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The Ownership of English and Communities of Practice

Streszczenie

Niniejsze studium jest głosem w dyskusji dotyczącej kwestii związanych z przynależnością języka angielskiego. W środowisku językoznawców trwa debata pomiędzy zwolennikami poglądu monocentrycznego określającego język angielski jako wyłączną domenę tzw. użytkowników natywnych i zwolennikami poglądu mówiącego, że angielski jest językiem międzynarodowej komunikacji charakteryzującym się wieloma standardami i brakiem jednego centrum określającego jedynie obowiązujące zasady jego użycia. Szczególnym głosem w tej dyskusji jest pogląd mówiący o potrzebie nowego rozumienia pojęcia wspólnoty użytkowników języka angielskiego, a co za tym idzie, innego rozumienia przynależności języka angielskiego. Ze względu na to, że komunikacja w języku angielskim ma charakter masowy, nasze rozumienie *wspólnoty* powinno zostać uzupełnione o pojęcie wspólnot tworzonych przez użytkowników Internetu. Szczególnym typem wspólnot tworzonych zarówno w sieci jak i poza nią jest tzw. *wspólnota praktyków* (*community of practice*). Niniejsza praca dokonuje analizy użycia języka angielskiego w sieci przez wspólnotę praktyków na podstawie wypowiedzi zebranych podczas seminarium przeprowadzonego na platformie zdalnego nauczania jednego z uniwersytetów w Wielkiej Brytanii. Konkluzją jest teza mówiąca o tym, że język angielski funkcjonuje jako jedno z narzędzi komunikacji pomiędzy członkami wielu wspólnot, w tym wspólnot praktyków.

1. Introduction

The ongoing debate revolving around the questions of the ownership of English has divided the community of linguists into two groups. While one group supports the *monocentric* view which claims that only the long-established varieties such as British, American or Australian Englishes count as legitimate

standards, the other supports the *pluricentric* approaches which perceive the regional varieties used in former colonies as fully legitimate types of the English language.

This debate is premised on the idea that geographical or political boundaries play a role in establishing the status of the varieties of English. However, in the age of mass travel and global digital communication facilitated by the Internet such boundaries often become obsolete. Transgressing such traditional boundaries leads to the formation of new forms of worldwide communities. Such communities are often formed for particular purposes uniting people with similar interests and goals. Frequently, it is English that becomes the main tool of communication in such communities. As a consequence, the traditional views on the issue of ownership of English, especially those associated with the monocentric perspective, can be put into question.

The current study reviews the approaches to the issue of ownership of English and discusses the claim that English belongs to various communities of practice, which use it as one of the main communication tools. The arguments in this discussion are supported by the presentation of the results of a small-scale study, which examines how English is used in a synchronous online academic discussion.

2. Ownership of English: from standard English to English as a lingua franca

The debate of the ownership of English revolves around the two above-mentioned general approaches. One approach sees English as belonging to the native speakers from such countries as Britain, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia, etc. In his model describing how English is used around the globe Kachru (1985) labels these as Inner Circle countries, because they represent those regions from which English started spreading across the world.

Adopting this monocentric perspective results in accepting the view which assigns the status of the standard setters to native speakers and the status of the passive observers of these standards to everybody else. Such a view is held by linguists from all Kachruvian circle countries. For example, both the British linguist Quirk (1990) and the Polish linguist Sobkowiak (2005) deny the right to assign any legitimate variety status to the Englishes used by the speakers residing in Kachruvian Outer (mostly former British or American colonies such as India, Nigeria or Singapore) or Expanding Circle countries (the rest of the world where English is spoken as a foreign language).

On the other hand, the pluricentric approach supports a completely different view of the ownership of English. Kachru (1985) claims, for example, that there are no reasons, perhaps except for the purely political ones, why regional

varieties of English should not be treated on a par with the long-established ones. Within this perspective, the following two main concepts come to the fore: World Englishes (WE) and English as a lingua franca (ELF).

Both concepts can be perceived as pointing to the global character of English, which has ceased to be the sole property of the so-called *native speaker*. The concept of World Englishes legitimizes the Outer Circle varieties of English and postulates placing them on the same level as the long-established ones. Jenkins (2009) describes the concept of World Englishes as encompassing any spoken variety used in the three Kachruvian circles. English as a lingua franca is defined by Jenkins (2009) as a common language for people coming from various linguo-cultural backgrounds. Understood within the ELF construct, using English requires speakers to negotiate the level of proficiency to the point where communicative exchanges become equally comprehensible for all parties. In consequence, ELF exchanges may require simplification of the vocabulary and grammatical structures on the part of native speakers in order to match the proficiency levels of their non-native interlocutors.

