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English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the issue of proficiency

KINGSLEY BOLTON

English is now an Asian language, but governments and businesses are concerned about proficiency

Introduction

The contemporary visibility and importance of English throughout the Asian region coupled with the emergence and development of distinct varieties of Asian Englishes have played an important part in the global story of English in recent years. Across Asia, the numbers of people having at least a functional command of the language have grown exponentially over the last four decades, and current changes in the sociolinguistic realities of the region are often so rapid that it is difficult for academic commentators to keep pace. One basic issue in the telling of this story is the question of what it is we mean by the term 'Asia', itself a word of contested etymology, whose geographical reference has ranged in application from the Middle East to Central Asia, and from the Indian sub-continent to Japan and Korea. In this article, my discussion will focus on the countries of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, as it is in these regions that we find not only the greatest concentration of 'outer-circle' English-using societies but also a number of the most populous English-learning and English-knowing nations in the world.

Outer-circle and expanding-circle Asian societies

Another basic distinction in the Asian context is the well-established dichotomy between 'outer-circle' English-using societies (where English is, sociolinguistically at least, a second language with important intranational uses) and 'expanding-circle' countries (where English has traditionally had the status of a foreign language). The major outer-circle Asian societies include such South Asian nations as

Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; Southeast Asian societies such as Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore; as well as Hong Kong in East Asia. Even here, however, the distinction between outer-circle and expanding-circle may be somewhat blurred, as in the case of Burma (Myanmar), see Kirkpatrick, this issue.

Historically, all the outer-circle Asian societies are former colonies of Anglophone colonial powers. In most cases, these were British colonies, as in the case of Brunei, Hong Kong, greater India, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore, most of whom achieved independence between 1947 and 1963, although it was not until 1997 that China regained sovereignty over Hong Kong. The one US colony in Asia was the Philippines, which was under Spanish colonial rule from c. 1565 until 1898, followed by American control until 1946.

In most of these societies, English has been retained for important internal purposes after independence, and in most outer-circle



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countries there is a *de jure* recognition of English in domains as government, law, and education. English is also typically widely used throughout the mass media, as in Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, which all have a lively daily press, and, to varying extents, a local English literary tradition in fiction, poetry, and other genres of creative writing. In addition to print media, such societies often have English-language radio and television channels on offer, as in Hong Kong, Singapore and the Philippines. Such societies are also characterised by the functional differentiation of indigenous languages and English, coupled with a high frequency of code-switching and code-mixing in informal and intimate domains. The map in Figure 1 illustrates the distinction between outer-circle and expanding-circle societies.

The statistics of English across Asia

The statistics of English worldwide is an inexact science, and utilises information of varying

reliability. In societies where there are regular language censuses and language surveys, such as Hong Kong and the Philippines, one may be able to refer to the 'hard' evidence of officially-endorsed data, but even here there is room for discussion and interpretation. Language censuses typically rely on the self-report of respondents on their own knowledge of languages, on whether they are able to speak *Language X* or *Language Y*, with little additional information about how well they may speak a certain language or the range of purposes for which the language is used.

For example, in the case of Hong Kong, in the 2006 by-census, when asked about their 'ability' in languages, 2.8 per cent of the population claimed to speak English as 'the usual language', while 41.9 per cent reported a knowledge of English as 'another language/dialect', thus giving an overall total almost 45 per cent for the whole community (Hong Kong Government, 2007). However, no indication is given in the census concerning the 'proficiency' of speakers in the Hong Kong context. In the



Figure 1: Outer-circle and expanding-circle societies in South, Southeast, and East Asia

Philippines, by contrast, language surveys are usually conducted by an independent social research institution, Social Weather Stations, who provide a good deal of information about self-assessed proficiency. For example, their 2006 survey indicated that 65 per cent of the population claimed to understand and to read English, 48 per cent claimed to write English, but only a 32 per cent said that they speak the language (Social Weather Stations, 2006). How, then, do we calculate the overall total for knowledge of English in the Philippines? One might well take the lower figure of 32 per cent as an overall total, but in some senses this seems counter-intuitive, as this appears to indicate a lower general level knowledge/use of English in the Philippines than in Hong Kong, which most observers would vigorously deny. Another complicating factor in the Philippine case is that a sizable percentage of the working population, an estimated 8 million or so, go overseas to work as engineers, technicians, health workers, nurses, domestic helpers, etc., and that one basic qualification for an overseas contract is at least a functional knowledge of the English language.

