A Critique on the Limitations of Kachru's Concentric Circles of World Englishes Model

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Introduction

The English language is indeed the most widely used Lingua Franca in the world as English is spoken as the first or secondary language approximately 1.35 billion people worldwide, equal to 17% of the world's population (Gration, 2022), together with its wider popularity as a foreign language in many populous countries such as China, Indonesia, and Brazil. The famous British linguist, Crystal (2012, p. 27) even finds that "all the evidence suggests that the position of English as a global language is going to become stronger."

However, the truth is that globally people speak different varieties of English in different regions of the world, thus the term 'world Englishes' came into being with the English language being worldwide spread with different varieties. Studies on the spread and use of Englishes have been constantly undertaken to reveal distinct levels of these 'Englishes,' and one of the well-known and influential theoretical models has been what is called Three Concentric Circles of English, created, and developed by Kachru since the mid of 1980s (Al-Mutairi, 2020). For decades, the model has been influential in shaping people's understanding of English from sociolinguistic perspective or even beyond. Meanwhile, the model has been being challenged and criticized since its limitations are constantly found by different scholars (Jenkins, 2015). The present essay attempts to critique the model in terms of its weaknesses or limitations.

1. Basic Conceptual Framework

1.1 Defining 'World Englishes'

It is necessary to begin by defining and explaining the term 'World Englishes.' The term *World Englishes could be defined as 'the* differences in the English language that emerge as it is used in various contexts across the world' (World Englishes: An Introduction, no date). In my understanding, English language takes on different looks within different social and cultural contexts and thus sociolinguists focused on how these varieties used in different sociolinguistic contexts, analyzing their history, background, function, and influence, etc. As the term 'Englishes' is indicative of distinct identities of the language and literature. As explained by Kachru (1996), "'Englishes' symbolizes variation in form and function, use in linguistically and culturally distinct contexts, and a range of variety in literary creativity" (1996, p.135). There is one more inclusive term 'Global Englishes' used, but as 'World English' is used for 'nation-bound' varieties (Jenkins, 2015) and Kachru used 'World Englishes' in his works, 'World Englishes' will be used in the present essay.

1.2 Kachru's Concentric Circles of World Englishes Model

To brief introduce the model, it is a system for classifying varieties of English, which was intended to capture the nature of the diffusion of English (Berns, 2019). Kachru (1985) divides World Englishes into three concentric circles, the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. English is spread from the UK to other few countries with English as their native language or first language, such as United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand (The Inner Circle); The second circle involves those countries with English as their second language, such as India, Kenya, Pakistan, etc., known as the Outer Circle; The third is the countries with English as their foreign language without official status, such as China, Egypt, Indonesia, etc. On the one hand, the three circles 'represent the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition, and the functional allocation of English in diverse cultural contexts (Kachru, 1985, p.12)', but he added that they 'have a message about the codification and diversification of English' and can be regarded as 'norm-providing, norm-developing, and norm-dependent' (Kachru, 1996, p.138). This definition definitely gives the uneven power of each circle. Kachru continues to develop his model and believes that the implications of this sociolinguistic reality of English causes both agony and ecstasy to different people and groups (1996). This statement indeed reveals the socio-linguistic power of the spread of English.

2. The Critique on the limitations of the Model

Though with constant challenges and criticism, the model is used extensively by the scholars worldwide due to its indeed invaluable significance and convenience (Jenkins, 2015). The truth is that the spread of world Englishes is so complex that the model has always been challenged. Jenkins (2015) also presents some points in terms of criticizing Kachru's Model. However, Rooy (2019) argues the criticism of the model was invalid due to partial readings of Kachru's overall ideas. No matter how the model is regarded, partial or impartial, it is worth revisiting it again. The present short critique essay aims to focus on its limitations. More specifically, the essay aims to critique the static characteristic of classifying the World Englishes.

2.1 The historical-and-geographical-based classification

As indicated from the model, what is included in the circles are geographically and historically based, which reflects the world Englishes, especially the historical and geographical changes from a static and formalistic perspective.

Firstly, the three circles are divided based on the historical traditions with ENL, ESL and EFL labels. However, the real situations are much more complex. For example, in the Inner Circle countries, a large number of immigrants have their second generation born in the UK or US and identified legally and politically as their citizens, but it is very likely that they grow up in bilingual context and speak bilingually (both English and their heritage language) and their English is acquired differently from the native

or L1 speakers of English and their English might not be regarded as 'norm providing'. Even for those native speakers in the UK or US, English is spoken with the interpretations of a large number of dialects. In the UK itself, Englishes vary from countries and regions. The various accents of native English speakers make it difficult to be regarded as standard English to be 'norm-providing' in terms of pronunciation. As Bruthiaux (2003) argues that the model fails to explain variation in the different dialects of English. What is more, Bruthiaux (2003, p.161) also believes that Kachru's three concentric circles model is too limited because it is 'a primarily nation-based model which draws on specific historical events, and which correlates poorly with current sociolinguistic data'. From another perspective, as Al-Mutairi pointed that 'it established differences in the use of English between countries that share a colonial history and yet belong to different circles in Kachru's model'(2019, p.87) . To sum up, the classification has its limitation on the historical setting where Kachru is located and fails to reflect the diversity within the same geographical and historical perspective.

