
Rheme and reason: Why is English always the Theme rather than the Rheme in our acronyms?

ALAN JAMES RUNCIEMAN

Why does English always get up front?

The position of 'E', for English, has always been at the forefront of all the acronyms of language learning and descriptions of world trends in English language teaching and acquisition, EFL, ESL, ELT, ESP, EIL, ELF, or second only to 'T' for teaching, TEFL and TESOL. We have become so used to seeing the letter 'E' out there in front, the Theme rather than the Rheme, that we do not even seem to question that position anymore. Despite developments in the study of World Englishes (Kachru, 1985, 1990, 1991, 2005; Jenkins, 2003; Bolton, 2005, 2006; Canagarajah, 2006, 2007, 2009) and a supposedly secondary role for so-called Native English and the Native English speaker, we continue to place the 'E' at the front, as though we have no option but to accept its primacy in every concept. If we always place 'E' at the beginning though, as the defining Theme, surely we are giving both it and its origin England a leading role in all conceptual beginnings. The Theme after all is always the principal actor, the familiar, whilst the Rheme is the unfamiliar and undefined object (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), but what English is now, in its global context, is exactly that, the unfamiliar and undefined object. In the following article I will argue for a rethinking of our terminology, particularly regarding the use of the acronym ELF (English as a Lingua Franca), and how perhaps we should be thinking more carefully about our choice of acronyms in order to be more precise about our approach to the study of English in the changing world.

There is precedent for analyzing acronyms for their semiotic underpinnings and for deriving ideological and pedagogical relevancies. Pennycook (Pennycook, 1998) takes the O in TESOL to highlight the Us/Other dialectic couched in a

colonialistic view of the world. He turns to the acronym for support of his theory of how institutionalized terms are driven by deeper ideologies. Widdowson (Widdowson, 2003) moves along the line of letters to SOL to argue that teaching English is framed in the context of Students of Other Languages and therefore in support of a bilingual approach to pedagogy. He also brings in other acronyms such as ESL and EFL to further drive his point home that English is taught as a Second and Foreign language. These acronyms are used as weapons to belie the politico-economic forces driving a pedagogical theory of an English only classroom. Widdowson argues that as coordinate bilingualism is a natural state in late acquisition and therefore necessarily a comparative state between L1 and L2, students cannot but refer to their L1 in order to have a deeper understanding of L2. In his opinion the teacher's refusal to use L1 is driven less by didactic concerns than



ALAN RUNCIEMAN is a Contract Professor at the University of Bologna's Advanced School for Interpreters and Translators, Italy. He teaches on the three-year degree in Liaison Interpreting and Intercultural Communication. His

research interests are in the field of Narrative and Identity, the multi-lingual/ multi-cultural self portrayed through personal histories.

Email: alanjames.runcieman2@unibo.it

by economic ones (though this is mainly done unknowingly I suspect) as now he/she has license to teach anywhere and to have multicultural classrooms, an obvious economic advantage.

So acronyms can be seen as instruments for reflection on wider truths or windows onto other ideological, politico-economic agendas. The way their letters are arranged (what is to be considered the Theme and the Rheme) can give us insights into the forces that select and position them. Their importance is not secondary but primary in trying to understand what is innately assumed, and possibly erroneously so, or ideologically driven.

I now turn to the most hotly debated acronym which is still in the crucible (or not) in the linguistic world at the moment, the acronym which will define the processes taking place in the world with regard to the use of English as a form of inter/intranational communication in the Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1985). The camps are still being set up and the battle lines are moving but what will eventually be decided upon will have relevance to the whole field of study and its approach to the subject in general.

In the first few years of 2000 a group of scholars (e.g. Jenkins and Seidlhofer, 2003) began turning their attention to the development of English in the Expanding Circle, a circle which encapsulated those countries which used English as a second language for international and intranational communication. Their interest was in how the language was evolving in different contexts far removed from the sociocultural ones of the Inner Circle (the so-called Native Speakers). The acronyms used were WE, World Englishes (*my emphasis*), highlighting the pluralistic nature of the inquiry (Jenkins, 2003) and ELF, English as a Lingua Franca, which seemed to have a more unitary approach (Jenkins & Seidlhofer, 2003). The non-pluralistic acronym ELF, and the position of English as the Theme, was seen by some scholars as a blurring of distinctions and a move towards attempting to define a single English variant (Saraceni, 2008) that some scholars envisage as evolving in the Expanding Circle. It also became clear that there was a more prescriptive than descriptive approach in their literature which seemed to go against the whole cross-cultural, cross-national border nature of English in contemporary times (Saraceni, 2008, 2009).