Given the difficulties in presenting reliable figures even for those societies where regular surveys take place, the problems in compiling statistics for less well-charted countries are enormous. In the case of India, the estimates of the English-knowing population have varied enormously in recent years. As David Crystal pointed out in the last issue of *English Today* (ET 93), one key story in the Asian context is that of English in India (Crystal, 2008:5). In the 1980s, estimates of the percentage of English speakers hovered around 3 per cent, but today, according to at least one national survey, around 33 per cent of people (a third of the population) claim to be able to hold a basic conversation in the language, which would indicate a total in the region of 350 million, a demographic he has suggested which qualifies India as 'the country with the largest English-speaking population in the world', bar none (Crystal, 2004).

Another emergent English-knowing society in Asia is China, and here again it is a story of numbers. In 1957, at a time when Russian was the major foreign language in schools, there were fewer than one thousand secondary-school English teachers, but by 2000 this figure had risen to 500,000 (Adamson, 2004). By 2003, the overall estimate for English teachers

at all levels was around one million, while the total of those learning/knowing English was thought to be around 250 million (McArthur, 2003). In the last issue of *ET*, Crystal (2008) even speculates that this figure may double by the end of 2008, given that many more millions are now studying the language in the run-up to the Olympic Games. In the Kachruvian sense, China is, of course, an 'expanding-circle'/EFL nation, and again one can problematise exactly what is meant by 'knowing English' in the China context, where Putonghua (Mandarin) has an unchallenged position as the national language and most English learners have relatively few real-life contexts where they can communicate with speakers from outside the People's Republic. Nevertheless, despite this, the story of English in China is one of astonishing proportions, demographically, statistically and sociolinguistically (Bolton, 2003).

Another numerically-important English-learning society in Asia is Japan, where Stanlaw (2004:284) estimates the total number of English speakers at approximately 41 million, or some 33 per cent of the population. However, given the question of proficiency, this figure seems high. Although by upper secondary level, a Japanese student will have had at least three hours of English per week for six years, and on completing university usually another two years of English, the level of attainment is generally disappointingly low. For example, Martin (2004) notes that:

... despite the great amount of time, energy, and money spent on English teaching, it is rare to find a Japanese student who, after six years of English, is able to engage in even a marginal dialogue with a speaker of English. Many factors have contributed to this disappointing and frustrating situation, most notably cultural and linguistic influences, and in particular the use of *katakana* script (one particular strand in the complex Japanese writing system) as an aid to transcribing – and often absorbing – foreign words into Japanese.

(Martin, 2004:50)

How then do we begin to trim the overall total for Japan from Stanlaw, based largely on the numbers who have learnt English, to come a more plausible figure for those that have at least a functional command of the language? Perhaps some compromise may be necessary here, otherwise we are left with a larger percentage for Japan than for the Philippines. This

is not to criticise Stanlaw's calculations, but rather to point to the inherent difficulties of playing the numbers game in this context. Table 1 below attempts to present approximate statistics for totals of English speakers across Asia, in the attempt to provide a broad picture of the spread of English across the region.

