

A Critical Evaluation of Kachru's Concentric Circles Model: Rethinking the Boundaries of World Englishes

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1. Introduction

The study of *World Englishes* has become one of the most influential areas in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, providing a framework for understanding the global diversity of English. Among various models, **Braj Kachru's Concentric Circles of World Englishes (1985, 1992)** remains foundational in conceptualising English as a pluricentric language. The model divides English users into three categories: the *Inner Circle* (native varieties such as the UK and the US), the *Outer Circle* (postcolonial contexts where English has an institutionalised role, such as India or Singapore), and the *Expanding Circle* (EFL contexts where English is used as a foreign language). This tripartite framework successfully challenged the dominance of native-speaker norms by legitimising multiple English varieties across different sociolinguistic contexts (Kachru, 1992; Jenkins, 2003).

However, as the global landscape of English use evolves, Kachru's model has attracted increasing criticism for its **static, geographically determined, and hierarchical nature** (Bruthiaux, 2003; Pennycook, 2007). The rigid division between “native” and “non-native” speakers, and between the so-called *core* and *periphery*, fails to reflect the fluid, transnational, and hybrid realities of English in the 21st century (Seidlhofer, 2011). In particular, the *Expanding Circle*—representing the majority of English users worldwide—is positioned as linguistically dependent on the Inner Circle, perpetuating ideological hierarchies of linguistic ownership and authority (Holliday, 2006).

This essay critically evaluates **the ideological hierarchy embedded in Kachru's model**, focusing on how it reinforces native-speaker dominance and marginalises users from the Expanding Circle. Through engagement with recent perspectives from *Global Englishes* and *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF) studies, the essay argues that while Kachru's model was revolutionary for its time, it now requires reconceptualisation to accommodate the fluidity, equality, and intercultural realities of global English use.

2. Background and Literature Review

The concept of *World Englishes* (WE) emerged in the 1980s as part of a broader recognition that English had developed distinct identities and functions across global contexts. Among its leading proponents, **Braj Kachru (1985, 1992)** proposed the *Concentric Circles model* as a sociolinguistic framework to categorise the historical, functional, and sociocultural diversity of English. The model positioned English use in three concentric circles: the *Inner Circle* (native English-speaking countries such as the UK and USA), the *Outer Circle* (postcolonial societies where English serves institutional purposes, such as India and Singapore), and the *Expanding Circle* (contexts where English is primarily a foreign language, such as China or Japan).

Kachru's intention was to challenge the linguistic imperialism implicit in the native-speaker paradigm and to legitimise non-native varieties as equally valid forms of English (Kachru, 1992). This theoretical move represented a shift from a monolithic conception of English to a **pluricentric model**, acknowledging multiple "norm-providing" and "norm-developing" centres of linguistic authority. The model also encouraged the emergence of research on regional norms and pedagogical autonomy in *World Englishes* scholarship (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

Scholars such as **Jenkins (2003)** and **Seidlhofer (2011)** further extended Kachru's ideas by exploring *English as a Lingua Franca* (ELF), where English operates as a medium of intercultural communication rather than as a native variety. This approach emphasises communicative effectiveness and mutual intelligibility over native-like accuracy, thereby reinforcing Kachru's call for inclusivity. Similarly, **Phillipson (1992)** viewed Kachru's framework as a counterpoint to *linguistic imperialism*, arguing that it decentralised power away from traditional centres such as Britain and the United States.

However, despite its progressive orientation, the *Concentric Circles model* has been criticised for its **structural rigidity and ideological implications**. **Bruthiaux (2003)** argues that the model oversimplifies global English use by linking linguistic legitimacy to geography rather than communicative function. Likewise, **Pennycook (2007)** contends that English today operates within transnational, postcolonial, and digital flows that transcend Kachru's static boundaries. The model,

though revolutionary at its inception, risks reinforcing the very hierarchies it sought to dismantle—those privileging *Inner Circle* varieties as linguistically superior or norm-giving.

Another key concern relates to the marginalisation of the *Expanding Circle*. Although Kachru conceptualised this group as *norm-dependent*, later scholarship has shown that users in this circle often demonstrate creative, adaptive uses of English in both global and local contexts (Canagarajah, 1999; Holliday, 2006). By maintaining the *Inner Circle* as the default source of linguistic legitimacy, the model implicitly sustains a *native-speakerist* ideology, which continues to influence English language teaching (ELT) policy and assessment frameworks worldwide (Jenkins, 2007; Galloway & Rose, 2015).

More recent paradigms—particularly *Global Englishes* and *Translingualism*—have sought to move beyond the limitations of Kachru’s model. These frameworks emphasise English as a dynamic, fluid resource negotiated among multilingual speakers, rather than as a fixed set of varieties. For instance, **Pennycook (2007)** conceptualises English as a *transcultural flow*, while **Galloway and Rose (2015)** propose a *Global Englishes paradigm* that recognises the legitimacy of all English users as co-owners of the language.

