designed to save money by having Egyptians take up the bulk of the civil service jobs, particularly at the lower levels…'

But, of course, once the language cat is out of the bag, it is free to pursue its own course:

Asians and Africans under British rule deliberately took advantage of the imperial role of English … to undertake a language policy of their own. They transformed English from a means of exploiting into a means of resistance.

The book is as full of linguistic insights as it is of socio-political ones. For example, in a chapter on language change she describes how World English draws on the resources of the languages it is in contact with, as in Southern Africa. She cites linguistic processes such as *lexical transfer* (i.e. the incorporation of African words such as *lobolo* (roughly dowry') into the new English variety. There is also the use of *hybridization*, whereby African words have English morphemes attached to them as in 'The man will be *bulawaed* (promoted) soon.' At an even deeper level, she discusses examples of *semantic extension*, whereby an English word is given a new meaning that is more relevant to its new users. In Nigeria, for example, the idiomatic *European appointment* means a high-level white-collar post. She goes on to describe in lively detail the role and particular development of English in the liberation movement in South Africa, giving a lively account, for example, of the linguistic transformation of the word *defy*.

In the penultimate chapter, *Englishes in Convergence*, she deftly brings together the historical and linguistic perspectives she has drawn on to demolish the concept of the 'native' speaker in the context of World English as it suggests a uni-directional flow from the native to the non-native speaker. She posits, instead, a model of local speech communities interacting with the world speech community in which 'every speaker has a dual speech community membership or affiliation: the local English speech community and the world English speech community'. What this argument does is remove any logical basis for a hierarchy between speech communities on linguistic grounds. As she succinctly points out, 'English as a national language is only the source of world language, not the world language itself.' The implications of this for any notion of 'standard' English are evident. The implications for our work as teachers of English bewildering.

Frank Monaghan
Staff Tutor in Education, The Open University