As noted above, the figures presented for English in Table 1 can at best be regarded as informed estimates (or even 'guesstimates'), based on current information, moderated by judgements based on personal knowledge of the communities. This has involved adjusting previously published estimates. Thus the total for the Philippines is an estimate of 48 per cent of the population (a compromise between the

most recent SWS percentages for receptive and productive abilities); and the percentage for Japan is calculated at around 20 per cent (in the attempt to allow for the low levels of attainment by Japanese students). By contrast, the table includes rather high estimates for both China and India, although some academics in both societies would query such large totals. Otherwise, if one has erred, it is on the side of caution. The estimates for the smaller outer-circle countries are based largely on percentages derived from Crystal (1997). In the case of the expanding-circle societies, with the notable exception of China, a rather conservative approach has been taken in the absence of accurate language surveys. In most instances,

Table 1: The statistics of Asian Englishes

Society	Approx. population	% of English speakers	Approx. totals
OUTER CIRCLE			
India	1,100 million	30%	330 million
Philippines	91 million	48%	44 million
Pakistan	165 million	11%	18 million
Nepal	29 million	30%	8.7 million
Malaysia	25 million	32%	8.0 million
Bangladesh	150 million	5%	7.5 million
Hong Kong	6.9 million	45%	3.1 million
Singapore	4.5 million	50%	2.2 million
Sri Lanka	21 million	10%	2.1 million
Brunei	0.4 million	39%	0.1 million
Bhutan	2.3 million	5%	0.1 million
EXPANDING CIRCLE			
China	1,322 million	25%	330 million
Japan	127 million	20%	25 million
Indonesia	234 million	5%	12 million
Thailand	65 million	10%	6.5 million
South Korea	49 million	10%	4.9 million
Vietnam	85 million	5%	4.2 million
Burma (Myanmar)	47 million	5%	2.4 million
Taiwan	23 million	10%	2.3 million
Cambodia	14 million	5%	0.7 million
Laos	6.5 million	5%	0.3 million

these calculations are either 10 per cent, as for South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, or 5 per cent, as for Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos and Vietnam (although I would be pleased to hear of more accurate estimates derived from censuses or language surveys).

Whatever the shortcomings of statistics in this context, such numbers do serve the basic purpose of indicating the astonishing spread of English within societies and across the region over recent decades, when the major spread of English in the region occurred not in the colonial period, but in the latter half of the twentieth century, as Asia's developing education systems began using and teaching English within mass education systems. Even with the very conservative estimates for a number of these Asian societies, we nevertheless reach a total of 424 million for outer-circle countries and 388 for expanding-circle areas, giving us a total of 812 million for South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. It may be now worth looking at the dynamics of English in contemporary Asia, in relation to a swathe of economic and social factors.

The economic and social dynamics of English in Asia

As in many other parts of the world, the spread of English across Asia has been propelled by a number of related economic and social factors, including demographics, economic change, technology and educational trends (Graddol, 2006).

At the level of population, many Asian societies have large populations, including China with 1.3 billion people, India with 1 billion, Indonesia with 238 million, Pakistan 159 million, and Bangladesh 141 million. Population growth is set to rise in the near future, with India expected to reach 1.6 billion by 2050, compared with 1.4 billion for China and 308 million for Indonesia (Al Tamimi, 2006).

When it comes to economic change and development, China has been a major success story during an era of globalisation. Since 2004, China has become the world's third largest exporter after the US and Germany, and China along with other Asian societies has benefited from high economic growth rates over the last two decades. Currently, China's annual economic growth is calculated at around 10 per cent, while India is running at 8 per cent, with such societies as Vietnam (8 per

cent), Indonesia (6 per cent), Philippines (6 per cent), Malaysia (5.5 per cent), Hong Kong (5.5 per cent), Singapore (5.5 per cent), Thailand (4.5 per cent), South Korea (4.5 per cent), and Taiwan (4 per cent), all achieving high rates of economic growth. By contrast, current figures for Japan (2 per cent), Europe (2.5 per cent), the UK (3 per cent) and the US (2 per cent) are all significantly lower.

Throughout the region, a number of Asian societies are achieving remarkably high GDP (Gross Domestic Product) results, but Asia also remains home to a number of the world's poorest countries, as illustrated by Table 2 below.

