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Revising and editing English in Switzerland:
Some considerations for native speakers
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The claim has been made that English is experiencing the most dynamic period of language change since Shakespeare's time (e.g. Crystal 2003), and a quick look through any quality newspaper confirms this impression. Not only advertisements but also editorials and news reports are loaded with new words, with nouns used as verbs and vice versa as well as with structures and collocations more typical of speech than writing just a few years ago (see Baron 2000 for a discussion of recent changes in written English).

Reflection about where English has come from and where is it going may seem more of an academic exercise for historical linguists than a concern for language professionals working in and into English. However, translators working outside of their native language community may become fossilized with an "old-fashioned" variant and be particularly vulnerable to influence from the source or surrounding language. In the case of English, the risk of taking on non-native patterns is particularly acute, since English is now used practically everywhere. It is thus especially important for native speakers outside their language community to re-acquaint themselves with the depth of their native linguistic resources and reflect on what "real" English is, who their audience is, and on their revising and editing practices.

What have experts predicted about English?

Throughout history, so-called experts have passed judgement on languages and made predictions. The position of English as the lingua franca of choice is probably a temporary status and can easily be put in perspective. For example, who would have predicted the death of Latin in the middle ages or the demise of French as a polite norm in the 18th century? A slight shift in the balance of power could well result in Spanish, Chinese, or Hindi displacing English (both Crystal 2003 and Graddol 2000 reflect on the future of English as a global language and its possible successors). Just over 200 years ago, Noah Webster apparently predicted that the English of North America would diverge so much from the English spoken elsewhere that it would be considered a separate language, which he referred to as "American". About 100 years later, the phonetician Henry Sweet (the model for Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*) also predicted mutual unintelligibility of English variants due to independent changes in pronunciation. Interestingly, it was the German linguist Jacob Grimm over 150 years ago who first recognized the potential of English to become a world language (reprinted in Grimm & Grimm 1986).

As we now know, Grimm was quite right, with technological advances in communication that he could not possibly have foreseen limiting the fragmentation of English and advancing its spread. In addition to native speakers from the traditionally English-speaking "inner circle" places such as the UK and US (cf. Kachru 1985), there are millions of non-native users throughout the world. Salman Rushdie pointed out that "the English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago" (1991: 70), and Graddol predicted that "those who speak English alongside other languages will out-number first-language speakers and, increasingly, will decide the global future of the language" (2000: 10). In South Asia alone, the estimated number of people speaking English in countries where it has official status

is almost equal to the total number of native speakers in North America (Crystal 2003).

Even in countries where English has no official status, such as Switzerland, English is being offered in primary schools, is compulsory in most secondary school programs, is a language of instruction in many post-secondary institutions (according to the 2000 census, 16-45% in Switzerland), and is used regularly on-the-job by a significant proportion of employees (23.4% in German-speaking areas, 17.7% in French-speaking areas, and 11% in Italian-speaking areas of Switzerland; see Lüdi & Werlen 2005).

How has English changed over time?

Intensive contact with speakers of other languages is nothing new in the history of English. The beginning of the Latin influence on English has been traced to before St. Augustine's conversion of the Anglo-Saxons in the 6th century, and it experienced a revival during the Renaissance (Baugh & Cable 2002). Thousands of words entered the language to describe ecclesiastical concepts (e.g. *altar, demon, disciple*) as well as more mundane items (e.g. *plant, radish, sock*). In addition to lexical change, the Viking raids between the 7th and 10th centuries introduced new sound combinations that resulted in numerous pairs of similar-sounding words with related meanings (e.g. *ship/skip, bath/bask*) and might have accelerated the loss of case and gender markings, since Old Norse and Old English shared grammatical structures and word stems but did not always have the same endings for nouns and adjectives.

Of course, the most dramatic influence on English started with the invasion of the Normans in 1066 (described in vivid detail by McCrum, MacNeil, & Cran 2003). Remnants of Norman French and later Parisian and standard French grammatical structures are still apparent in present-day formal English, especially in legal texts. The loss of morphological markings during the Norman occupation resulted in relatively fixed word order; grammatical subjects became obligatory except for isolated exceptions (e.g. imperatives); and the verb phrase gained complexity (auxiliary verbs to indicate probability, aspect, and voice). Middle English (11th-16th centuries) may not be very accessible to modern day users of the language, as anyone who struggled through Chaucer will attest, but the evolution of the language slowed down during that period. Early Modern English (16th-19th centuries) is actually very similar to the English of today (although people who struggled through Shakespeare may disagree). The bibles produced during this period, the invention of the printing press, and the consequent rise in publishing and literacy contributed to standardization of spelling, grammatical structures, and written conventions exactly at the time when English began to spread significantly beyond the British Isles. At the grammatical level, there are relatively few significant differences between variants of present-day English and Early Modern English (e.g. double negatives, progressive passive, *get*-passive, functions of *do*, subjunctive), and even some of these depend very much on text type and context.