In summary, while Kachru’s *Concentric Circles* remain a cornerstone of *World Englishes* research, their static, geography-based classifications have been increasingly questioned. Contemporary linguistic realities—marked by globalisation, mobility, and digital communication—demand a reconceptualisation of English as a fluid, networked system of interaction. This critique provides the foundation for the next section, which examines how Kachru’s hierarchical structure continues to shape perceptions of linguistic ownership and inequality in global English use.

3. Critical Discussion: The Ideological Hierarchy in Kachru’s Model

Although Kachru’s *Concentric Circles model* was revolutionary in recognising the pluralisation of English, it paradoxically reproduces the very hierarchies it sought to dismantle. At the heart of this paradox lies the **ideological hierarchy embedded in the model’s spatial and categorical structure**—a hierarchy that privileges the *Inner Circle* as norm-providing, positions the *Outer Circle*

as norm-developing, and relegates the *Expanding Circle* to a norm-dependent periphery (Kachru, 1992). This stratified configuration inadvertently reinforces a native-speakerist ideology that associates linguistic legitimacy and authority with historical colonial power and geographic centrality.

3.1 Native-speakerism and Linguistic Ownership

One of the most significant criticisms of Kachru's framework concerns its implicit reinforcement of **native-speakerism**, the belief that native speakers represent the ideal linguistic model and ultimate source of authority. Holliday (2006) argues that despite Kachru's inclusive intentions, the tripartite structure of his model entrenches the privileged status of Inner Circle speakers by continuing to define other varieties in relation to the native norm. The labels *norm-providing*, *norm-developing*, and *norm-dependent* encode a hierarchy of linguistic legitimacy that mirrors colonial relations of dominance and dependency.

This ideological configuration has far-reaching implications for English language teaching (ELT). As Jenkins (2007) and Galloway and Rose (2015) observe, the persistence of native-speaker norms continues to shape teacher recruitment, curriculum design, and proficiency assessment worldwide. Teachers from Inner Circle backgrounds are often perceived as inherently more qualified, while learners in the Expanding Circle are positioned as perpetual apprentices striving for unattainable native-like mastery. Thus, Kachru's framework, while ostensibly pluralistic, risks institutionalising a **deficit discourse** that frames non-native speakers in terms of linguistic lack rather than multilingual resourcefulness (Canagarajah, 1999).

3.2 The Marginalisation of the Expanding Circle

The Expanding Circle represents the majority of global English users—an estimated 1.5 billion speakers who use English for education, business, and intercultural communication. Yet in Kachru's model, this group is defined primarily by its *lack of ownership* of English norms. Phillipson (1992) and Bruthiaux (2003) argue that such positioning reproduces the ideology of *linguistic imperialism*, where power over language standards remains concentrated in historical centres of English dominance.

Moreover, the assumption that Expanding Circle users are merely “norm-dependent” ignores empirical evidence of creative and contextually appropriate English usage in these regions. Research in *Global Englishes* (Jenkins, 2015; Galloway & Rose, 2015) and *English as a Lingua Franca* (Seidlhofer, 2011) demonstrates that speakers from China, Japan, or Europe often co-construct intelligible and effective communication without adhering to Inner Circle norms. In these contexts, communicative success is measured not by conformity to native grammar, but by pragmatic adaptability and mutual intelligibility (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

By maintaining a peripheral status for the Expanding Circle, Kachru’s model indirectly legitimises the **native–non-native binary**, perpetuating inequality in linguistic identity. Canagarajah (2007) calls this a “centre–periphery epistemology” that confines linguistic authority within a colonial legacy. For Expanding Circle users, this hierarchy translates into material consequences: linguistic discrimination, restricted professional opportunities, and diminished self-perception as legitimate English speakers.

3.3 Static Geography vs. Dynamic Globalisation

Another critical weakness of Kachru’s model lies in its **geographical determinism**. The model equates linguistic legitimacy with national boundaries, assuming that English usage can be neatly categorised by political geography. However, in an era of digital mobility, migration, and transnational communication, English functions as a **global repertoire** rather than a territorially bound system (Pennycook, 2007). For instance, the use of English on global social media platforms such as TikTok or YouTube transcends the Inner–Outer–Expanding categorisation: a Chinese influencer, a Nigerian entrepreneur, and a German academic may all participate in English-mediated discourse communities that bear no relation to national origin.

This dynamic, translocal nature of English challenges the static, spatial logic of the concentric circles. Schneider’s (2007) *Dynamic Model of Postcolonial Englishes* proposes that English varieties evolve through continuous contact and adaptation, suggesting that Kachru’s framework needs reconceptualisation as a **network model** rather than a hierarchical map. Similarly, Blommaert (2010) advocates for a *sociolinguistics of mobility*, where language is understood as a resource circulating across global flows rather than as a possession of fixed communities.

3.4 Reinterpreting Kachru in the Age of Global Englishes

While critical, it is essential to acknowledge that Kachru's model was historically groundbreaking in legitimising the multiplicity of Englishes. It served as an intellectual catalyst for *World Englishes* scholarship, paving the way for more fluid frameworks such as *Global Englishes*, *English as a Lingua Franca*, and *Translingualism*. As Jenkins (2015) notes, Kachru's work shifted the paradigm from "ownership by native speakers" to "ownership by all users." However, contemporary scholarship now seeks to extend this vision by dissolving hierarchical distinctions altogether.