Economic development has also brought with it technological development in the leading countries of the region. China, India, Korea and Taiwan are all highly active in the world's IT and computer industries, although the division of labour here may vary somewhat, with India specialising more in software while the other three East Asian societies focus more on hardware production. These include such well-known products as *Lenovo* (formerly IBM) laptops from the People's Republic, *Samsung* electronics from South Korea, and *Acer* computers from Taiwan. Within just one generation, Asia has become computer-savvy in an

Table 2: GDPs (US\$ per capita) of selected Asian societies (2007)

Wealthiest	
Singapore	\$48,900
Hong Kong	\$42,000
Japan	\$33,800
Brunei	\$33,600
Taiwan	\$29,800
South Korea	\$24,600
Poorest	
Pakistan	\$2,600
Cambodia	\$1,800
Laos	\$1,900
Bangladesh	\$1,400
Nepal	\$1,100

Cf. The USA with \$46,000, Sweden \$36,900, UK \$35,300, Germany \$34,400. The figure for China is now \$5,300, and that for India \$2,700 (source: CIA, 2008)

unprecedented fashion. Another related result in this context has been the extent to which western businesses are now outsourcing their back-office work, including customer records and accounts, as well as call-centre operations, to societies such as India and the Philippines.

Linked to this has been the impact of massive social change in recent decades. The spread of English in Asia has been linked to the emergence and growth of sizeable middle classes throughout a number of Asian countries. Societies such as Hong Kong and Singapore have seen expansion in their middle classes for two to three decades, but now societies such as India and China have growing middle classes as well. In India it is estimated that income levels will rise by 300 per cent over the next twenty years, lifting 291 million Indians out of poverty, 'to create a 583 million-strong middle-class population by 2025' (*Asia Times*, 1 June, 2007). Similarly, in China, a recent study from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimated the middle class to comprise 19 per cent of the population in 2003, which accounts for some 247 million people. By 2020, it is estimated that '300 million, or 40 per cent of the Chinese population to be in the middle class by 2020' (PBS, 11 January, 2006).

The effects of such social change involve an increasing demand for education and an increasing demand for English. Within Asian school systems, children are beginning to learn English from the lowest forms of primary school onwards. In 2001, English was made compulsory in all Chinese primary schools, and a number of Indian states have established similar systems. In Asia, as in other parts of the world, the trend is that children are learning English at an ever earlier age. According to Graddol, the result of this will be that in Asia as elsewhere the function of English in the curriculum will no longer be that of 'foreign language', but instead will become a 'near universal basic skill' (2006:72). However, while such a scenario may hold good for societies like Hong Kong, Singapore, some sectors of Indian society, and some cities in China, the extent to which other Asian societies will follow this pattern, given wide divergences in wealth and prosperity as well as cultural attitudes, remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the overall pattern of links between development, economic prosperity, the growth of the Asian middle classes and the spread of English seem

undeniable. What is remarkable about the Asian experience in recent years has been the extent to which societies have moved from poor and often pre-modern conditions, as in India and China, to modernity and beyond. A modern lifestyle for most Asians means life in the city, employment, housing and a steady income. It also means English, if not for them, then for their children. English has become a marker of middle-class identity, as well as a means for young people to gain an internationally competitive education and employment.

Asian Englishes

One of the outstanding contributions of scholarship in world Englishes over the last twenty-five years has been to highlight the existence and vitality of localised forms of English throughout the Asian region, so that today it has become almost commonplace to refer to Indian English, Malaysian English, Philippine English, Singapore English and Hong Kong English. Part of this work has been to study and describe the 'sociolinguistic realities' underpinning distinct varieties, in terms of their sociolinguistic histories, as well as a description of the status and functions of English within outer-circle Asian communities, not least in relation to local hierarchies of language. At a linguistic level, the study of individual varieties of English typically involves a description of distinctive features at the levels of phonology, vocabulary, and grammar, and much work in this field has been concerned with establishing a solid descriptive framework for this task.

