

Some Speculation on World Standard Spoken English

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言語学者デービッド・クリスタルは、その著書「世界語としての英語」(English as a Global Language)の中で、近い将来、英語は世界語としての地位を確固たるものとする一方地域化し、世界各国の人々が相互理解を必要とする場面では WSSE, World Standard Spoken English (世界標準口頭英語) が誕生することを予言している。国際放送の英語アナウンサーであった筆者は、WSSE が、一部国際放送の英語に近いものになる可能性があると思う一方、これはあくまで英語国民からの提言に過ぎず、英語を母語としない外国人の WSSE は口語よりも書き言葉に近いものになるのではないかと推測する。

キーワード：デービッド・クリスタル、英語、世界共通語、VOA、Basic English

Introduction

In the final chapter of his thought-provoking book, *English as a Global Language*, David Crystal, world authority on the English language, considers the possibility of the fragmentation of English into different “new Englishes,” raising the specter of “the eventual dissolution of English into a range of mutually unintelligible languages.” (1997) Admitting such a possibility, however, Crystal is still optimistic that aside from different varieties of indigenous English, a new form of English, “World Standard Spoken English,” WSSE for short, would arise to fill the need for international communication. (1997). He says, in fact, most people are already “multidialectal” to some extent. At home, they use a rather informal spoken dialect while using another more formal spoken English when they are away from home. (1997)

Crystal also offers a peek into the world of the future where a multinational company is holding a conference with representatives coming from each of the country where it operates. “Reps from Calcutta, sharing a cab on their way to the conference would be conversing in informal Indian English....The reps from Los Angeles would be using informal American English. Any one of these groups, overhearing any other, might well find the conversation difficult to follow. But when all meet at the conference table, there would be no problem: everyone would be using WSSE.” (1997)

Elements of WSSE

What, then, might be some of the features of such a language? Crystal suggests that those for whom the world is the target audience, such as those who attend international conferences, or those “talking” on the Internet, already

consciously avoid a word or phrase which you know is not going to be understood outside your own country, and of finding an alternative form of expression. He says it can also affect your pronunciation and grammar. (1997)

Having been with Radio Japan, one of the world broadcasters on shortwave, television and now on the Internet as well, for twenty odd years as English announcer/producer, I believe I have something to offer to the discussion by amplifying on Crystal’s remarks on the form WSSE may take, though much of it will have to be speculative in nature.

For the purpose of this discussion, I take many of my examples from VOA as I have an access to their programming handbook, and Crystal himself seems to consider that the future of English belongs with the American variety, rather than the British. The direction of influence has for some time been largely one way. (1997)

A word about VOA. Voice of America, or VOA, is Washington based international multimedia broadcasting service which began broadcasting just before the Second World War in February, 1942. Funded by the U.S. Government, it presently broadcasts in English and 52 other languages through radio, satellite television and the Internet. (VOA, FAQ)

Elements of VOA Programming Handbook

First of all, broadcast English must be understood by mostly listeners who are not native speakers of English and who usually have only one opportunity to listen to and understand what is being spoken. This requires a great deal of discipline on the part of native speakers of the language to make it easily understood.

VOA is quite aware of who the target audiences are. VOA Programming Handbook says, “Many listeners to VOA – and VOA foreign language broadcasters – speak English as a second or third language. Some have learned British, not the

American usage, and some listeners speak in an idiom which is not considered Standard English. Therefore we must make a special effort to ensure that VOA scripts are easily understood.” (VOA, 1992) A script, of course, is not speech, strictly speaking, but it is written with thought to eventual vocalization. In this sense, characteristics of VOA broadcast scripts can be considered equal to the spoken language and used to shed light on how one might approach world standard spoken English.

The first rule to remember is clarity; and VOA Programming Handbook recommends the use of declarative sentences. “Writing should be clear and straightforward. Rely on simple declarative sentences.” (1992) The sentences must also be short, says the handbook, “They should rarely exceed two-and-a-half lines,” and the writers should “emphasize present tenses, active verb.” (1992)

In terms of vocabulary, the handbook asks the writers to avoid using “Americanisms” It says, “Do not refer to aspects of American life that might be alien to our listeners – ‘fast food,’ for example – unless you describe them fully.” By the same token, writers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with British usage in order to avoid confusing the listeners. “Do not use words which have different meanings depending on the idiom. For example: ‘to table a motion’ in British usage is to put an issue forward for consideration, not put it aside, as in American English.” The examples are somewhat dated so that by current standards, use of words like “fast food” probably will not lead to any misunderstanding and neither will the use of such an obvious difference in usage between the British English and its American counterpart. What is important in international communication is quite easy to see. (1992)

Something else that the writers should be careful of, and should, in fact, not use, according to the handbook, are “contractions, slang or popular expressions.” In a sense, such constitute the basis of informal, conversational English. But they must not be used for the sake of better understanding. (1992)