According to Seidlhofer (2009), there exist valid arguments in support of the pluricentric visions of the role of English, such as the WE and ELF. The changing nature and the contexts in which communication takes place in the contemporary world can be argued to speak in favor of the pluricentric approaches. Seidlhofer (2009) argues that in the age of mass travel and electronic communication the old notion of face-to-face community, which encompasses local or regional contexts, needs to be revised. She points to the changes in the social conditions that necessarily lead to different perceptions of the roles that English has to play in the contemporary world. She argues that:

> [i]n the early 21st century, it seems clear that there are English-using communities not only in the Inner and the Outer Circle but also English-using local, regional, and global communities of practice communicating via ELF in the Expanding Circle and, importantly, across all circles. What is certain is that we have come a long way from conditions a quarter of a century ago that prompted an eminent linguist to claim that "*[t]he relatively narrow range of purposes* for which the non-native needs to use English is arguably well catered for by a single monochrome standard form" (Quirk 1985: 6, emphasis added). Seidlhofer (2009: 239–240)

An alternative understanding of the term *community* stems from Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of *community of practice* which seems able to, better than the traditional definitions, grasp the idea of social groupings in which

learning may take place. Wenger (2006) defines communities of practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." The idea of communities of practice stems from the observation of how knowledge and skills are developed among members of various communities who share the same type of work tasks in a particular context. For example, Lave and Wenger (1991) examined the work of such communities as Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, US Navy meat cutters and others and came to the conclusion that novice learners develop their knowledge and skills observing and participating in tasks together with experts.

According to Wenger (2006), communities of practice are distinguished by: 1) the shared domain in which the community's identity is defined, 2) shared community where learners engage in joint activities such as discussions when members build a sense of community, and 3) shared practice which refers to a common repertoire of resources, such as stories or experiences whose purpose is to facilitate learning.

These notions can be argued to apply to online communities, too. Wenger directly refers to online communities when he states that "the web has enabled people to interact in new ways across time and space and form new breeds of distributed yet interactive communities of practice" (quoted in Guldberg and Macknesst 2009: 2). The use of the English language as one of the shared tools in online communities seems to be pervasive. One example where online communities thrive and use English is the popular social network Facebook, which in 2009 boasted 350 million users (*Facebook Statistics* n.d.). The burgeoning use of English by Facebook communities is evidenced by, for example, Yunker (2009), who claims that only 40 % of all Facebook members are non-English language users. This means that in 2009, English was the tool of communication for about 200 million of users who formed numerous communities across the globe.

The question of how English is used online is an interesting issue in itself. The language used in online synchronous chats, which is of direct interest here, was labeled by Crystal (2006) as *netspeak*. Crystal (2006: 20) characterizes netspeak "as a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet, and encountered in all the above situations, arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive." Despite its textual form, this language shares more characteristics with speech than it does with writing. It is typically instantaneous and rapid. Such observations are also shared by many online chat participants. Below is a comment referring to the language used in online chats made by one of the chat participants examined in this study:

(1) Although we are using written lgg in a chat, we are not really developing any writing skills. It's more like talking, thus the major problems with spelling, I think.

3. The study

In order to illustrate how English is used by an online community, this article analyzes samples of language produced during synchronous exchanges. One aim of this analysis was to describe the lingua franca status of English used by a multinational group of students taking part in online chats. Another aim of the analysis was to reveal the features of English used online. The analysis focuses on the similarities and differences in how the language is used by the native and non-native speakers.

The examined group can be argued to constitute an online community of practice since it displays all or most of the typical characteristics of such a community listed by Wenger (2006). The group was characterized by a shared domain of interest which, in this case, was information and communication technology in education. The community and a sense of participation were built through computer mediated communication tools, both synchronous (chats) and asynchronous (conferences, email messages). The community also engaged in a set of common practices which, apart from using technological tools, included sharing experiences and stories related to the common domain of interest. The shared repertoire of resources may also be said to include the use of English which functioned as the lingua franca in this community.

The chat seminars were held within the academic context and were carried out on a distance learning platform at a British university. The participants took part in discussions on topics related to computer technology in education. The examined group consisted of multinational participants including students from Brazil, Brunei, Cyprus, England, Greece, Poland and Turkey. 7 native speakers (English) and 14 non-native speakers (the remaining nationalities) participated in the analyzed conversations.

The examined sample consisted of 10 synchronous discussions whose length of transcripts ranged from 8 to 12 pages of text. Each of the discussions encompassed between 150 to 300 turns. The typical structure of each chat consisted of greetings and introductions, introductions to the topics, discussion sessions and concluding remarks. The examination of the language used in these exchanges focused on answering the following questions: 1) what are the differences between how the native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) use English in these online chats? and 2) what are the similarities in how the language is used?