Hitherto, the most detailed studies of Asian Englishes have focused on such postcolonial societies as India, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, thus contributing over the past three decades to a sizable body of description (while very recent work has also included Hong Kong and varieties of Chinese English). At a linguistic level, much of the descriptive work here has been concerned to identify and to highlight the distinctive features of individual varieties in terms of phonology (accent), lexis (vocabulary) and grammar (morphology and syntax). This has recently been aided by the availability of comparable Asian English corpora through the International Corpus of English project (Greenbaum and Nelson, 1996). The outcome of this research has been the increasingly detailed description of the accents, word stock and grammars of individual Asian Englishes, in

terms of both substrate as well as developmental features.

In addition to linguistic features which are held to be distinctive for (if not unique to) particular outer-circle societies – most visibly at the level of vocabulary – there are also patterns of ‘structural nativisation’ that are found across a number of outer-circle Asian societies. At the level of phonology, these include the lack of distinction between long and short vowels, the realisation of diphthongs as monophthongs, a reduction of vowel contrasts, consonant-cluster reduction and the use of syllable-timed intonation (Schneider, 2007). At the level of grammar, features that appear in a number of Asian varieties include the lack of plural marking; omission of third-person singular –s; use of invariant question tags (*isn't it*); the weakening of the count/mass distinction with nouns (as in *equipments*, *furnitures*, etc.); and inverted word order in indirect questions. However, current research into the linguistic differentiation of individual varieties points less to the characterisation of such Englishes as uniquely-constituted entities and more to an appreciation of the ways in which the structural features of such varieties develop as a result of the complex interaction of substrate influences with developmental processes as simplification and overgeneralisation (Schneider, 2007). Research on Asian Englishes thus has the strong potential to extend our understanding of a range of linguistic processes associated with language contact, multilingualism and second-language acquisition.

In addition, the potential for continuing research on English across Asia is considerable, given the multiple sociolinguistic roles for the language across the region. In addition to studies of English in individual outer-circle Asian societies, such as those mentioned above, there are interesting issues concerning the status, functions and features of English across a swathe of lesser-researched (expanding-circle) societies, including Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, etc. There are also pan-Asian issues relating to the use of English in such domains as the education, media, literature and popular culture that cut across the region. It was largely in response to this need that Hong Kong University Press established the book series *Asian Englishes Today*, which thus far has published three volumes on English in particular Asian societies (Bolton (2002) on Hong Kong, Stanlaw (2004)

on Japan, and Adamson (2004) on China), and two dealing with Asia from a wider sociolinguistic perspective (Kachru & Nelson, 2005, and Kachru 2004). Other volumes on the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia, as well as on English in Asian universities, English in Asian popular culture, and English as an ASEAN lingua franca (see Kirkpatrick, this issue) are scheduled for publication in the near future.²

However, whatever the current interest in the dramatic spread and utilisation of English across Asia, it would be misleading to give the impression that such tendencies were without their discontents. For some linguists, the world Englishes approach to such issues is seen as enabling the continuing linguistic imperialism of ‘global English’ and a related degradation of linguistic ecology (Phillipson, 2002). For others, not least those motivated by business and commercial interests, discontent has taken another form, with numerous complaints across Asian societies concerning the abilities or ‘proficiency’ of English-users across the region.

The issue of proficiency

Despite the ground-breaking interest in individual Asian Englishes over the last thirty years, the degree of acceptance that such varieties have gained has varied a great deal. While academics and linguists have often revelled in the task of identifying and describing distinct varieties of English, the reactions of the educational, political and business elites have often been less than enthusiastic.

Despite the patient explanations of many linguists, the use of such terms as ‘Hong Kong English’, ‘Indian English’, ‘Malaysian English’, ‘Philippine English’, and ‘Singapore English’ have typically evoked negative reactions from business and political leaders. To some extent, attitudes among academics and educators may have softened (and become better informed) in recent years, but misunderstandings still abound and the popular discussion of English in many Asian communities often revolves around ‘standards’ of English. While much of the discourse on such issues in individual societies may be generated by the particular issues that adhere to local ‘complaint traditions’ about language standards similar to those of the UK and US, there is evidence that there are real-world issues for Asian businesses and technology enterprises at stake here too.