And a note on pronunciation and delivery is given in VOA Programming Handbook about communication on the air. The following, being a point made about broadcast in English by native speakers, may not have direct bearing on how WSSE should sound like, but it does offer a hint. It says that it takes more than a good voice to make a good newscast or a good feature program and says, “Above all, the news or feature copy should be properly interpreted. Pronunciation should be correct throughout. The tempo should conform to VOA standards. The delivery should be natural, almost conversational. Diction must be impeccable.” What is difficult for English broadcasters, moreover, is the strain of making every syllable clear in a way

which the English language by its very nature is not meant to do. The handbook says, “For English broadcasters, the task of communicating may be the most demanding because they must assume they are using the listener’s second language.” (1992) The next sentence, however, says it all, as far as pointing out the difficulty of communicating to a world audience for native speakers of English. The handbook advises that the announcer pronounce “all the parts of all the words all the time – while still sounding conversational.” (1992)

Pronunciation of proper names, must defer to the local practice “We try to pronounce the names of people just as they themselves pronounce them. However, there is a long established English tradition for place names so that they pose a special problem: “Consider Munich versus Muenchen, and Moscow versus Moskva. In many cases, there is no spelling change, but standard American pronunciation is different from the indigenous pronunciation – as in Berlin and Paris. VOA’s pronunciation of such places reflects standard American pronunciation.” (1992)

Special English (VOA)

In the meantime, VOA has gone even further in trying to reach a wider international audience by initiating its Special English programs, largely as an experiment. (VOA, 1992) The goal was to “communicate by radio in clear and simple English with people whose native language is not English.” (VOA, FAQ) Nobody thought that it would work. But they were apparently proven wrong. After some 40 years, Special English broadcasts programs around the world seven days a week, five times a day.

According to their web site, three elements make Special English unique. These elements, in fact, have some relevance to the discussion on hand of elements of WSSE. First of all it has a limited vocabulary of 1,500 words. Most are simple words that describe objects, actions or emotions. Some are more difficult. Special English is written in short, simple sentences that contains only one idea. No idioms are used. And Special English is spoken at a slower pace, about two-thirds the speed of standard English. This apparently helps people learning English hear each word clearly. (VOA, History)

So far, you have seen the amount of effort native speakers of English have put into trying to reach an international audience. Use of simple declarative sentences, limited vocabulary without idioms or Americanisms, delivered at a slow even pace.

Perspective of World Englishes

Will this suffice? Not very likely. The language will

have to change further than that to take on many of the characteristics of variety of new Englishes.

For example, we must consider the fact that the Japanese speakers of English understand their fellow Japanese speaking English, better than a native American or British speaker of the language. The reason for this may not be so simple: it could be the structure of the sentences, or pronunciation that is more tone oriented, but in terms of vocabulary, it could be the use of more formal rather than colloquial, idiomatic English that is making for this ease of understanding. And I presume to think that this holds true for other non-native speakers of English as well. After all, for them, learning to read and write had precedence over listening and speaking. Long considered a handicap, there is a kind of advantage in being able to rely on the very “bookish” origins of one’s own English.

In what might be a surprising reversal to a native speaker, in the world of World English, multi-syllable, “big words” may be more practical, at least for educated non-native speakers of English, than the limited vocabulary approach of Special English. Although I enjoy listening to Special English, I am not fully convinced that it is as easy as VOA makes it sound. The criticism I have is exactly the same as the one that some have made against Basic English, which lies at the base of Special English programs. The inventors of Basic English were “able to reduce its vocabulary so much by taking advantage of idioms like *make good* for succeed. That may save a word, but it’s still a lexical entry that must be learned as a unit, with no help from its component pieces. Plus the whole process was highly irregular. (Make bad doesn’t mean fail.)” (Rifkin, 1996, December 20).

Basic English, of course, was created by people like C. K. Ogden, British writer and linguist who originated the simplified system of the English language intended as a uniform, standardized means of international communication. However, native speakers do not realize how difficult it is for non-native speakers to come up with the sense of what they mean using many so-called “basic” words, which involve some knowledge of “idiomatic English.” At least among educated speakers, limited vocabulary approach to express their thoughts may turn out to be far more difficult than otherwise.

Increase in the number of non-native speakers of English in the future may cause the language to veer towards various native pronunciations. Crystal gave an example of the possibility that sounds of English may change depending on the number of speakers of such regional variation. He offers: “No feature of L2 [language 2, meaning English as second language] English has yet become part of standard US or UK English; but, as the balance of speakers changes, there is no reason for L2 features not to become part of WSSE. This would be especially likely if there were features which were shared by several (or all) L2 varieties – such as the use of syllable-timed rhythm, or the widespread difficulty observed in the use of *th* sounds.”(1997)

Conclusion

In my opinion though much can be learned from international broadcasters like VOA, the future course of WSSE will most likely be shaped by the formal style of English of those to whom it is a second or even a third language. Who know in that process, even the legendary “Englic” may have a place of its own.

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