As regards the first of these questions, one of the differences observed between how NS and NNS used English concerned the fluency of language use. Fluency can be defined as "the extent to which the language produced in performing a task manifests pausing, hesitation, or reformulation" (Ellis 2003:342). Wolf (2008) points out that measuring fluency is a debatable issue and that various criteria have been proposed. For the purposes of this study Kormos and Denet's (2004) criterion of fluency was selected. The authors argue that speaking fluency can be measured as an average length of turn. This criterion seems to fit the context of this study since, as it was pointed out above, netspeak shares more characteristics with speaking than it does with writing.

In the analyzed samples the average length of turn calculated for the NS was 10.6 words per turn whereas the average for the NNS was considerably lower and reached 6.6 words per turn. This difference can be explained by the difference in the levels of the general English language proficiency displayed by the native and the non-native speakers. However, it needs to be added that the average length of turn observed in the analyzed samples was considerably higher than the average length of turn calculated for discussions on general subjects in public chat rooms. Crystal (2006) points out that the average length of turn in netspeak exchanges in public chat rooms equals ca. 3.5 word/ turn. He adds, however, that academic discussions are characterized by much longer turns since they require verbalizing more insightful views and opinions than those usually expressed in conversations on general topics.

Yet another difference between how NS and NNS use English consists in the complexity of the language used by both groups. Complexity may be defined as "[t]he extent to which the language produced in performing a task is elaborate and varied" (Ellis 2003: 340). One measure used to diagnose complexity of the language used by the chat participants was the frequency of phrasal verbs (e.g., 'put off', 'take on', etc.) used by both groups. For example, Laufer and Eliasson (1993) as well as Liao and Fukuya (2004) argue that advanced speakers of English use phrasal verbs much more frequently than those who are less advanced.

In the analyzed samples the average NS used statistically 1 phrasal verb in a single chat. This mean was about two times higher than the mean calculated for the NNS who, on average, used about 0.5 phrasal verb in each chat. The native speakers demonstrated higher complexity as measured by the number of phrasal verbs used in a chat. This is hardly surprising given the higher language proficiency of the native speakers group.

Apart from the differences, both groups displayed a number of similarities, especially regarding discourse strategies. One similarity concerned the common repertoire of discourse devices used in the exchanges. For example, the

chat participants extensively used various acronyms (e.g., 'btw' ('by the way'), 'lol' ('laughing out loud'), 'imho' ('in my humble opinion'), shortenings and the strategy of representing words with numbers (e.g., 'f2f' ('face to face') or multiplying vowels to represent special pronunciation (e.g., 'it's sooooo funny').

The similarities also concern other strategies. For example, the language produced by both groups was characterized by frequent misspellings which were caused by the rapid pace of communication and quick typing. These misspellings, sometimes potentially disrupting communication, were hardly ever subject to corrections from fellow participants. Self-repairs were the most frequent types of corrections. Below is one example of such correction made by chat participant PP:

(2)   PP: *interative*
      PP: can't spell
      PP: interactive!

Generally, the chat participants displayed a very tolerant approach to spelling and other mistakes. Neither the native speakers nor the non-native speakers intervened in the cases of even blatant violations of spelling, grammatical or lexical rules of English, presumably rating comprehensibility much higher than accuracy. Another reason which can explain this lack of correction may be the instantaneous character of online chats, which leaves participants with little time to react.

On the whole, the similarities concerning how both groups used English confirm the lingua franca character of the language. Both groups negotiated a common set of linguistic behaviors which was acceptable to both the native and non-native speakers. The focus of communication in such contexts was placed on the subject matter while meta-linguistic issues, such as focus on form, played a considerably less important role and were brought up only in the cases of communication breakdown. The example below illustrates an exchange in which chat participant NT asks another chat participant HA for clarification or reformulation of an ill-formed question:

(3)   HA: but what do u think the way?
      HA: that we can develop E-learning?
      NT: what do u mean by *what do u think the way that we can develop E-learning*, HA??
      HA: how we can develop e-learning?

4. Conclusions

The question of the ownership of English requires a revision of our under-standing of contexts in which communication takes place. The old notions of *community* and *language variety* need to be revised in order to accommodate the concept of the *online community* and varieties of English used on the Inter-net. English may be claimed to belong to various communities of practice who use it as part of their shared repertoire of resources. Members of these commu-nities, although often characterized by different levels of language proficiency, seem to employ a common set of *online discourse strategies*.

The fact that English is the language of choice for (hundreds of) millions of people communicating online leads to a number of consequences which transform our understanding of the question of the ownership of this lan-guage. This unprecedented situation has the potential to create numerous ex-citing research perspectives.

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