As many Asian societies have moved away from labour-intensive mass production towards higher-level service industries, the demand for more proficient speakers of English has grown. In both Singapore and Hong Kong in recent years, the governments have both introduced various campaigns to improve standards of English at work and in the public domain, and similar schemes have received support in such other societies as India and the Philippines. In these latter two countries, concerns about English proficiency have been prompted by the importance of the language in these two nations' developing BPO ('business processing outsourcing') industries, which include international call centres (or 'contact centres') as well as such related industries as back-office documentation, financial services, and legal and medical transcription.

The emergence of such industries has helped develop both the Indian economy and – perhaps more dramatically – that of the Philippines, with both locations attracting clients through a combination of low labour costs and a claimed high proficiency in the English language. Industry commentators, however, have expressed concern about the availability of good English speakers, with companies in both countries accepting only 4–6 per cent of (college-educated) applicants for jobs in call centres. One recent industry report entitled 'India Facing Offshore Call-centre Skills Crisis' claimed that 'only a small percentage of the two million English-speaking graduates turned out each year by Indian universities have good enough language skills to work in customer-facing operations' (McCue, 2005), while another dispatch from the Philippines noted that '[c]all centres might already be scraping the bottom of the barrel for qualified employees, particularly those with adequate English comprehension, speaking and writing skills' (Callcentres.net, 2005). While such concerns with high-level proficiency are perhaps most visible in the BPO industries, similar anxieties are felt by international and regional businesses across a range of information and service industries, all of which has contributed to an ongoing concern among business communication professionals across Asia.

As with statistics concerning the spread of English in the region, hard evidence relating to comparative levels of proficiency is hard to come by. One potentially useful source of data are the results of international tests, such as

those for the TOEFL Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examinations (TOEFL, 2006, 2007). The average TOEFL scores for individual Asian societies are presented in Table 3 below, together with a somewhat ad hoc ranking of these societies (based on 'paper-based' and 'computer-based' results). There are, however, severe limitations on the extent to which we can draw sound inferences on the basis of such figures, and these scores are not claimed by the TOEFL organisation (the Educational Testing Service) itself to represent comparative national proficiency levels. Crucially, we lack detailed information about the demographic, educational and social characteristics of candidates in the societies concerned, making any comparisons between national groups haphazard at best. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the results are interesting at even an impressionistic level. At the higher end of the table we find Singapore, India, Malaysia, Pakistan and the Philippines, which generally tallies with anecdotal perceptions of English

Table 3: TOEFL scores for individual Asian societies, 2005–6

Rank	Country	Paper-based (computer-based)
1	Singapore	— (255)
2	India	586 (236)
3	Malaysia	572 (232)
4	Philippines	566 (238)
5	Pakistan	562 (238)
6	Bangladesh	557 (228)
7	China	557 (216)
8	Sri Lanka	548 (234)
9	Hong Kong	539 (216)
10	South Korea	538 (218)
11	Nepal	535 (218)
12	Indonesia	535 (214)
13	Vietnam	534 (207)
14	Taiwan	530 (206)
15	Burma (Myanmar)	518 (206)
16	Cambodia	— (206)
17	Thailand	500 (200)
18	Japan	497 (192)

use in such societies. At the lower end, we find such countries as Japan, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma and Taiwan.

Apart from these broad comments, however, few accurate and sound conclusions can be drawn from what are somewhat fragmentary data. Aside from the limitations of the data, there are also profound issues about how 'proficiency' might best be measured in Asian contexts, given that many traditional proficiency tests are benchmarked in various ways against inner-circle (UK or US) 'native speaker' patterns of performance, and yet ignore the multilingual proficiency of many Asian users of English.