2.2 Where to get the norm?

Although Kachru was found not to indicate that the Inner Circle countries have any sense of superiority (Jenkins, 2015), he did mention that Inner Circle plays the role as a norm-provider, Outer Circle as norm-developer and Expanding Circle as the norm-dependent. To the EFL countries of the Expanding Circle, for example China, the real question is, which specific English norm or standard should its English learners follow?

Firstly, there are noticeable divergence, or linguistic diversity between British and North American English and thousands of words either do not exist at all in one or other variety, or have completely or partially different meanings (Jenkins, 2015). And this number is expected to increase day by day since the essence of language is like a container of ever-emerging new concepts in each social-cultural context. Some slang or idioms work well in America may be misinterpreted or not interpreted by British people. As British English and American English are the two prestige Englishes and also major two sources of providing norm for the thousands of millions of English learners in China, the parents of pre-school children, the young college students do have a crazy to learn the authentic English from Inner Circle countries, but they have difficulty making the right choice between the two dominant ones. Other varieties of this circle are secondary, but the point here is that it is not uniform for all the countries in the same circle, and it leaves further space to explore.

Secondly, should Expanding Circle countries such as China follow the norm with its own characteristics? In Kachru's model, China is contained in the Expanding Circle where English is learned as a foreign language, a variety without any official status and dependent on the standards set by the native speakers in the Inner Circle.

However, it is always significant to uncover what is behind the circle. As Crystal (2008) estimates, China has a substantial English-knowing population of 440 million or even more.

Due to the increasing emphasis on international exchange, English is increasingly used as a medium of instruction on many educational institutions in China. The scholars such as Wang (2013) argues that there is need for change from monolithic English to pluralistic Englishes in mainstream ELT in China. The reason behind is the belief of 'the majority of ELF users, continue to be considered as followers of exonormative English' (p. 259), so Chinese English users should regard English more pragmatically on its communicative function instead following the unreachable norm from native speakers of the Inner Circles. At the same time, Chinese government set about organizing a group of scholars to develop its own assessment framework of English in 2014 and China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) was released and came into effect 2018 (Ministry of Education, P.R. China, 2018). The tailor-made assessment is now being used to further construct the English variety in China and brings out a more realistic attitude from both the Chinese authority and the Chinese public and they tend to seek the balance between the ideal norm and actual practice of English.

2.3 The Blurred Boundaries

The distinction between the three circles appears to be blurred, or in other words, there are grey areas between each pair of close circles. The British English apart, all other Englishes in the two circles are caused by immigration or colonization of the Britain and the differences between the two domains are that Englishes in the US, Australia and Canada Englishes are resulted from massive immigration and English is spoken as the mother tongue while the English is spoken as the second language or one language within a bilingual or multilingual context in the Outer Circle (Jenkins, 2015). However, the truth is that the waves of globalization and immigration blurred the boundaries. English is likely to be the first language learned in some Outer Circle countries and may be used at home rather than only at institutions. That is to say, it is to assertive to classify just based on whether L1 or L2 the speaker use. What's more, it is equally same to the boundaries between the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle. According to the data from Graddol (1997), about twenty countries are in the process of transition from EFL and ESL status, such as Argentina, Belgium, Costa Rica, Denmark, Sudan, Switzerland, etc. I argue that the ongoing change does indicate that it is too assertive by judging the L1 or L2 from the speakers.

2.4 Bilingualism and Multilingualism Ignored.

Different from the ideal model, bilingual and multilingual speakers are not uncommon around the world. To name just a few, the Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Ireland people in the UK are born and educated in the bilingual context. Numerous speakers from ethnic groups or tribes in some countries of Africa and Asia are naturally born in

multilingual contexts. For the bilingual or multilingual communities in the UK or US, etc. from the Inner Circles, or in countries such as Singapore or India from the Outer Circles, the situations of how English is acquired can be quite complex. The general tendency is that a large number of people worldwide are gradually becoming bilingual or multilingual. However, the model fails not contain specific bilingual or multilingual situations, which might change the nature of each circle. And a more salient problem is that since people have difficulty in distinguishing their languages they acquire as L1, L2, or L3, and so on, English is hard to be regarded as L1, L2 or L3..., therefore the current classification is problematic given the complex bilingual or multilingual contexts.

Conclusion

To be objective, Kachru's Concentric Circles of World Englishes Model has had the landmark significance to the sociolinguistic study of the spread of World Englishes, providing a paradigm or a visual map for categorizing and conceptualizing the complicated vast varieties of English in a convenient way. The three concentric circles indicate the differentiated relation between different varieties, bringing forth immeasurable power to the learning and application of English for different countries. Different scholars may differ in the extent of its importance, but no one denies its achievements.

Nevertheless, the aim of the essay is to be critical, especially to comment from a Chinese perspective. The model has its obvious limitations and should be further updated and improved. Its historical and geographical classification leads to its being static, failing to cover the realities of English varieties; The roles of 'norm-providing,' 'norm-developing' and 'norm-dependent' should be renewed into a pluralistic Englishes; The circles fail to consider the complex bilingual or multilingual contexts. As Bruthiaux (2003, p.159) points out, 'the model can continue to serve as a shorthand for English worldwide' but must make adaptations. Based on the above-mentioned limitations, the present essay argues that the model reveals its over-simplification of dealing with the world Englishes and much further work is expected.

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