One of the most powerful arguments for why English has its present status is its flexibility (e.g. Bragg 2003). It has always been influenced by the languages it has contact with and has readily absorbed new lexical items. For example, the Normans were a source for thousands of new words in domains as varied as administration, fashion, art, learning, and food. Later, as English speakers started to move around the world, they borrowed words from other languages to describe new objects, plants, animals, and concepts (e.g. *knapsack, potato, giraffe, plunder*). The label "loan words" or "foreign words" tends to be applied only to very recent borrowings until they become commonly used and/or incorporated into dictionaries. This is probably because most English words were originally loans (over 70% by some estimates; see Baugh & Cable 2002 for examples). The result is an enormous

resource of vocabulary ranging from "solid" Anglo-Saxon words to "refined" borrowed words and "educated" technical terms, often for the same concept (e.g. *ask/question/interrogate*). In addition, speakers around the world have developed their own vocabularies to cover their particular social, cultural, and geographical circumstances. Although modern media might be driving an unprecedented convergence of language use in order to appeal to global audiences, it is important for language professionals to be aware of the differences between the main variants and their own.

What distinguishes the main variants?

The main variants of English include so-called "standard" English, which by definition is a variety of English with no local base. It is the English with the most prestige within a country, the English used by the powerful, and the communication norm of leading institutions (such as government, law courts, and media). It is a variant that is widely understood, not widely produced, found primarily in print, and thus a minority variety. It is hard to claim that there is any one standard of English, since there are differences between national standards. As G.B. Shaw so famously said: "We (the British and Americans) are two countries separated by a common language." Certainly there are differences between these two main variants in some conventions of spelling (e.g. *centre/center* or *programme/program*), punctuation (i.e. commas in lists), and grammar (i.e. the use of the definite article, some prepositions, present perfect, certain degree adverbs, or the subjunctive: *he suggested she should go/he suggested she go*) but the main differences concern lexis (e.g. collective nouns or different meanings for the same word: *football*) and cultural and/or intertextual references.

Lexical distinctiveness between variants is most obvious in the specialized terms of local politics, business, culture, and natural history and in the "domestic" columns of national newspapers. As well, much of the vocabulary for everyday life is distinct (e.g. *squash/soda pop* or *nappy/diaper*). It is easy to find lists on the internet of American English words with their British English equivalents and vice versa (such as under http://english2american.com). At and beyond the lexical level, cultural differences might relate to social conventions of politeness and respect (e.g. towards women, minority groups, authority), sports and leisure activities, and of course the particularities of money (e.g. *5 pence/nickel*), government, and educational systems. Intertextual references and allusions can be very mysterious to people from outside a linguistic community and include those to fairy tales, children's stories, entertainment, movies, popular TV shows, best-selling books, and media, all of which can be very local or regional.

Another concern for professional producers of English texts is variation in genre conventions. High-level texts tend to exhibit more similarities than differences, independent of their provenance, but the lower the register a text is, the more familiar the language is and the more variation there is in the appearance, focus, structure, and movements in the text. Successful companies are obviously sensitive to their local audiences and design their texts accordingly; for example, the U.K., U.S., and Canadian sites of the multinational company McDonald's reflect genre conventions, rhetorical strategies, and cultural values of the respective countries.

How should we write for a Swiss readership?

A crucial question for language professionals and other producers of English texts is what variant should be used in a setting such as Switzerland where English is not the dominant language. In a study of speakers' judgments of grammatically problematic sentences, we discovered that although very proficient non-native speakers (Swiss German trainee translators) were not as accurate as expert native speakers in

identifying English errors, they were much more bothered by what they identified than either linguistically expert or untrained native speakers were (Derwing, Rossiter, & Ehrensberger-Dow 2002). In subsequent studies, we have consistently found that native speakers agree with each other about what is preferred (or not) in English, independent of the variant they use, but non-native speakers in Switzerland show much less agreement among themselves or with native speakers (e.g. Ehrensberger-Dow & Ricketts 2003; Ehrensberger-Dow & Jekat 2005). It is not unusual for non-native speakers to identify structures as incorrect that are perfectly acceptable to native speakers. Native speakers seem to have more tolerance for informal and less frequent structures, probably because they can recognize when they are appropriate, whereas non-native speakers may lack the experience to do so.

Producing English texts acceptable to a Swiss audience thus might present special challenges. Native speakers may be confronted with a lack of appreciation for their variant of English, even if they observe all of the standard conventions, or their texts may be criticized for being too informal or sounding too British, American, Australian, Canadian, etc. In order to minimize this risk, it is advisable to use core vocabulary and frequent structures as much as possible, to avoid national idioms (e.g. sports) and provenance markers, to edit rigorously for potential ambiguity or misinterpretation, to be consistent with spelling and punctuation, and to proofread very carefully to catch "typical" native speaker slips (e.g. by reading texts aloud or skimming backwards, by changing the look of texts before proofreading, and by leaving time between writing and proofreading). For translators, the parameters Mossop (2001) proposes provide a solid basis for revision and editing practice: they focus on meaning transfer (accuracy, completeness), content (logic, facts), language and style (smoothness, tailoring, sub-language, idiom, mechanics), and physical presentation (layout, typography, organization). He makes it clear that revising for language and style always requires an awareness of a text's potential audience, genre and expected idiom and not just sensitivity to text flow, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and correct usage.

Trying to read English texts from a non-native speaker's perspective and good revision, editing, and proofreading strategies should help us avoid slips like "I would love to attend a college where the foundation was built upon women" or the consternation caused by the announcement "Potluck supper on Sunday at 5:00 pm ... prayer and medication to follow".

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