What does seem likely, however, is that, across Asia, as economies move up the 'value-added' chain from labour-intensive into knowledge-intensive, high-tech and service-related industries, the demand for higher-level English skills will grow. Concern with proficiency, moreover, is not limited to Asia, but is a topic that is drawing increased interest in Europe, and, in Sweden, the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Fund is currently financing a large-scale research programme on 'High-level Proficiency in Second Language Use', which includes a project on 'linguistic outsourcing' in India and the Philippines.²

Within the Asian context, one might also speculate about the linguistic outcomes of the globalisation of Asian industries. For example, in India and the Philippines, will the BPOs and international call centres bring with them (as many believe) a reorientation of linguistic performance away from localised, intranational norms towards a 'native-like' performance in British and American English? After decades of de-centring from the UK and US, are Asian Englishes about to re-centre their linguistic norms? To what extent, are such expectations of 'native-like' or 'near-native' proficiency realistic, or ever achieved, for that matter? These are some of the questions highlighted by such developments. A related question, too large to even begin to tackle here, would be the extent to which the globalisation of English-language media such as the film, DVDs, television, the Internet, etc., are similarly having an impact in spreading standard or non-standard (for example, 'hip-hop') norms from, in particular, the US to Asia and other regions of the world.

Whatever the complexities, it does seem as if the issue of proficiency in the Asian context has now gained a good deal of prominence. In India, for example, the Central Institute of

English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL) at Hyderabad has recently introduced a new National English Language Testing Service (NELTS) in order to meet the demand for proficiency testing across a wide range of industries and institutions. In Hong Kong, the British-developed 'International English Language Testing System' (IELTS) is now administered at a number of universities, while TOEFL and TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) are widely used within the BPO industry in the Philippines. For good or ill, this rather recent concern with the benchmarking and measurement of English proficiency seems set to stay for the foreseeable future, not least in response to the demands of both the business and educational sectors.

If nothing else, the issue of proficiency may also serve to re-awaken – and to re-configure – research into individual bilingualism (and multilingualism) within outer-circle societies. For a number of years, approaches to such questions seem to have polarised researchers in second-language acquisition versus those employing a world Englishes approach. In the past, second-language acquisition research has often been dominated by approaches concerned with the adaptation of immigrants to a host societies such as the US, where a standard language ideology tends to view monolingualism as the default norm. By contrast, the 'varieties-based' approach to world Englishes – with its focus on features rather than errors – has been built on an extrapolation (and idealisation) from the individual choices made by individual language users in selecting from the 'features pool' they have available to them (Mufwene, 2001). In a reconfigured approach to individual bilingualism, the challenge for second-language acquisition research is to recognise that, in many Asian contexts, individual language learning takes place in complex multilingual and functionally-differentiated settings. This is certainly so in many parts of India and the Philippines, where language users are usually trilingual, and also in most Asian settings, where there is a typical home-school or home-office language switch, at the very least. Conversely, the challenge for the world Englishes researcher may be to re-examine the notion of 'native speaker' within localised contexts, and to provide psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic descriptions of the 'native speaker' of Philippine English or Indian English, for example, not least in order to

investigate what it is this may tell us about the native speaker of British or American English, as well as the ontological status of this rather controversial term

Conclusion

This article has attempted to survey a range of issues relating to English across Asia and as well as approaches to Asian Englishes as localised varieties of English. It began by reviewing recent statistics on English in Asia before discussing the economic and social dynamics of English throughout the region, as well as research on Asian Englishes. The article then considered the issue of English 'proficiency' in a number of Asian societies, noting that, while the growing interest in this seems driven by market forces, a wider consideration of English proficiency in the Asian context highlights the need for a new, or at least reconfigured, interface between second-language acquisition research and world Englishes. ■

Notes

1 ASEAN is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which currently includes Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

2 This research programme is entitled 'High-level Proficiency in Second Language Use' (in Swedish, *Avancerad Andraspråks Användning*), and it is funded by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Fund (*Riksbankens Jubiléumsfond*), Dnr M2005-0459. The research team is led by Professor Kenneth Hyltenstam of the Centre for Bilingual Research at Stockholm University, Sweden.

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