Pennycook (2017) argues that we must move beyond *World Englishes* to a *world of Englishes*, where English is seen not as multiple fixed varieties but as a set of dynamic, hybrid practices embedded in cultural exchange. In this sense, a *post-Kachruvian* perspective views English as a relational and negotiated practice rather than a stratified system. This reconceptualisation aligns with the *plurilingual turn* in applied linguistics, which embraces multilingual fluidity as the norm rather than the exception (Canagarajah, 2013).

3.5 Summary of Critical Points

In sum, Kachru's Concentric Circles model occupies an ambivalent position in the history of *World Englishes*. On one hand, it broke the hegemony of monolithic English by legitimising diversity; on the other, it inadvertently sustained hierarchical ideologies that privilege native norms and marginalise peripheral voices. Its categorical rigidity, geographic essentialism, and implicit native-speakerism limit its explanatory power in a globalised, interconnected world.

The evolution of English today—characterised by online communication, migration, and global knowledge exchange—demands a theoretical shift from static circles to **networked fluidity**, from linguistic ownership to **shared agency**, and from native-speakerism to **inclusive multilingualism**. These insights form the theoretical basis for reimagining English as a dynamic global resource rather than a stratified colonial relic.

4. Implications for Research and Pedagogy

The critique of Kachru's *Concentric Circles model* highlights the need for a paradigm shift in both linguistic research and English language pedagogy. While Kachru's framework offered an essential recognition of English diversity, its hierarchical implications underscore the importance of reorienting our approaches to reflect the *fluid, networked, and equitable* nature of English in global use.

4.1 Implications for Linguistic Research

From a research perspective, future studies should move beyond static, geography-based categorizations and adopt **dynamic, sociocognitive, and translingual frameworks**. English can no longer be adequately studied as a set of fixed varieties within predefined circles; rather, it functions as a repertoire of semiotic resources negotiated by multilingual speakers (Canagarajah, 2013). Researchers such as Pennycook (2017) and Blommaert (2010) have proposed *mobility-oriented* approaches that account for how English circulates across digital, professional, and intercultural contexts. These perspectives encourage scholars to analyse *Englishes* as fluid practices rather than bounded systems.

Moreover, a **decolonial turn** in applied linguistics calls for attention to issues of power, legitimacy, and identity in English research. By challenging the implicit Eurocentricity of Kachru's model, scholars can better represent how English functions as a tool for both empowerment and inequality in global communication. This critical orientation also invites intersectional analyses that consider how race, class, and gender intersect with linguistic hierarchies in multilingual spaces.

4.2 Implications for Pedagogy

In English language teaching, the recognition of English as a *pluricentric and dynamic resource* necessitates pedagogical transformation. Instead of positioning native-speaker norms as the target, ELT should embrace **Global Englishes-informed pedagogy**, which promotes intelligibility, adaptability, and intercultural awareness (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Jenkins, 2015). Teachers can design classroom tasks that expose learners to diverse accents, discourses, and pragmatic conventions, reflecting authentic global use.

Furthermore, teacher education programmes must critically interrogate **native-speakerism** and empower educators from the Outer and Expanding Circles as legitimate language professionals. Encouraging reflexivity and inclusivity in teacher identity development can dismantle the hierarchical assumptions embedded in traditional ELT models.

4.3 Summary

Ultimately, the critique of Kachru's model extends beyond theoretical refinement—it demands a rethinking of how English is *researched, taught, and owned*. A post-Kachruvian paradigm envisions English as a shared, negotiated, and ethically inclusive practice that reflects the realities of global communication. By integrating critical, sociocultural, and pedagogical insights, linguistics can move toward a more just and representative understanding of English in the world.

5. Conclusion

Kachru's *Concentric Circles model* has been one of the most influential frameworks in understanding the global spread and diversity of English. It challenged the linguistic imperialism of the native-speaker paradigm and provided a foundational lens for legitimising multiple Englishes across postcolonial and global contexts. However, as this essay has demonstrated, the model's static, geography-based classification and its implicit ideological hierarchy render it inadequate for describing the dynamic realities of English use in the 21st century.

The analysis of the model's hierarchical implications—particularly its privileging of the Inner Circle and marginalisation of the Expanding Circle—reveals how it inadvertently sustains native-speakerism and linguistic inequality. Despite Kachru's inclusive vision, the terminology of “norm-providing,” “norm-developing,” and “norm-dependent” reinforces old hierarchies of linguistic legitimacy. These structural assumptions continue to shape English language teaching, teacher identity, and global communication in ways that reproduce inequality.

In response, contemporary frameworks such as *Global Englishes*, *English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)*, and *Translingualism* offer more inclusive, dynamic, and ethically grounded alternatives. They position

English as a co-owned global resource, practiced and negotiated by multilingual users in diverse contexts.

Ultimately, moving beyond Kachru's circles means re-envisioning English as a **fluid, networked, and socially negotiated phenomenon**—a language that belongs to all its users rather than to a privileged few. This post-Kachruvian perspective not only reflects current linguistic realities but also reaffirms a broader ethical commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion in global communication.

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