So let me now turn to one of the most recent contributions from Jenkins in this field. In her monograph 'English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and identity', Jenkins attempts to defend her choice

of acronym by concentrating on its last word, Franca:

{...} the Latin name symbolically removes the ownership of English from the Anglos both to no one and, in effect, to everyone. (Jenkins, 2007)

However, she appears to forget to refer to the capital 'E' for English which initiates the entire acronym and holds the role of Theme. Furthermore she goes on to confidently assure the reader that the study of English as a Lingua Franca (E.L.F) ignores data with any Native Speaker input, but appears to forget that any engagement with any Native Speaker (physical or imaginary) of some 400 million (Crystal, 2008) might have an influence on that very data if we are to acknowledge any Bakhtinian concept of the plurality of the 'I' in linguistic interaction (see Freeman-Lawson, 2007; Kramsch, 2008). The well of data, so to speak, may well be already contaminated, and the pure waters of a Lingua Franca only a longed-for memory. Jenkins refutes the possible alternative, English as an International Language (E.I.L), based on its associations with the dominance of English as a Native Speaker orientated term although most of her examples at least have the word International as their Theme: 'International English Qualifications'; 'International Spoken ESOL'. Her final conclusion is that:

ELF would seem to be an entirely *logical and natural development* arising out of new language contact situations in expanding circle contexts as a result of the changing role of English. (my emphasis) (Jenkins, 2007).

Why should the acronym be *logical and natural*? Apart from the obvious, artificial nature of all acronyms, are we handcuffed to the terms already in circulation, unable to invent new ones but only capable of redefining the old ones? Is it logical and natural to use a term we obviously have to struggle with in its definition? Indeed, the role of English may certainly be changing, but Jenkins has no inclination of removing it from first place as her chosen acronym and deals passively with the question of its conflict with past uses of the word Franca, which she admits exclusively excluded a native speaker or even the concept of one! Hardly an argument for retaining the term as being *logical and natural*.

Yet Jenkins is one of the most forthright speakers for the acknowledgment that English should no longer be bound to the notion of one nation, one culture, one language. She would free it from its

cultural ties, though she evidently cannot envisage an alternative name for that expression of freedom outside of the usual English-first acronym-based terminology. At least Canagarajah (Canagarajah, 2007) puts English last in his acronym, the Rheme rather than the Theme, 'Lingua Franca English' perhaps because he feels more part of the expanding circle. Whilst I do not doubt Jenkins's serious and academic approach to her subject I am perturbed by her choice of an acronym which appears to confute the plurality of the Englishes that are the source of her research.

Returning again to Saraceni, we find it hard enough to envisage a concept of world Englishes, never mind 'one' world English:

There is a degree of simplification in the WE literature when it comes to the demarcation among varieties of English, in that country defined varieties are assumed to be identifiable on the purposely selected phonological, lexical and grammatical items

(...)

However, definitions of languages are always artificial and often political, and as such may be more to do with assertions of identity than the actual linguistic features. (Saraceni, 2009)

If the complexity of even a WE pluralistic view limits, or at least complicates, research in that area how are we to envisage a unitary ELF one? The whole shift from a WE acronym to an ELF one seems suspicious to say the least. ELF does show a paradigm shift, however. The second place Englishes in WE has mutated to a first place singular in ELF though the argument appears to be that the second is complementary to the first; but how can that be given the complexities of the first? It appears to be a little anticipatory at this stage in the game to assume one from so many. It is very questionable I believe to move so quickly from a pluralistic approach to a unitary one, from a purely descriptive to a prescriptive one, an observable or forgeable single entity. Is this an objective conclusion derived from all the data, still being collated I note and possibly ad infinitum, or a subjective, ideologically driven and felicitous one? It appears to feed off the very poison it claims to refute, a one nation, one culture, one language source. It appears to be in the process of gathering individual seeds from individual, definable sources which can then be somehow genetically modified in some linguistic laboratory to produce a super plant, a single resistant English which has more echoes of Frankenstein than natural processes. It

also has hints of post-colonialism, a desire to shape nations in one's own image by taking their small 'otherly' contributions and engineering a language that belongs to 'Us' again. This may be far from the truth but acronyms may reveal what our conscious or unconscious intentions are.

Conclusions

I believe any linguistic community of scholars should be very careful of accepting acronyms that have not been fully defined and evaluated for all their ideological content. It is after all our job to be as precise and pragmatically clear as we can. We risk talking about areas of research that are already tainted by the very titles they fall under and communicating it through conduits that leave traces of pollutants in their wake.

Every time we try to remove the word English from its primary position in nearly every acronym, its role as Theme, we find it creeping back into pole position, promoting a centripetal force rather than a balance between centripetal and centrifugal which is surely the better approach. Is it not time to debate the most apt acronym for the relatively new field we have embarked upon, instead of continually blurring the line in the interest perhaps of academic hegemony? Why can we not show our cards or at least debate in detail what they mean to us? Is it ELF or LFE, is it NWLSE (New World Language (s) Sourced from English) or LDFES (Language(s) Derived from English Sources)? Do we lack the ability or the will perhaps to invent new acronyms that put English in the Rheme rather than the Theme position, at the end rather than at the beginning? ■

References

- Bolton, K. 2004. *World Englishes*. In A. Davies & C. Elder (eds.), *The Handbook of Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp. 367–96.
- . 2005. 'Where WE stands: Approaches, issues and debate in world Englishes.' *World Englishes*, 24(1), 69–83.
- Canagarajah, S. 2006. 'Negotiating the local in English as a lingua franca.' *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 197–218.
- . 2007. 'Lingua Franca English, multilingual communities, and language acquisition.' *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, 923–39.
- . 2009. 'The plurilingual tradition and the English language in South Asia.' *AILA Review*, 22, 5–22.
- Crystal, D. 2008. 'Two thousand million?' *English Today*, 93(1).
- Freeman-Lawson, D. 2007. 'Reflecting on the Cognitive-Social Debate in Second Language Acquisition.' *The Modern Language Journal*, 91, Focus Issue.

- Halliday, M. Matthiessen, C. 2004. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 3rd edition. London: Edward Arnold.
- Jenkins, J. 2003. *World Englishes*. London: Routledge.
- Jenkins, J. & Seidlhofer, B. 2003. 'English as a Lingua Franca and the politics of property.' In C. Mair (ed), *The Politics of English as a World Language*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Jenkins, J. 2007. *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitudes and Identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kachru, B. 1985. 'Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle.' In R. Quirk & H. Widdowson (eds.), *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 11–36.
- . 1990. *The Alchemy of English: The Spread, Functions and Models of Non-Native Englishes*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- . 1991. 'Liberation linguistics and the Quirk concern.' *English Today*, 7(1), 3–13.
- . 2005. *Asian Englishes: Beyond the Canon*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Kramsch, C. 2008. 'Language ecology in multilingual settings. Towards a Theory of symbolic competence.' *AL* 29(4), 645–71.
- Pennycook, A. 1998. *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Saraceni, M. 2008. 'English as a lingua franca: between form and function.' *English Today* 24(2).
- . 2009. 'Relocating English to a new paradigm for English in the world.' *Language and Intercultural Communication* 9(3), 175–86.
- Seidlhofer, B. 2005. 'English as a lingua franca.' *ELT Journal*, 59, 339–41.
- Widdowson, H. G. 2003. *Defining Issues in English Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CAMBRIDGE

Language Contact

Yaron Matras

Most societies in today's world are multilingual. 'Language contact' occurs when speakers of different languages interact and their languages influence each other. This book is an introduction to the subject, covering individual and societal multilingualism, the acquisition of two or more languages from birth, second language acquisition in adulthood, language change, linguistic typology, language processing and the structure of the language faculty. It explains the effects of multilingualism on society and language policy, as well as the consequences that long-term bilingualism within communities can have for the structure of languages. Drawing on the author's own first-hand observations of child and adult bilingualism, the book provides a clear analysis of such phenomena as language convergence, grammatical borrowing, and mixed languages.

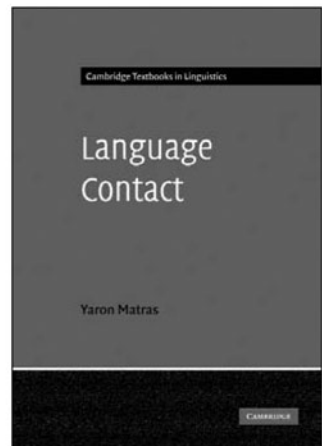
Lecturers can request inspection copies of this title.

Series: *Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics*

247 x 174mm | 384 pages

Hardback | **£60.00** | 9780521825351 | Paperback | **£23.99** | 9780521532211

Adobe eBook Reader | **\$36.00 USD** | 9780511629761



www.cambridge.org



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS